

# Issues in Thinking about God

Michaelmas Term 2008

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# Week 6: God and Language

- J. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, London 1967
- F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, Oxford 1986
- I. Ramsay, *Religious Language*, London 1957
- J. Soskice, *Metaphor and religious language*, Oxford 1985

# God and Language

- Not a new problem in theology:
- Patristic and medieval debates about the nature of God reflect on its linguistic side
- New impulse in 20th century due to prevalence of language as philosophical topic
- Convergence of interest in two different traditions: analytic philosophy and hermeneutics

# Ludwig Wittgenstein (1898-1951)

- Fundamental is the perception that abuse of language causes pseudo-philosophy
- Immediate consequences for (traditional, metaphysical) theology
- Position of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:
- Language can only express empirical facts; logical propositions are tautological.

# Wittgenstein II

- *There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical (Tractatus 6.522).*
- Similar to Kant's position: critique of truth-claims leaves void that can be filled by religion.
- Extreme version of negative theology:
- *What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (Tractatus 7).*

# Wittgenstein III

- Wittgenstein's later philosophy starts from ordinary language.
- *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)
- *The meaning of a word is its use in a language.*
- Language is one with human practice
- Model of 'language-games'.

# Consequences for theology

- Critique of 'nonsensical' metaphysical propositions applies to traditional doctrine of God.
- Possibility of understanding religion as a language-game: non-realistic version of theology:
- George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, London 1984

# George Lindbeck

- Truth of doctrine is neither propositional nor subjective.
- It rests in the communal rules of discourse accepted by a church.
- Theology is thus 'grammar of faith'.
- Attractive as a response to modern challenges, but *can* theology do without realism?



# Hermeneutics and Language

- Since the early 19th century hermeneutics was transformed from an applied into a foundational discipline.
- ‘Understanding’ was increasingly seen as tantamount to human interaction with the world.
- Language became interesting insofar as it enabled understanding.

# Metaphor and Parables

- Traditional view (Aristotle):
- Metaphors are figures of speech
- They don't add to meaning, embellish expression.
- Through a *tertium comparationis* predicates are transferred (*metapherein*) from one object to another

# Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)

- *The Rule of Metaphor. Creation of Meaning in Language*, London 2003
- How do we understand a text?
- Meaning could be *in* the text or *behind* it.
- Yet Ricoeur suggests it is constituted *before* the text.
- Interaction between text and reader creates a 'text-world' inviting and challenging the reader.

# Ricoeur II

- Text creates new reality
- Transformation of reader is crucially involved
- Metaphor is a tool for the generation of new being involving a text and a recipient.
- Jesus therefore had to use metaphor to reveal through language the new world of the Kingdom of God.

# Eberhard Jüngel (\*1933)

- *God as the Mystery of the World*,  
Edinburgh 1983
- Metaphysical notion of God led to his  
'unspeakability' and thus to his  
disappearance in the modern world.
- Correcting the former may help  
alleviating the latter.

# Jüngel II

- God is creative possibility, not latent actuality
- Jesus was sent as the Word of God to bring God to language.
- Parables through metaphor create new reality.
- The problem of negative theology is overcome in the Incarnation.

# Jüngel III

- The revealed God is to be found in the world
- Opposite conclusion to early Wittgenstein: rejection of negative theology.
- How can it avoid 'liberal' identification of God and world?
- Will need notion of 'mysterious' and transcendent God as corrective.