

Religious Discourse

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Key Points

- Religious discourse has a number of distinctive features related to the establishment of speakers' authority through connections with tradition, the construal of agency (including *supernatural* agency), ambivalence toward the soteriological role of language (especially within mystical discourse), and the frequent use of multimodal forms and patterns of communication (especially within ritual).
- Recent research on religious discourse has employed a number of theoretical frameworks, including positioning theory (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), membership categorization analysis (Sacks, 1995), and conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).
- A current challenge is accounting for the ways in which online interaction has transformed patterns of religious discourse.

Abstract

This overview of research on religious discourse discusses specific features that make this a distinctive area of inquiry. These include specific methods for asserting authority, unconventional construals of agency, interaction with supernatural agents, ambivalence regarding the soteriological usefulness of language, and the rich multimodal contexts of religious rituals. The article also provides an overview of recent work on religious discourse, to include research on how online media has altered patterns of interaction between religious believers and has transformed interfaith dialog.

Introduction

In the past decade, interest in the analysis of religious discourse has increased considerably, as evidenced by the appearance of edited collections (Johnston & Stuckrad, 2021; Wijsen & Stuckrad, 2016) and a special issue of the journal *Religion* (Volume 43, Issue 1) devoted exclusively to the topic. Empirical work on religious discourse can be roughly divided into fine-grained analyses of language in use (e.g., conversation and stories) and broader analyses that attempt to reconstruct the network of associations that underlie social identity and “our ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting” in the appropriate places and times and with the appropriate objects (Gee, 2010, p. 34). Gee’s contrast between a narrow and wide focus can also be found in Fairclough’s (1995) framework that treats texts, discursive practices, and social practices as three differentiated levels of analysis. In actual practice, these levels are never entirely distinct since broad analyses are ultimately generalizations over instances of more fine-grained discourse events. Religious discourse, as one broad and diffuse area of discourse, has been analyzed using many of the same theoretical frameworks and methodologies applied to other forms of discourse; however, several features combine to make it a distinctive area of inquiry. These include specific methods of establishing authority (e.g., the use of sacred languages, see Bennett, 2024), interactions with nonhuman agents and nonconventional construal of agency (Richardson & Nagashima, 2022), ambivalence regarding the soteriological role of language (Mueller & Richardson, 2025), specific ways of using language and other communicative devices within ritual and multimodal contexts (Mueller, 2023), and the radical transformation of religious discourse due to the advent of social media (Pihlaja, 2024).

Main Text

A key assumption of discourse analysis is that language in use is multifaceted. In addition to constative uses (i.e., those concerned with statements that can be true or false), language can also be performative, seeking to alter the world around us (Austin, 1962).

Language use also reflects our social situatedness and knowledge of rights and duties (Harré, 2012). There is, after all, a profound change in the social dynamic between participants when, for example, a judge declares someone guilty or when a minister declares that a couple is married. Language used in discourse thus has the potential to shape social relations and perceptions of agency through the construction, construal, or evaluation of the speaker's identity and the identities of the other participants and referents. Frameworks for analyzing these aspects of discourse, such as membership categorization analysis and positioning theory (Sacks, 1995; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), have been applied to both religious and non-religious interactions. Pihlaja (2014, 2018) demonstrates the usefulness of this framework in his detailed analyses of online interactions of Christian, Muslim, and atheist participants. All the discourse participants make use of positioning and categorization, while also drawing on a range of metaphors that involve specific evaluations and storylines that often serve to strengthen the speaker's position and undermine the position of rivals. While the speakers in his analysis differ markedly in terms of their particular beliefs, they often resort to similar discourse strategies aimed at the "malignant positioning" (Sabat, 2001) of opponents.

In discourse analysis, it is both impossible and undesirable to separate the closely intertwined relationship between non-religious aspects of a participant's cultural context, background, and beliefs from the fluid construction of their own religious identity. Mueller et al.'s (2023) analysis of an interview involving a participant talking about her Jewish faith against the backdrop of her life in the UK reveals a fluid interaction between the secular dimension of her specific culture, her desire to fit in, her responses to racial discrimination, and her religious faith as it is situated within the faith of her family and community. Their study highlights the fact that there is a fluid and porous boundary between religious and non-religious language. The "transcendent" aspects of religious faith are thus always enmeshed with an individual's ever-evolving and thoroughly non-transcendent psychological and sociocultural context.

The blurred line between the secular and the religious dimensions is also evident in the blending of personal narratives related to everyday life with traditional religious narratives. Stories can be used to construct identities (Labov, 1972) and position the teller and the referents in particular ways (Andrews, 2002). Moreover, they often involve systemic patterns of figurative mappings and extended allegories, which reveal specific ways of conceptualizing the world (Gibbs, 2011). They can also be associated with positioning strategies. For example, Al-Bundawi (2021) shows how Shia Muslim women used positioning to match events and people in their own lives to events and people in the religious narrative of the martyrdom of Hussein and his family. This allowed a seemingly non-religious event, such as reacting to a family member's illness, to be understood within the context of a pivotal religious narrative. Baquedano-López (1997), in her analysis of Roman Catholic *doctrina* classes provided for Mexican immigrants, extends this by relating traditional religious stories to the stories told within communities. She notes how "a traditional religious narrative becomes not only a story to live by, it affirms and contests the community's past, present, and possible stories" (p. 28). This suggests that it is better to view religion, not as a fixed category with clear borders, but as a complex network of "discursive knots" that dynamically interact with a wide range of elements that may not be traditionally associated with religious belief (Stuckrad, 2019, p. 319). Narratives can also be constructed so as to downplay inconsistencies between past and present selves. Pihlaja (2024), for example, discusses how a YouTube content provider who began as a staunch advocate for atheism but later converted to the Serbian Orthodox faith focused solely on his previous advocacy of free speech (a portrayal of his former self that appeared to be wholly contrived) while ignoring the important fact that he formerly held strong atheist views.

Other discourse strategies that have been previously analyzed in non-religious discourse have also been examined in studies of atheist and religious discourse. A good example of this is the occurrence of metaphor recontextualization, where the metaphor of one participant is used and adapted by another participant for positive or negative purposes (Cameron, 2011; Semino et al., 2013). For example, Richardson and Mueller's (2022) analysis of a debate between an atheist and an Evangelical Christian reveals a "tug of war" of competing figurative mappings and strategic recontextualizations of the metaphors used by the speaker's opponent. Along similar lines, Richardson (2017) looks at how recontextualization can be used to express agreement and build empathy or, in the case of its absence or negative use, express disagreement and a lack of common ground.

Another common discourse strategy that particularly applies to retelling shared stories or recounting key events is for the teller to become the "animator." This happens when the speaker chooses to retell what a person said in a particular way so as to achieve specific discourse goals (De Fina & Georakopoulou, 2012). Richardson et al. (2020) analyzes the use of this strategy in an Indonesian Christian's retelling of the former governor of Jakarta's speech and thought processes after he was arrested for blasphemy, while Mueller and Richardson (2025) analyze how a Zen Buddhist "animates" Jesus' words and intentions in order to convey a specific way of looking at Jesus' intentions and mindset from a Buddhist perspective.

Religious discourse often reflects values and assumptions held by the culture at large. In other cases, it can express a counter-cultural narrative that opposes particular aspects of mainstream culture. Ringrow's (2021) analysis of the language of Evangelical Christian and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint fashion bloggers shows how they use figurative mappings such as GOD IS AN ARTIST/DESIGNER and WOMEN ARE DRAWINGS/CREATIONS to express the narrative that women's identity is a "divine gendered creation" (p. 283). This is then enacted using language and photos through displays of modesty, which are perceived as countering the titillating displays of female sexuality encountered within the world of mainstream fashion.

It is often not merely the positioning and agency of the speaker and the participants, but also the positioning and agency of supernatural entities that needs to be taken into account when analyzing religious discourse. This can be seen in the observation that some forms of religious language are not just *about* a divine entity but instead involve language-mediated interactions *with* such an entity (Keane, 2004). In these cases, existing theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches can, of course, be applied, but the extra layers of positioning and perspective-taking need to be factored into the analysis. A good example of this is Dorst and Klop's (2017) examination of interviews with Muslim teenagers who were asked about the appropriateness of using

Christian metaphors about God, such as *GOD IS FATHER* and *GOD IS KING* when talking about Allah. Dorst and Klop's focus was on the use of particular metaphors in religious language and their entailments, but their article also has a clear connection to the act of positioning and identity construal. If Christians choose to refer to God as "father," they are not just saying something about their perception of a divine entity's identity. They are also inferring that the divine entity likewise construes believers in a particular way (i.e., identifying them as "children" who should be obedient to the "father" who loves, protects, and guides them). This extra layer of meaning can also be analyzed in terms of membership categories. Power (2023) notes this in an interview with residents from Claresholm, Canada, where one participant referred to his prayer that "The Lord" would heal him: "In doing so, he portrays God ... as the [one and only] Lord—thereby implicitly categorizing himself as party to a "standard relational pair" (i.e., a relationship of mutual obligation)" (p. 380). Again, the participant, in addition to categorizing himself and God, is inferring that the divine entity he prays to is also actively engaged in the categorization of itself and others.

In a similar manner, agency may also be figuratively attributed to supernatural events, such as conversion or enlightenment experiences. Such events may also influence how speakers foreground or background their own agency as a result of an event. This can be seen in Warner's (2021) analysis of a book club of women from the same Baptist church. Warner notes how, at different moments in the conversation, one participant both reclaims and emphasizes her agency in the way she talks about particular decisions made after her conversion, while simultaneously limiting her agency in the way she describes her choices that were consistent with her religious experience and beliefs.

One final unique aspect of religious talk, especially mystical discourse, occurs when speakers express a critical stance regarding the potential usefulness of language and communication. This is seen in mystics' use of paradox. According to Bagger (2007), this discourse strategy has several functions. For some (e.g., Kierkegaard), it is used to cultivate cognitive dissonance and is thus employed ascetically. For others (e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius, Zhuangzi), "paradox opens out onto a plane of exceptional cognition" (p. 9). Intriguingly, Bagger also suggests that acceptance of cognition beyond the bounds of reason (as evinced by paradox) serves to better incorporate outsiders. The use of paradox can take many forms, such as the use of paradoxical figurative mappings such as Thomas Merton's (1969) use of the *SILENCE AS PRAYER* conceptual blend (Mueller & Richardson, 2025) or the use of source domain reversal (Richardson & Mueller, 2019). In the latter case, a speaker employs an unconventional metaphor (e.g., *ENLIGHTENMENT IS DARKNESS*) in which the source domain (*LIGHT*) from the conventional metaphor has been inverted. This makes the metaphor more salient and draws listeners' attention to a novel set of source-to-target mappings that are generally associated with a deeper level of truth.

Related to paradox is the view that religious experience is inherently nonconceptual. This view, commonly put forth in mystical discourse, often leads to a delicate dance in which the speaker condemns talk of the ultimate and related experiences as unhelpful, misleading, and dangerous, while at other times acknowledging the necessity of language on soteriological grounds (Mueller & Richardson, 2025). In other words, mystics' ambivalent attitude toward language may not lead them to abandon language altogether, but it does produce distinctive perspectives regarding the appropriate function of language. These perspectives run the gamut from pragmatic views, such as the notion that language cannot express the transcendent, to more radical views, such as the employment of language that appears nonsensical or irrational, as in the case of Zen Buddhist koans. One interesting feature of the latter discourse is that it is often justified entirely in terms of its value as a performance. The Zen practitioner, when interviewed by the master, is required to *demonstrate* a state of realization rather than express knowledge (Hori, 2000), yet such demonstrations can (and often do) include language.

The notion of performative discourse can also be extended to include ritual activities. In one sense, ritual involves the interaction between participants, but from the perspective of the religious believer and the speech acts that occur, ritual activities can also involve interactions with supernatural agents. The power of the performative speech may also not be located in the meaning of the words themselves but in the act of them being spoken by the right person at the right time in the right way (for example, in the case of the Mass being conducted in Latin). Indeed, the poetic structure and (in many cases) the incomprehensibility of the language seem to be key characteristics of some rituals (Sørensen, 2007), perhaps reinforcing the sense "that these words are independent of their speakers, and that this contributes to their power" (Keane, 2004, p. 433).

From a methodological perspective, accounts of ritual require greater employment of multimodal approaches to discourse. As an example, consider the description of the "four instruments" of ritual discussed in Richardson et al. (2021). The authors analyze this Korean Buddhist ritual in terms of a conceptual blend (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) in which three inputs (the ritual, dharma, and mythic spaces) are combined to create a blend that expresses the Buddhist ideal of saving all living beings. Notably, the blend is made up entirely of nonlinguistic elements, such as the shape of the instruments, the tonal height of the sounds, the number of times the instruments are struck, the gestures of the monk performing the ritual, and other properties, all of which convey the blend's message through specific symbolic and iconic associations.

Much of the research on religious discourse has rightly focused on how texts evoke rich associations with tradition (e.g., through intertextuality, see Yelle, 2019) so as to construct and maintain a shared chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger, 1993/2000). While linking society to a less technologically advanced past, religious discourse has also been transformed by technological innovation, especially through the pervasive influence of social media. As Pihlaja (2024) points out, the recent advent of online social networking sites has created a distinctive context that has had a profound effect on patterns of social interaction. Content creators are expected to create "authentic" portrayals of themselves on platforms where they have limited control over who views their videos. This situation, referred to as "context collapse," occurs when a speaker communicates with multiple audiences within a single discourse context (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Moreover, their content is inevitably filtered by the hosting site's algorithms, which often attempt to lead users to content that suits viewers' preferences and may reward those with more hostile or extreme views as these are more likely to engage users (and thus lead to increased advertising revenue). Most importantly, ephemeral communities of viewers

can form without geographical constraints. As Pihlaja points out, these changes, along with those now coming from the increased use of artificial intelligence to generate content, are likely to further transform religious discourse in the future.

Conclusion

In sum, the growing interest in religious discourse as a separate field of inquiry largely reflects the realization that linguistic approaches can significantly contribute to our understanding of how human individuals and social groups think and talk about religious matters. In particular, much interest in the field has been in contemporary discourse within informal situations, and in this sense, current research has sought to go beyond the folk-theoretic assumption that religious discourse is primarily associated with sacred texts. A key challenge for future research is to develop a synthesis of those theoretical frameworks that emphasize the dynamic and ephemeral patterns of discourse with frameworks that emphasize the more entrenched and recurrent patterns that form language users' stock of linguistic knowledge.

See Also: [Discourse Analysis and Gender and Sexuality](#).

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