

Semantic Appraisal of Blessing and the Sacred in Contemporary Philosophy of Language and Religion

Dr. Rajiba Lochan Behera

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Arts, B. H. U. Varanasi- 221 005, U. P., India

Abstract: *This paper examines the semantic status of blessing and the sacred from the perspectives of contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of religion. It considers four approaches to these concepts and distinguishes between theories that understand meaning primarily through reference and those that understand meaning through relations within broader linguistic and conceptual networks. Drawing on debates concerning referentialism, semantic holism, contextualism, and religious language, the analysis asks whether blessing and the sacred can be understood without assuming independently existing referents. It also considers the role of belief attribution and the wider importance of semantics for the study of religion. The paper argues that non-referential and holistic approaches provide useful resources for interpreting religious concepts while allowing questions concerning their ontological referents to remain open.*

Keywords: Blessing; Sacred; Religious Language; Semantics; Referentialism; Semantic Holism; Philosophy of Religion

1. Introduction

Philosophy of language navigates the semantic problem of sacred and blessed as both are central parts of religious language. Several philosophers of language have questioned the meaningfulness of religious language with the consideration of verifiability criterion of semantics which is not fulfilled by the religious languages. But there are several philosophers of language who have challenged the criterion of verifiability in order to elaborate religious language with the consideration of investigative approach which act as a safeguard of the semantics of religious language in general but sacred and blessed in particular. This paper suggested an investigative approach to the notion of the sacred and blessed with the implication of the arguments of the scholars of philosophy of language and the arguments of the scholars of religion. This paper has been discussed in four different sections as follows.

2. Etymological Semantics of the Bless and Sacred

The etymological history of the word 'bless' raises the question of how did the word bless evolve into common expressions like "God bless you?" This linguistic projection of the expression expounds upon the origin, various definitions, and uses of the word bless. What is that symmetric nature of bless and sacred? (Lieberman, 2008). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the word sacred can understand that "To make 'sacred' or 'holy' with blood". According to the OED, Bless takes on the meaning of "happiness" and "well-being," which was first documented around the 11th century. Bless and bliss are not etymologically related, but phonological developments may have caused the connotations to become misconstrued. The semantic similarities become transparent between the two words, once bless is converted to take the place of Latin *benedicere*. The spelling of bliss in Middle English varied by using *i* or *y*. The spelling, semantic, and phonology shows how easy it would have been for the human psyche to intertwine these words.

The word bless has transformed in the English language from a specific religious practice, into a euphemistic utterance, which in part is due to a natural semantic mutation. Bless once meant to consecrate with blood and is now uttered when referring to a divine spirit. According to the OED, bless is derived from Old English *blod* and *bloedsian*, which is not found elsewhere in Germanic languages. *Blot* was originally used to describe a pagan ritual of marking or affecting with blood. Around the 11th century, the *ds* in *bloedsian* phonetically shifted into a *ts* sound, and yields *blet sien* or similar spellings. By the fourteenth century the *t* was dropped, and formed *blessed*, which looks identical to the way we currently spell the past participle of *bless*. Although this is how *blessed* has orthographically changed throughout the English language, *bless* has a longer derivational history. According to the OED, the borrowing history of the word *bless* can be traced back to the Hebrew word *brk* meaning "to bend," which can be linked to Present-day interpretations of *bless* in religious contexts. The word *bless* was used as a semantic loan from the Germanic language to represent Latin *benedicere* and Greek, which meant "to speak well of, praise, or eulogize," but was itself influenced by the Hebrew word *brk*, meaning "to bend." The conversion of *bless* into its current usage in English happened as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were being converted from their pagan ways, into the Christian society within England. Overall, the function and context of *bless* has changed drastically. The overwhelming majority of resources that I researched throughout this etymological analysis listed identical interpretations of the word *bless*, and all defined it as to make holy by a religious rite.

In its earliest attestations in the OED, *bless* and *blood* continued to coincide with each other. Once an entity was consecrated with blood, it was thought to rid o evil influences of men and demons. When used in this context the entity know is controlled by God's prospering care, which can be linked to the present-day use of *bless* before dinner, when praying over food. The OED dates this documented history back to the eleventh century. This usage of *bless*, which is "to sanctify or hollow by crossing yourself," can be linked back

to the first entry. The cross is put up in the Défense of evil, and the usage started to circulate in circa 1225. Using the cross as protection can visually imitate the power of God to rid of evil, and is similar to the act of consecrating an entity with blood to gain God's favour over it. Bless was also cited as an adoration towards God, and can be used when praising God for a blessing bestowed upon an entity. God can also bless someone by showing a supernatural favour over their life. A superior, such as a priest or sacred person, can also invoke blessings over some one's life, which will yield favour and well-being for that individual. This usage of bless began circulating around the eleventh century. Bless can also be used to show mortification or a state of surprise. This is described by the OED as an elliptical or ironic use of bless, which would be stated as such: "Bless me!" The last entry in the OED states that bless can be used in an ironic way or a euphemistic saying. The word blesses took on a contradicting meaning in the nineteenth century, when it began to mean "to curse, damn, or condemn" someone (Smith, 2014).

3. Semantics of Bless and Sacred

This paper used several arguments of the scholars of Philosophy of language as well as the arguments of the scholars of religions. It focuses on philosophical questions about how the semantics of religious language is constituted and constrained.

At the risk of introducing the potential for confusion, in the following the paper will adopt the terms 'sign' and 'thing signalled' as the principal *relata* in the basic semiotic relation rather than the more usual 'signifier/signified.' This is because the paper tends to use them more along Peircean lines and so wish to avoid importing connotations from the Saussure a terminology. In general, signs are linguistic entities most commonly associated with the syntactic structures of familiar phonemes and morphemes. These syntactic structures are themselves just the products of intentional human behaviour, and so signs can be detected in things other than just language use narrowly construed – such as in ritual action. At further risk of censure, I say that they are grammatically constituted entities, though of course much turns on what one takes grammar to be. As we shall see, not all semantic theories are truth-conditional ones (i.e., not all of them identify the meaning of a sentence with the conditions under which it would be true), nor are all truth-conditional theories of meaning referential ones.

The philosophy of language has developed a large number of particular theories of in what that semantic content may consist, perhaps most influential is the Fregean-Wittgensteinian notion that the semantic content of a sentence is the thought (Gedanke) its occurrence expresses (Frege, 1956; Wittgenstein, 1922). The association of semantic content with a mental state has been a particularly important one. For example, much work in the philosophy of mind, especially that which partners in the cognitive-science programme, is centered on providing an account of mental content and the role it might play in mental causation (i.e., the relation of cognitive inputs to behavioral outputs). Along somewhat different lines, British philosopher Michael Dummett identifies semantic content with mental states by arguing that a theory of semantic meaning must take the form

of a theory of what one understands when one understands a language (Dummett, 1991). American philosophers W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson further argue that what one understands can only be gauged in light of one's explicit behavior, thus further bringing together theories of meaning with the goal of understanding human behavior (Davidson, 1984a; Quine, 1960).

Nor is there any single view of reference which dominates the market. Given the widespread agreement that there can be no 'magical' connection between word and referent (Putnam, 1981), different theories offer different accounts of how reference is fixed. These range from ostensive views in which reference is fixed by some sort of pointing, to descriptivism (Donnellan, 1966) in which reference is fixed by whatever satisfies a description implicitly associated with a word, to causal theories (Kripke, 1980; Putnam, 1975) in which reference is fixed by whatever stands in the right causal relationship to the introduction of the term into the language, to various hybrids and other alternatives. Various translated as 'On Sense and Reference,' 'On Sense and Meaning,' and 'On Sense and Nominatum.' Notice that the translator, Max Black, renders the German 'Bedeutung' as the English 'meaning,' reinforcing the assumption of a referential semantics. Perhaps anticipating Saussure, Frege endorses the 'arbitrariness of the sign:' 'Nobody can be forbidden to use any arbitrarily producible event or object as a sign for something' (Frege, 1952). Indeed, it is precisely this arbitrariness that produces the 'crises' he sees the sense-reference distinction as needed in overcoming – it is because there is no intrinsic relation between either 'The Morning Star' or 'The Evening Star' and Venus that their meanings cannot be guaranteed to be the same. Frege tried to solve this problem by arguing that sense determines reference – i.e., the reference of an expression is fixed by its meaning, rather than vice versa. 'Use' conceptions of meaning have become quite sophisticated and cluster around a constellation of views which collectively have been associated with semantic contextualism (to be discussed elsewhere in this article). Davidson's views have recently been taken up by a number of scholars of religion. For a representative sample (Davis, 2007; Engler and Gardiner 2010; Frankenberry, 2002; Gardiner and Engler, 2010, 2012; Godlove, 1989; Penner, 1994; Schilbrack, 2002). It is by starting with the sign that (Charles Morris, 1938) first introduced the familiar semiotic trichotomy of syntactics (involving relations that signs stand in to other signs), semantics (involving relations that signs stand in to objects), and pragmatics (involving relations that signs stand in to sign-users) (Szabó, 2006, 364–367) for a critique of Morris' distinction.

From the perspective of formalism, it is somewhat difficult to see semiotics' move from content to form as a move away from semantics. For the formalists, grammar (form) plays a large role in determining meaning (content). There is a reading, I think, of Saussure's emphasis on form over content which is not at odds with this: meaning does depend on form, as long as 'form' is not limited to the sub-sentential grammatical structure but extends to an interrelation of all linguistic expressions. This would make structuralism strongly analogous to another broad constellation of semantic theories – semantic holism – which takes the meaning of any linguistic expression to be, at least in part, a function of its

relation to the meaning of others for a critical overview of some of its main forms (Fodor and Lepore, 1992).

Some contextualists further blur the semantic/pragmatic distinction by continuing to adopt a truth-conditional semantics where truth-conditions are regarded as contextually sensitive things not determinable a priori. A collapse of the semantic/pragmatic distinction is not limited to contextualists argued that semantic content is a function of a speaker's intentions that her words be interpreted by others in a particular way (Grice, 1957). Contextually insensitive meaning to account for the fact that, at least very often, someone can understand a sentence without knowing the context in which it was originally given (Cappelen and Lepore, 2006). Donald Davidson's interpretational semantics regards meaning-theories as formally constructed proposals which are tested against as broad a range of contexts as possible (Davidson, 1984b, 1990). He further notes that this 'shift from a focus on semantics to one on pragmatics' is counterintuitive in that it 'threatens a certain concept of human autonomy, or the idea that humans choose, in every particular, the meanings that they attribute to the world'. (Why to the 'world' rather than to their 'words'? The fundamental assumption that words are thought of as signs, and hence as signs of something, that suggests there is little difference between assigning meanings to words and assigning them to things in the world.) There is an implicit illicit dichotomy here: either meaning is pragmatically constructed or it is subjective. Many perspectives in the philosophy of language offer alternatives to both.

For introductory overviews of relevant philosophical ideas, written for scholars of religion (Frankenberry and Penner, 1999; Jensen, 2004, 2014); Engler and Gardiner, 2010); Schilbrack, 2014); Gardiner and Engler, 2016); Stausberg and Gardiner, 2016). Thanks to Bill Paden, Michael Stausberg and Bryan Rennie for comments on previous drafts. Translations from French are by Engler. We take the literal sense as that set out in the *OED*: 'That cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; transcending expression; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible.' 'Ineffable' evokes an absolute impossibility of using language to speak of the sacred, not a relative difficulty or challenge in doing to. Other senses of 'ineffable' – for example, that which should not be spoken or mentioned, or that which is difficult to pronounce – are not relevant here. Rehman equates ineffability and ambiguity in this passage, but this muddies the waters. The *impossibility* of speaking about X is different from the word 'X' having multiple senses or referents. The latter case presents a complex way of speaking about X, but it is still a way of speaking. If the sacred is just *hard* to talk about, it is not ineffable. Not so far out of context – Wittgenstein claimed that his 'said-shown' distinction pointed to mysticism: 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical' (Wittgenstein, 1922).

We are not offering an exegesis of Eliade. He can be and is read in different ways, with variant readings resting on different semantic assumptions. Our possible reading of selected passages illustrates the experienced sacred, though other passages arguably exemplify the polarized view discussed below. To illustrate the ways that different views can be present in or attributed to a given complex thinker, here

are two other 'Eliadean' views of the sacred (emphasizing metaphysics rather than semantics). (i) Eliade has a Kantian view, that the sacred is one of the categories of experience; the mind, as it were, is pre-structured by it as a precondition for being able to experience something as sacred: 'Eliade sees the sacred as an element in the structure of consciousness' (Colpe, 1987, 2005, 7975). On this view, to understand 'sacred' is not to glimpse some objective or noumenal object, but rather to understand how this category figures into judgments of sacrality. (ii) Eliade has a Platonic view, that the 'sacred' is a pure Form, an objective essence that all and only sacred things participate in. The Eliadean 'hierophany' is just this relationship – a manifestation of The Sacred Itself in certain ordinary objects/events, each of which 'has' that property in defective ways: 'Each historical religious expression is a limited and mutilated reflection of the archetype, and each is presumed to contribute one piece to the assembly of this meta-theology. Comparison of all expressions would make it possible to reconstitute 'plenary forms,' the totality of which would portray a 'morphology of the sacred' (Borgeaud, 1994). On the Platonic view, in contrast to the Kantian model, the sacred is a real thing, and one that we can directly apprehend or have knowledge of, with the right kind of training. This view is often called *semantic internalism* in the philosophy of language (Stausberg and Gardiner, 2016). The main idea is that meaningfulness depends only on facts about language users. One obvious disanalogy is that there seems to be no sense-organ associated with this 'sixth sense.' It seems clear, though, that Kripal intends the sacred to be *sui generis* in some sense: the experience of (i) is not merely a concatenation of ordinary sense-based sensations. We will return to the problem of *sui genericity* later. Kripal's discussion of 'experience' and 'sacred' invites comparison with Bertrand Russell's analysis of 'sentences' and 'truth.' The parallel to Russell is perhaps clearest when Kripal argues as follows: 'UFO encounters ... are not what they seem to be. They symbolize. They translate across metaphysical orders. They reveal the sacred in the mode and code of the day' (Kripal, 2010). Russell analyzed truth, a relationship between language and reality, by pushing past the particularities of, say, English to get to the logical structure of all languages; Kripal, reading Méheust, analyzes 'sacred' – seen as a relation between sacred-experience and sacred-reality – by pushing past the particularities of one cultural mode of representation to get to a universal or 'logical' structure.

This assumption is often labelled *representationalism* or *referentialism* in the philosophy of language. The main idea is that meaning is a function of what language is about or what words refer to, which presupposes a relatively direct relation between word and world. In the case of Eliade, it would be a red herring to quibble over (i) whether he holds that language refers to the sacred (substantive form) or to experiences that are sacred (adjectival form) or (ii) whether he is concerned with religious language or religious behaviour: all these views presuppose referentialism, insofar as our focus is on the meaning of 'sacred.'

Both camps presuppose representationalism or referentialism. The prominence of an unsophisticated view of this sort is related to problematic appeals to the map/territory metaphor in the study of religion (Gardiner and Engler, 2010). Non-

representational semantic theories, especially holistic variants, offer a way past this and related impasses (on holism in the study of religion see Penner, 1994, 1999; Godlove, 1989, 2014; Davis, 2007, 2012; Engler and Gardiner, 2010; Frankenberry, 2014; Gardiner and Engler, 2016). There are important resonances between holistic semantic theories and other influential theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of religion: e.g., hermeneutics, poststructuralism, deconstruction and grounded theory (Penner, 1986; Wheeler, 1986, 1993; Malpas, 1992; Peregrin, 2001; McDowell, 2002; Engler, 2011c). This will be unloaded in the following two sections as follows:

Semantic holism is most often contrasted with semantic atomism. Atomists hold that basic semantic units, most usually individual words, have their meanings independently of the meaning of other semantic units, whereas semantic holism locates meaning at a broader level, ranging from an indefinite network of linked units to an entire language ... [It sees] meaning as inherently dynamic: where meaning is defined in terms of a broad network of relations between words, sentences, beliefs, etc., the inherent changeability of those relations implies that meaning necessarily has a certain open-ended quality. (Engler and Gardiner, 2010, 285) This is not a confusion between the polarizing and ineffabilist views; it shows what happens if they are combined. *Sui generis* echoes various well-known debates. Our purpose is not to take sides in those debates but to show how they relate to the kinds of semantic assumptions that are our focus. The referential/non-referential distinction is different from the atomist/holist one. Our point in the previous section was that the polarized sacred *points* to the sacred (hence the assumption of referentialism) via exploiting the *meaning* of relations with the profane (hence the assumption of holism). That is, the polarizer still wants us to get to the thing itself.

One of our readers asked, 'If the referent is the attribution (not some independent ontology) can that referent still be *sui generis* despite the very different "commitments" (does that mean beliefs?) of different groups?' We are not suggesting that referents can shift from one sort of thing to another sort of thing. Rather, we point out the potential value of understanding concepts in non-referential terms: independent from asserting, for example, that their meaning-conferring referents are belief-attributions. Meaning can be independent of the issue of reference. This is not to deny that words can refer to all sort of things (as we acknowledge in the text, right after this note); it is just to highlight that we can make sense of religious language while bracketing the issue of whether there are real things 'out there' to which the words refer. A non-referential approach to meaning lurks among the semantic assumptions that we find in our selection of discussions of 'sacred.' Dictionary-style definitions assume atomism; holism thinks of definition in very different ways (Stausberg and Gardiner, 2016). On a related note, a relational, holistic reading of the meaning of 'Otto,' 'Girard' or 'Eliade' would acknowledge that there is no such thing as the one true reading of these scholars' work. Some readings are more defensible – for example, based on close, consistent interpretation of a more complete corpus and a fuller set of influences, in more languages, etc. – but the process of interpretation is open-ended (Gardiner, 2013).

4. Conclusion

In sum, the analysis shows that blessing and the sacred cannot be adequately understood through a single referential model of meaning. Their meanings are shaped by historical usage, linguistic relations, religious practices, belief attributions, and interpretive contexts. Referential approaches remain useful when religious expressions are treated as pointing toward entities, experiences, or states of affairs, while holistic and contextual approaches explain how meaning can operate without first resolving the ontological status of those referents. The concepts of blessing and the sacred can therefore be studied meaningfully while questions about independently existing sacred realities remain open. Semantics matters to the study of religion because different theories of meaning influence how religious expressions, experiences, and practices are interpreted.

References

- [1] Blank, A., & Koch, P. (2013). *Historical semantics and cognition*. Walter de Gruyter.
- [2] Borgeaud, P. (1988). *The cult of pan in Ancient Greece*. The University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2005). A tall tale in defense of semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism. *Contextualism in Philosophy*, 197–219. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199267408.003.0008>
- [4] Colpe, Carsten. [1987] 2005. "The Sacred and the Profane." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, Vol. 12: 7964–7978. Detroit, MI: MacMillan Reference.
- [5] Dummett, M. (1991). *The logical basis of metaphysics*. Harvard University Press.
- [6] Fodor, J. A., & LePore, E. (1996). *Holism: A shopper's guide*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [7] Grice, H. P. (1957). Meaning. *The Philosophical Review*, 66(3), 377. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182440>
- [8] Kripal, J. J. (2010). *Authors of the impossible: The paranormal and the sacred*. University of Chicago Press.
- [9] Kripke, S. A. (1980). *Naming and necessity*. Harvard University Press.
- [10] Liberman, A. (2008). *An analytic dictionary of English etymology: An introduction*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [11] Olivelle, P. (2009). *Dharma: Studies in its semantic, cultural and religious history*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [12] Stausberg, M., & Engler, S. (2016). *The Oxford handbook of the study of religion*. Oxford University Press.
- [13] Streib, H., & Ralph W. Hood, J. (2015). *Semantics and psychology of spirituality: A cross-cultural analysis*. Springer.
- [14] Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Binkert North.
- [15] Zimmermann, T. E., & ternefeld, W. (2013). *Introduction to semantics: An essential guide to the composition of meaning*. Walter de Gruyter.
- [16] Albinus, L. (2015). The limitation of truth-semantics in the understanding of religion. *Method*

- [17] & *Theory in the Study of Religion*, 27(4-5), 447-474. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341344>
- [18] Davis, G. S. (2018). Semantics and the study of religion. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 30(4-5), 378-401. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341425>
- [20] Donnellan, K., Almog, J., & Leonardi, P. (1966). Reference and definite descriptions. *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind*, 3-30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199857999.003.0001>
- [22] Frege, G. (1975). The thought: A logical inquiry. *Logic and philosophy for linguists*, 279-298. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111546216-018>
- [23] Gottlob Frege. (1948). Sense and reference. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 57(No. 3), 209-230. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2181485>
- [24] Gardiner, M. Q. (2013). The semiotics of religion: Reflections from a semanticist. *Religion*, 44(1), 114-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721x.2014.866185>
- [25] Gardiner, M. Q. (2018). Why truth matters for the study of religion: A defense of a truth-conditional semantics. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 30(4-5), 402-424. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341426>
- [26] Gardiner, M. Q., & Engler, S. (2016). Semantics. *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, 194-207. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198729570.013.14>
- [27] Gardiner, M. Q., & Engler, S. (2022). Religion, translation, semantics 1. *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Religion*, 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315443485-3>
- [28] Morris, C. W. (1939). Esthetics and the theory of signs. *Erkenntnis*, 8(1), 131-150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00176021>
- [29] Penner, H. H. (1995). Why does semantics matter to the study of religion? *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 7(2), 221-249. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006895x00405>
- [30] Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, truth and history*. Cambridge University Press.
- [31] Szabó, L. E. (2017). Meaning, truth, and physics. *European Studies in Philosophy of Science*, 165-177. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55486-0_9
- [32] Smith, Ranesha, "The Etymology of bless" (2014). 2014 IPFW Student Research and Creative Endeavor Symposium. Book 14. http://opus.ipfw.edu/stu_symp2014/14
- [33] Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- [34] Evans, G., McDowell, J., & McDowell, J. H. (1999). *Truth and meaning: Essays in semantics*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- [35] Quine, W. V. (1960). *Word and object*. MIT Press.