A Socio-Linguistic Approach to Religious Language

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Abstract: Studies of religious language tend to work with a rather static, simplistic view of language as possessing one criterion of meaningfulness and one basic form (the theistic world-view). A more linguistic approach suggests, however, that language is much more complex, with ongoing questions of how meaning works, how language is comprehended or learned, and so forth. Rather than investigating religious language from a vaguely refined apex, we need to approach it from its 'on the ground' base via language's volatility. Some variables relating to the particularities and generalities of religious language include three multiple variables (genre, language and religion) and three binary variables (level, time and mode). Respectively, they point to important distinctions between: authentic and distilled language; the historical nature of every utterance and the interpretative nature of every understanding; the more analytical meaning of the written text and the more participatory power of the oral word.

Key Words: religious language; socio-linguistics; language variation; linguistic modes; genre; oral language; written language; temporality

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented, intellectual interest in language. The discipline of linguistics, for example, rapidly outgrew its ancillary role of a tool for field studies in anthropology and established itself as a burgeoning independent field of study with numerous theoretical and applied focal points which in turn have attracted the attention of social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Philosophy, too, was characterised as having taken a 'linguistic turn' during this period, particularly its British, analytical variety and specifically religious language has increasingly come under scrutiny by both theologians and students of other disciplines, such as literary criticism.

Philosophers have tended to focus on the epistemological status and nature of religious belief, rather than on religious language itself. That is, their attention has been almost exclusively trained on the meaningfulness of religious language in general, logical terms rather than on the linguistic characteristics themselves. Thus, philosophical

discussion - in the English speaking world at least – has tended to confine religious language to minimalist propositions like ‘God exists’ or ‘God loves us’, or to summarise it in functional terms as exclusively or fundamentally emotive, or moral, or convictional, and so forth.³

Conversely, literary approaches to religious language have tended, with some justification, to emphasize the limitations of rationalist-empirical epistemology and the special semantic status and complexity of poetic ‘truth’ in its various ‘forms’.⁴ Theological approaches have most notably been concerned with language as integral to both the human’s self-understanding and God’s self-communication (as in Rahner’s ‘theology of the word,’⁵ with the scriptural representation of God’s ‘Word’⁶ and with the nature of linguistic symbols, metaphors and myths.)⁷

Within this general, developing interest in religious language two related phenomena stand out: the tendency to view it as a relatively undifferentiated monolith and the consequent, relative lack of interest in the particular linguistic features of the many varieties of religious language - notwithstanding such ground-breaking studies as the nature of speech acts and performatives in the Genesis account of the Creation by Evans, Ebeling’s broad analysis of language’s relevance for theology, or Mananzan’s analysis of the characteristics of ‘creedal’ language, or Crystal’s small-scale analysis of the prosodic features of four modalities of spoken religious language; or even the more philologically oriented description of scriptural, literary genres by scholars such as Fohrer.⁸ The general situation, in short, has been aptly summarised by Prozesky as: “(Religious language) has been assumed to possess a uniformity by virtue of which its total compass could be subjected to a single criterion of meaning.”⁹ Thus, it is frequently asserted, for example, that religious language is ‘figurative’, not ‘literal’, when clearly both types are frequently encountered: “Where were you when I founded the earth?” (Job 38:4)


no less than "Saul... applied for letters to the synagogues at Damascus authorising him to arrest any followers of the new way" (Acts 9: 1-2).

A Sociolinguistic Perspective

This essentialist or categorical approach to religious language parallels to some extent the situation within linguistics itself from roughly the 1950’s to the 1970’s. Chomsky’s justified attack on the Behaviourist psychological theory of language learning and his own theory of ‘linguistic competence’ as an “independent abstract entity remote from linguistic performance” resulted in an exclusive focus on the grammatical operations involved in generating sentences, in the hope of discovering “the system represented in the brain.” The neglecting, in the Chomskian distinction between ‘competence/performance’ (or ‘knowledge/use’), of the aspect of speakers’ actual use of their linguistic ‘knowledge’ in the real world led increasingly to a re-emphasis on the natural variability of actual language use, associated with the rise of the discipline of sociolinguistics. As one commentator noted: “it is not language but a particular language which is acquired by the child,” so that Chomsky’s project of “the study of potential performance of an idealised speaker-hearer,” of mapping the native speaker’s ‘ideal knowledge’, increasingly appeared, at least to some linguists, to be overly biological and trite, akin perhaps to Lennerberg’s analogy of language with the ability of human beings to walk upright. The present writer would not completely share such a negative view of Chomsky’s theory, particularly since one aspect, his ‘innateness hypothesis of first language acquisition’, is of special relevance for theology; however, just as the variationist perspective on language generally has been of major significance in the development of linguistics (especially discourse analysis), since the 1970’s, so too it can usefully illuminate discussions of religious language.

At the broadest level, sociolinguistics views language as a dynamic, cultural-behavioural, symbolical system comprising two opposing or competing forces: centrifugal and centripetal (to borrow an analogy from physics). The former represents the ‘peripheral’ pressure for language variation and individuation; the latter the ‘centralising’ pressure for standardisation or homogenisation. Sociolinguistics is thus largely concerned with the identification of the variables that promote either force, the mapping

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of these onto the language itself and the general explanation of such phenomena. Thus, for example, major variables promoting variation in language would be: nation, region (dialect), socio-economic status (sociolect), ethnicity (ethnolect), gender (gendolect), time, person (idiolect), situation/context and function; major standardisation variables would be: urbanisation, technology, power, formality, government, organisation and systems, institutions, education, occupation and mass media.\(^19\) The language effects of such variables would be evident in any or all of a language’s sub-systems: phonology (pronunciation and intonation or graphological style), morphology (word structure), syntax (sentence grammar), semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (strategic aspects of language use, ways of ‘doing’ things with language).\(^20\)

**Language Variation**

This variable nature of language can often be quite invisible, even to sophisticated language-users, including, as we have seen, interogators of religious language. The following is an attempt to briefly outline some major, background variables that would clearly affect religious language, with a view to underlining the problematic nature of approaches which view it in simple propositional terms.

An initial distinction that can easily be overlooked is that of religion itself, in two respects. First, since some religions and their variants (e.g. Hinayana Buddhism or Taoism) may operate without a God-concept, it could be appropriate to distinguish between ‘God-language’ and the more general term: ‘religious language’.\(^21\) Secondly, different religions, and different traditions within each of them, may well conceive of language itself quite differently and may even have quite developed views about the nature of language. The Hindu and especially the Buddhist traditions, for example, developed sophisticated, sceptical theories of language\(^22\) and within the Catholic tradition of Christianity the legacies, again, of sophisticated theories of meaning, such as those of Augustine and Aquinas, exert a background influence on theological discussions, and would clearly mark it off from, say, fundamentalist Christian notions of language.\(^23\)

Second, an important distinction is that between the ‘linguistic’ and ‘metalinguistic’ levels of language - what might usefully be called ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ religious language, respectively. The former may be thought of as language in use, in the experiential world or Lebenswelt (‘life-world’, to use Husserl’s term) of the individual. The latter may be characterised as language about such existential language. Thus, the language of worship or scripture would exemplify the category ‘linguistic’ or ‘primary’ and the language of the present paper would exemplify the term ‘metalinguistic’. This ‘secondary’ level has further been usefully differentiated by Hall into ‘second- and third-order’ kinds of religious language,\(^24\) the former referring to the language of biblical

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\(^21\) Jennings, *Beyond Theism*, 142.


theology and the latter to systematic theology, including philosophy of religion. Charlesworth also suggested a division of secondary religious language into a ‘second and third level’: theology, defined as ‘theorizing about religious activities’, and natural or philosophical theology which concerns itself with the presuppositions made by the religious believer in her/his first-level religious language.25 Charlesworth’s latter category would include, too, language itself as an object of examination, something that has become particularly pertinent since around 1900 when general scepticism about language has often developed into radical pessimism and, more recently, ‘postmodernist’ nihilism.26 Figure 1 below seeks to represent these distinctions visually.

The notion of ‘level’ overlaps with another important variable, that of ‘genre’. The secondary level of published theological language, for example, would share certain features with academic discourse and, within that broad division, with certain genres of academic writing - and would no doubt reveal some differences too. The primary level of religious language would, of course, be far more differentiated; proposals for its most basic categorisation include ‘language to, from or about God’;27 Ricoeur’s different linguistic modes of ‘prophetic address, hymnic praise, projection of narrative worlds and indirect communication of wisdom literature’;28 and Prozesky’s typology of ‘worshipful language, kerygma, doctrine, instruction, edification.’29 Other broader classifications, based on a more literary notion of ‘genre’, might include, for example: mythopoetic, historical, fictional narrative, genealogical, lamenting, hymnic, legalistic, wisdom, prophetic, poetic, apocalyptic, gospel, parabolic, epistolary, and so forth. To be truly

representative of religious language in general, however, they would need to be extended beyond the foundational texts to categories like: mystical language, homiletics, testimony, organisational/institutional language, pastoral and mediated language (including literature of both the literary and popular varieties, as well as journalism in its various form group and interpersonal spiritual communication, both formal and informal). Such genres are also likely, on closer examination, to reveal 'sub-genres', or further patterened differences within themselves.

Fourth, the temporal aspect represents another important source of variation. The most obvious distinction is that between ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’, that is, respectively, between language at a particular time in history (the eleventh century, for example, or the 1920’s or the year 2,000) and the tracing of language over a period of time (of any length from, say, two generations to across two millennia). For example, the various genres referred to above could be treated comparatively across time (diachronically) or contemporaneously across place (synchronically).

For the Christian, the tension between past and present is particularly complex because of the bi-directional dialectic between the present and the particular point in time in the past “when the Word as the divine self-expression has been uttered into the struggle and groaning of the universal process, so to offer a new hope of reconciled existence,”\textsuperscript{30} and between both these dimensions and the incalculable imminence of a fulfilling ending of time as such. This dialectic has been the fundamental concern of the study of hermeneutics, both biblical and other varieties,\textsuperscript{31} which views its role essentially as the ‘fusing of the two horizons’ of the past and the present,\textsuperscript{32} of exegesis (the meaning of a text for its author) and interpretation (the text’s present-day meaning).\textsuperscript{33}

The hermeneutical perspective also overlaps with our fifth variable: context. Two terms from literary studies, ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘intertextuality’, are useful for exemplifying this general concept and although, given their field of origin, they are used exclusively in terms of written text, they could apply to oral ‘texts’ as well. The former term was coined in 1929 by Bakhtin, a Russian semiotician and literary theorist, to point to the polyvocal nature of texts, to “the dialogic quality of language, (its) ability...to juxtapose language drawn from and invoking language environments of different kinds.”\textsuperscript{34} He viewed all human discourse as ‘heteroglossic’ although he was particularly concerned with the literary form of the novel whose language he characterised as: “...not...unitary, completely finished off, indubitably adequate”, but rather “a living mix of varied and opposing voices.”\textsuperscript{35} As Eagleton has commented in this regard:

The sign was to be seen less as a fixed unit (like a signal) than as an active component of speech, modified and transformed in meaning by the variable social tones, valuations and connotations it condensed within itself in specific social conditions. Since such valuations and connotations were constantly shifting, since the ‘linguistic community’ was in fact a heterogeneous society composed of many conflicting interests, the sign for

\textsuperscript{30} T. Kelly, An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections (Sydney: Dwyer, 1993), 32.


Thiselton, The Two Horizons.

\textsuperscript{34} A. Georgakopoulou and D. Goutos, Discourse Analysis: An Introduction (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 159.

Bakhtin was a less a neutral element in a given structure than a focus of struggle and contention. It was not simply a matter of asking 'what the sign meant', but of investigating its varied history, as conflicting social groups, classes, individuals and discourses sought to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings... Words were 'multi-accentual' rather than frozen in meaning: they were always the words of one particular human subject for another, and this practical context would shape and shift their meaning.36

Without assenting fully to the conflict model of society inherent in the above quotation, the point is well made that the word meanings contained in texts are interactive and dynamic, that each word use is to some extent a recontextualisation, living, "as it were, on the boundary of its own context and another, alien context."37  An example of this notion of 'interactivity' would be, say, Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel which, while advancing the narrative of the situation prior to Jesus' Passion, clearly alludes to a number of problems besetting the immediate Christian community the author is specifically addressing some 40 years later, including: widespread anxiety about the imminence of the Second Coming and associated questions about the validity of the Christian concept of Messiah; dispute and hostility concerning the demarcation of Judaism and Christianity, especially from those among the Jews who subscribe to a new fundamentalist approach associated with the rise of Rabbinic Judaism after 70 CE; general political and social unrest and discord; an environment in which cranks and false teachers of various types thrive and spread confusion; the frequent giving up of the Christian faith, even by those in positions of leadership within the Christian community; general unfaithfulness to the moral precepts of Jesus; hostility from outside the community, especially towards Christian missionaries and hostility both within and without towards non-Jewish Christians.

A closely related term, 'intertextuality', coined Kristeva,38 usefully represents the idea that "any text is a link in a chain of texts, reacting to, drawing in, and transforming other texts...necessarily shaped by socially available repertoires of genres."39 Thus, any text is an 'intertext' in a "succession of texts already existing or yet to be written."40 The connections between texts are various and may be marked, for example, by formal features (such as the conventions of the sonnet form of poetry), by allusion (such as the word-play in an advertising slogan like 'Worth its Wait', or the newspaper headline: 'Comedy of Terrors'), by direct citation (such as T.S.Eliot's use in 1927 of an extract from a sixteenth century sermon at the beginning of his poem The Journey of the Magi), and by subversion (as in graffiti on advertising billboards or in William Golding’s parody in his novel Lord of the Flies (1954) of the nineteenth century adventure novel The Coral Island. Such intertextuality may also be overt or conscious (as in James Joyce's imitation of various styles in Ulysses [1922]) or latent or unconscious (as in, say, Herman Melville's [1819-91] assimilation of styles ranging from Shakespeare, the King James Bible and John Milton to the vernacular of contemporary merchant seamen).

Both terms, in short, are a reminder of the fact that the various text-types we daily encounter (whether written or spoken or pictorial) are not independent but highly

37 Bakhtin, cited in Prickett, Words and 'the Word', 213.
interactive. ‘Genre’ reflects the fact, too, that we group such texts into types, thereby bringing to our understandings of new texts our cumulative understandings of past texts and genres.

In this regard, clearly, the length of the Judaeo-Christian tradition represents something of a challenge, if we are not to smother it unduly with a purely contemporary perspective. The original Greek for Bible (ta biblia - ‘the books’) is a useful reminder that in the case of the Scriptures we are dealing less with a title than with a library, with heterogeneity rather than a unified, single composition; this is further emphasized by the frequent Hebrew designation of its 39 books simply as migra (‘the text’ or ‘that which is read’) or as tanakh (an acronym for torah or Pentateuch, nevi‘im or Prophets and ketuvim or ‘everything else’).41

With the events of the Hebrew Bible spanning some two thousand years, from c.1800 BCE (the age of the patriarchs) to 140 BCE (the Maccabean Wars), and its actual formation spanning some nine hundred years (c.1000 - 100 BCE),42 many earlier materials were rewritten into later texts, presumably to improve their intelligibility; thus, Chronicles I and II, for example, contain amplified rewritings from Genesis, Samuel and Kings, and Jeremiah’s sermons are rewritings in the wake of the Exile.43 We know, too, from excavations such as that uncovering the Ugaritic texts in Northern Syria in 1939 that many inter-connections existed between the Hebrew texts and early Canaanite (fourteenth century BCE), Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Phoenician and Aramaic texts.44

Although the contents of the New Testament were written over a relatively short period of about 60 years and are less heterogeneous than the Old Testament, they are inevitably entwined with the time and place of their composition. Letters, for example, which comprise 21 of the New Testament’s 27 books, were a common literary medium used by Jewish and Graeco-Roman religious authors, philosophers and rulers. The Gospels consciously used a form, to evangelion (‘the good news’), that was also used for imperial proclamations; they also (along with Acts) resonate with various forms of popular Hellenistic biography and romance, such as: the life and miracles of a divinely endowed person (aretology), the memoirs of a great teacher reported by a student or narratives organised around the fulfilment of a prophecy or quest.45 They also, of course, interrelate amongst themselves, the most likely order of composition being Mark, Matthew and Luke via reconstructed ‘Q’ (German Quelle - ‘source’) and John,46 with the term ‘Gospel’ itself initially being variously used as referring to ‘God’ (Mk 1:14; Rom 1:1), ‘the kingdom of God’ (Lk 16:16), ‘Jesus’ (Mk 1:1; Gal 1:7), ‘salvation’ (Rom 1:16) or ‘narrative’ (Lk 1:1), or to a generic form (Mk 1:1; Phil 1:5) rather than a specific exemplar (usage prevalent by the time of Iraenus, second century).

“Gospel’ resonates, of course, with the Hebrew Bible (Isa 52:7, 61:1; cf. Lk 4:16-20) and the New Testament generally understands the Old as a latent precursor of itself (e.g., cf. Mt 3:16-17 and Gen 22,28; Gal 4:22-31), so that the last five chapters of Mark alone contain some 57 direct Old Testament quotations and no less than 160 allusions to it, giving the original texts an ‘open’ character and making the Bible “like an expanding telescope” and Jesus “the hermeneutical principle of the Old Law.”47

Despite the interactive context of the various texts of both Testaments, it is also worth remembering that, with the possible exception of the author of Revelation,48 that the single/joint writers/editors of the various ‘books’ did not suppose they were candidates for entry into a fixed corpus. The closing of the respective canons - at the end of the first century CE at the Council of Jamnia and towards the end of the fourth century, associated with Athanasius’ list in 367 (although the Catholic Church definitively closed only at the Council of Trent, 1546-63) - constituted a certain homogenising effect, so that both Testaments came to be seen as a unified, single work, “eternally fixed, unalterable, and of such immeasurable interpretative potential that it remains, despite its unaltered state, sufficient for all future times.”49 The hermeneutical ramification of canonisation is well illustrated by Barton who raises the question of whether, say, Ecclesiastes would be understood in the same way if it had been discovered in identical form amongst, say, the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran?50 Thus, the act of canonising is comparable, say, to the framing of a section of a large canvas, whereby the framed section becomes spotlighted or focussed and its more fluid continuities with the surrounding ‘landscape’ become progressively dimmer - although flickers may even still occur, as with the discovery in 1886-7 at Akhmim, Egypt of a possible Gospel by Peter, or the publication in 1935 (added to in 1987) of the so-called Egerton Gospel based on a papyrus fragment (Egerton 2), or, from the Nag Hammadi Library, the finding of a possible Gospel by Thomas based on three different copies of the original Greek text around 200-250 CE and a Coptic text (c. 350 CE) of 114 sayings of Jesus.51

There were, of course, considerable pressures for canonisation. In the case of the Jewish canon these included: the need to re-establish traditional religious values and authority after the return from the Exile (and in Babylon itself, where a considerable Jewish community remained and thrived), the decline of Hebrew as a spoken language, war with Rome and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the subsequent decline of cultic forms of worship, together with the rise of Rabbinic Judaism. In the case of the Christian canon, factors included: the rapid, geographical spread of ‘the new way’; the rise of Gnosticism and many other ‘heresies’; the centrality of sacred texts in the early liturgies; the persecutions of Christians by Roman and other authorities; and the astonishingly rapid adoption by Christians of the ‘codex’, or new, book-like format for storing text - in preference to the scroll.52 More specific historical and theological reasons why the early churches gradually reached consensus in this regard has, of course, been the
project of the historical-critical tradition of biblical theology since the eighteenth century - a project that has increasingly come to understand its role as the dauntingly integrative one of reconciling the philological-exegetical, the historical-critical and the literary approaches with one’s own ‘horizon’ or ‘situatedness.’

This discussion of Scripture leads us to a further, useful variable of language: ‘mode’ or the medium in which the textual message is delivered. The dominance of the printed text in the modern world easily blinds us to the equivalent dominance of the oral text in the worlds that span the evolution of the Old and New Testaments. Like the foundational texts of other great religious traditions, such as the Hindu Vedas and Upanishads (Antze 1992: 73), early Hebrew ‘books’ were transmitted, elaborated and refined orally for many generations before being written down (e.g. Eccl 12:9-10). Even after the committing of oral text to written form became custom, renewed emphasis on the oral mode occurred in the Jewish tradition from at least period of the Second Temple (third-second centuries BCE) in the form of oral discussion and teaching, concerned mostly with legalistic aspects of the written torah. The period 50 BCE to 200 CE saw a proliferation of such oral teachings (called mishnah - ‘repetition’), based on the system of various schools of sages or rabbis attracting a group of scholars who meticulously memorized the teacher’s interpretations and, in turn, eventually transmitted them to their disciples. During the second century in Israel numerous mishnah collections began to be committed to writing, with one collection, by c.200 CE, (that of the rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi,) achieving recognition as the authoritative compilation. Although there is still some dispute as to its precise genre, the mishnah certainly emphasized legal codification arranged around six main sedarim (‘orders’): agriculture, appointed times, women, damages, holy things, purities, and yet is considered essentially as “a work of poetry...formulated to facilitate oral repetition and memorization...through its severe adherence to a few stunningly simple patterns of language.”

It became, in turn, the basis for further systematic study in both Israel and Babylonia resulting in the third century in voluminous commentary in Aramaic called thegemara (‘completion’) in two versions: the Palestinian and even larger Babylonian, which were further edited between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, becoming popularly known, together with the mishnah, as the talmud (‘teaching/instruction’). Despite the comittal of this oral tradition (called generally midrash - ‘exposition/giving an account’) to written form, it has continued until today to be regarded as ‘oral torah’ or ‘torah she-be’al peh (‘by memory’).

The eventual texts of the New Testament, (together with other oral or written accounts,) though written down much more quickly and based on dramatic, oral witness of first- and second-hand accounts of the teachings and events surrounding the Messiah’s short presence, also appear to reveal continuity with the tradition of midrash, to judge by the report of the first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, that the practice of spontaneous exegesis was the norm in early Christian worship. Christianity, however, was less legalistic and also did not record oral commentary in such a meticulous fashion as the Talmudic tradition, with authorship being considered personal rather than communal

- as is evident in the profusion of writings from the patristic period. Nevertheless, just as much of the oral language of faith in any religious tradition will inevitably be ephemeral, so much that was significant was recorded in writing and, indeed, may live on in liturgy, which raises a number of important ‘modal’ distinctions, namely: between texts that are recorded speech and texts that are written, and between language written to be spoken and spoken to be written, and so on.

Thus, the Jewish idea of ‘an oral torah,’ which may re-assert itself at any time with great vigour (as was the case with the medieval kabbalah [‘tradition’] and eighteenth century, East European Hasidic movements), is relevant to Christianity. As Bruns has pointed out, it also stood for “a form of life...a basic hermeneutical principle...that the understanding of a text (is not) simply a state of intellectual agreement...or conceptual grasp.” Rather, the sacred text was understood as ‘binding’ in the sense that proper dialogic involvement with its meaning should translate into worldly action and conduct; that is, the major concern resided in the text’s implicatory ‘force’, not just with its form and meaning.

Ong, in his discussion of the “psychodynamics of orality” makes the further point that the different modes of language are associated with a different ‘consciousness’:

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer...I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the centre of my auditory word, which envelops me...By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. A typically visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart...The auditory ideal, by contrast is harmony, a putting together... Mode would seem, in other words, to be associated with different functions; the oral may, with its directness of mediation, have not only more complicatory or transformative ‘force’ but also more relational or personalising power, suggesting that along with the progressive writing of religion there exists the concomitant, constant challenge of a dialogic recovery of orality (particularly poignant, for example, in the case of homiletics and non-liturgical, spiritual community-building). In fact, the relative merits of both modes have been of considerable interest to theology recently, in relation to Derrida’s denigration of both orality and the concept of ‘subject’ and Pickstock’s (1998) deconstruction of the inventor of ‘deconstruction’ in refuting his critique of Plato’s defence of dialectic (orality) in his Phaedrus and in her argument for liturgy as the highest form of language (“...that which both expresses and performs shared values of what is praiseworthy.”)

Diachronically, however, we can too easily assume that orality and literacy are invariant. In his study of St. Augustine’s theory of language and reading, Stock, for example, points out that in the fourth century books were normally read aloud because of the un-punctuated format of scrolls and codices: “Visual reading did not make serious progress until Latin was recognised to be a foreign language, word-separation became common in manuscripts, and punctuation gave rise to...a grammar of legibility.”

59 Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory,” 628f.
63 Stock, Augustine the Reader, 5.
has pointed out that in the English language punctuation only emerged fully in the sixteenth century.)

A final variable of particular relevance to religious language is language itself. The multilingualism of the Bible, for example, is quite complex. Not only are there significant differences in style in the Greek of the New Testament and in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, three books in the latter were partly written in Aramaic which displaced Hebrew as the vernacular of the Jews after the release from the Exile (sixth century BCE) until after the Arab conquests of the seventh century CE, but survived as a theological language (for example, in the thirteenth century, Spanish, classical kabbalistic text, the zohar ['splendour'] and in contemporary prayer liturgy [opening of the domestic Passover ceremony, kol nidre and kaddish]) and even as a living language (Assyrian) amongst certain Christian communities in Northern Iraq, most of whom emigrated from persecution to North and South America in the 1930's.

From the third century BCE a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, plus an additional twelve books called the apocrypha ('hidden things'), was progressively produced during the next four centuries, mainly for the Hellenized Jews of the diaspora, particularly in Egypt; it became known by a Latin name, the septuagint ('seventy'), based on the legend that 72 Jewish scholars in Alexandria produced identical translations in 72 days. Alongside it there also grew up the widespread, devotional use of Aramaic paraphrases of parts of the torah called targumim ('translations'), originating from both Palestine and Babylonia and continuing at least until the thirteenth century CE. By the fourth century, for Christians, the Latin vulgate ('made public'), St Jerome's translation of both Testaments from the original Hebrew and Greek, became the normative Western text.

Such multilingualism was, however, only foundational and textual. Apart from the rapid growth of oral vernacular uses of religious language, there occurred the gradual proliferation of cultic-liturgical languages, apart from Greek and Latin, such as: Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Old Slavonic and, since the Reformation, of vernacular Bible translations (which, according to the Wycliffe Society, in 1996 numbered 2,086). The issue of translation naturally involves notions of 'transculturation' and raises the spectre of linguistic distortion and specific translations, with massive cultural repercussions, and may reveal fundamentally opposed philosophies of translation - such as, say, St. Jerome's principle of absolute literalness in the Vulgate and Luther's notion of translating for a specific, intended audience (anticipating Nida's dominant influence on modern Bible translation). In fact, modern translation theory tends to view any concept of 'absolute translatability' as highly dubious, advocating instead that each translation needs to be carefully evaluated as "a concrete act of performance", in terms of: text-type, purpose and principles.

Connected, too, with the problem of translation is the question of the literary nature of the Bible. If prose is largely restricted, in the Old Testament at least, to narrative - interestingly, the opposite of most other ancient cultures - then might not much of its truth

relate to multivalent, poetic-aesthetic language, rather than literal language? If so, how can one preserve its literary force in the face of the press for denotative precision? As Hammond comments: "Does 'literal'... mean the same thing as 'accurate' or 'faithful'?" 70 Such issues are often deeply felt by the faithful but little discussed. In the English speaking world, for example, many Anglicans have argued for the restitution of earlier, more literary translations, such as the Authorized Version71 and, more widely, many from other faith traditions and language environments perceive modern liturgical and scriptural language varieties, with their insistence on a bland, 'plain style', as problematically condescending, semantically simplistic and constituting nothing less than a spiritually self-destructive domestication of God.

Conclusion

This brief outline of a variationist perspective simply makes the general point that religious language is complex and dynamic in terms of function, style, historical context, interrelation with other texts, mode and language vehicle; it is therefore naive to consider it in terms of there being one criterion of meaningfulness and "one basic language... into which everything... must be translated."72 Rather, it has been suggested that a more productive approach is that of investigating the actual instances and varieties of religious language in terms of their actual linguistic characteristics and of broadly modelling language as a kind of constellation of discourse held in balance by two opposing forces: a central attraction for uniformity and generality and a peripheral pull for individuation and particularity.

Thus, discussion of the variable of 'level' made the point that it is important to distinguish between the authentic language of faith itself and the intellectualised language about such faith language and discussion of 'genre' pointed to the utility of carefully considering the different stylistic patternings and purposes of religious language within that broad division of 'level'. The variable of 'time' underlined the historical nature of every utterance and the interpretative nature of every understanding; additionally, the temporal dimension challenges modern notions of authorship and manuscript and the process of canonisation entails decisive though ambiguous selection and interpretation criteria, as well as the question of the status of non-canonical literature and tradition. As Prozesky noted: "(Religious language entails) not just the theistic world-view and terminology of the first century... but also the accumulating heritage of both Church and secular world down the centuries."73 The concepts of 'heteroglossia' and 'intertextuality' also accentuated this aspect of language as continuum, as shared or interdependent subjectivity.

'Mode' raised the tension between the more analytical meaning of written text and the more participatory power of the oral word; it also suggests that language is at the very heart of both faith and theology by virtue of its being the medium of both religious experience and practical action, the medium of unaffecting, routinised thought and of powerful, new insight.

This latter characteristic, despite language’s final inadequacy, that “opaque residuum of inexpressibility,” is persuasively described by Ebeling as its most profound mystery: “...through it we can reach the heart of another, even though we have no control over how it is received... and that language that goes to the heart can even change the heart.”

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74 Colish, The Mirror of Language, 34.
75 Ebeling, Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language, 123.