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incorporating The Kingsman

TWO KINDS OF AMBIGUITY

Malcolm Torry

What kind of language is appropriate to religion?—and, in particular, to Christian faith?

This is a problem which Christian faith shares with every other area of life—for *all* language is a problem. Words have shifting definitions—and these definitions themselves are expressed in words with shifting definitions. There is never a relationship between an object and a word without some question arising about that relationship.

In our talk about everyday life, we employ all manner of different kinds of language—analogy, (approximate) description, story, sarcasm, ambiguity, negative definition, etc. Our language does actually communicate (—though it will not convey *exactly* what we *intend* it to convey); and because it approximately communicates what we intend it to communicate, we continue to use it.

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Are there right and wrong kinds of language? In this article I intend simply to begin the discussion by asking what kinds of language we ought *not* to use.

Language which intends to be exact description (as opposed to language which just *looks* like exact description) is problematical in any sphere—and should therefore be excluded from our religious discourse.

Perhaps the next most problematical area is 'ambiguity'.

An 'ambiguity' is an "equivocal expression. a doubtful or double meaning."¹ An ambiguity intends *not* to be clear.

In everyday life, there are two kinds of ambiguity. The first occurs where the two possible meanings of the statement can be expected to be grasped by the person communicated to. Then the ambiguity can be clever, and possibly amusing—and can provoke thought about the

relationship between the two meanings. The second occurs where only *one* of the two possible meanings of the statement can be expected to be grasped by the person communicated to. Then the ambiguity can become simple dishonesty.

Do these same two uses exist in *religious* discourse? I shall discuss three examples before attempting an answer.

My first example is Matthew 5:17-20.

¹⁷Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.²

For a long time it has been recognized that the arrangement of the short sayings in Matthew's Gospel reveals the writer's theology, but scholars have disagreed as to what point is being made in the passage we have chosen to consider. Jesus had come to 'fulfil' (plērōsai—v.17) the law—but in what sense to fulfil? One of the following three interpretations has generally been chosen by successive commentators of the first gospel—

(a) that Jesus had come to carry out the law,³

(b) that Jesus had come to reveal the true meaning of the law, to refine it, and to give to it a focus—the command to love,⁴

(c) that Jesus fulfilled the promises found in the Old Testament.⁵

All three of these interpretations regard the Old Testament law as still valid.

My hypothesis is that the gospel-writer, in his arrangement of what appear to be four originally quite separate sayings, is suggesting that Jesus completely overthrew the old law, and introduced his own new and eternally valid 'law of love'. I

also believe that, because there were people in the writer's congregation who were still devoted to the old law, he had to say this carefully, and that he found ambiguity the best way to do it.

The passage is certainly ambiguous—

v.17—The difficulty experienced in interpreting *plērōsai* suggests not simply that we cannot *discover* the clear meaning which the word possessed in this context, but that it never *had* a clear meaning with reference to this saying. The verse could mean either that the law is to be radically changed, or that it is valid as it stands and is to receive Jesus' total obedience—or anything between these two extremes. Neither is *katalusai* ('to abolish') univocal. The Greek word need not mean 'to destroy utterly', but simply 'to dismantle' (i.e., in preparation for a subsequent rebuilding out of the same material). The word's only other use in the gospels is in the context of sayings concerning the destruction of the temple—and, especially considering that these sayings may well refer to Jesus' person, they could well indicate a dismantlement in preparation for a better reconstruction.

v.18—If this gospel took this verse from the source that Luke took Lk. 16:17 from, then the 'till all is accomplished' (*hēos an panta genētai*) has been added by our writer. This last phrase does not refer to the end of all things, as that would be tautologous; but it might mean that the old law is valid until *what the law demands* has been 'accomplished'. Might the evangelist be suggesting that this 'accomplishment' has already taken place in Jesus' ministry, and that it is therefore *now legitimate* for 'dots' and 'iotas' to 'pass from the law' if that law is found to be less than perfect?

v.19—The 'commandments' referred to can be either those of the old or of the new law.⁶ 'These commandments' could just as easily refer to the Beatitudes as to the Old Testament Law.

v.20—The 'righteousness' which is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees might be that which is impossible within the confines of the old law, and which is defined in terms of the new 'law of love'.

Matthew's Gospel does portray Jesus as abolishing the old law—written and oral together.

To take one example. Jesus dismisses the Pentateuchal food laws in one sentence—"Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth

defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."⁷ Yet, to the Jew, these laws stood on the same footing as the prohibitions against sorcery, blasphemy, and adultery, to name but a few. It is clear that Jesus overthrew the imperfect code in order to make way for the new 'law of love'—the law of the kingdom which he was to bring in by his death, resurrection and Parousia.⁸

Why did Mt. 5:17-20 *need* to be ambiguous? It may be that *Jesus* was ambiguous; or it may be that the gospel-writer was ambiguous.

That Jesus was ambiguous with reference to the law seems quite probable. The passage's meaning, at face value, is that the law is eternally valid. But Jesus expounded such antitheses as those we find recorded in Mt. 5:21ff . . . Jesus did not want to alienate those who were devoted to the old law; rather he wanted them to understand his mission and to embrace the Kingdom of God. But he did not want to leave men within the fetters of the old law once they had seen the possibility of the new freedom of obedience to himself.

That the gospel-writer was ambiguous with reference to the law seems equally likely. Like Jesus, he did not want to alienate those members of his community who were still devoted to the old law. But he, like Jesus, wanted Christians to embrace the new 'freedom for obedience' which Jesus offered.

Jesus, in his ministry, brought physical and spiritual rescue. He abolished the Old Testament law and replaced it with his 'law of love'—the love which his ministry and Passion embodied, and which he invites his disciples to give back to him in their confession of him as Lord and in their lives of obedience. The Church neglects this revolution at its peril. The gospel which must be preached is one of release from physical and spiritual imprisonment, and not one of adherence to a set of moral instructions. It is the *response* to this release which takes the form of obedience to the new 'law of love'—an obedience which is directed towards a living Christ rather than towards a dead code.

Our communication of this revolution must be like that of Jesus and the gospel-writer. The law of love demands that no-one be alienated—and that the invitation to abandon an old law

and to take on a new be firmly given. Jesus and the gospel-writer have sanctioned purposeful ambiguity as the solution to this communicational problem.

My second example of ambiguity in religious discourse is Rudolf Bultmann's treatment of 'Jesus Christ'—and especially his use of the word 'Jesus'.

'Jesus Christ' is an 'eschatological event'⁹—an event which transcends world history, one which is attached to no one particular time and thus one which can have significance for me here and now, in my existential situation.¹⁰ Such an event is 'historical'—but by this Bultmann does not mean what most scholars would mean by 'the historical event of Jesus Christ'. He means that 'Jesus Christ' is an event which happens for me now—in the context of *my* history, rather than in the context of Palestine's history nearly two thousand years ago.

Bultmann talks a great deal about the 'Jesus' the New Testament talks about. This man was a not very special rabbi who talked about God's kingdom and who died on a cross—though Bultmann does not think that we can know anything certain about him. This 'Jesus' is the content of the Church's preaching now, and it is as we listen to the Church's preaching (which is the same as that of the apostles) that God's Word comes to us. *This* is the paradox of the Christian Faith—that in the context of a man's action now (preaching) God's Word comes. It is not God coming as a particular man which is the paradox.

So what does Bultmann *mean* when he uses the word 'Jesus'?

Bultmann says that "the natural man has the stumbling-block to overcome of a chance historical event coming forward with the claim that it is the revelation of God."¹¹ But *which* historical event? We must remember that the Word's coming to me now is a 'historical event'—it is a part of *my* history.

Bultmann talks about "the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, to whom faith must look."¹² Is this the Jesus of nineteen hundred years ago? or is it the Jesus who comes to us now in the Church's preaching? *That* is a 'historical figure', as far as Bultmann is concerned—for the preaching is man's word and God's Word—and the 'man's word' has a content—'Jesus'.

"The Word of God is not some mysterious oracle, but a sober, factual account of a human life, of Jesus of Nazareth, possessing saving efficacy for man."¹³ Is this 'factual account of a human life' anything other than a sermon preached today? We must remember that Bultmann does not think we can know anything about the Jesus of history—and that this does not matter. He *certainly* does not think that the Jesus of history can have 'saving efficacy'. Bultmann thus means here that, on the human side, God's Word is a sermon, holding out to us the need for decision. R.C. Roberts says that we either accept this interpretation of the passage, or we must say that Bultmann is here guilty of gross inconsistency.¹⁴

Roberts concludes that 'Jesus' "has now become a cipher for the concreteness, the 'historical', the here-and-now character of the kerygma, the fact that it confronts me in the moment."¹⁵

Bultmann's theological and philosophical commitments have led him to insist on a qualitative difference between God and the world. The only contact between the two is in the Word which comes to a man in his concrete situation.

A definitive God-man encounter in a particular man back in world history is no part of Bultmann's Christian faith. But Bultmann wants to be regarded as a Christian theologian. He believes that by using the insights of both dialectical theology and of existentialist philosophy he can be both true to God and relevant to man. However, many Christians find his doctrine not a little unpalatable—and it would be even less palatable if he were to *admit* what he simply must believe if he is to be consistent—that, if Jesus of Nazareth had not lived, the sermon could still be preached, the Word could still come, and we could still be lifted from inauthentic to authentic existence—and thus the Christian Gospel would be unchanged.

Bultmann uses the word 'Jesus' in a way which will look familiar to many Christians—but, to those who can grasp the direction of his thought, 'Jesus' will be seen for what it is—a cipher for the present historical context in which God's Word comes to us.

My third example of purposeful ambiguity is nearer to us both geographically and tempo-

rally—it is the title of the book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*.¹⁶

My point in relation to this book is a simple one—the use of ‘myth’ in the title is ambiguous. Anyone who has sufficient inclination and theological background to read the book will give the word one meaning; anyone who simply reads the title will give it another.

The very fact that Maurice Wiles takes a whole chapter to tell us what ‘myth’ means proves that the word’s definition is by no means easy even for a theologian—but I believe Bultmann to be representative when he says that “mythology is the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side.”¹⁷ But *Chambers’ Twentieth Century Dictionary* gives a variety of meanings—1. “an ancient traditional story of gods or heroes, especially one offering an explanation of some fact or phenomenon:” 2. “a story with a veiled meaning:” 3. “mythical matter: a figment: a commonly-held belief that is untrue, or without foundation.” We must remember that a dictionary’s only task is to record meanings actually in circulation; it does not aim to tell us what the word *ought* to mean for us. The first couple of definitions here refer to ‘stories’—and the Incarnation, to most people, is a dogma, and not a story. Thus, the non-theological member of the public, reading the title of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, can only go away with the third set of meanings in his mind. He will think that the writers have declared to be false the very foundation of Christian Faith. The writers may well have done nothing of the sort—but the title-reader will not know that.

The writers have engaged in ambiguity. They have done this to be provocative (—to create debate, and not to sell copies, I hope). The *careful* reader will find the title a focus for his thoughts about the use of the language of ‘incarnation’—the non-careful or non-theologically-literate reader of the title will think that he knows what the writers mean.

In the introduction, we distinguished between two types of ambiguity—1. that which is ambiguous to both parties in the conversation, and 2. that which is ambiguous to the speaker, but univocal to the hearer. It is now clear that the

two sorts do exist in religious discourse.

Our first example is of the first type—with maybe a touch of the second. A ‘new law’ was expected at the End of the Age—and any Jew meditating on Mt. 5:17-20 and on the rest of the gospel could reasonably be expected to appreciate the ambiguity, and to learn from it. Nowadays this is not the case—but this does not affect the original intention of the ambiguity.

Our second example is of the first type for some, and of the second type for others. Anyone familiar with the theological presuppositions underlying Bultmann’s work will see the ambiguity in his use of the word ‘Jesus’ and will learn from it. Anyone *unfamiliar* with Bultmann’s presuppositions will not see the ambiguity, and may well go away with a false impression of what Bultmann thinks of the Jesus of history.

Our third example is similar to the second. Some will understand the ambiguity in the use of the word ‘myth’, and will learn from it. Others will gain a false impression of what the writers believe, simply because they do not have the theological background to enable them to grasp both sides of the ambiguity.

In everyday life, we judge the first kind of ambiguity we mentioned to be admissible, the second not. In that our second and third examples each contain elements of both sorts, and predominantly the second sort (—for the non-theological audience is larger than the theologically-literate), they must come under scrutiny. In that they contain elements of the first sort, they cannot be immediately condemned as dishonest. But neither can they be regarded as wholly honest pieces of religious discourse.

Malcolm Torry

1. *Chambers’ Twentieth Century Dictionary*.
2. Revised Standard Version.
3. H. Ljungmann (in *Das Gesetz Erfüllen: Mt. 5:17ff und 3:15 untersucht* (Lund, 1954) quotes with approval Zahn’s thought that the law was ‘empty’ until the time of Christ, as no one had perfectly obeyed it. Jesus accepted the law as it stood and obeyed it, thus ‘(ful)filling’ it (plērōsai here meaning ‘to fill up’). Ljungmann

supports this interpretation of Mt. 5:17 by recourse to the plērōsai in Mt. 3:15 (which is the word's only other use in the active voice in the first gospel)—'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.'

4. Ljungmann—"Jesus hebt das Gesetz nich auf, nein, er 'vollendet' es" (*op.cit.* p.23) ("Jesus did not cancel the law; no, he 'consummated' it"), where the German 'vollendet' embraces both 'termination' and 'completion'

5. Albert Descamps (quoted by Ljungmann) says that Jesus came to 'realise' the law. The law was 'fulfilled' in a sense similar to that in which the prophets were fulfilled. plērōsai is often used in Matthew's Gospel in this sense, but always in the passive voice (as in the frequent expression, hina plērōthē to rhēthen . . .). However, this explanation does not account for the parallel positions in which plērōsai and katalusai appear in 5:17. By accepting the 'prophetic fulfilment' interpretation of plērōsai, it is difficult to take the two words as opposites.

6. Eduard Schweizer (in *The Good News according to Matthew* also makes this suggestion, and points out that the original context of the saying may have been a collection of Jesus' sayings rather than a discussion of the validity of the law.

7. Mt.15:10,11.—cf. Mk. 7.14-23. Matthew omits Mark's katharizōn panta ta brōmata ('declaring all foods clean')(7.19). He does not want to say unambiguously that Jesus has overthrown the Mosaic law.

8. It could be objected that in some instances Jesus endorsed the dictates of the old law, and sometimes even put them on a firmer footing. But this does not necessarily mean that Jesus is insisting on the old law's validity. It is just that, in some cases, the old law happens to agree with Jesus' other concerns.

9. cf. Karl Barth's talk of God's revelation occurring in His Word. What Bultmann says about the 'eschatological event' is very similar to what Barth says about the 'Word of God'.

10. Bultmann learnt his existentialist philosophy from Heidegger, who said that, by 'resolution', man passes from inauthentic existence (attached to the world) to authentic existence (open to the future). By calling this change 'faith', and by saying that the Word of God brought it about, Bultmann formed a synthesis between existentialism and Barth's 'Word' theology.

11. R. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, (English translation of *Glauben und Verstehen*, II), (SCM, 1955), p.133.

12. R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, (English translation of *Glauben und Verstehen*, I), (SCM, 1969), p.265.

13. *Kerygma and Myth*, (ed. H.W. Bartsch), vol. I, (SPCK, 1953), p.44.

14; Robert Campbell Roberts, *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology*, p.119.

15. Robert Campbell Roberts, *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology*, p.105.

16. SCM, 1977.

17. *Kerygma and Myth*, (ed. H.W. Bartsch), vol. I, p.10.