



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Shifting the spotlight: What do we mean by ‘religious language’?

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### Abstract

There are mainly two types of questions asked about religious language: those about identity (e.g., what is a religious language?) and those about meaning (e.g., what do its sentences say?). Most philosophers focus on the latter because while they disagree about meaning, they agree that some sentences are religious and that our understanding of them does not depend on us knowing what makes them religious. In this article, I provide two reasons why questions about identity should receive more attention. First, theories of identity and theories of meaning share a two-way relationship where the characteristics of one influence those of the other, and so overlooking identity overlooks important characteristics of meaning. Second, the study of religious language has been shaped by this relationship for some time and being aware of it improves our understanding of conventional trends and contemporary debates. If successful, this article will motivate philosophers to reconsider the role of identity in research and to dedicate more effort to its study.

**Keywords:** religious language; philosophy of language; theories of meaning; theories of identity; methodology

When we study the meaning of religious language, what do we mean by ‘religious language’? It is important to answer this question for two reasons. First, we need some idea about what religious language is like to find suitable examples to inform our study; second, how we study its meaning depends on what we think it is like. The study conventionally takes religious language to consist of religious sentences (i.e., sentences with religious subject matters) and religious utterances (i.e., the production of religious sentences in writing or speech) (Scott 2022). We should therefore expect a theory of meaning to be accompanied by some comments on identity. Or as McClendon and Smith (1973, 414) phrase it, a general account of religious language will expose the elements in it that warrant it being called both ‘religious’ and ‘language’. Yet almost all research is about meaning and very little is said about identity.

This is perhaps unsurprising. There is broad agreement in research that sentences like ‘God is with us’ are ‘religious’ and that we can ask about their meaning without needing a comprehensive definition for ‘religious language’. Moreover, many of those who study religious language are motivated by other philosophical interests and they already have in mind the kinds of sentences they wish to address. Philosophers, then, typically discuss identity for the practical sake of specifying which sentences appeal to their interests and

some are upfront about taking religious language to be ‘talk about God’ or ‘God-talk’ for this reason (see Blackstone 1966; Daher 1976; Dann 2002; Hesse 2023; Nielsen 1970). I am sympathetic that the study needs to start somewhere, and it seems safe to start with sentences like ‘God is love’ and ‘I will watch over you from heaven’ because their religious status is rarely contested. That said, there are more than practical reasons why those participating in the study should identify what a religious language, sentence, or utterance is. I provide two such reasons in this article.

First, what we say about identity influences what we say about meaning (and vice versa); second, the study of religious language has been influenced by that relationship for some time, and coming to know about it improves our understanding of research. Regarding the first, not all languages, sentences, and utterances are the same. So, a theory that accounts for the meaning of *some* is not necessarily expected to account for the meaning of *all*. For example, different sentences have different characteristics that a theory of meaning needs to address, and some kinds of sentences, like assertions, might have characteristics that are not found in other kinds of sentences, like questions. Therefore, what a language, sentence, or utterance is like influences what we expect a successful theory of meaning to do. This also goes the other way: theories of meaning differ in part because they address different languages, sentences, and utterances. For example, cognitivism holds that a region of discourse, like ethics or religion, contains declarative statements that make some factual claim that could be true or false (that is, they are truth-apt). However, imperatives, remarks, and questions are not truth-apt because they express attitudes, dispositions, and intentions, rather than facts or beliefs. As such, just as how a religious language with only imperatives, remarks, and questions is unlikely to inspire a cognitive theory of meaning, supporters of cognitive theories of meaning are unlikely to think that religious language consists of just imperatives, remarks, and questions. This leads to the second reason. The two-way relationship between what we say about identity and what we say about meaning has influenced research for some time, and ambiguities and potential miscommunications have arisen because the relationship has not received much attention. For example, the debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism might at first appear to be about what religious sentences mean – whether they mean to express facts and beliefs, or attitudes and dispositions. But on some occasions, it is more accurate to say that the disagreement is about what religious sentences and utterances are like. They might on the surface agree that ‘God is good’ is religious and therefore assume their disagreement is about what it means, when in fact, they disagree about why it is religious: cognitivists think it is a truth-apt claim while non-cognitivists think it expresses a religious attitude. If what at first appears to be disagreements about meaning are occasionally disagreements about identity, then philosophers risk talking past rather than against one another. This can be avoided by bringing what we mean by ‘religious language’ into closer view, and it also lets us see how identity and meaning relate and how that shapes research.

To make this argument, I first highlight how theories of identity relate to theories of meaning, then distinguish definitions from descriptions, and then propose that there are at least two theories of meaning and three theories of identity. I then give examples of different theories of identity leading to different theories of meaning, including an example of contemporary research potentially miscommunicating because it overlooks what is proposed in this chapter. I conclude that these are good reasons for philosophers to consider questions about the identity of religious language in greater detail.

### Identity and meaning in theory

It is important to answer: ‘What should we be studying when we study the meaning of religious language?’ because whatever we think counts as religious language shapes the study

of its meaning. This is already recognised in research, along with its potentially negative effects. Scott (2022) notes that the range of sentences that could be considered religious is extensive especially if they are identified due to their use, function, context, or intentions, and as the range widens or narrows so too does the study's scope; Vainio (2020, 3) points out the diverse range of religious traditions and advises against theories that exclude some from consideration; Alston (2005, 220) warns that the phrase 'religious language' is misleading and can cause philosophers to misidentify the 'proper' object of study; and Chatterjee (1974) criticises the Western assumptions which the study has about 'religion' and 'language'. The link, then, between what we count as a 'religious language' and what the study of its meaning looks like is already established, and potentially problematic outcomes have been noted. But with so little serious attention directed towards religious identity, most philosophers who study religious language identify examples that meet their interests or the theories that they want to defend or explore. Such a selection basis risks flaws worth avoiding, and they can be avoided if philosophers examine religious identity in more detail than they currently do. This explains why some sentences are studied more than others, and why philosophers should say more about the identity of *that* which they study the meaning of.

Not every sentence apt for religious classification appeals to the interests of the typical philosopher of religion. Scott notes that while understanding 'please kneel' will likely offer insight into religious practice, it is not obvious that a philosophical analysis of it will address questions about cognitivism, verification, and other typical areas of philosophical interest (Scott 2022). Another motivation behind which sentences are selected is that while some religious sentences might also be ethical or political, we should not unduly conflate the study of ethical or political language with the study of religious language. I say we should not unduly conflate the studies because although we should leave space for theories that take religious language to be necessarily ethical or political, we should nonetheless ensure that ethics and politics do not become red herrings. In the Western analytic context, 'interest in the meaning of religious utterances is largely subservient to our interest in the truth or falsity of religion or religious beliefs' (Nielsen 1982, 1). This has caused philosophers to be 'narrowly selective in their approach to the field. Dominated for the most part by epistemological and metaphysical concerns, they have concentrated on what look to be factual statements about God or other objects of religious worship' (Alston 2005, 221). The contemporary study is consequently mostly concerned with developing a theory of meaning that can answer questions about cognitivism, ineffability, divine names, and reducibility (Scott 2010, 1). Developing a theory of meaning that can answer those questions is not without merit and so it would be unreasonable to stop the study until we are provided a thorough account of the religious identity of every possible language, sentence, and utterance. But it would be just as unreasonable to not study identity at all, especially if we have reason to believe that what we say about identity influences what we say about meaning. Therefore, we do not expect a theory of meaning to be accompanied by a comprehensive definition that picks out the religious essence of every language, sentence, and utterance. But we do expect at a minimum a description of the languages, sentences, and utterances that are being classed as religious.

To make this clear, I distinguish definitions from descriptions of religious languages, sentences, and utterances. A definition states the necessary conditions that must be met to warrant being called a religious language, sentence, or utterance. A description highlights common but not always essential characteristics of religious languages, sentences, and utterances. A description can include both essential definitional features and common but non-definitional features, while a definition always includes features fit for descriptions. The difference between them is not that they cover different grounds, but that they cover similar grounds for different methodological purposes. They mark a difference

between what is necessary and unnegotiable (definitional) from what is common but often negotiable (descriptive), and in doing so address conceptual and practical concerns. Conceptually, a definition always counts as a theory of identity, but a description does not. Practically, descriptions have the advantage of letting philosophers identify the kinds of languages, sentences, and utterances they want to focus on without forcing them to definitionally include or exclude alternatives. For the sake of illustrating the difference, a religious sentence could be defined as a sentence that posits the existence of a supernatural entity and those sorts of sentences could be described as found in scripture. In this view, a sentence is not religious because it is in scripture, but it is helpful to know that religious sentences can be found in scripture when one is looking for them. Similarly, philosophers can give descriptions without needing to give definitions – one could say, ‘It seems that *some* religious sentences have religious subject matters, and those are the ones I want to study the meaning of without commenting on what *makes* a sentence “religious.”’ This lets us observe how identity and meaning influence one another in greater detail, and it also explains how theories of meaning have developed over time.

Theories of meaning conventionally consider the semantic and pragmatic features of language, and some theories hold that one set of features has greater sway on meaning than the other. In the context of religious language, some philosophers focus on semantic features (such as the meaning of individual words) more than pragmatic features (such as the intentions of the speaker), and vice versa, because they think that one set of features has more relevance to *religious meaning* than the other (Scott 2010, 505–507). Theories that focus on the semantic features of religious language are typically called ‘semantic theories’ and those that focus on pragmatic features are typically called ‘pragmatic theories’. This is not to be confused with what ‘semantic theory’ and ‘pragmatic theory’ refer to in the philosophy of language. Where in the philosophy of language they refer to approaches for studying language, in religious language they refer to theories that focus more on the semantic or pragmatic features of language due to the belief that one set of features is more involved in expressing religious meaning than the other. Put another way, the aim of studying religious language is to get at religiously relevant meaning and theories of meaning can differ due to whether a person thinks that the principal bearers of religiously relevant meaning are semantic or pragmatic. We should therefore distinguish theories of meaning that focus on the semantic features of language from those that focus on the pragmatic features in a way that avoids confusion with the semantic and pragmatic theories in the philosophy of language. One way to achieve this is by noting that the semantic features of language (e.g., proper names) are features of sentences, while the pragmatic features of language (e.g., speaker intention) are features of utterances. It is therefore useful to say that theories that focus on the semantic features of language are sentence-focused and theories that focus on the pragmatic features are utterance-focused. This lets us keep the semantic and pragmatic features of religious language as the focus for theories of meaning while avoiding conflation with the semantic and pragmatic theories found in the philosophy of language. Let us therefore adopt the following terms:

Sentence-Focused Theory (meaning-in-words) – the semantic features of sentences are the main bearers of religious meaning and thus the focus of a theory of meaning.

Utterance-Focused Theory (meaning-in-context) – the pragmatic features of utterances are the main bearers of religious meaning and thus the focus of a theory of meaning.

The phrase ‘focused’ signals that these two theories are neither incompatible nor exhaustive. Neither theory denies the relevance of the other. Utterance-Focused Theories agree that the semantic content of a sentence is a constituent of meaning, and Sentence-Focused Theories agree that the pragmatic context of an utterance is a constituent of meaning. Their disagreement is about which matters *most* to religious meaning, and thus which should be the focus. Moreover, one can argue that context and content equally matter to meaning because an uttered sentence has pragmatic and semantic features. This might indicate the need for a third theory of meaning that captures both, or perhaps a third theory is not required and the two overlap like a Venn Diagram. Either way, these terms capture the focus of theories of religious language meaning while avoiding conflation with the semantic and pragmatic theories in the philosophy of language. This is also in keeping with literature. Scott, for example, outlines that researchers draw a relationship between the semantic and pragmatic features of religious language and the focus that theories of meaning have on them. He explains that those who focus on sentences do so because they think that the semantic features of language are most responsible for expressing religiously relevant meaning, and those who focus on utterances do so because they think that pragmatic features are most responsible. This is seen when he explains the rationale behind what he calls the ‘pragmatic theory’ of religious language:

some philosophers are sceptical about the prospects of developing a semantic theory and favour a pragmatic theory. On this alternative approach, an account of the meaning of religious sentences provides limited information because their meaning is highly sensitive to the context of utterance. Instead, we should aim to give an account of the meaning of religious utterances (Scott 2010, 506).

What Scott calls the ‘pragmatic theory’ leads to a focus on utterances, not sentences. The meaning of a religious sentence, though relevant, is so significantly influenced by the context of an utterance that the pragmatic features of utterances require more focus than the semantic features of sentences. In this view, the proper object of study for the meaning of religious language is the features believed to be most responsible for expressing religiously relevant meaning; if they are semantic then sentences are the focus, if pragmatic then utterances are the focus. I agree with Scott on this, but I propose that we should use the terms ‘Sentence-Focused Theory’ and ‘Utterance-Focused Theory’ rather than ‘semantic theory’ and ‘pragmatic theory’. These alternative terms capture Scott’s point while distancing it from the approaches found in the philosophy of language. This also shows the link between meaning and identity. The pragmatic features of utterances being the focus of a theory of meaning implies that there are religious utterances, and the semantic features of sentences being the focus implies that there are religious sentences. However, confusion can arise when theories of meaning and identity draw from similar frameworks and come in various patterns.

On the one hand, we can identify ‘God is love’ as religious due to its context and focus on its pragmatic features when accounting for its meaning. We can also identify it as religious due to its content and focus on its semantic features when accounting for its meaning. On the other hand, we can identify ‘God is love’ as religious due to its context and focus on its semantic features when accounting for its meaning. We can also identify it as religious due to its content and focus on its pragmatic features when accounting for its meaning. The confusion is twofold: first, what *makes* a language religious and *how* it expresses its religious meaning are overlapping and easily muddled questions; second, the answers to those questions are sometimes, but not always, the same. To avoid this confusion, we need to differentiate theories of identity from theories of meaning, and theories of

identity from one another. There are broadly three kinds of theories of identity, let us call them:

Context Theory (religious-by-use) – an utterance is religious due to its contextual use.

Content Theory (religious-by-content) – a sentence is religious due to its content (typically subject matter).

Divine Language Theory (religious-by-nature) – a language (and its sentences and utterances) is inherently religious.

The difference between the Content and Context Theory is nuanced. First, the subject matter of a sentence (which is typically fixed by content) could be fixed by the speaker's contextual actions (e.g., they are looking at an object and context indicates that that is the subject matter being spoken about). Second, Content and Context Theory are not mutually exclusive – one could argue that sometimes context is decisive, other times the content is, and on other occasions, it takes both. Third, the very same English is used by the religious as by the non-religious, and so a case could be made that one uses language in a religious way (Context Theory) when they talk about religious subject matters (Content Theory). These three factors deserve more attention than I can give here, but they should not distract from the value of distinguishing Content from Context Theory, as we shall see in the following sections.

Returning to the relationship between identity and meaning, the most common combinations of theories of identity and meaning are Content Theories and Sentence-Focused Theories, and Context Theories and Utterance-Focused Theories. Under Divine Language Theory, the content and context of a language, sentence, and utterance falls from consideration. These are only common combinations – they are not necessary. They are common because we tend to think that the features responsible for conferring religious identity are the same features responsible for expressing religious meaning (and vice versa). Those who think X is religious because of its content will likely focus on the sentence's semantic features when accounting for its meaning. Those who think it is religious because of its context will likely focus on the utterance's pragmatic features when accounting for its meaning. As noted with Scott, this relationship also runs the other way. The semantic features of sentences being the main bearers of religious meaning imply that some sentences are religious, and the pragmatic features of utterances being the main bearers of religious meaning imply that some utterances are religious. None of this is to deny that religious utterances often have semantic content as a constituent of meaning, and religious sentences often have relevant contextual factors that influence meaning. Indeed, even in the case where subject matter is fixed by context, the semantic content of the utterance is still a constituent of meaning worth considering. This raises broader metaphilosophical questions.

The plurality of theories on offer and the flexibility that descriptions bring lead to questions about whether different religions require different theories of identity or meaning. Is there one or several religious languages?; are they religious in the same way and for the same reasons?; must a successful theory for one be successful for others?; do different religions require different approaches? This prompts reflection on what we want the study of religious language to achieve and what it might take to achieve it. If we want the study to be informative about what each community means by what they say, then we should bring our postulations back to the everyday lives of religious-speaking communities and engage in their context (Burley 2018). This might mean that when religions have multiple religious language traditions, the philosopher should sooner account for the nuances



of each than revise them. This resembles MacIntyre's view that 'the philosopher is not concerned qua philosopher to offer an account of religion that will make religion appear logically reputable, but only to describe how religious language is in fact used' (MacIntyre 1970, 175). Alternatively, if we want to study certain sentences without excluding the religious status of others, then descriptions provide the flexibility to do so. This might mean that the study is primarily about the meaning of certain sentences that pertain to mostly analytic interests, but that should not become what constitutes the study of religious language.

The study could (and probably should) do both: that is, account for the meaning of as many religious languages as possible, and where appropriate, develop areas of focus that pertain to individual philosophical interests. In any case, the kinds of languages, sentences, and utterances we identify as religious have far-reaching consequences on what we expect a theory of meaning to do; how we expect to gain one; the sorts of religions that are included in the study; and the study's future trajectory. All of these risk being overlooked when identity is overlooked. There are therefore at least two reasons why questions about identity should receive more attention: answers to questions about identity influence answers to questions about meaning (and vice versa), and this influences research.

Now that the relationship between identity and meaning has been traced in theory, we are better placed to observe it in practice. In the next sections, we will observe how the above three theories of identity lead to different theories of meaning. We will also see how the distinction between definitions and descriptions clarifies some ambiguities and mitigates some inconsistencies. We will begin with the Divine Language Theory which holds that a language exists as a divine entity or is in some other way endowed with religious-making properties. We will then consider Context and Content Theories of identity, both of which agree that there are no 'divine languages' but disagree about what makes a sentence or utterance religious.

### Divine language theory

Some religious traditions posit the actual existence of a divine language and explain that that matters to how they approach and understand its meaning. For example,

according to the mainstream of Hindu religious philosophy, the Vedic scriptures, and by extension the Sanskrit language, are eternal entities. Depending on which particular school of philosophy one looks at, these entities were either created by some divine agency, or were always there, uncreated and eternally self-existent (Deshpande 1985, 122).

This is not limited to just some sentences. All Sanskrit sentences are viewed as religious by this community, causing content and context to fall from consideration. Nevertheless, Sanskrit can be used in mantras about Krishna as well as in conversations about the housing market. So even if every Sanskrit sentence is 'religious' in one sense, we can still make distinctions based on content or context. Here we see the value of distinguishing definitions from descriptions: philosophers can accept that some communities define religious language in this way, whilst describing (and focusing on) a category of sentences with religious subject matters or utterances in religious contexts. This is practically useful, but such an approach might struggle to explain what the religious take themselves to be saying. We do not need to believe that Sanskrit is divine to recognise the influence that belief has on those who do. Some communities developed a tradition where,

grammarians not only concerned themselves with the formal description of Sanskrit and the details of how a grammar operates [...] but also with a philosophical-religious aspect of language associated with such release and union [Moksha] [...] Finally, the great god that is said to enter mortal beings is speech (Sabdah): we should study grammar in order to attain union with this great god. [...] And one who knows grammar and uses correct forms thereby practices a type of yoga which gains him merit, felicity, and ultimate union with the absolute being (Cardona 1990, 12–13).

This community's belief that Sanskrit is divine matters for how they study and understand it. This is reflected in the role of *guna*, which loosely translates as 'quality of nature,' and is,

a fundamental – yet often ignored – feature of any theory of knowledge in a Hindu context, since it says that one must have specific moral, hygienic, and intellectual virtues to develop knowledge ... All orthodox Hindu traditions agree that the true nature of the self is different from the qualities of nature, but to understand that one must purify the qualities of the mind. The Bhagavad Gita (14.17), for example, articulates the widely held view that one's personal qualities and habits determine the sort of philosophical views one holds, the type of food one desires, and ultimately the sort of knowledge one is able to obtain ... It is, thus, necessary in this context to cultivate the habits, conceptions, behaviors, and mores that are influenced by goodness (*sattva*) to achieve higher forms of knowledge. These are the epistemological views that govern how Hindus in this context would think about theology (Edelmann 2013, 454).

The belief that Sanskrit is divine influences how believers interact with it at various levels, including their philosophical study of its meaning. Although the community agrees that some sentences have religious subject matters, they disagree with theories of meaning that focus on just those sentences and methodologies which treat the language as non-divine. Any study of Sanskrit – grammatical, etymological, philosophical – is a religious activity in virtue of being a study of something divine, and success depends on one's *guna* as marked by morality, purity, hygiene, and diet. The philosophical context of this language tradition is different to what Western analytic philosophy is accustomed to, and distinguishing definitions from descriptions allows us to cater for it. On the one hand, Sanskrit is defined as inherently religious and some of its sentences can be described as having religious subject matters. If the philosopher is only interested in the meaning of certain sentences, then they can acknowledge that some treat Sanskrit in a particular way due to a belief in its divinity, but still study sentences that meet their philosophical interests. On the other hand, the reason why this community accepts the description that some religious sentences feature religious subject matters is not because of content or context, but because those descriptions are of Sanskrit sentences. The issue is that most philosophers who study religious language study *English*, but English is not divine for this community. If the philosopher does not believe that Sanskrit is divine then they will likely be willing to study reliable English translations, and this allows them to study the meaning of sentences that express religiously relevant information. This seems acceptable if it is recognised that while some religious communities define English sentences with religious subject matters 'religious', this community doesn't. From their perspective, the philosopher isn't studying their religious language but just their religious beliefs.

Those who think that there are no divine languages typically fall into one of two groups: Context theorists and Content theorists. Alston is arguably the most vocal supporter of



the former, and MacIntyre and Harrison share agreements. But despite their agreements on identity, they have different theories of meaning; MacIntyre leans towards Sentence-Focused Theories more than Alston, and Harrison aims for a non-literal account that focuses on the influence that an utterance's context has on a sentence's meaning. On the other side, Scott is arguably the strongest supporter of Content Theories of identity. He even goes as far as to reject Context Theories as 'implausible' and warns that anything could be religious under their terms. Vainio agrees that there are religious sentences insofar as there are sentences that feature putatively religious content, but whether he agrees or disagrees with Scott depends on whether they are describing or defining religious language. We will begin with Alston's Context Theory of identity.

### Context theory of identity: Alston

Alston acknowledges the link between what we think a religious language is and what we think a study of its meaning should be like. He warns that the phrase 'religious language' misleads us into thinking that there is an exclusive language or discrete class of sentences to be studied, when in reality,

'What is erroneously called religious language is the use of language (any language) in connection with the practice of religion—in prayer, worship, praise, thanksgiving, confession, ritual, preaching, instruction, exhortation, theological reflection, and so on' (Alston 2005, 220).

For Alston, the proper object of study is not a sentence with a religious subject matter, but (any) utterance in contextual relation to religious practice, and this pushes him towards Utterance-Focused Theories of meaning more than Sentence-Focused alternatives (Alston 2005, 220; Scott 2010, 506). Despite his focus on context and warnings that talk of a religious 'language' or 'sentence' is misleading, he clarifies that he uses the terms 'language' and 'sentence' because they are too ingrained in literature to avoid (Alston 2005, 220). That said, Scott observes a potential inconsistency in Alston's work. Alston endorses a Context Theory of identity that focuses on utterances as opposed to sentences, yet he almost always talks about sentences that have putatively religious subject matters (Scott 2013, ft1 xiii). The distinction between definitions and descriptions helps mitigate this potential inconsistency.

For Alston, an utterance is *definitionally* religious when used in connection with religious practice, and some religious utterances can be *described* as expressing sentences with religious subject matters. Scott is therefore right to point out that Alston mainly talks about sentences with religious subject matters, but Alston avoids any potential inconsistency. His definition is compatible with the description that some sentences with religious subject matters feature in some religious utterances. MacIntyre and Harrison agree with the thrust of Alston's Context Theory, but they reach different theories of meaning. MacIntyre (1970, 158–196) takes a Wittgensteinian approach towards the identity and meaning of religious language, and Harrison (2007) holds that the identity and meaning of religious language are accountable to something other than the words themselves, and is optimistic about metaphor theories of meaning.

### Context theory of identity: MacIntyre

Agreeing with Alston, MacIntyre writes that despite how some people speak, 'talk about "the language of the Bible" or "religious language" must not conceal from us that such language is nothing more nor less than Hebrew or English or what you will, put to a special use' (MacIntyre 1970, 166). MacIntyre, therefore, rejects the Divine Language Theory of identity and appears to endorse the Context Theory which focuses on the religious identity of the

utterance rather than the sentence. MacIntyre adds that although the ‘special use’ of ordinary language confers a religious identity onto the utterance, it does not ‘confer on such expressions a new and esoteric meaning’ for at least two reasons (MacIntyre 1970, 165).

First, he argues that the meaning of most religious expressions is accountable to their ordinary non-religious deployment: giving thanks, praise, instruction, and counsel, and reporting and expressing attitudes, facts, and beliefs happen in non-religious contexts. So at least some meaning will carry over because the religious use of language is not entirely different. Second, religious communities want meaning to carry over so that they can assert things about God’s ‘love’ and Christ’s ‘birth’, especially in ways that the non-religious can understand. Put another way, the religious want to share the ‘Good News’, and that requires them to speak in a common language.

A key difference between Alston and MacIntyre in this respect is that anything uttered in a religious context is religious for Alston, but there is less flexibility for MacIntyre. MacIntyre endorses the Wittgensteinian language game view which takes religious language to consist of a series of activities performed in a religious form of life (MacIntyre 1970, 165–167). In this view, just as how the context for ‘forgive me’ may be that of prayer, the context of prayer is that of the speaker’s life. Therefore, an utterance is not religious because it is said in prayer (because in principle, anything could be said in prayer), but because it is said within a form of life where activities like prayer and asking for forgiveness hang together in a fairly systematic way (Wittgenstein 1994, §23). MacIntyre thinks that the religious form of life in the West is marked by an attitude where believers are simultaneously ‘committed to the practice of worship in some fairly systematic way’ and willing to declare that ‘God acts in the universe’ (MacIntyre 1970, 176). The need for a systematic way of worship might cut off the plausibility of some sentences being religious; a systematic form of worship might be jeopardised if ‘we should pray because God listens’ and ‘we should not pray because God does not listen’ had equal religious status. Moreover, the willingness to declare that God acts in the universe appears to weakly endorse a Content Theory of identity and a Sentence-Focused Theory of meaning because that declaration could stand as a religious sentence outside the context of worship. This, though, remains unclear because MacIntyre also writes that ‘in worship we are concerned with praising God, not with describing him. But of course in worship some assertions are made about God’ (MacIntyre 1970, 179). So, perhaps assertions about God count as religious only when they are uttered in the context of worship.

In any case, MacIntyre endorses Alston’s views in the round, but with some modifications concerning meaning. For MacIntyre, the key feature of an utterance’s religiosity is the speaker’s attitude of worship and willingness to declare that God acts in the universe. But that declaration along with the need for a systematic form of worship might be too content-themed for Alston’s endorsement.

### Context theory of identity: Harrison

Harrison endorses the Context Theory of identity and champions a non-literal theory of meaning that overlaps aspects of Sentence-Focused and Utterance-Focused Theories. Harrison agrees that the term ‘religious language’ can trick us into thinking that there is a non-natural ‘religious’ component to language when the term actually refers to a way of using ordinary language (Harrison 2007, 127–128). Harrison also observes that the religious use the same words found in non-religious discourse, and so ‘it would seem that the religiosity of language cannot lie in the actual words used but in something else’ (Harrison 2007, 128). She suggests that this ‘something else’ consists of at least two principal components: ‘first, the “religious” purpose some language serves, and, secondly, the overtly

“religious” context of some linguistic uses’ (Harrison 2007, 128). Therefore, while acknowledging that scholars use ‘religious language’ to refer ‘to the written and spoken language typically used by religious believers when they talk about their religious beliefs and their religious experiences’, Harrison takes the term to refer to ‘language that is used either to serve a religious purpose or in a religious context, or both’ (Harrison 2007, 128). On this view, an utterance is definitionally religious when used to serve a religious purpose and/or in a religious context, and some of the uttered sentences can be described as having religious subject matters. Harrison goes on to support a non-literal theory of meaning for two reasons; one which she makes explicit, and another which is seen when the relationship between identity and meaning is made explicit.

Harrison thinks it is odd to say that God is transcendent and that religious language is literally meaningful because literal meaning is based on direct experience of the world, and if God transcends the world then God transcends literal language (Harrison 2007, 130). Religious language can, however, be non-literally meaningful. This is because extraordinary experiences share enough in common with ordinary experiences that we can speak about them figuratively, analogously, metaphorically; non-literally. But there is another reason why Harrison leans towards a non-literal theory of meaning, and it is accountable to her Context Theory of identity. Literalism focuses on the straightforward conventional uses and meanings of words, but Harrison defines ‘religious language’ in direct contrast to the ordinary uses and meanings of words. The religious identity of language must be found in something other than the words themselves because the religious use the same words as the non-religious; likewise, the religiously relevant meaning must be found in something other than the literal meaning of the words because the religious use the same words as the non-religious. For Harrison, it is the use of language that confers a religious identity and meaning onto language and in doing so modifies meaning into something non-literal. Harrison therefore links the Context Theory of identity with a non-literal theory of meaning for two reasons. First, it is harder to capture a transcendent God in literal than non-literal language. Second, if the religious identity of language is not accountable to the words themselves but to their context and purpose, then their religious meaning will likewise be accountable to the context and purpose of the utterance and not the literal semantic meaning of the sentences.

Now that we have seen Divine Language Theory and three variations of Context Theory leading to different studies and theories of meaning, we can observe the same with the Content Theory of identity leading to Sentence-Focused Theories of meaning. Content Theories of identity make two claims: that there are religious sentences and not just utterances, and they are religious because of what they say. In the following sections, we will see that while Vainio and Scott agree that religious sentences are religious due to content, they disagree about what sorts of things are and are not said in religious sentences.

### Content theory of identity: Vainio

Vainio and Scott express views that generally endorse a Content Theory of identity but either conform and lead to similar theories of meaning or contradict and lead to dissimilar theories of meaning. The difference hinges on whether certain comments made by Vainio and Scott are to be treated as definitions or descriptions. Vainio also asks what kind of language religious language is and provides four options which Scott initially proposed, but it is unclear whether those options are theories of identity, theories of meaning, or both.

Vainio specifies that the religious identity of a sentence is not accountable to it featuring supernatural subject matters because some non-religious sentences have them, some religious sentences lack them, and other factors like context are just as significant (Vainio 2020, 2–3). More than echoing the supposed linguistic fact that ‘utterances are not religious

simply because words like “God” are used in them’ (Nielsen 1982, 1), Vainio highlights that many religions are ambiguous about such beings and argues that we should not exclude them from consideration (Vainio 2020, 3). Vainio proposes ‘that religious language consists of sentences that express some claim, belief, attitude, or preference which is religiously relevant’ and notes that ‘this definition can be taken to be too vague, but this is in keeping with the multifaceted nature of religious traditions’ (Vainio 2020, 3). Vainio supports the Content Theory as he thinks that there are religious sentences and not just religious utterances, and the fact that he referred to his proposal as a definition lends further weight to this interpretation. Vainio’s phrasing that a religious sentence is a sentence that features something ‘religiously relevant’ offers enough scope to include sentences with and without supernatural subject matters. His point is that having a supernatural subject matter is not *definitionally* necessary, but it may nonetheless be an accurate *description* of the sorts of sentences that interest philosophers of religion. Vainio limits his work to ‘those sentences that make claims about supernatural reality, since this is the context from which the philosophical debate concerning the meaningfulness of religious language arose in the early twentieth century’ (Vainio 2020, 3). Scott agrees research addresses those sorts of sentences and he endorses Content Theory, but he potentially defines religious sentences as sentences that feature supernatural subject matters.

### Content theory of identity: Scott

Scott documents the study to link what a religious sentence is taken to be with what a successful theory of meaning is expected to do. Scott supports Content Theories of identity and prioritises Sentence-Focused over Utterance-Focused Theories of meaning. This is seen when he offers the following as a plausible presentation of the sorts of sentences that interest the study:

‘Religious sentences are sentences with a religious subject matter, i.e. they concern supernatural agents (God, other deities, angels, etc.), the actions of such agents (miracles, creation, redemption, etc.), and supernatural properties and states of affairs (holiness, heaven and hell, etc.)’ (Scott 2010, 505).

This endorses the Content Theory of identity where there are sentences that are religious because of their subject matters. It is also a useful description of the sorts of sentences that have conventionally interested the study. It is obvious that Scott is not suggesting that all supernatural subject matters are religious, but it is not as obvious whether Scott is suggesting that all religious subject matters are supernatural. Moreover, it is not clear whether Scott is defining or describing religious sentences. He could be defining a religious sentence to be any sentence that has one of the above examples as a subject matter or he could be describing a class of sentences that are religious for another reason but which nonetheless feature those subject matters. If Scott is describing religious sentences that typically interest philosophers, then he and Vainio agree; but if Scott is defining religious sentences as those which have religious – if not supernatural – subject matters, then Vainio disagrees.

Scott explains that the study’s conventional aim is to develop a theory of meaning that answers questions like,

- (i) the truth conditions for religious sentences (are there defensible reductionist or subjectivist accounts?);
- (ii) whether indicative religious sentences are truth-apt or have propositional content (or do they express beliefs or merely attitudes?);
- (iii) if indicative religious sentences are truth-apt how should we construe the truth for which they are apt?
- (iv) The meaning of religious terms and how they combine to form meaningful sentences (is ‘God’ a referring expression?) (Scott 2010, 505).

Scott describes the answers to the above questions as ‘the principal components of a semantic theory for religious language’ (Scott 2010, 505) and he prioritises the development of one over an Utterance-Focused Theory. This is more than Scott’s preference. Scott thinks that this is the study’s chief aim, or at least the study’s conventional aim which he has no reason to move away from. Contra Alston, Scott thinks that the study of religious language is right to be a study of religious ‘language’ and religious ‘sentences’. Scott provides two reasons why we should support this. First, if pragmatic factors influence a sentence’s meaning then we would only notice the influence after an initial semantic understanding of its content; second, it is hard to imagine how language could be meaningful if it were not possible to identify a kind of semantic content which is to some extent unaffected by context (Scott 2010, 506). Scott directly rejects the plausibility of Context Theories of identity, arguing that ‘a pragmatic account of what utterances count as religious seems implausible’ because of ‘the vast range of different topics that can be raised in utterances in “thanksgiving, confession, ritual, preaching, instruction, exhortation, etc”’ (Scott 2010, 507; referencing Alston 2005, 220). Scott sides with Content Theory and prioritises Sentence-Focused over Utterance-Focused Theories of meaning. Crucially, Scott is *prioritising* the semantic features of sentences over the pragmatic features of utterances. He accepts that pragmatic factors influence meaning, but his point is that that presupposes that there is semantic meaning implicit to the sentence in the first place and it is *that* which makes the sentence ‘religious’. However, Scott presents a slightly different definition or description elsewhere, writing:

‘I take religious sentences (unless otherwise indicated, I discuss indicative religious sentences) to be ones that posit a religious entity, such as God, or a religious property, such as holiness’ (Scott 2013, viii).

If ‘positing’ means something like committing to the truth or existence of a religious entity or property, then religions that are ambiguous about such entities or properties face the same problems Vainio wants to avoid. These problems can be avoided if Scott is *describing* religious language. Once again, there is ambiguity about whether Vainio and Scott agree or disagree; they disagree if the above is a definition, but they may agree if it’s a description.

Neither Vainio nor Scott are to blame for this ambiguity. This ambiguity results from the study overlooking the relationship between identity and meaning, and the difference between definitions and descriptions. This ambiguity impedes the clarity of contemporary research and the communication between philosophers, and the next section highlights an example in the work of Vainio and Scott.

### Blurring the lines between theories of identity and theories of meaning

When Vainio (2020, 5) asks ‘What kind of language is religious language?’ he responds by quoting a list of options that were initially drawn by Scott (2013, 9):

Face value theory. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express beliefs that those facts obtain.

Noncognitivism. Religious sentences do not represent facts and are not conventionally used to express beliefs; they express noncognitive attitudes.

Expressivism. Religious sentences do not represent religious facts but do conventionally express noncognitive attitudes; insofar as they represent nonreligious facts (if they represent any facts at all), they may be used conventionally to express belief in those (nonreligious) facts.

Moderate attitude theory. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express belief in those facts, and they conventionally express noncognitive states.

There are two areas of ambiguity: first, these options presuppose a Content Theory of identity as they address sentences and not utterances; second, these options comment on *both* identity and meaning. It is worth noting that face value theory and moderate attitude theory address identity more directly than the other two options. This is because they specify the religious element of the sentence – their expression of religious facts. Non-cognitivism and expressivism assert that religious sentences do not represent religious facts but instead express attitudes, but there is little said about what a religious attitude is and how it makes a sentence – not an utterance – religious. This is however easily resolved. We can likely guess what is included under the category of ‘religious’ attitudes, and although religious ‘utterance’ might be a more appropriate term, ‘sentence’ might be used for the same reason Alston uses it. The second area of ambiguity is much harder to avoid.

The second area makes it unclear whether each option disagrees about the meaning of the same sentences or whether they are talking about the meaning of different sentences and thus talk past rather than against one another. In virtue of offering these options in response to his question about the *identity* of religious language, Vainio seems to interpret them as four candidate theories of identity that also comment on meaning. Read in that way, they do not solely disagree about the meaning of a religious sentence, but also about the meaning of the term ‘religious sentence’. Although face value theorists and non-cognitivists appear to disagree about the meaning of religious sentences, they might be talking about *different* sentences and not disagree in the way they might think they do. Adding to the complexity, face value theorists and non-cognitivists could agree that ‘God is with us’ is religious but for different reasons; the former may say it represents a religious fact and the latter may say it expresses a non-cognitive religious attitude. The former favours a Sentence-Focused Theory of meaning because belief claims are semantic and seemingly unaffected by context, and the latter favours an Utterance-Focused Theory of meaning because non-cognitive attitudes are almost always marked by context. Similarly, expressivists and moderate attitude theorists can agree that ‘from nothing came everything’ is religious, but for different reasons that lead to different theories of meaning. They can agree that the sentence expresses a religiously relevant non-cognitive attitude and that it represents a fact or expresses a belief. But they disagree about whether the fact or belief is religious. In this case, we cannot avoid answering questions about what makes a fact or belief religious because that determines whether a sentence is religious. Therefore, if each above option has a different definition for ‘religious language’ then each explains the meaning of different things. But if each is a description of an undefined ‘religious language’ then there is still room to show that each theory of meaning talks against one another. That, though, would require researchers to pay more attention to identity than they currently do.

## Conclusion

The conventional aim of the study of religious language is to develop a theory for the meaning of religious sentences that answers philosophical questions. With this as its focus, the study usually overlooks theories of identity in favour of theories of meaning, especially because we already seem able to spot religious sentences, and our study of their meaning does not appear hindered without one. In this article, I argued that theories of identity and theories of meaning share a more intricate and influential relationship than conventionally acknowledged. I also argued that our understanding of research improves when we are



aware of this relationship, and examples were given of how this is so. I think there are no facts of the matter as to what makes a language religious, but rather facts about what each religious community takes to be religious about their language. I think this also applies to philosophers where there are facts about how we use the term ‘religious language’ that need to be brought to the surface, hence why we need to shift the spotlight to what we mean by ‘religious language’. That said, I think context matters more than content for the religious languages philosophers are usually concerned with, and I am inclined towards a family resemblance account which embraces content and context. In any case, the question ‘what should we be studying when we study the meaning of religious language?’ deserves further thought and attention because an answer not only matters to theories of meaning but contributes to the form the study takes.

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