A Pragmatic Integration of Science and Religion

Zhu Zhifang, Wuhan University

1. Introduction

For people with religious commitment, religious piety is at a higher level than commonsense life and religious statements are true of a world of spirit. But for people without religious commitment, all sorts of justification for religious statements are pointless and problematic. Many religious statements are literally in opposition to our best scientific knowledge. Moreover, there are a variety of religions in the world and the groups of different faiths fought and fight each other. Against the background stated above we need a comprehensive understanding of religious statements or beliefs.

The meaning of linguistic expressions is the central concern since the first decade of 20th century. Is the meaning of religious statement what is literally meant by it? If the belief was what is literally expressed by a statement, then it would be reasonable for naturalists to dismiss most of the religious statements and beliefs.

The theory of meaning composed by Peirce and other American pragmatists provides us with a line to cope with the problem.

For Peirce, a belief as an internal mental state is to be specified by means of the related modes of action. To have a belief \( p \) is the same as a disposition to act in the way of \( a \). So all beliefs and statements are projects or guides of actions. The meaning of a belief \( p \) (or a conception, a rational concept, a theoretical statement) is to be determined in the following procedure. (1) Take \( p \) as true; (2) if \( p \) is true, what acts it will lead to and what empirical consequence will obtain. (3) all and only the actions and consequences are the meaning of \( p \). The procedure articulated above is what is specified by Peirce’s pragmatic maxim.

W. James extended Peirce’s basic conception of meaning to the cognitive appraisal of beliefs and theories. If a belief functions as a guide of action, then having a belief is to act in some way and the actions lead in turn to practical effects; if those effects fit to our purpose of action, then, the belief must be true. Truth consist indeed in its correspondence to reality, and correspondence to reality consists in turn in the practical workings of the belief. James developed a pragmatic theory of truth based on Peirce’s theory of meaning.

From the pragmatic perspective of meaning and truth initiated by Peirce and James, all statements, including religious and value statements, can be evaluated in the same method. The meaning of a religious statement consists in the mode of actions it will evoke. And in view of the consequences the actions effect, the statement may be justified or rejected. If religious belief leads to positive, valuable, and noble ways of life, then religious belief should be affirmed. Therefore religion may promote
human life essentially as science.

2. The problem

Alvin Plantinga listed the reasons for the debates between science and religion and its continuation:

1) There is the association of science with secularism or the so-called “scientific world-view”.

2) There is conflict between scientific theories of evolution and essential aspects of Christianity and other theistic religions—for example, that human beings are created in the image of God.

3) There is alleged conflict between science and the claim, common to theistic religions, that God acts especially in the world. Miracles would be one example of special divine action, but there are others as well: for example, Calvin’s “Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit” and “Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit”.

4) There is conflict between Religious claims and many explanations in evolutionary psychology of such human phenomena as love, altruism, morality, and religion itself.

5) There is conflict between certain classical Christian doctrine—the resurrection of Jesus, for example—and certain varieties of scientific or historical Biblical criticism.

6) Finally, there is alleged conflict between the epistemic attitudes of science and religion. The scientific method, so it is said, involves forming belief on the basis of empirical investigation, holding belief tentatively, constantly testing belief and looking for a better alternative; the religious attitude believing on faith. (Plantinga 2010, pp. 301-302)

The relation between science and religion may be viewed in many ways.

1) Science and religion conflicts with each other diametrically. Naturalists and materialists take the view.

2) Science and religion are compatible with each other. Plantinga is typical of the position, God creates by means of evolution, for example.

3) Science is all right but religion is deeper. Del Ratzsch gives following argument:

(1) Science itself rests upon a foundation of a number of presuppositions.

(2) Science itself is not rationally legitimate unless those foundational presuppositions are themselves rationally legitimate. But

(3) Science cannot operate unless those foundational presuppositions are already in place.

(4) Science cannot be original source of rational justification for its own foundational presuppositions. Therefore:

(5) If science is rationally legitimate, then science cannot be the only source of rational justification. Thus:

(6) If science itself is rationally legitimate, then there must be some other deeper source of rational justification. (Ratzsch, 2010, pp.47-48)

It is questionable that science must have a number of foundational presuppositions which are outside of science; and it is more questionable that science finds those presuppositions in religious beliefs. Ratzsch might confused foundations with source which may be contingent historical connections. A
confusion implies that a culture without Christianity would not be possible to obtain rational justification in the way of science. But we may concede that Ratzsch’s argument is feasible and we remain in face of a problem.

There are a number of naturalists who see religion as incompatible with science.

(2) There are more people who have religious beliefs other than Christian ones.

(3) It is logically impossible that the world and the human beings were created by Christian God and Islamic God and Taoist God and a great a number of Gods of other religions.

Thus the problem: we want an interpretation which makes religious beliefs reasonable, rational, meaningful, or at least understandable in the eyes of naturalists and heretic people.

3. The meaning

The religious text, The Bible for example, when meaning is concerned, may be treated at least in two ways. First, it is to be decomposed into a number of single sentences each of which has a clear meaning and true of an independent fact. Second, it is a structured whole such that the meaning of each sentence is informed by all other co-existent sentences.

The religious text, The Bible for example, when meaning is concerned, may be treated at least in two ways. First, it is to be decomposed into a number of single sentences each of which has a clear meaning and true of an independent fact. Second, it is a structured whole such that the meaning of each sentence is informed by all other co-existent sentences.

If the meaning is to be dealt with in the first way, sentences or a small set of sentences in The Bible are obviously false or meaningless to the naturalists or heretics. For instance,

(1) In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1)

(2) God created man in his own image. (Genesis 26)

(3) She [Mary] was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 18)

(4) Taking the five loaves and two fish ... he [Jesus] gave them to disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketful of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 19-21)

To naturalists above sentences are false for they oppose to the claims of our best sciences. If texts of The Bible are treated sentence by sentence, naturalist will wonder why Christians hold such false sentences.

The alternative is to treat the text of The Bible holistically. But the challenge is that it is difficult for the naturalist to remember all the sentences in the text and to have an interpretation of them as a whole. Even if the work is theoretically possible, it requires him to commit a world of God where all miracles happened. But the commitment is contrary to naturalist world-view.

The trouble comes from a dominant but dubious theory of meaning and truth. Truth-value semantics says that a sentence is true of an extra-linguistic fact, be it natural or non-natural, and the fact is the meaning of the sentence. As Wittgenstein says, “To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true. (One can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true.)”
Truth-value semantics renders it impossible for people to understand a great deal of sentences, ethical and esthetic statements in particular. It also renders religious statements in its central part false. It remains a problem for naturalists why Christians continue to have beliefs in those statements when they have been shown to be false.

Semiological semantics of Saussurean type provide no any remedy to the difficulty. The structural linguist sees meaning of signs as a property of intra-linguistic relations. “Language … is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification.” “Language is a system that has its own arrangement. Comparison with chess will bring out the point.” (Saussure 1959, p. 9, 22) It implies that meaning of signs is given by language as a whole or a structure and it needs no reference to any extra-linguistic facts, human activity or social factors. In Saussure’s words, meanings are mental images determined by language itself. If meaning works as what Saussure says, it is quite unclear how the text of The Bible is to be understood.

Fortunately, there is third alternative theory of meaning, the pragmatic theory of meaning developed by C. S. Peirce and his followers.

The central idea of Peirce’s pragmatic interpretation of meaning is his so-called “pragmatics maxim”: “It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce [1878] 1998, 5.402) The pragmatic maxim is a constant element in Peirce philosophy that he never change. “He framed the theory that a conception, that is, the rational purpose of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and there is absolutely nothing more in it.” (Peirce [1905], 1998, 5, 412)

Peirce’s theory of meaning rests on his treatment of beliefs. “What is a belief? … We has seen that it has just three properties: First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit. … Thought is essentially an action. The final upshot of thinking is the exercise of volition, and of this thought no longer forms a part; but belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking. The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. If beliefs do not differ in this respect, if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere differences in the manner of consciousness of them can make them different beliefs.” “We shall be perfectly safe so long as we reflect that the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action; and that whatever there is connected with a thought, but irrelevant to its purpose, is an accretion to it, but not part of it. If there be a unity among our sensations which has no reference to how we shall act on a given occasion, as when we listen to a piece of music, why do we call that thinking. To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves. Now the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be. What the habit is depends on when and how it causes us to act. As for the when, every stimulus to action is derived from perception; as for the bow, every purpose of action is to produce some sensible result. Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtile it may be; and there is not distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in
Peirce’s unified conception of belief, truth, meaning and action may be articulated in the following way:

1. Inquiry aims to fix beliefs.
2. Truth as fixed true belief is the ideal limit of inquiry and the ultimate consensus of the infinite community of inquirers.
3. Beliefs as things which can be true or false have to be objectively identified.
4. A belief in its essence involves a habit or a mode of action, that is, a disposition to act in a certain way in a certain occasion.
5. All statements (propositions, declarative sentences) are conditional, that is, if circumstance \( c \) occur, do \( a \).
6. Having a belief \( p \) is in a state of believing that \( p \) is true.
7. The meaning of a statement \( p \) is clarified by the habit or mode of action it gives rise and the result it produces.

4. The meaning of religious statements

The problem of the meaning of religious statements is not if it is literal or metaphorical, but what kind of theory of meaning is more appealing in the case. If a statement in a religious text is understood as referring to a possible fact as the naturalists understand it, then religious statements would not be intelligible to the naturalist, thus no fruitful dialogue is possible between the religious believers and the naturalists. If we take a pragmatic theory of meaning, religious statements and the dialogue between science and religion would make sense.

1. Religious text is to be treated quasi-holistically. When we talk about what is meant by a certain religious text, at least a set of interconnected statements must be taken into consideration. (This version of quasi-holism does not require an interpreter to be able to invoke every sentence in a religious text.) For example, it is difficult to conceive what kind of habits is produced by the single sentence “God created man in his own image”. A form of practice or a habit is inevitably involves a set of statements in a religious text.

2. To make sense of a religious text, our attention should be put to what practice is connected with the religion in question rather than the story of genesis or miracles as descriptions of what indeed happened. For example, the text of The Bible is inherently connected to a body of practice of Christianity, such as the reading of The Bible, the worship, the pray, the church ceremony, the confessions to clergyman, the group communication of witness, the relevant moral discipline, the attitude of the believers to each other and to others, the gesture and pose in relevant occasions, and of course all the results thereby produced. [Needless to say that Christian practice is not a homogeneous, unified, well-ordered structure, but its overall pattern is ready to be distinguished from Buddhist or Islamic practice.] So it is safe to say that the Christianity is a form of life or a way of life. As a form of life, the question of truth or falsity [in the sense of agreement with facts] is pointless.

3. Taking a pragmatic view of meaning, religious statements may be positively appraised even by a naturalist. William James is used to talk about “the will to believe” or “the right to believe”. Having given up talking about the origin, the starting point, the first principle, he put emphasis on results, ends,
effects, or workings of our beliefs, religious or not. “Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; religion says essentially two things. First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, … The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.” (James [1896] 1937, pp. 25-26.) In a footnote he adds, “Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true. The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief.” (James 1937, pp. 30-31).

(4) An additional merit of pragmatic theory of meaning is that it gives the same epistemological status to all sorts of statements, be it common-sense, scientific, religious or ethical. That is, all sorts of statements are tested in the same way. We test scientific hypothesis by contrast experimental results with the predictions derived from the hypothesis. An ethical statements is of the form that “we ought to do a” (E) if we desire x’. It has implicitly the form “if E is true” then x will obtain. The test of E is doing action x and seeing what happens. This is a procedure similar to the test of scientific theories. As John Dewey points out, “To generalize the recognition that the true means the verified and means nothing else places upon men the responsibility for surrendering political and moral dogmas, and subjecting to the test of consequences their most cherished prejudices.” (Dewey 1920, p. 160)

5. Conclusion
From the pragmatic theories of meaning and truth we learn the lesson that all statements, including religious and ethical statements, can be appraised in the same method. The meaning of a religious statement [co-existent statements in the same text are indispensible backgrounds] consists in the mode of actions it will produce. And in view of the consequences the actions effect, the statement may be justified or rejected. If religious beliefs lead to positive, fruitful, and noble ways of life, then religious beliefs should be affirmed. Therefore the naturalist who does not commit any religious belief may understand that religion may promote human life essentially as science.

References
Peirce, C. S.: What pragmatism is, the Monist, 15, April 1905.


Wittgenstein, Ludwig: *Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus*.


For more information on the conference “Philosophie und Religion” see [philosophie-religion.de](http://philosophie-religion.de)