
On Strata of Meaning in Religious Discourse

1. Properly religious utterances are cognitively meaningful, in that, whatever else they may be used to do, they function to give an explicit answer to the question of faith, understood as the question about the ultimate meaning of human existence. Religious utterances function to give explicit answer to this question by simultaneously expressing a metaphysic, or comprehensive understanding of reality as a whole, and an ethic, or comprehensive understanding of the authentic human possibility--each of these, as Geertz argues, implying the other and, in part, deriving its own authority from it. Even so, just as religion is no more merely a metaphysic than it is merely an ethic, but, rather, is a unique form of culture cognate with both, so religious utterances are cognitively meaningful in their own distinctive way. Given an understanding of philosophy in general as centrally concerned with the questions of meaning and truth, it follows that a properly philosophical study of religion must be concerned, above all, with the distinctive cognitivity of religious utterances, or, if you will, with the distinctive way in which, whatever other kinds of meaning they may have, they so mean that the question of their truth, and hence of their distinctive kind of truth, is both a possible and necessary question.

2. But now, if religious utterances are in some way used so as to lay claim to being true, and hence cognitively meaningful, one of their most distinctive traits is that many, if not all, of them disavow any claim to be literally true, in the sense that their terms and categories are not used in exactly the same way in which those same terms and categories are otherwise used. As a matter of fact, this use of terms and categories in a nonliteral, symbolic way is so prominent a trait of religious utterances that some students contend that the only way in which religious utterances use language is a nonliteral, symbolic way.

3. The difficulty with this contention, however, is that it jars against the claim that religious utterances are in some way cognitively meaningful. For if the only way in which religious utterances can use terms and categories is a nonliteral, symbolic way, there is no reason to suppose that they can use language at all for the purpose of making claims that can in some way be true. Otherwise put, if the only use of language in religious utterances is a nonliteral symbolic use, there is no way to establish that their use of language is a proper use of language at all, as distinct, simply, from being a misuse of it, or the use of it for some other, altogether noncognitive purpose(s).

4. The logic of the case, then, is this. If religious utterances can in some way be meaningful and true, even though at least some of them, admittedly, involve a nonliteral, symbolic use of language, there has to be the possibility of distinguishing more than one stratum on which such language is cognitively meaningful. Conversely, unless there are multiple strata on which religious language is used to make claims to truth, either one must maintain that all religious language is used literally and nonsymbolically, or else concede that religious utterances in no way serve to express claims that in some way at least could be true. Believing, as I do, then, both that religious utterances are in some way cognitively meaningful, and that many of them, at least, are distinguished by a nonliteral, symbolic use of language in expressing their claims to truth, I have no alternative but to pursue the hypothesis that there are, indeed, multiple strata of cognitive meaning in religious language. (In principle, one might conceivably argue that, insofar as religious utterances use terms and categories nonliterally, the use to which they put them is a noncognitive use. On this argument, religious utterances are cognitively meaningful only insofar as they use language literally, and noncognitively meaningful

insofar as they use language symbolically. But, while I would not deny that there are data that lend support to such an argument, I incline to think that there are other data that tell against it. If there are few, if any, cases where literal language is used noncognitively, there certainly appear to be a great many cases where nonliteral language is used cognitively.)