

From Theolinguistics to Critical Theolinguistics: The Case for Communicative Probity¹

Jean-Pierre van Noppen, *Université Libre de Bruxelles*

Faith is undeniably more a matter of how people live than how they talk; and it would be an overstatement to say that religion is simply and exclusively a matter of language; but it must be granted that religion as we know it is, in many respects, a linguistic enterprise, and that language is an indispensable instrument for understanding the ways in which faith is experienced, expressed, and practised: the central statements of the belief system are recorded in a canon of writings, and reading, reciting, studying and commenting on these authoritative texts is part and parcel of religious behaviour. Other activities in Christian life and worship, such as praying, hymn-singing, meditating, preaching, praising, blessing, forgiving, confessing one's belief, excommunicating, theologising and many other practices are, first and foremost, forms of linguistic behaviour, which may be described as different sorts of speech acts, in which language not only means things to people, but is actually used to carry out certain actions.

Yet, even though faith and religion cannot live without language, the relationship between them often seems to be a tense, strained one, not least because religious expression centres—directly or indirectly—around the concept *God*. To philosophers of language, this implicit or explicit reference to a transcendent divinity makes religious discourse 'problematic' in that it supposes a logical status which distinguishes religious propositions from expressions referring to, say, tables and chairs (the most hackneyed examples), and does not allow empirical verification of its assertions. But then again, not all human discourse can be boiled down to verifiable statements: the languages of, say,

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poetry, love, or metaphysics would be open to the same indictment; but the question whether the divine and transcendent can be referred to in a language 'normally' designed to cater for this-worldly human situations and realities deserves some critical attention nevertheless. The argument of 'ineffability' may be used in two senses with radically different corollaries: when understood as 'a sense-content that cannot be expressed at all', the principle is bound to result in a kind of linguistic agnosticism—Wittgenstein's '*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen*'. If, on the other hand, 'ineffable' is understood as 'that which cannot be expressed directly, literally, completely or properly in ordinary language', there remains a possibility of referring, albeit tentatively, to God.

The adverb 'normally' and the phrase 'ordinary language', however, entail an implicit value judgment on the meaningful and valid use of human linguistic resources. While the optimistic philosophical answer to ineffability is '*Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen*' or Boileau's '*Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement...*', any possibility of discourse about the divine will still have to be guarded rather carefully against charges of meaninglessness. It has been, in our view, the error of logical positivists and empirical verificationists to judge God-language against criteria that hold mainly within the perspective of the physical sciences. The basis for the refusal to assign any truth-value to theological statements (as, for that matter, to any metaphysical proposition) and for regarding them as a misuse of language is the fact that utterances like, say, 'God exists' cannot be proven true or false when the cognitive import of the statements cannot be adequately assessed by relying upon sense-experience or, more specifically, upon 'religious experience' which, being private, is neither verifiable nor communicable.

If God-talk and much other religious language do not obey all the rules governing truth-valued propositions, and if the divine cannot be spoken about in literal, univocal terms, the language must, if it is to make sense, respond to some logic able to account for 'meaningful non-propositionality'; a logic, moreover, which can be demarcated and understood, lest religious discourse should become a hermetic and incommunicable private language. If the meaning of religious language is to be accessible to humans, it must be human-centred, i.e. not require an unusual kind of semantics reposing on extralinguistic revelation (Güttgemans 1973). For this reason also, claims on truth-value in theology must be qualified as tentative: human discourse about the

divine bears on one side of the Man/God relationship only; and in this sense, part of the infinite qualitative difference may indeed be regarded as beyond human expression.

For the sake of completeness, it must be pointed out that beside the cognitivist and the experiential-expressive accounts of religious language, there has in recent decades emerged a third, postliberal view according to which theological and doctrinal language need not posit a reality prior to its language but constitutes a cultural-linguistic process which precedes and conditions (indeed constructs and regulates) religious experience. In this perspective, the 'truth' of theological propositions is to be assessed intertextually with regard to their coherence within a system rather than with regard to any objective (empirical) or subjective (experiential) reality (Lindbeck 1984).

Another characteristic feature of Christian discourse is its dependence on assertions and statements recorded in a number of texts, i.e. in the Scriptures and traditional statements of faith and doctrine, which are regarded (albeit with varying degrees of intensity) as having authority in matters of faith. The importance of these texts as a primary source of Christian theology and as the basic expression of the belief system explains, at least in part, the archaic character of much religious language; linguistic conservatives express the fear (apparently motivated by the conviction that 'the map is the territory' rather than a codified representation) that if one starts fiddling with the linguistic representation of what is held to be the eternal and immutable substance of faith, its reality will eventually be altered or misrepresented. Another form of reticence to modern reformulation of religious texts will be voiced by those who feel that the grandiloquence and beauty of the text attests to its sacred, numinous character, or adds an air of 'mystery' which helps to maintain the distinction between the realm of the religious and the world of ordinary profane endeavours.

At the other end of the spectrum we find those who give the message priority over the form, who feel that the antiquated language is an obstacle to communication, and who would bring it up to date to make the Biblical message more acceptable to all and sundry. Taking the contemporary addressee's sensitivity as the main (or sole) criterion, may however lead to excessive positions as well: in this manner, whole passages of Scripture and liturgy have been rewritten in order to avoid a presumed sexist bias, apparently without regard for the fact that a different imagery fosters different cultural and affective connotations, and hence, it may be feared, a different perception of the intended

message (van Noppen 2004b). While the Bible translators cannot always reproduce the form of the original, even when its features are relevant to the meaning and use of the text (Chopineau 1980), intellectual honesty demands that they should not alter the original communicative intent—inasmuch, of course, as the author's original intention can be retraced and reconstructed.

To say that religious language is the sociolect of religion is not as much of a tautology as might appear at first sight. Of course, 'Christian language' involves use among a vast body of members, presumably with a solid core of common presuppositions; by their respective status, individual and doctrinal differences may condition the value given to particular terms and propositions ('This is my body' in the sacrament of the Eucharist may be interpreted in terms of both transubstantiation and consubstantiation). In doctrinal language, say, in the creeds, the terms can be interpreted on two largely independent planes: as part of theological expression (where the creeds are used as definitions of a church's doctrine) they enjoy a technical status, while at the level of the non-specialist man-in-the-pew they may be interpreted in an immediate albeit imprecise way. Experimental evidence (Ader 1975) indicates that outside the framework of religious practice, religious words receive a more profane understanding, especially when religious discourse draws (as it often does) on the resources of everyday language.

This lack of uniformity in linguistic response is not surprising when one considers the dichotomy, typical for the Christian religion and found throughout its history, between personal piety in the vernacular and Christian thought and education in Latin (Crystal & Davy 1969: 167). The language of doctrine still carries to lay believers something of the air of a foreign language, incompatible with their own expression of faith. Although this inherent duality may prevail to some extent throughout the whole of religious language, conflicting readings due to disagreement on verbal or propositional meaning are most likely to appear in those situations where the professional and the layman stand in an asymmetric discourse situation, as in much pastoral and missionary preaching, in theological vulgarisation (van Noppen 1981), and not least in conflicts opposing different readings of scripture over ethical or political issues.

And there's the rub—in the discrepancy between approaches, not only between clergy and laymen or theological and freelance lay

interpretations of Scripture, but also between different denominations, theologies, and priorities, or between militants for a variety of issues.

Biblical, theological, literary and linguistic scholarship have offered many insightful and well-informed answers to many of the problems of religious language. Matters of meaning have received answers in terms of exegesis, hermeneutics, and Biblical semantics; matters of reference and truth in terms of analogy, metaphor, myth, and model; matters of authorship in terms of philology and forensic text study; matters of textuality in terms of narrativity, genre, and intertext; matters of language use in terms of language functions, speech acts and different language games; matters of translation in terms of the translator's priorities (to meaning, form, or effect on the target audience); and so on. Yet controversies about the value of religious language, and complaints about its inefficiency, have gone on unabated—albeit with an accent shifting from one function to another, and often with an increasing tendency towards polarization.

And thus, (Christian) religious language remains problematic and controversial. One reason for this seems to be that a theory of (Christian) religious language, no matter how open-ended, cannot accommodate the full variety of religious temperaments (Towler 1984: 1–19) nor, *a fortiori*, the 'natural' but misguided human tendency to cast differences of opinion into two-valued judgments (Hayakawa 1978: 128–140).

Fundamentalists will cling to a univocal reading of what they regard as God's unadulterated word (often in one specific translation or edition); liberals will subject the texts to what they feel is a more scientifically responsible historical criticism, and place the words within a wider perspective of the history of ideas. Pro-lifers and pro-choicers, pro-gay and contra-gay, pro-war and anti-war, pro-property and anti-property lobbies will each in their own domain seek scriptural support for the cause they advocate—both, presumably, with equal sincerity. Moral arguments are often dressed up in a highly selective religious garb to give them an additional authority and credibility they would not enjoy otherwise. The open-minded approach to the subjacent moral choices is that they may be equally valid (at least inasmuch as one is free to adhere to them as one feels proper); the mature approach, (as in stylistics) would be 'I see your point but I disagree' rather than 'I am right and you are wrong' (Dillon 1982: 75); but ideology rarely works that way (Van Dijk 1995).

On the other hand, the use made of Scripture must (as a matter of intellectual honesty) remain faithful to the original text and intention (inasmuch as these may be retraced). At this point, where religious language comes to be fraught with ideology (or vice versa), the emerging discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, van Noppen 2004a) may prove useful—although here too, the instrument should be used with discernment: CDA itself often starts from ideological premises (Fairclough 1989: 32) which sometimes lead to predictable or, worse, foregone conclusions.

The approach, however, which (re)places instances of language within their full co-text, con-text and inter-text may be useful when it is put to the service of communicative probity—to denounce cases of manipulation wherein texts are read according to a system or set of values altogether extraneous to them, or alienated from their original meaning or purpose.

Note that this is not a resurgent form of etymological fallacy—I am not arguing that words and phrases have one historical meaning that should be immutable and intangible. Semantic evolution is a natural process, after all. My argument is that it is an unfair and manipulative use of power to deviate the language of faith and religion from its original purpose and distort it ‘to shape people’s perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept the existing order of things, [...] because they are made to value it as divinely ordained’ (Lukes 1974: 24).

I would like to illustrate this point by means of two very different case examples: the Marxist theory according to which Wesleyan Methodism was used as an instrument in the oppression of the working classes, and George W. Bush’s recourse of religious language and categories to justify (notably) U.S. foreign policy and beyond that, to serve his own electoral purposes.

The instrument I would like to use here is the (somewhat dated, but still useful) ethnographic approach of Dell Hymes, conveniently summarized in his mnemonic SPEAKING. (Hymes 1972, fully implemented in van Noppen 1999). This approach moves beyond the text to take into account (inasmuch as it can be retraced, notably in secondary literature) the full discourse context, that is, not only the more usual stylistic categories of form, content, tone and genre (important as these may be), but also the historical, political and psychological environment, the participants (sender and addressee), their motivations and expectations, their avowed or unavowed purposes, the channels or

media chosen and, importantly, the norms of interpretation. I would like to show how this critical approach can work in (at least) two ways: once, in a 'with-the-text' perspective, to exonerate a religious language (early Methodist discourse) from collusion with political interests, and once, on the other hand, from an 'against-the-text' angle to denounce the possible misuse of the religious idiom for political purposes.

Example 1: The Methodist Work Ethic and Industrial Capitalism

One reproach which has been levelled at the Methodist revival (notably by E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963 [1991]) was that Methodism acted as the handmaid of industrial capitalism, in that it advocated diligence and application in people's vocational life. And it must be granted that by encouraging industrious habits and discouraging idle ones, the Methodist work ethic played straight into the hands of the industrialists, once the Industrial Revolution got under way. The work ethic can be found in the sermons as well as in the hymns, especially in Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs for Children* (1715) a book in frequent use in 18th and 19th century England. Here, the Sun (a), the Bee (b) and the Emmet are held up as examples of relentless activity, and work is viewed as a "calling" (c).

- (a) My God, who mak'st the sun to know His proper hour to rise
And to give light to all below Dost send him round the skies
When from the Chambers of the East His morning race begins
He never tires nor stops to rest But round the world he shines.

So like the sun would I fulfil The business of the day
Begin my work betimes and still March on my heavenly way!
Give me, O Lord, thine early grace Nor let my soul complain,
That the young morning of my days Has all been spent in vain.
(Isaac Watts, 1715)

- (b) How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour
And gather honey all the day from every opening flower!
How skilfully she builds her cell, how neat she spreads her wax
and labours hard to store it well with the sweet food she makes!

In works of labour or of skill I would be busy too
For Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.
In books or work or healthful play let my first years be past,
That I may give for every day some good account at last!
(Isaac Watts, 1715)

- (c) Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go, My daily labour to pursue (...)
 The task thy wisdom hath assigned O let me cheerfully fulfil
 In all my works Thy presence find And prove thy acceptable will.
 (Wesley 1780, Hymn 315)

One could, on the basis of this kind of circumstantial evidence, build up some sort of a case for a religious movement that contributed to the emergence of capitalism.

Placing the excerpts within the framework of Methodist discourse as a whole, however, it appears that Wesley (one of the initiators of the Methodist revival) did not view work in a utilitarian perspective, but primarily as 1) a way for humans to make proper use of the time and talents lent them by God for the duration of their earthly existence, and to be accounted for thereafter; and 2) as a means to be so busily engaged as to refrain from sin ("Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do"): commitment to their work discouraged the men from drinking and betting, made them popular with their work-masters, led to increased responsibility and income, and eventually resulted in more comfortable and happier family lives. Wesley also advocated work as 3) a way to gather the means to practise charity, to aid the poor, and thus to achieve social justice ("Gain all you can, save all you can, and then give all you can", Wesley 1760). He inveighed loudly enough against the accumulation of wealth and material goods to be above all suspicion of capitalist sympathies—something, incidentally, that his Marxist critics fail to mention.

But then again, it must be granted that the 19th-century, post-Wesleyan Methodists increasingly tended to forget the third precept, "give all you can", and adopted a number of bourgeois reflexes quite contrary to Wesley's social programme. These smug attitudes find their reflection in some hymns, too; for instance in Watts' *Sluggard* (d) or in a later Sunday-school hymn (by Cecil Frances Alexander), which suggests that "all things [are] bright and beautiful", even "the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate" (f)—an attitude closer to the Calvinist doctrine of election and its bourgeois interpretation of wealth and comfort as a manifestation of divine favour (e), (cf. van Noppen 2001).

- (d) Said I then to my heart: here's a lesson for me
 the Sluggard's the picture of what I might be
 But thanks to my friends for their care in my breeding

Who taught me betimes to love working and reading.
(Isaac Watts, 1715)

- (e) When'er I take my walks abroad, How many poor I see?
What shall I render to my Lord for all his gifts to me?
While some poor wretches scarce can tell
Where they may lie their head
I have a home wherein to dwell and rest upon my bed.
Are these thy favours day by day to me above the rest?
Then let me love thee more than they and try to serve thee best.
(Isaac Watts, 1715)

- (f) All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful, The Lord God made them all.
The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly, And ordered their estate.
(C.F. Alexander, 1848)

In this instance, the contextualization effected by CDA underscores the need for a more nuanced criticism and allows one to exonerate at least Wesley and the early Methodists from the Marxist accusations of collusion with industrial capitalism.

Example 2: God in George W. Bush's Rhetoric

My second example concerns George W. Bush's use of religious language. I suggest that these references may appear as relatively natural within the framework of U.S. patriotic rhetoric, but that within the configuration of events at the time the statements were made (from the aftermath of 9/11 to the 2004 campaign for the presidency), the president has wrung words out of their religious context to serve non-religious interests.

It has been said that President (George W.) Bush uses religious language more than any president in U.S. history (Wallis 2003). I have no statistics to support this (the Baptist Jimmy Carter was fairly lavish with religious references too), but it is a fact that (especially after September 11th) both Bush's speeches and other off-the-cuff remarks make frequent allusion to God, Scripture and other religious texts.

If we read 'with' rather than 'against' the text (Janks 1997), this is not totally unexpected and not necessarily immoral. Patriotism with a religious flavour is part of the general American ideology: 'basically, the U.S. are a diffuse form of theocracy' (Joly & O'Kelly 1989: 69)—not in the sense of being led by a caste of clergy, but in the sense of

believing that its fate and mission are determined by divine providence—a ‘theocracy’ which inspired George H. Bush (Sr.) to start his inaugural address (Bush 1989) with a prayer asking God to ‘Make us strong to do your work, willing to hear and heed your will,’ and his son George W. Bush to say that ‘we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in his image’ and to talk of a ‘calling’ by ‘Him’, who ‘fills time and eternity with His purpose [which] is achieved in our duty’ (Bush 2001a). George W. Bush’s autobiography (1999) is titled *A Charge to Keep*, a phrase from Wesley (1780, Hymn 309):

A Charge to keep I have / A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save / And fit it for the sky
To serve the present age, / My calling to fulfil:
O may it all my powers engage / To do my Master’s will!

Bush views his own presidency as part of a divine plan. He has been reported as saying, ‘I believe God wants me to be president’ (note the ‘I believe’, which constitutes no external evidence). The idea of a ‘calling’ is a Lutheran idea (the Christian is called to involvement in the world, rather than to withdrawal into a life of contemplation, cf. van Noppen 2000), with the additional component of the individual’s responsibility to make the world a better, kinder place. Charles Wesley’s hymn is inspired by Leviticus 8:35, ‘Keep the charge of the Lord, that ye die not’; but note that in the hymn the ‘charge’ is ‘a God to glorify’—not to ‘do everything we can to protect the American homeland’, as Bush defined his mission (2003c).

The idea of election is Calvinist in nature, and has throughout history been appropriated by various groups and nations—unsurprisingly, always to include themselves among God’s chosen ones and reprove others. After Sept. 11, Bush (rather immodestly) declared that ‘this call of history has come to the right country’ and talked of himself as ‘being chosen by the grace of God to lead at that moment’. Obviously there is neither objective nor scriptural evidence for the election of the U.S. or for the choice of George Bush as the instrument of God’s purpose; nor, *a fortiori*, for the assimilation of the Master’s Will to the global strategy of the US: that is a heavily skewed reading of reality as circumstantial evidence, albeit a recurrent one in American history (Longley 2002). It suggests (but does not argue) a divine sanction of the presidential powers: if the US feels invested with a divine mission to tell ‘the captives’ to ‘come out’ and those in darkness to ‘be free’

(Bush 2003b, cf. Isaiah 49:9) or to 'defend the hopes of all mankind' (Bush 2003a), it is implied that those who question Bush's foreign policy are no longer critics, but blasphemers (Monbiot 2003a).

The Methodist George Bush might, of course, be talking 'in good faith'; I have no right to question that. He declared his initial programme to be one of compassion, charity, and humility, based on the idea that 'everyone belongs and everyone deserves a chance' (Bush 2003a, 2001a). This might be viewed as a secular translation of Wesley's idea of universal grace, but at least one critic suggested that 'compassionate conservatism' was tantamount to offering the poor and the disempowered religion instead of the political power or economic resources they needed (Chernus 2001). What is disturbing, indeed, is how this discourse with its religious resonances is made to tie in with, or is put to the service of strategic, corporate and electoral interests.

As George Monbiot put it (2003b), 'a moral case is not the same as a moral reason: (...) superpowers act out of self-interest, not morality, and the US in Iraq is no different'. U.S. troops would not be fighting in the region if it were the world's leading producer of pudding rather than the repository of the world's largest oil reserves. But the moral case must be made. 'The genius of the hawks has been to accept a fiction as the reference point for debate' (Monbiot 2003b). The deconstruction of this fiction is where the toolkit of CDA may come in useful.

A first point, already mentioned in passing, is the tendency to reduce complex issues to simple binary contrasts for public consumption ('us = good vs. they = bad'). At the onset of the Gulf War in 1991, George Lakoff circulated a paper showing how the metaphorical presentation of the conflict in terms, notably, of a fairy-tale narrative (a hero rescuing a victim from the power of a villain) not only gave U.S. involvement a veneer of acceptability, but moreover polarized opinion in such a manner as to demonize Saddam Hussein (Lakoff 1991). This genre-crossing between political argumentation and narrative reduction inspired Robert Clark to write: 'the narrativisation of Iraqi actions and questions of truth in representation have become the ground where our democracies either survive or fail. Wars always begin with the stories about the Others. (...) The stories we tell can bring happiness or miseries to millions' (Clark 2003).

A two-valued representation in which 'the bad guys are lumped together' (Gallagher 2003) has fostered in the public's mind the

politically convenient fiction of a link between the WTC attacks and Saddam Hussein. According to Deborah Tannen, President Bush has sought to imply this connection to suggest that when they invaded Iraq, the US went to war with the terrorists who attacked them—an amalgam that reportedly went down well with the public: ‘If we like the conclusion, we’re much less critical of the logic.’ John Mueller is quoted in the same article as saying ‘It’s very easy to picture Saddam as a demon. You get a general fuzz going around: people know they don’t like al Qaeda, they are horrified by September 11th, they know this guy is a bad guy, and it’s not hard to put those things together.’ (Milbank & Deane 2003).

The second point is that here as elsewhere, responsibility for human preferences can be allocated to divine authority, without much need for further justification :

[When I came to the church to attend my mother’s funeral], the pastor told me I would have to unplait my hair before he would let me attend. Only women wore plaits, and God would not approve. When I asked him to show me the part of the Bible that says men cannot wear plaits, he told me it was his church and my choice. I took them out. (Younge 2004)

Transposed into the field of military involvement, this yields utterances like :

Since God has blessed you with a homeland, it is a sin to dodge the draft and refuse to give your life for your country (overheard in a U.S. family, 1965).

America must fight Communism in Viet Nam. It is the will of God. (Ron Kovic / Oliver Stone: *Born on the 4th of July*)

or:

This call of history has come to the right country (...) We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history. (Bush 2003a)

What we are seeing today is that these two verbal strategies are combined, and that the two-valued polarities are ‘mythified’, i.e. given a moral and religious dimension. As in Van Dijk’s ideological square, the moral dimension assimilates the polarity *us / them* with the contrast

good / evil, while the religious dimension represents the US role in the contest between good and evil as part of the divine purpose:

Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us [...] The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them. (Bush 2001)

The rhetoric skilfully equates God's and Bush's definitions of freedom and justice, and thus grants the U.S. the status of an instrument in the implementation of God's plans for the world. In this respect, it is interesting to note the role played by U.S. evangelicals in the fight against Evil and the preparation of the Second Coming as projected in Lahaye & Jenkins' Apocalyptic *Left Behind* novels. The links between Iraq, Babylon and the Antichrist figure centrally in the fundamentalist vision of things religious and political, and have been exploited by several 'studies' and less serious websites, one of which even produced a bogus prophecy, allegedly from the Quran 9:11 (note the reference!):

For it is written that a son of Arabia would awaken a fearsome Eagle. The wrath of the Eagle would be felt throughout the lands of Allah and lo, while some of the people trembled in despair still more rejoiced; for the wrath of the Eagle cleansed the lands of Allah; and there was peace. (*Truthorfiction* 2003)

The Quran quote is false. On the other hand, Bush's quotes from the Bible and hymnals are authentic, but dislocated from their original context, pasted together in misleading manners, or employed in ways which distort their meaning.

In his inaugural address (2001a) Bush suggested that 'we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in his image.' This calls for two comments :

1. Divine guidance is a matter of faith, and not necessarily a criticable idea provided one does not project into it one's own desires and aspirations: John Wesley (1746) cautioned that 'the presumptuous, self-deceiving Christian may mistake the voice of his own desire and imagination for the voice of God,' and that the visible 'evidence' of the Spirit resided in its outward 'fruits' (as described in Galatians 5:22—not in military victories or strengthened strategic positions).

2. The Enlightenment's conviction that all men are born/created equal has found its expression in the Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In its religious form (e.g. Galatians 3:28) it undoubtedly underlies Wesley's theology of grace 'for all' willed, but not imposed, by God. Bush's clause 'a power who creates us equal in his image', however (besides the strange choice of tense) introduces a relationship of analogy that has no scriptural counterpart. One easy misreading of the formula (hopefully, not a deliberately induced one) is a form of national self-deification, whereby 'we' are created equal not *in*, but *to* the divine image; in Monbiot's words, 'America no longer needs to call upon God; it *is* God, and those who go abroad to spread the light do so in the name of a celestial domain' (Monbiot 2003a).

On the first anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks, President Bush said at Ellis Island, 'This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.' While the 'glow from a fire that lights the world' has, since John Kennedy's inaugural, become a U.S. ideological cliché, the last two sentences are straight out of John's gospel. But in the gospel the light shining in the darkness is the Word of God, and the light is the light of Christ. It is not about America and its values.

In the 2003 State of the Union, the president evoked an easily recognized and quite famous line from an old gospel hymn. Speaking of America's deepest problems, Bush said, 'The need is great. Yet there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.' But that is not what the song is about. The hymn says there is 'power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb'. The hymn is about the power of Christ in salvation, not the power of the American people, or any people, or any country. Bush's citation was a complete misuse. (Wallis 2003)

Could this strategy possibly be intended to fulfil a further purpose? America is—obviously and understandably—traumatized by 9/11, and seeking solace in religion and patriotism, both of which provide a much-needed certainty. George Bush's unambiguous use of terms like 'evildoers' was felt to convey just this sense of strength and certainty (rather than critical reflection), and to make Americans feel there was a moral, and even divine cause to be defended ('We were targeted because we're the brightest beacon for freedom'). It was a politically astute way of rallying Americans around a cause. Talk of a

nation chosen by God to set things right in the world certainly makes good epideictic rhetoric, intended to reassure and trigger a positive response. It conveys a sense of unity, it makes people 'feel good', gives them a sense of purpose (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 198: 67), and is even likely to be expected and approved of by a substantial part of the Christian-conservative electorate. There are an estimated 90 million evangelical Christians in the US (Sutherland 2004). 40% of the population are white evangelical Christians, arguably the most important single constituency in the US, a significant proportion of whom have backed the policies and the candidacy of a president whose idiom resonated with them as a matter of faith. Of course, 'evangelicals' should not be regarded as one monolithic unit: here as elsewhere, people display different degrees of religious commitment and of religious belief ranging from conservative to moderate, and not all evangelicals adhere to the same values or are sensitive to the same issues. If, as has been increasingly suspected and suggested, the recourse to religious language was a strategy, it seems to have worked for some, and not for others. Some pastors and their churches on the receiving end declared they would 'do everything within the law to get Bush re-elected' (Borger 2004), while others voiced fears that Bush was representing the war on Iraq as a holy crusade, and/or insisted on the constitutional separation between church and state (Frontline 2004). But in a race which was expected to be a lot closer than it turned out to be, the evangelical constituency constituted a solid body of political support which helped tilt the scales towards George W. Bush's victory in the November 2004 presidential elections.

Conclusion: the Case for Communicative Probity

In the first example, I have argued that the criticism levelled at Methodism wrung the texts Wesley used or wrote out of the context within which they were originally meant to operate, and ignored the religious meaning and purpose with which they were actually invested. On the other hand, in the second example, I criticised President Bush's use of religious and Biblical texts invested with new meanings or otherwise reconfigured to serve secular purposes. In either case, the original meaning of the text was distorted and alienated from its original communicative intent. One of the purposes of CDA is to denounce such cases of manipulation—communicative honesty demands that the language of faith and religion (or any text for that matter) should not

be deviated from its original aim in order to serve purposes extraneous to it.

I believe that this kind of 'critical' approach is part of the role that linguists can usefully play in today's society. There was a time when philologists held a high-profile position in society, when they could decipher and give access to the sacred texts which helped shape people's thought and action. Today they fill a much more modest niche, where they command a smaller audience and force less respect, admiration and interest than, say, scholars who clone sheep, discover vaccines, or develop processor units that are even faster, lighter and (sometimes) cheaper than the previous ones. Yet there remains an essential function that the linguist is pre-eminently qualified to fulfil in a free society, namely to give people the necessary language-awareness to cast a critical glance on the verbal universe in which they live, and in which they are constantly showered with myriads of messages which deliberately or unwittingly affect their cognition, thought and ideology. In Clark's terms, again, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that literary and linguistic studies must remain 'blessedly remote from politics'.

The second remark is also committed to communicative probity, but at a different level: If there is a 'misuse' of religious language, is there a 'proper' use, and if so, what is it? I would be tempted to give a rather Wesleyan answer. Let it not be a language that judges, divides, or excludes. Let it not even be a language that fills churches or collection plates—any good PR manual could do that. Let it be, above all, a language that 'changes hearts' and thus, as Wesley said, 'changes lives'—a language that makes a difference in the world, but a difference for the better.

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