THEOLINGUISTICS
The English of Religion : At the Edges of Language.

Because of its reference to transcendent, supernatural categories, Christian religious language has been said to be situated at the “edges” of language, and this is what makes it interesting - and clearly marked- as a register. But on the other hand, one might say that within the English language as a whole, religious English holds a place which is far from peripheral, and conversely, that linguistic expression plays a central role in religious expression and practice:

To describe this religion as a form of linguistic behaviour is to focus on its central feature and therefore to present it fairly. There is no need to deny that religion is more a matter of how men live than how they talk. However, (...) a human form of life is precisely linguistic; (...) it is the fact that language is woven into all the rest of our activities that makes those activities distinctively human and, also, that gives our language its peculiar character.¹

Religious English transpires in many non-religious uses of English. Biblical and liturgical images, collocations, idioms and turns of phrase have quite naturally found their way into everyday language as well as into literary forms of expression² (cf. the literary pastiche of the Beatitudes below). This may be explained through the widespread religious practice and contact with Scripture in church, at home and in school typical of Protestant countries:

The sweat of one’s brow; eye for eye; to be one’s brother’s keeper; Sodom and Gomorrah; to see the writing on the wall; to harden one’s heart; to cast pearls before swine; the salt of the earth; the light of the world; separate the chaff from the wheat; weeping and gnashing of teeth; the prodigal son; a faithful servant; to have received a talent; heaven and earth shall pass away; our daily bread; a whitewashed sepulchre; the good shepherd; a lost sheep; a wolf in sheep’s clothing; the lilies of the field; the judgment seat; man shall not live by bread alone; to every thing there is a season, king of kings...

It would be an overstatement to say that religion consists simply and exclusively in talk; but it must be granted that religion is, in many respects, a linguistic enterprise, and that language is a principal tool for understanding a religion: the central statements of the Christian belief system are recorded in a canon of writings, and reading, reciting, studying and commenting on these authoritative texts is part and parcel of religious behaviour. The other activities in Christian life and worship, such as praying, hymn-singing, meditating, preaching, praising, blessing, forgiving, excommunicating, confessing one’s belief, theologising and many other religious practices are, first and foremost, forms of linguistic behaviour, which may be described as different sorts of speech acts³.

In Christian language, religious expression centres round the concept God⁴; hence the attempt to define Christian language as “God-Talk”. The characterization may be at once too wide

⁴ Crystal, D. & D. Davy, Investigating English Style 1969:166 show a schema illustrating the centrality of the concept “God” in liturgical language.
and too narrow: too wide in that it includes non-religious uses of the word God, as in interjections and swearing; too narrow in that it apparently ignores other hypostases of the divine, in that other items may define the register with as much adequacy, and finally in the sense that in an actual discourse situation, practically any word, phrase or sentence may take on religious meaning when set in the appropriate religious context. To philosophers, this implicit or explicit reference to a transcendent divinity makes God-Talk “problematic” in that it presupposes a logical status which distinguishes religious utterances from expressions referring to, say, tables and chairs (the most hackneyed examples), and does not allow empirical verification of its assertions. But then again, not all human language can be boiled down to verifiable statements: the languages of, say, poetry or metaphysics would be open to the same indictment; but the subsequent question whether the divine and transcendent can be referred to in a language “normally” designed to cater for human situations and realities deserves some critical attention nevertheless. “Ineffable” may be used in two senses with totally different corollaries: when understood as “a sense-content that cannot be expressed at all”, the principle is bound to result in the silence of “linguistic agnosticism”. The philosophical answer seems to be that “if one knows clearly what one wants to say, one will find a way to say it”. Expressibility, however, does not entail communicability. If, on the other hand, “ineffable” is understood as “that which cannot be expressed directly, literally, completely or properly in “ordinary” language”, there remains a possibility of referring, albeit tentatively, to God.

The adverb “normally” and the phrase “ordinary language”, however, entail an implicit value judgment on the “meaningful” or “valid” use of human linguistic resources; and any possibility of discourse about the divine will, therefore, have to be guarded rather carefully against charges of meaninglessness. It has been, in our view, the error of logical positivists and empirical verificationists to judge God-language against criteria valid only within the perspective of the physical sciences. The basis for the refusal to assign any truth-value to theological statements (as, for that matter, to any metaphysical proposition) and for regarding them as a “misuse of language” is the fact that utterances like, say, “God exists” cannot be proven true or false when the cognitive import of the word “God” cannot be adequately assessed by relying upon sense-experience or, specifically, upon “religious experience” which, being private, is neither verifiable nor communicable.

If God-talk and much other religious language do not obey all the rules governing truth-valued propositions, it must, if it is to be meaningful, respond to some logic which may account for “meaningful non-propositionality”, as the divine cannot be spoken about in literal, univocal terms; a logic, moreover, which can be demarcated and understood, lest religious discourse should become a hermetic and incomunicable private language. If the meaning of religious utterances is to be accessible to humans, it must be human-centred, i.e. not repose on extralinguistic “revelation” or on any exotic epistemology.

For this reason also, claims on truth-value in theography must be qualified as tentative: human discourse about the divine bears on one side of the Man / God relationship only. In this sense, part of the “infinite qualitative difference” may be regarded as being “beyond” human expression. In its descriptive (“theographic”) phase, however, religious language can be

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satisfactorily described in terms of metaphor logic, which, providing some indispensable reserves and qualifications, may encompass the above criteria⁶.

Metaphor

It has by now become a widely accepted conviction that metaphor may constitute a satisfactory model to demarcate the semantico-logical relationship between the divine (including divine hypostases, actions, attributes, and the relations between the divine and Man) on the one hand, and its human expression on the other. This mode of meaning concords remarkably well with the conditions for meaningful, valid, and understandable religious expression.

In the description of metaphor logic underlying this paper, metaphor is constituted by a metaphorical term or idea (the focus) within a context (the frame). The focus has two references, what Max Black⁷ has called the principal subject (the idea being referred to, in casu the divine) and the subsidiary subject (the thought used to refer to it, in casu a thisworldly reality or relationship). Dualistic theories⁸ hold that the term used metaphorically keeps its usual referential potential, thus retaining its known intension, but at the same time takes on a second reference in context, which gives the metaphor its special, plurisignificative status. Thus, the principal subject is spoken about in terms of the subsidiary subject in such a manner that the resulting meaning involves interaction between, or blending of the two (both of them intensional ideas, not extensional objects): the subsidiary subject acts as a ‘filter’ through which the principal subject, or part of it, is ‘viewed’; the features of the subsidiary subject that are not applicable to the primary subject constitute the ‘difference’, i.e. the sortal, semantic and/or pragmatic breach in isotropy, i.e. the literal contradiction or irrelevance which acts as a clue that one may be in the presence of a metaphor, whereas the mutually relevant features, acting in accordance with one or several principles of assimilation (of which prior resemblance is only one), prompt the construction of the eventual meaning of the metaphor: a new, ‘amalgamated’ meaning which is, in some cases at least, altogether beyond univocal paraphrase.

This is what endows metaphor with the faculty to transcend the limits of literal, univocal expression and thus to refer — albeit within the limitations of its own logic — to subjects that lie beyond the edges of immediate reference.

Thus, from a ‘mere ornament’, a ‘kind of lie’ saying in an elaborate ‘false and misleading’ way what could have been expressed more efficiently and more economically in straightforward terms, metaphor becomes a genuine means of expanding the resources of available human language, so as to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, between the expressible and the ineffable, and to include, notably, references to the divine or the otherworldly.

It is in this respect that an approach in terms of metaphor is to be recognised — as it increasingly has been — as a useful contribution to the description of theograpy. Human

discourse about God has previously been characterised as responding to a logic other than that of literal, univocal reference, and a number of appeals are found for a mode of meaning transcending the narrow limits of univocity. The notion of ‘meaningful non-propositionality’ encountered among the theological answers to the positivists accords remarkably well with the idea of ‘significant self-contradiction’ in metaphor theory. To the positivist, our human language is derived from our reference to, and experience of, objects and relations in the realm of the empirical, and is therefore inapplicable in its ordinary sense to what can not be identified with an object. The option leaves the linguist with the possibility of interpreting human utterances about God as employed ‘in an unusual sense, but in such a way that this sense can be understood on the basis of the already established senses’. The procedure clearly calls for a view of metaphor in which the point of departure is a familiar, man-centred meaning: the divine is then ‘construed as’, ‘viewed in terms of’ human, this-worldly categories and relations.

The philosopher, however, may feel dissatisfied with this explanation inasmuch as it fails to state the cognitive implications of the logic chosen to account for theographic language. He may justifiably ask how accurate a metaphorical utterance is held to be with regard to the divine reality it is intended to refer to; whether it is able to convey any real knowledge of or insight into the divine, and whether a metaphorical proposition can be attributed any truth-value. Although the question falls outside the linguist's immediate concerns, the issue is hard to dodge. Within the bounds of this study, however, it seems sufficient and consistent with the adopted view of metaphorical expression to note that if theographic utterances convey any knowledge or report any experience of the divine, they can only refer to the believed or perceived aspect(s) of the total reality, while part of the divine ‘mystery’ and transcendence is bound to remain beyond expression.

For the sake of completeness, it must be pointed out that beside the cognitivist and the experiential-expressive accounts of religious language, there has in the late 20th century emerged a third, postliberal view according to which theological and doctrinal language need not posit a reality prior to its language but constitutes a cultural-linguistic process which precedes and conditions (indeed constructs and regulates) religious experience. In this perspective, the “truth” of theological propositions is to be assessed intertextually with regard to their coherence within a system rather than with regard to any objective (empirical) or subjective (experiential) reality.

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EXERCISES:

1. Remembering Hayakawa’s classification of the meanings of “true” into “at least four senses” assess the truth-value of the following religious utterances:

   1. Christ died on the cross.
   2. Christ ascended to heaven.
   3. Christ died for our sins.
   4. God is in heaven.
   5. God loves me.

2. Paying attention to the particular logic and truth-claims of religious language, describe the logical differences between:

   1. My Father, who is in heaven.
   2. My mother, who is in the kitchen.

3. Explain the possible meaning(s) of the following “theographic” utterances in terms of metaphor logic:

   1. God is not “out there”, an Other beyond the skies, but the Ground of our very being.
   2. God is in and yet without the soul.
   3. God is the pole, the point around which all our existence pivots.
   4. Jesus is a window through the surface of things into God.

A Text-Dependent Register.

As pointed out above, a typical feature of Christian discourse is its dependence on assertions and statements recorded in a number of texts, i.e. in the Scriptures and traditional statements of faith and doctrine, which are considered (albeit with varying degrees of intensity) as having authority in matters of faith. The importance of these texts as a primary source of Christian theology and as the basic expression of the belief system explains, at least in part, the archaic character of much religious language: linguistic conservatives express the fear (apparently motivated by the conviction that “the map is the territory”) that if one starts fiddling with the linguistic representation of what it held to be the eternal and immutable substance of faith, its reality will eventually be altered or misrepresented – an argument which shows little awareness of the fact that the texts presumed to be the unadulterated word of God are heavily edited works of undoubtedly well-intentioned but fallible humans.

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Another form of reticence to modern reformulation of religious texts will be voiced by those who feel that the grandiloquence and beauty of a text like the King James Bible attests to its sacred, numinous character, or adds an air of “mystery” which helps to maintain the distinction between the realm of the religious and the world of ordinary human endeavours.

The fault (...) is to make the Bible homely, to remove its strangeness. (...) The word for the N.E.B.’s style is “journalism”. And that does seem to me disastrous, because (...) its place could not be in the Bible and in public reading in Church. (...) The failure of style in the new versions makes the book insignificant and incredible. (...) If God and angels are to speak it must be somehow like the way they speak in the Revised Version. (...) The belief that the English of the present day is the same as contemporary speech shows a blank unawareness that different modes of discourse need different styles19.

At the other end of the scale we find those who give the message priority over the form, who feel that the antiquated language is an obstacle to communication, and who would “bring it up to date” to make the Biblical message more accessible to all and sundry. Taking the contemporary addressee’s sensitivity as the sole criterion, may, however, lead to excessive attitudes as well: in this manner, whole passages of Scripture have recently been “re-written” in order to avoid their presumed “sexist bias”20, apparently without regard for the fact that different imagery entails different cultural and affective connotations, and hence, it may be feared, a different perception of the intended message. While the Bible translators cannot always reproduce the form of the presumed original (even when its features are relevant to the overall meaning and use of the text21), intellectual honesty demands that they should not alter the communicative intent.

21 Cf. e.g. J. Chopineau: “Texte et Parole. Note sur l’art du récit dans le livre de la Genèse”, in *Lectures Bibliques*. Bruxelles: Institutum Iudaicum, 1980, pp. 23-35.: “l’organisation du texte (son découpage, les procédés auditifs, …) ne prend tout son sens qu’en fonction de son utilisation. (...) Pas plus que le découpage n’est arbitraire, les jeux de mots ne sont gratuits (...) *La forme est ici un élément essentiel du message.*”
EXERCISES:

1. Identify the archaic features (lexical, grammatical and even graphemic) in the following excerpt; also pay attention to biblical clichés and collocations:

   **THE LORD** is my shepherd; I shall not want.
   2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
   3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
   4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
   5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil: my cup runneth over.
   6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

   2. Compare the following three versions of the same text, and comment on the “appeal” they may have to different audiences.

   **AUTHORISED VERSION**

   For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

   For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. - John 3:16-17.

   **GOOD NEWS BIBLE**

   For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

   For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour. - John 3:16-17.

   **NEW NCC LECTIOARY**

   For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Child, that whosoever believes in that Child should not perish but have eternal life.

   For God sent that Child into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through that Child the world might be saved. - John 3:16-17.

   All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. - Matthew 11:27.

   My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. - Matthew 11:27.

   All things have been delivered to me by [God] my Father [and Mother]; and no one knows the Child except God, and no one knows God except the Child and any one to whom the Child chooses the reveal God. – Matthew 11:27.

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Religious Language: a Sociolect?

To say that religious language is the language of religion is not as much of a tautology as might appear at first sight: placed in an appropriate situational or verbal context, almost any utterance may acquire "religious" status or a particular meaning (e.g. Joseph Smith’s sentence “This is the place”, when the Mormons reached Salt Lake City, Utah; or “It is raining”, when the speaker has been praying for rain). A more "sociolectic" approach, which might define religious language as the discourse of a religious speaker-community obviously postulates some sort of linguistic consensus among its members. Of course, "Christian language" involves use among a vast body of members with a wide set of common presuppositions; but their respective status, individual and doctrinal differences may condition the value given to particular terms and propositions (“This is my body” in the sacrament of the Eucharist may be interpreted in terms of both transubstantiation and consubstantiation). In doctrinal language, say in the creeds, the terms can be interpreted on two largely independent planes: as part of theological expression (where the creeds are used as definitions of a church’s doctrine) they enjoy a technical status, while at the level of the non-specialist man-in-the-pew they may be interpreted in an immediate albeit imprecise way. Armin Ader uses experimental evidence to indicate that outside the framework of religious practice, religious words receive a more profane understanding, especially when religious discourse draws on the resources of everyday language.

This lack of uniformity in linguistic response is not surprising when one considers the dichotomy, typical for the Christian religion and found throughout its history, between personal piety in the vernacular and Christian thought and education in Latin. The language of doctrine still carries to the layman "something of the air of a foreign language" incompatible with his own expression of belief. Although this "inherent duality" may prevail to some extent throughout the whole of religious language, conflicting readings due to disagreement on verbal or propositional meaning are most likely to appear in those situations where the professional and the layman stand in an asymmetric discourse situation. This is realized, for instance, in much pastoral and missionary preaching, as well as in the field of theological vulgarisation.

Religious Language and Grice’s Principles.

Contemporary uses of religious language, more than the language of scripture and worship, can be judged in terms of Grice’s cooperative principles. The principle of quantity requires the speaker to convey as much "information" as the particular discourse situation demands. The amount and nature of that information will, of course, vary with each particular situation or interlocutor. The function of Christian teaching is “the actualisation in a discourse situation of a capital of information by means of a particular strategy”. The aim is to bring or to keep

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24 This is the subject of J.P. van Noppen’s doctoral dissertation (ULB 1980), Spatial Theography, A Study in Linguistic Expression and Communication in British Popular Theology. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 1980, where popular theological statements are found to have three dimensions: a biblical or doctrinal “original meaning”, a present-day “author’s meaning” sometimes divergent from the original one, and the recipients’ “readers’ meaning”. Cf. also “Communication et vulgarisation. Le problème posé par une situation de discours asymétrique, étudiée dans la théologie populaire britannique”, in Réseaux 32-33-34 (1978), pp. 163-167.
one (according to the situation) within the ambit of a paradigm-specific community. In the
case of a theological student, the aim of teaching and training is likely to be analogous to that
of, say, a science student. Christian education, however, involves a much wider field of
teaching, since one of its tasks is the perpetuation of the belief. In the case of "missionary"
preaching, addressed to the neophyte, all presuppositions must be built up and justified,
whereas, say, the "pastoral" discourse of the usual Sunday sermon may take a number of
presuppositions for granted and aim at preserving the orthodoxy of the doctrine or at
promoting its practice within a community of believers.

The principle of quality demands that the information should be true. The criterion of truth
inevitably leads us back to the answers proposed to the empiricists' challenges above: one
cannot expect statements about God to be "true" in any literal, empirical sense; but within the
framework of beliefs and presuppositions held by the community, they may be considered as
relatively adequate and reliable reflections of human attempts at describing their
understanding and interpretation of the world and Man’s situation in it.

The principle of relation states that the information given must be relevant to the discourse
situation. The demand is for a meaningful language grounded in the realities of the hic et nunc
, which may then be adapted to the special purposes of religious communication. Both
religious language in general (as a reflection of a religious world-view and ideology) and
traditional religious categories of language and imagery, which are heavily conditioned by
history, often appear as irrelevant to people’s present-day existential situation; it remains to be
seen, however, whether present-day vocabulary and alternative imagery have the potential to
convey a presumably eternal and unchanging message.25

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EXERCISE: in the following utterances, observe how religious language may be used as a vehicle of ideology, and whether they reflect a religious world-view or are (mis)used as a way of legitimizing existing relations of political and/or moral dominance:

« Since God has blessed you with a homeland, it is a sin to dodge the draft and refuse to give your life for your country. »

« Since life is a gift of God, contraception, abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering are sinful. »

« God has created the universe. Therefore it is a sin to contribute to pollution of the environment. »

« It is the will of God that America should fight Communism in Viet Nam. » - Born on the 4th of July.

« Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank you for your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do your work, willing to hear and heed your will, and write on our hearts these words: ‘Use power to help people’. For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us remember, Lord. Amen. » - George H. Bush.

« Inside everybody
There’s some bad and there’s some good.
But don’t let anybody
Start attacking peoplehood!
Love them as they are
Each in their own right to be:
Great men and great women
as God wants them to be. » - Up with People, 1965.

« We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. » - The Declaration of Independence, 1776.

The principle of modality, finally, demands that the information provided should be clearly understandable, not obscure or ambiguous. If, as we have contended before, religious language cannot be understood in univocal terms (at least in its descriptive phase, and probably in most of its other discursive functions as well), it may be considered a violation of this fourth maxim, unless, of course, the obliquity or equivocity involved in this kind of language is part of the presuppositions, and known and accepted by the participants as thus. Metaphor, as we have seen, is a familiar and widespread linguistic phenomenon which may provide a model by means of which the logic of religious language may be described in such a manner as to highlight its man-centredness (and hence its capacity to be understood by Man) while yet granting it the faculty to transcend the narrow limits of univocal reference and to make some, albeit modest, claims at truth-value.

26 Cf. N. Fairclough (op. cit.) 1989: 33: “Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimate existing power relations.”

But not all religious language use can be satisfactorily delineated in terms of metaphor, inasmuch as religious expression seeks not only to “mean”, but also to “do” certain things for its users. In the communal use of creeds, for instance, (i.e. the act of confessing one’s belief) and in prayer, one may discern various levels of linguistic activity.

“I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. Born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father: through whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary: and was made Man. (...)”

(The Rite of Low Mass)

Originally, the Christian confessions of faith were essentially expressive acts, which they consisted of brief and spontaneous ejaculations of joy, admiration and adoration (Jesus is Lord! He is risen indeed!); but as the events responded to receded in time, the exclamations crystallised into formulas which had the same locutionary force (since the facts referred to did not change), but which at the illocutionary level were given the shape of informative representations to be used, say, in the instruction of neophytes, while on the perlocutionary level they invited the addressee to adhesion, commitment and Christian witness.

Throughout the history of religious conflicts and controversies, the confessions subsequently came to be adopted as doctrinal propositions, which thus acquired -and often still have- a declarative, normative, or even polemical value: a given Church subscribes to a given confession; membership of a particular denomination entails adhesion to a particular creed; and one Church may distinguish itself from another by the adoption or rejection of a specific article of faith. Thus, from a range of spontaneous ejaculations, creeds have been progressively reduced to a set of authorised formulae, frozen at one stage of their historic evolution, and the various utterances have been handed down to later generations in this stereotyped form: since a Church's faith is defined through these propositions, a change, however slight, in the formulations entails the risk of altering the content and substance of a faith presumed to be immutable. For at the locutionary level, the creed claims to be the “systematic and objective repository” of the basic truths on which the faith is founded, i.e. the detailed (if not literal) description of the fundamental doctrine; and from this first function derives the creed's present-day illocutionary force.

Within the Church as an institution, the creed may act as the “norm” with regard to which the degree of orthodoxy or heresy in thought and expression is defined. It is also the basic principle to be subscribed by those taking up office in the Church, who thus commit themselves to respect the faith and the doctrine, and to lead a life in harmony with the moral principles they entail.

In the Church community, the creed plays a role of praise and worship in the liturgical context, but also functions as the local community's act of adhesion to the Church at large; not only in order to distinguish it from non-Christian communities, but also as an affirmation.

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of unity in a common faith - just as the unity of a nation is expressed through its flag and its national anthem: by their presence and their use, these symbols maintain and strengthen the unity for which they stand. The individual believers reciting their creed, however, affirm their allegiance to the Church as well as their obedience, if they commit themselves to act as a worthy members of the community. As the main emphasis thus shifts from locutionary content towards illocutionary function, the uncritical believers may actually adhere to the Church faith without understanding all the creed's terms, trusting that Church authorities will be able to elucidate its propositions at the locutionary level.


Public, i.e. liturgical prayer is highly stereotyped and conditioned by the models, notably of the Book of Common Prayer 28; but here as before, awareness of meaning and structure are not sufficient, and the student must be aware of the intricate bundle of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In utterances such as the Gloria’s “We praise thee, bless thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee”, the act (in addition to being performative) is more expressive than descriptive of discrete attitudes: even a serious, practising Christian may be at pains to explain what exactly he “means” by the four verbs, and what the difference between them is:

“Glory be to God on high and on earth peace to men of good will.
We praise thee.
We bless thee.
We adore thee.
We glorify thee.
We give thee thanks for thy great glory.
Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty.
Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son.
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.
Thou who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Thou who takest away the sins of the world, hear our prayer.
Thou who sittest at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.
For thou alone art holy.
For thou alone art the Lord.
Thou alone art most high, O Jesus Christ.
With the Holy Ghost, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.” (The Rite of Low Mass)

“O ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that thou wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen..” (The Rite of Low Mass)

The fact that prayers are addressed to one not physically present, but overheard by others, is an unexpected but significant form of complex participation. Prayers may have informative content, i.e. apparently qualify as representatives, when worldly concerns are brought to the divine attention by means of some circumlocution like “O Lord, Thou knowest...”; but in terms of the conversational principles of quantity and relevance, it may seem rather redundant to inform an omniscient Addressee of a state of affairs which He must already be aware of. We may then, once again, seek the meaning at the illocutionary and perlocutionary levels, and

presume that such utterances qualify as expressives of the speakers’ concern for less fortunate fellow humans. Viewed as directives, they apparently seek to prompt the supernatural Addressee to some form of beneficial intervention at the perlocutionary level; one may wonder, however, whether the act of interceding does not involve a strong commissive element as well, inasmuch as showing concern for an unfortunate neighbour’s plight may place the speaker under the obligation to act towards his fellow being in accordance with the precepts of neighbourly love. The issue, of course, is more ethic than linguistic: is prayer to be viewed as an incentive to action, or as a verbal substitute for it? The answer can be found only in the practical, extralinguistic situation: according to the speaker, “Teach us, O Lord, to be Thy faithful servants” may come to mean “I must leave my mistress and return to my wife”, “I should go to choir practice instead of watching the football game” or “I really ought to send the kids to Sunday School”. Perhaps the Christian who sings “The Lord is my shepherd”, “Let me hide myself in thee”, “Give me love in my heart” or “Thou art acquainted with all my ways” does not simply repeat a familiar formula, offer a metaphoric description of an attitude, or express religious emotions (although all these three of these may to some extent be part of his speech act); in principle he also commits himself to a way of life in accordance with the God / Man relationship metaphorically expressed in those utterances.29

Religious Vocabulary.

The religious register is, like many other registers, clearly marked at the lexical level; but surprisingly, “religious vocabulary” is a notion which is remarkably difficult to circumscribe. We may imagine a set of concentric circles, the centre of which is constituted by a relatively small set of obviously religious terms (God, baptise, sin, ...) which function as definite markers of the register. A second, intermediate field would be constituted by items shared with profane forms of thought (love, truth, fellowship,...) which, however, undergo a specific shift in intension; a religious dimension of meaning which is handed down via religious practice within a community of believers. A third, larger circle encompasses “ordinary” items used most frequently outside the religious register to refer to “this-worldly” objects, states and relationships, but which may be applied in an “extraordinary” manner to a divine or religious referent. (father, kingdom, shepherd, rock of ages, vine,...) here again, the “oddness” resides not so much at the sentence as at the utterance level, where the items -often through a metaphorical twist- take on a specific meaning. This meaning may be conditioned by biblical or liturgical tradition; but the process whereby everyday items are “adopted” into religious language is still productive in present-day theological discourse.30 Finally, we observe an outer fringe of vocabulary where the terms are less explicitly “religious” in terms of “God-Talk”, but bear some sort of relationship to religious activities and objects (altar, matins, monk, presbyter, nave, incense, ...).

Especially at the third of these lexical levels, a number of remarks are in order. The conservative nature of religious language inevitably affects lexical choice, and a number of words and meanings which are disappearing or have disappeared out of the language are here

30 D. Crystal: “Generating Theological Language”, in Theolinguistics. Brussels, VUB, 1981, pp. 265-281; cf. also the “switchboard” and the “cloverleaf junction” of Harvey Cox’s Secular City. The opposite movement, whereby religious vocabulary finds its way into secular language, is also a productive process, cf. e.g. charismatic, enthusiasm, neophyte, ...
maintained, or appear with a significantly different degree of frequency (abide, behold, bewray, covetousness, degree (in Psalm of degrees), dwell, everlasting, fowls,...). Patterns of synonymy and of collocation are different from those which the words enjoy in ordinary usage: “Father in heaven” cannot be paraphrased as “Daddy in the sky”; and God “dwells”, but does not “live” in particular loci. Even an apparently simple preposition like “in”, when applied to divine immanence, is not necessarily the antonym of “out”, as it would be in ordinary usage\(^{31}\).

In addition to those collocations that are biblically conditioned (King of Kings, Heart and soul, Valley of the Shadow of Death, ...), the Christian context also accounts for a number of collocations which outside the liturgical context might seem odd or unexpected: the combination precious + death refers to the redeeming power of Christ’s sacrifice; while eat + body and drink + blood have here no cannibalistic connotations, but point back to the root metaphor hoc est corpus meum.\(^{32}\)

**Religious Language and Other Registers**

In Halliday’s terminology, “religious language” is a “field” which may be broken up into what Crystal and Davy have called several “provinces” and “modalities”: the religious language of Scripture does not operate like, and therefore does not show the same features, as the religious English of prayers, hymns, or radio broadcasts.

The language of sermons, for instance, constitutes a register in its own respect, inasmuch as it clearly qualifies as religious language, but also has a rhetorical structure of its own, and features many markers (notably at the prosodic level) of public speaking\(^{33}\).

Crystal underlines the fact that “as a source of linguistic effect, religious language is very evident within literature, where a deliberate, evocative use may be made of its terminology and phraseology; or in humour, where one may readily cause laughter by discussing a non-religious topic, such as a cricket match, in the tone of voice, grammar, and vocabulary associated with [religious language use]”\(^{34}\):

It all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

Pastiche of the *Lord’s Prayer* in E. Hemingway: *A Clean, Well-lighted Place*.

The Lord of Creation said unto Man:

« Give an account of thy stewardship. »

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And Man answered:

« I have changed the lush forests into deserts,
changed the amber fields of grain into battlefields,
and the fruited plains into tar-topped highways and car parks;
I have changed the earth into a garbage dump
turned the shining sea into a sewer;
I have poisoned the spacious skies,
melted the glaciers and the ice-caps,
I have conquered, and then depleted the earth’s resources,
and sold my cotton cheaper
than that grown in the third world,
and I have earned a lot of money. »

And the Lord of Creation said unto him:

« Well done, thou good and faithful servant:
write me a cheque,
and enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. »

J.-P. van Noppen: *Harvest Sunday sermon* (unpubl.)
(pastiche of *Luke 16*, *Matthew 25* and *America the Beautiful*).

The Critical Approach

Much religious language today has become sociolectal inasmuch as it makes sense only to people engaged in religious practice, but its language may still be employed ("usurped") outside the discourse community to support non-religious causes, one example being the way in which religious discourse has been instrumentalised in U.S. politics. At the point where religious language comes to be fraught with ideology (or vice versa), the emerging discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis may prove useful. The discourse-minded theolinguist will seek to establish a meaningful relationship between texts and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures; this approach becomes “critical” when one considers that “institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimise existing power relations.”

The critical perspective seeks to denounce misuses of religious discourse which “shape people's perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept the existing order of things, [...] because they are made to value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.” The theolinguist will thus ask the fundamental question of the use to which religious language, hymns and prayers, biblical stories and narratives are to be put. Human language has a potential for cooperation as well as for conflict, and the choice between the two is a moral one. Consequently, if there is a misuse of religious language to be denounced, is there a proper use to be advocated, and if so, what is it?

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Let it be, above all, a language that “changes hearts” and thus “changes lives”: a language
that unites rather than divides;
that fulfils and enriches rather than limits people’s potential;
that opens hearts rather than closes minds;
that fosters love rather than stokes hate;
that teaches tolerance rather than fanatic judgment and exclusion;
that advocates responsible and compassionate behaviour rather than violence;
in brief: a language that makes a difference in the world, but a difference for the better.