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The texture of religious language

Anthony Kenny

Poetry has always played a large part in religion for as long as there have been records of such discourse: the psalms of David and the Homeric hymns are among the oldest religious texts we possess. In Christian as well as Jewish and Greek religious discourse poetry has been prominent, and I would like to start my lecture with a brief look at two of the finest poems in the Christian tradition.

First the *Dies Irae* – familiar I am sure to all of you if not from the liturgy itself then from settings of it by Mozart and Verdi.

Tuba mirum spargens sonum / per sepulcra regionum/ coget omnes ante tronum / mors stupebit et natura / cum resurget creatura / judicanti responsura / liber scriptus proferetur unde mundus iudicetur (*Dies Irae*)

Every mortal quakes and trembles
As the great assize assembles.
Just or guilty, none dissembles.

Fear in every heart instilling
Hear the trumpet's final shrilling
Summon willing and unwilling.

Death's and nature's laws reversing
Bodies from their graves emerging
Answer to the summons' urging

All men's deeds, sublime or sordid,
Are in one great book recorded
Ready for the final audit.

It is characteristic of poetic language to be figurative. No one is surely

going to take literally the story told in this poem. Even in the middle ages it would be physically impossible to gather in one arena the inhabitants of the globe, and many billions have been added to the population since then. Even with the most modern techniques of amplification and broadcast, no trumpet could be audible in every graveyard. Even the most capacious of databases would find it hard to contain the details of all the sins that humans have ever committed. But of course none of this obscures the moral message that it is well for each of us to think how all our thoughts and deeds would be regarded by an all-knowing and righteous judge.

The text of the *Dies Irae* is not explicitly metaphorical. The matter is different with my second example of Christian poetry, the Spritual Canticle of St. John of the Cross. The Saint himslf makes explicit the figurative nature of his poem – based on the biblical Song of Solomon – by providing us with a commentary which offers the literal meaning of each metaphorical element.

The text runs:

Buscando mis amores / iré por esos montes y riberas; /ni cogeré las flores / ni temeré las fieras, / y pasaré los fuertos y fronteras. (Juan de la Cruz, *Cantico*)

Seeking my loves, I will go over yonder mountains and banks; I will neither pluck the flowers nor fear the wild beasts; I will pass by the mighty and cross the frontiers.

In his commentary St. John tells us that the mountains are virtues, and the banks are mortifications. Flowers are pleasures of three kinds, temporal, sensual, and spiritual. Wild beasts are the world, the mighty are evil spirits, and the frontiers are the inclinations and the desires of the flesh. So the message is: in seeking God the soul must put into practice the lofty virtues and abase itself in mortifications and things lowly. She must not set her heart on riches, or the delights of the flesh, or the consolations of the spirit. She must resist the remptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. (comments on stanza 3 in Spritual Canticle)

Since the earliest days of the Christian church scholars have offered distinctions between different kinds of non-literal discourse. Origen (*De principiis* 4,2,4, cit. Wansbrough, p. 43) distinguished, beside the literal or somatic meaning of the text three more important meanings: allegorical, moral, and typological meaning. Augustine (*De Utilitate credendi*, ML 42, 68) speaks of interpreting the OT secundum historiam, secundum aetiologiam, secundum analogiam, secundum allegoriam. Bede has fourfould division: history, allegory, moral, anagogical.

Modern grammarians distinguish between simile, metaphor, parable and allegory. Simile is the explicit statement of a likeness between two things: e.g.Ps 128 favoured by Pope Francis:

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots round your table.

For our purposes simile can be dismissed: it is a form of literal truth. The important distinction is between allegory and metaphor. Allegorical interpretation appears already in the NT.

It is written that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free woman. but he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory, for these are the two covenants. (*Gal*. 4,23-4)

For Paul the Genesis narrative has both a literal and an allegorical sense: there is no reason to doubt that he took it as a historical truth that Abraham had two sons. It is this piece of history, not the Genesis narrative of it, that is the allegory. But quite often Church fathers offer allegorical interpretations of OT narratives that explicitly or implicitly deny their literal truth. St. Paul himself pointed in this direction when he said «It is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen?». He answers that God says it «altogether for our sakes» – that is, as an injunction to the faithful to provide sustenance for apostolic missioners. (1 *Cor*. 9.9)

Church fathers found allegorical interpretation extremely useful when dealing with some of the more puzzling or revolting episodes narrated in the OT. But many different allegorical interpretations can be given of the same text, and it was quite clear by the time of St. Thomas Aquinas that some rule was necessary if the use of allegory was not to lead to chaos.

[I]n sacra Scriptura.. omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem, ex quo solo potest trahi argumentum, non autem ex his quae secondum allegoriam dicuntur.. Non tamen ex hoc aliquid deperit sacrae Scripturae: quia nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium, quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat. (S.T.Ia 1,10 ad 1.)

It is customary to distinguish between allegory and parable. Both of them convey a moral message, but only in allegory are individual characters in a story identifiable as standing in for a particular person or item outside the narrative. Thus in the parable of the lost coin there is no need to worry who the widow is meant to be. But the borderline between the two tropes is not sharp: in the parable of the prodigal son we may regard the

elder son as representing Israel while the prodigal represents the Gentile church.

The important distinction is between allegory and metaphor. Allegory is a form of discourse, metaphor is a form of predication. In religious language the most significant use of metaphor is in the attribution of predicates to the Godhead. The predicates that religious people apply to God can be divided into two classes. There are bodily predicates, and these seem to be almost universally agreed to be metaphorical. There are mentalistic predicates, and these would be claimed by at least some theologians to be literally true of God.

Non enim cum Scriptura nominat Dei brachium, est litteralis sensus quod in Deo sit membrum huiusmodi corporale: sed id quod per hoc membrum significatur, scillicet virtus operativa. (S.T. Ia 10, ad 3)

Let us look first at personal predicates. We have been taught to pray: Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum, «Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by the name». In the Lord's prayer, as prayed by a twentieth century believer, neither "Father" nor "Heaven" is understood literally. With regard to "Father", St. Thomas Aquinas, rather surprisingly, is in agreement. When we say the Our Father, he says, we are praying to the whole Trinity (the prayer, after all, is not Jesus' own prayer to his heavenly Father, but the one he taught the likes of us to pray). And the Trinity is not a literal father, because fatherhood involves the origination of another being of the same nature as oneself; and we are not, by nature, in any way consubstantial with the Trinity.

I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and earth is named. (*Eph*. 14-15)

What, then, does St. Thomas make of the passage of Ephesians «I bow my knee to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and in earth is named»?

His answer, as you might expect, is subtle. First of all, he does believe that the relationship of Father and Son within the Trinity itself is not a matter of metaphor, because the Son is not only of the same nature as the Father but that nature is itself numerically identical in both the begetter and the begotten. Secondly, he thinks that our word "Father" as a matter of reference applies to God the Father primarily and to creatures secondly, but as a matter of sense applies first within the creaturely realm. (Ia 33, 2, 4 and ad 4, 3,1 and ad 1)

If we, following this hint, accept that the word "Father" acquires its sense from within the world of human generation, then we cannot help but admit that its application to God in relation to creatures can be no more than a metaphor. God has no body and belongs to no species; he cannot therefore literally be described by a word which derives its sense from the material propagation of an animal species. St. Thomas cannot, in consistency, have any quarrel with the feminist theologians who wish to describe God as our mother. No doubt when it was believed that only the male was the agent of generation, with the female no more than a seed-bed to nurture the offspring, fatherhood was the more appropriate metaphor for the divine influence on human development. But since we have learnt that each sex has an equal part in the generation of offspring, there is no reason, other than cultural and liturgical tradition, to object to anyone praying to "Our Mother" above.

But where above? Can we take "Heaven" literally? St. Thomas was willing to do so. Of course, he believed that God was everywhere, and that meant that if anything was a place, God was there. But was heaven a place? Many contemporary theologians would deny this, and offer some unhelpful paraphrase such as "an alternative mode of being". St. Thomas, too, was willing to allow that "heaven" could be used metaphorically. He gave as an example from the Old Testament Isaiah 15,13 where Lucifer says «I will ascend into heaven» – this, he explains, means equality with God. From the New Testament he gives a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells those who are persecuted «Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven». Since the reward is enjoyed in this life, "heaven" must mean "spiritual benefits".

But for St. Thomas heaven was undoubtedly a real place, and this belief was based both on philosophy and revelation. He accepted the Aristotelian cosmos according to which the earth was in the centre of the universe: around it a succession of concentric crystalline spheres carried the moon, the sun, and the planets in their journeys around the visible sky. The heavenly bodies were not compounds of the four terrestrial elements, but were made of a superior fifth element or quintessence. They had souls as well as bodies: living supernatural intellects, guiding their travels through the cosmos. These intellects were movers which were themselves in motion, and behind them, Aristotle argued, there must be a source of movement not itself in motion. The only way in which an unchanging, eternal mover could cause motion in other beings was by attracting them as an object of love, an attraction which they express by their perfect circular mo-

tion. It is thus that Dante, in the final lines of his *Paradiso* finds his own will, like a smoothly rotating wheel, caught up in the love that moves the sun and all the other stars.

Dicitur caelum corpus aliquod sublime, et luminosum actu vel potentia, et incorruptibile per naturam. Et secundum hoc, ponuntur tres caeli. Primum totaliter lucidum, quiod vocant empyreum. Secundum totaliter diaphanum, quod vocant caelum aqueum vel crystallinum. Tertium partim diaphanum et partim lucidum actu, quod vocant caelum sidereum, et dividitur in octo sphaeras. (1a 68,4)

Aquinas devotes several pages of dense argument in commentary on the verse of Genesis "God called the firmament heaven" and he took it as a matter of scientific inquiry to determine what place, or places, were designated by this name. He compared the Genesis account with the theories of Empedocles (the firmament is made up of four elements) of Plato (it consists of fire) and Aristotle (it is not any of the four elements but a quintessence). He devotes great effort to reconciling together the Genesis narrative, the Patristic commentators, and the Greek cosmologists. His final conclusion is that by the word "heaven" the Bible means a sublime, luminous and naturally incorruptible body. He goes on to say that there are, in fact, three heavens as thus defined. The first is totally shining, and is called the empyrean heaven. The second is entirely diaphanous, and is called crystalline; the third is called the *caelum sidereum*, or starry sky, and it consists of eight spheres, the outermost carrying the fixed stars and the seven interior ones carrying each a planet.

The heavens in which St. Thomas believed could not survive within the Newtonian system in which the sun, the earth, the planets and the stars all cavort in empty space. Historians of science make much of the difference between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican universe. To me it seems that as long as one believes that the members of the solar system are carried around on concentric crystalline spheres, like jewels on an engagement ring, it is of comparatively little philosophical importance whether the sun is carried round the earth on a sphere, or whether the earth is carried round the sun. At least, for the interpretation of the notion of heaven in religious discourse, the crucial change – the abandonment of the idea of crystalline spheres – was brought about not by Copernicus but by Tycho Brahe.

In 1577 Brahe observed a bright comet which he proved could not be travelling between the earth and the moon, but must travel among the planets themselves, actually crossing their orbits. This destroyed the notion of crystalline spheres, since the comet moved right through the places

where the spheres were supposed to be. Though it took some while for the consequences to be fully spelt out, this was tantamount to the idea that planets moved through empty space. The heavenly bodies were no longer in heaven.

The abandonment of the Aristotelian heavens had no disastrous implications for the interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. God was and always had been in every place, and if heaven was not a place, then "heaven" must be taken metaphorically, just as "Father" was. But there were disturbing implications for the article of the Creed «he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father». The second clause of that article had always been taken metaphorically. The old penny catechism taught children to say «When I say sitteth at the right hand of the Father, I do not mean that God the Father has hands, for He is a spirit». But what of the first clause?

If the body of Jesus is still in existence, it must surely be in some place. For St. Thomas, it could be a matter of scientific inquiry to determine which of the heavens is the one in which the body of the ascended Jesus now inhabits. (Sadly, I have been unable to discover his answer to the question.) So too, there could be a quest for the location of the heaven in which the body of Mary resides, if she was assumed into heaven. But in a Newtonian world any such quest must surely seem absurd. If so, then "ascended into heaven" and "assumed into heaven" must be no less metaphorical than "sitteth at the right hand of God". Hell, too, as a subterrestrial region, went the same way as the Aristotelian heaven – even though the great Galileo began his academic career with a dissertation on the location and dimensions of Dante's *Inferno*.

Many who agree with my contention so far about the metaphorical nature of religious language will insist that there is a final irreducible bedrock of literal truth about God: namely, the mentalistic predicates that we apply to him, as in "God knows us" and "God loves us". St. Thomas, for instance, has this to say:

> Deo nulla perfectio deest quae in aliquot genere entium inveniatur… Inter perfectiones autem rerum potissima est quod aliquid sit intellectivum: nam per hoc ipsum est quoddamodo omnia, habens in se omnium perfectionem. Deus igitur est intelligens. (ScG I,44)

God does not lack any perfection that is found in any kind of being. But among the perfections of things the most important is that a thing should be intellectual: because that makes it in a manner everything, having in itself all perfections. Therefore God is intellectual.

St. Thomas's case for God's being a thinker depends on his acceptance of Aristotle's account of intentionality in accordance with which intelligence and immateriality go hand in hand. I have elsewhere explored the strengths and weaknesses of this theory. For present purposes I want to start not from any philosophical theory of cognition but simply from our ordinary use of words like "know" "understand" "intelligence".

Mentalistic predicates are used primarily of human beings, and they are ascribed to human beings on the basis of their behaviour. It is not only to human beings, however, that we ascribe mentalistic properties and mental acts: we ascribe them also to animals who behave in ways similar to human beings. We also ascribe mental acts and processes to human institutions and artefacts – to governments, say, to texts, and to computers. This is not because governments and texts and computers behave like individual human beings, but because of the relationships they have to the humans who constitute them, create them, or make use of them. If we try to ascribe mentality to God we cannot do so in any of these ways. God has no behaviour to resemble human behaviour in the way that animal behaviour does; nor, if he really is God, is he a human creation like a government, a text, or a computer.

A divine mind would be a mind without a history. In the concept of mind that we apply to human beings, time enters in various ways; but with God there is no variation or shadow of change. God does not change his mind, nor learn, nor forget, nor imagine, nor desire. With us, time enters into both the acquisition and exercise of knowledge, and the onset and satisfaction of wanting. The exercise of knowledge and the execution of wants involve a course of conduct (external or internal) spread over time, which could not be attributed to a being outside time.

The notions of time and change enter into our very concept of intelligence. Intelligence entails speed of acquisition of information, and versatility in adaptation to altered and unforeseen circumstances. In an all-knowing unchanging being there is no scope for intelligence thus understood: no new information is ever acquired, and no circumstances are ever unforeseen.

Reflection on what is involved in the attribution of mentalistic predicates to human beings, and to other finite creatures that resemble them, brings out for us the enormous difficulty in applying such predicates in any literal sense to a being that was infinite and unchanging, and whose field of operation is the entire universe.

If knowledge and intelligence cannot literally be attributed to God, what about willing and loving? St. Thomas has a swift proof that God loves us (and indeed everything else that there is).

Voluntas Dei est causa omnium rerum: et sic oportet quod intantum habeat aliquid esse, aut quodcumque bonum, inquantum est volitum a Deo. Cuilibet igitur existenti Deus vult aliquod bonum. Unde, cum amare nil aliud sit quam velle bonum alicui, manifestum est quod Deus omnia quae sunt, amat. Non tamen eo modo sicut nos. (S.Th. I, 20,2)

The will of God is the cause of all things, and so it must be the case that insofar as anything has being, or goodness of any kind that is because it is so willed by God. Therefore God wills some good to anything that exists. Hence, since loving is nothing other than willing good to someone, it is plain that God loves everything there is. But not in the same way as we do.

Is the difference between our loving and God's loving so great that it means that "love" can only be applied to God in metaphor? I believe so. Most theologians would prefer to say that the use of the word about God is a matter of analogy. Analogical discourse is not necessarily metaphorical. "Good", for instance, is an analogical term. A good knife is a knife that is handy and sharp; a good strawberry is a strawberry that is soft and tasty. Clearly, goodness in knives is something different from goodness in strawberries; yet one does not seem to be using a metaphor drawn from knives when one calls a particular batch of strawberries good.

However, there is an important contrast to be drawn between analogy and metaphor, and the distinction between the two is not a matter of a fuzzy borderline. Analogy belongs in the realm of sense. A mastery of the language is enough to convey understanding of the analogous terms it contains (such as "good" and "real"). Indeed a person who did not understand that certain terms were analogous would not understand their meaning in the language at all. Being analogical does not prevent a predicate from being literally true of things.Metaphor, unlike analogy, is not a matter of sense. To introduce a metaphor is not to introduce a new sense into the dictionary. Metaphor is the use of an expression outside the language game that is its home.

There is no doubt that "love" is an analogical term, just as "good" is. loving chocolates involves wanting to eat them, loving my mother-in-law does not involve wanting to eat her, and so on. But the question is whether any of the analogical uses of "love" applies literally to God.

Aquinas says that God loves just everyone and everything. This means that, at one level, his love is like that of an environmentalist for a blade of grass or an endangered species. But that it not what believers and interested in when they are told that God loves us. The most important sense of "love" is that involved when we talk of human beings' love for each other,

whether maternal, sexual, or whatever. It is essential to human love that it should crave for reciprocity: if A loves B, A wants B to love A. This is a matter not only of wanting but needing: the lover is somehow imperfect, incomplete, unless his love is returned. This fact does not prevent us loving God: but does it mean that it makes sense to talk of God loving us?

Spinoza, having told us that our love toward God should occupy the principal place in our minds (E, 5,16) goes on to say that God is totally free of passion and cannot experience joy or sadness, since he cannot move either towards a greater or lesser state of perfection. He concludes that some one who loves God cannot expect God to love him in return. That would be wanting God not to be God.

Qui Deum amat, conari non potest, ut Deus ipsum contra amet. Si homo id conaret, cuperet ergo ut Deus, quem amat, non esset Deus. (Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5.19)

Here Spinoza, for once, is in line with Aristotle. Discussing friendship between unequals, Aristotle says (EE 1238b27) «It would be ridiculous to reproach God for not returning love in the same way as he is loved».

If Spinoza and Aristotle are right, then, "God loves us" is just as metaphorical as "God is intelligent".

I must draw attention to one final aspect of the religious use of metaphor. Metaphor is commonly used to inform – to express a truth in a non-literal way. But of course it can also be used to instruct or command – as in "don't be such a dog in a manger". When St. Paul compared the relationship between Christ and the Church to a marriage, he was intending, on the one hand, to give information – to bring out in a vivid way the closeness of the union between the saviour and the congregation of believers. But he also uses the relation between sign and thing signified in the reverse direction. «Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord; for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church… Husbands, love your wi ves, even as Christ also loved the church». So metaphor is being used in an imperative as well as an indicative mode. The onus is not on the metaphor to match the truth, but on the behaviour to match the metaphor. In this case, as Pope Francis has brought out, this is quite a tall order!

There is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails a dynamic process. (*Amoris Laetitia 122*)

The fact that one cannot speak about God with any literal truth, does

not mean that one cannot pray to him. No philosopher has explored this paradox as skilfully as the nineteenth century English poet Arthur Hugh Clough. In my recently published Italian autobiography I quoted at length one of his poems, *Hymnos Aumnos* (1851) which appears on your handout and with which I will conclude this lecture. Its first stanza begins with an invocation to the incomprehensible Godhead.

O Thou whose image in the shrine
Of human spirits dwells divine;
Which from that precinct once conveyed,
To be to outer day displayed,
Doth vanish, part, and leave behind
Mere blank and void of empty mind,
Which wilful fancy seeks in vain
With casual shapes to fill again.

The poem starts from the assumption that the place to look for God is in the individual's inmost soul Attempts to give public expression to the God encountered in the soul yield only meaningless, self-contradictory utterances ("blank and void") or images unconnected with reality ("casual shapes").

In a later stanza the poet proclaims that silence – inner as well as outer – is the only response to the ineffable. Not only can we not say of God what he is, we are equally impotent to say what he is not. The possibility, therefore, cannot be ruled out that one or other of the revelations claimed by others may after all be true:

Unseen, secure in that high shrine
Acknowledged present and divine
I will not ask some upper air,
Some future day, to place thee there;
Nor say, nor yet deny, Such men
Or women saw thee thus and then:
Thy name was such, and there or here
To him or her thou didst appear.

In the final stanza Clough pushes his agnosticism a stage further. Perhaps there is no way in which God dwells – even ineffably – as an object of the inner vision of the soul. Perhaps we should reconcile ourselves to the idea that God is not to be found at all by human minds. But even that does not take off all possibility of prayer.

Do only thou in that dim shrine,
Unknown or known, remain, divine;
There, or if not, at least in eyes
That scan the fact that round them lies.
The hand to sway, the judgment guide,
In sight and sense, thyself divide:
Be thou but there, – in soul and heart,
I will not ask to feel thou art.

I am happy to make that agnostic prayer my own.

English title: The texture of religious language.

Abstract

From time immemorial poetry and religion have been linked. Lucretius, Thomas of Celano, and St. John of the Cross provide iconic examples. Both involve non-literal discourse, as spelt out by Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. We need to distinguish allegory, parable, metaphor, and analogy. In talking of God we use both bodily and mentalistic predicates: both can only be understood metaphorically. This is illustrated by an examination of "Our Father who art in Heaven". Even for Aquinas the notion of fatherhood was metaphorical, and the biblical notion of heaven cannot survive in any literal sense in a world of Newtonian physics. The metaphorical nature of religious language does not rule out the possibility of prayer, as illustrated by A.H. Clough.

Keywords: religious language; metaphor; analogy; Aquinas; heaven; prayer; Clough.

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