Thoughts on a theory of the religious language with practical meaning

In this essay I would like to try and find a connection between the theory of a religious language and the trinity. The question is how can one speak to God in mere words. My idea can be divided into three points: I shall start with thoughts on 1. the meaning of a language then 2. explain the doctrine of the trinity as the grammar of the speech and 3. what the consequences are for the sermon.

1. What makes a text or a speech religious? Does it depend on the choice of words, the use of the word „God“ or on specific symbols? The theory I have is: religiousness falls into a category that is not grammatically explainable. There are no differences in the lexical, syntax or semantic criteria between religious and non-religious text. Religiousness is not determined by speech nor is it linguistically explained. Whether a language can be qualified as religious – to use the well known distinction of Saussure – is not dependent on the system of the language (Langue) but only on the use of words – the parole. And I repeat, it depends on the religious use of a language. This religious use is not linguistically describeable. It is rather an additional non-linguistic aspect that religiousness takes its form from. Therefore I am critical of the attempts to prove that religious speech such as prayer, blessing, comfort etc have a specific form. These religious patterns are no different from the general speech patterns like claim, requests, questions that are used in a religious context. It doesn’t depend on competent use of words that enable a speaker to pray, bless and comfort. This ability is connected to religious socialisation and not language socialisation. A theory on religious speech is not part of a theory on speech but part of a religious theory.

How can we describe the Christian use of a language?

2. What does it mean theologically, to use a language in a Christian way? Christian language must use a language that it so refers to Jesus Christ in such a way that Jesus is understood as the Christ. The doctrine of the trinity is ideal in appropriately monitoring the use of this language. It describes God as He Himself describes Himself in Jesus Christ in the New Testament: as love. The doctrine of the trinity describes how the reality of God’s love is absolutely present. This presence is the last and final reality through which we all exist. This fact is only made possible by God, but also the fact of its mere being is alone in God’s hands. It is this point that leads theological reflections via the reality, the nature, the perception of the love of God to the trinitarian development of God’s thought. God’s love is absolutely alive. One must imagined this “aliveness“ to have three different centres: the creative centre (the Father) the centre of truth (the Son) and the centre of certainty (the Spirit). The doctrine of the trinity commits every Christian speech to accept the eschatological fact of God’s love.
How does this take place in the sermon?

3. This question is important, because in the protestant tradition, especially in evangelical preaching, this is regarded as an important medium through which people hear of God’s love and through which they are also challenged to tell of God’s love. The main point that I want to make in my third point is: a preacher is only truly capable of Christian communication if he has sufficient religious competence to back him up.

1. What does religious competence mean?
a. Foremost I think it is very important to use the Bible/Bible text as both an opportunity and an aid. Both from its content and its form. The text itself is a successful (or unsuccessful) human experience of the closeness of God in a specific situation. The text does not tell in general and vague words of God’s love but speaks clearly and concretely: it encourages, it judges, it praises, it warns and it tells stories ... The preacher must be aware of how the love of God is expressed and mirrored in the text. Therefore, on the one hand the sermon text must refer to the trinitarian idea of God and on the other hand God’s nature and personality is only made clear through this text. In this respect the preacher finds himself in a hermeneutical circle: from just a part of the matter to the whole, and from the whole to just a part.

This critical and explicit definition of the text is important for religious competence.

b. It is also necessary that the preacher has his own experience of the truth of a bible text. He himself must be prepared to stand up for what he believes and answer questions and must make his own experience with the text contents. This theological, personally accepted, credible and humane contact with a biblical text is the competence the preacher needs if he himself is to further the process of religious communication. This experience of the Christian use of a language is absolutely necessary for the furtherence of the Christian belief. I think that Friederich Schleiermacher very explicitly explained this. I expand on this in more detail in my paper.

I am now at the second point of my main theme: how does a preacher bring over his religiously communicative competence adequately? Briefly: for Schleiermacher religious communication – to which the sermon also belongs – is an exchange of experience in an artful way. The preacher talks of his own experiences in an ordered and thought-out manner so that as many people as possible are encouraged to make their own experience. The preacher must therefore, carefully think out what day to day language and manner of speech he can use to indirectly bring over his experience. At the end of my report I would like to point out that when speaking of religion a particular form of speech is preferred. (Myths, symbols and the metaphors).
I think, though, that it is the religious competence of the preacher and not the use of specific figures of speech that is most important. He must permeate the theme of his sermon with his own life and use his own words. He must use his own manner of speech when trying to bring over his religion. He shouldn't use the same illustrations and speech as ancient Christians did but should himself understand these so that he can form his own illustrations etc. In this excercise the preacher must be up to date and use modern language but also take Christian tradition into consideration. He must try to combine these two points in his own words and also in his personal behaviour.
 Thoughts on a theory of the religious language with practical meaning

Remarks concerning the doctrine of the trinity and philosophical reflections often have one thing in common: they often appear speculative, abstract and are difficult to understand. From my modest experience in parish work I see that neither of these themes are at the top of the religious hit list. Especially when reflecting on the theory of religious language I have the impression that, because of the complicatedness and the high level of abstractedness and although this language is the medium that I and all who preach have to deal with, we are practically at a loss. I have only spent a few months on this problem of the theory of the religious language in practice. I am therefore only at the beginning of my reflections. I will try to combine both spheres – the conception of the trinity and ideas on the theory of religious language. I shall start with 1. theoretical remarks 2. to describe the doctrine of the trinity as the grammar of the speech of God and 3. I shall try to show what it should indicate in a sermon. I orientate myself, especially in the first two sections on the works and thoughts of I. U. Dalferths.

1. Thoughts on the meaning of language

The question that I first want to discuss is: what makes a speech or text religious? How does one feel that it surpasses the visual reality? Does it depend on the choice of words, the tone of voice of the speaker, the frequent use of the word "God", many Bible citations or particular symbols? The criteria that allows us to judge this must be able to show what religiousness the text is based on. This statement
is not as commonplace as it sounds. Religiousness falls into a category that is not easily grammatically explained. That means, there are no lexical, syntactical or semantical criterion, that are allowed to differentiate between the religious or non religious text or speech. More clearly: Religiousness is not determined in speech nor is it linguistically explained.

To simplify what I mean, the well known difference between *parole* and *langue* of Ferdinand de Saussure is useful. Saussure explains *langue* as a particular language like English or German but also as languages like a computer language. The *langue* is therefore a language system or science of a specific language. *Parole* is a language that is current and definite – the individual speech. Subsequently my theory is as that of Dalferth: whether a language qualifies as religious isn’t judged on its system (langue) but only on the use that is made from it. The use of a language is therefore the determining factor and I repeat – it depends on the religious use of the language and this factor is undescribable. There are for example, no particular grammatical points of religiousness so that one cannot speak of a religious language as an independant language system. Also the use of typically religious words does not mean true religiousness. It could just be that it is either literature or parody. It is rather an additional non language aspect that religiousness takes it form from. That means to decide on the religiousness of a text or expression other factors must certainly be taken into consideration. These additional factors, that add to the religious value of the language in my opinion, are to be found in and taken from the current situation. The religiousness of a remark must be
judged also on the situation where it is found.

I am critical of the attempts of the followers of Searle as well as other further developments of Austin, among others, as regards specific religious speech acts or rather to prove speech acts of faith. For example, confession, the taking of vows, baptism, praise etc. Naturally – and I'm not contesting this – they are well known religious acts. But – and this is my question – are these really speech acts or rather speech patterns? Are really illikutionary patterns meant which solominise actions, for example warnings, threatenings, greetings. Are there really religious speech acts that are able to function as a criteria of religiousness in statements?

One thing seems plain to me: there are expressions whose religiousness doesn't lie in the manner of speech. One could, for example, tell the biography of a holy person. This illikutionary act is to tell, no different really from the telling of mundane stories. With regard to the theory of speech acts they are just the general manner of speaking as with speech patterns of assertion, a command, question etc in a religious context. The theologian Dalfert is correct when he writes: religious manner of speech is not a concrete realisation of religious speech but may be explained as religiously qualified realisation of patterns of speech. For example assertions, orders questions etc. Wherever their religiousness may be, they cannot be illikutionarily i.e. linguistically specified. (Dalferth 108). Prayer, confession, sermons etc don't have their own type of language but use general figures of speech when talking of claims, requests, questions and promises. A speaker must therefore, be competent enough to use language in a communititive fashion when speaking of
request, question, assertions etc. But that doesn't mean that they are able to pray, preach or bless. Once again Dalferth: this ability is acquired in connection with the religious and not the linguistic socialisation ... and is therefore neither linguistic, nor non-linguistic, nature. (Dalferth 113).

To sum up one could say: religious text consists of the interaction of both language and religious competence. A perfectly normal manner of speech is brought over in a religious fashion. In a specifically religious speech pattern different elements of various repertoires are brought over – and this is most important – not only grammatical repertoires but also religious repertoires are brought together. They should not be combined and adopted as a religious speech acts because the grammatical realisation of a religious repertoire is only one possibility. To come back to the differentiation of Saussures: the religiousness of speech is therefore principally a parole phenomena. The religiousness can only be defined as common speech patterns, they can be defined as the realisation of certain patterns of the religious repertoire. Therefore, speech isn't religious in itself but has to be defined in the end from the point of view of religion. And that means that a theory on religious speech has not to be a part of a theory of speech in general but a part of the theory of religion which examines in what linguistic way religion can be defined. How can we define the religious use of a language? Or: the Christian use of a language? I would like to discuss this in the second part of my project.
2. The doctrine of trinity being the grammar of the speech of God.

What does it mean to use a language in a Christian fashion? What rules apply? It is a theological and not a grammatical problem that will now be dealt with.

Firstly, a general formulation: the use of a language must, if it is to be Christ-like, be appropriate and take into consideration the life and death of Jesus Christ. To be theologically more exact: not only as the research of historians tells us about the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is not only the historical Jesus. Naturally a fairly exact knowledge of the historical Jesus of Nazareth is necessary as well as research into the religious and political situation of His time. Without this knowledge it is unclear exactly who Christians proclaim that Christ was and is. That alone is not enough. One must analyse the life and death of Jesus as regards God and it affects God. Possibly – I would like to add, without wanting to start New Testament debate, that Jesus Himself thought of Himself as God’s son. Therefore Christian literature/speech uses a language where Jesus as the Christ is understood.

The doctrine of the trinity is ideal in appropriately controlling the use of this language because it describes God as He describes Himself in Jesus in the New Testament – as love. God himself lives and is life itself and identifies Himself with the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth and in such a way that one can speak of a union, life and death in favour of eternal life (E. Jüngel). This life and death in favour of eternal life is the main point behind God’s love and it also embraces death, the distancing from God and overcomes it. The love of God is therefore,
radically inventive and creative. The life and death of Jesus strengthens the fact that God is life and gives to: God is love. From the point of view of the trinity this love becomes understandable. Of His own free will God goes beyond Himself and gives Himself freely and for this reason remains true to Himself. The doctrine of the trinity describes how the reality of God's love is absolutely present. The eschatologically presence is absolutely the last and final reality through which we all exist. This fact is no inbetween thing, no attempt on God's part, no forgiving whim and no temporary chance to make God pleasant to people. This eschatological fact is only made possible by God, but also the fact of its mere being is alone in God's hands. It is this point that leads theological reflections via the reality, the nature, the perception of the love of God to the development of the trinitarian development of God's thoughts. These three (reality, nature and truth) lie alone in God's hands, and have to contain three parts which tradition has named as creation, forgiveness, redemption. There God's love is limitlessly at work. You can imagine this activity as an area with three centres: the creative and real centre (the Father), the truth and nature centre (the Son) and the novelty and certainty centre (the Spirit). I will, later speak more precisely about the Spirit-centre.

I find it important to emphasise that the doctrine of the trinity is not a speculatory theory about the life of God but that it also has a very practical function. It is the theologically worked out ......... The doctrine of the trinity reminds all theologians that their main aim, their midpoint, is the creative work of God through Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the trinity – to get back to my theme – commits every
Christian speech to accept the eschatological fact of God's love. The doctrine of the trinity shows what one has to take into consideration when talking in a concrete and concise way about God, to the experience of the crucified and resurrected Jesus.

Let me be precise in a pneumatological way: if we consider God's love to come from the centre of the Spirit we can define the love of the Spirit on the one hand, to be the extension of the Father's love for his Son. On the other hand the love of the Spirit to be the extension of the love of the Son for the Father. The Spirit shows the openness of God, all embracing. Everybody has access to this love and has the opportunity to find his own way to the love of God. God's spirit is always present in our life and it makes us certain of his love. God is not only there for the exclusive but attracts and integrates everyone. This integration can also take place through a sermon. That is why I would like to speak about these points as regards the sermon.

3. The consequences for the sermon

The use of a language and not its structure gives a speech/sermon a religious or Christian character. The form of speech is therefore not the deciding factor but the way in which the speech is used to make plain that God is love both in being and nature and that this is available for everyone. This love is not a selfish love but desires to integrate and embrace every living being throughout the whole world, so that everyone and everything finds his rightful place. God's love is the-
before all encompassing. The human proclamation and the sermon play a large role within this process – especially in the Protestant tradition. People come to know of God’s love through Evangelical preaching. They not only hear of God’s love but are also affected by this love and can themselves pass it on. God’s love shows itself not only through speech but it most dependant on the word of mouth to enable one to be quite sure of God’s love. The honesty and openness of holy activities, that in trinititarian theology is known as the Holy Ghost, takes place itself among other things in linguistic form. What can one say about this language? This question is important to me personally as a large part of my works consists of preaching. How should a preacher use a language so that God is spoken of and about in a fitting manner? In general, and I will explain this sentence more fully later on, a preacher is only truly capable of Christian communication if he has sufficient religious competence to realise his communicative competence. What does that mean as regards the sermon? Before I make two points about this I would like to say that I presume that the preacher uses a bible text (one or more) for his sermon. I mean that he doesn’t just speak generally of God’s love but is backed up by a text. In any case this is the case in the congregations surrounding me. The idea is that the preacher is himself convinced of and affected by the text before he starts to preach. He doesn’t only speak but also listens.

3.1. Then, what does "to have religious competence" with regard to the sermon mean?

a) I think, firstly, that it is important to use the Bible text as an opportunity and an
aid. Its context as well as the form it takes. The text itself is a successful (or unsuccessful) human experience of the closeness of God in a specific situation. The text does not generalise and say "God accepts you as you are therefore you must accept youself and place yourself under Gods protection". It has a definate message and encourages, advises, praises, warns, it tells a specific story in a specific situation. It blesses as well. To prove the certainty of a text one must use all methods that are available! This involves also showing from the text how the truth that "God is love" is put forward, how this truth is mirrored in the text of the sermon, or whether it is glossed over. Therefore, on the one hand the sermon text must refer to the trinitarian idea of God and on the other hand Gods nature and very personality is only made clear through this text. In this respect the preacher finds himself in a hermeneutical circle: from just a part of the matter to the whole, and from the whole to to just a part. The preacher is himself bound in this circle. He himself is affected. It is of great importance to his religious competence that he, with great honestey and inner conviction checks – with all his questions and doubts – that the text fully brings to light the christian way of thinking. But that is not all. A further point to religious competence is:

b) Together with the definition of the text it is also, from my point of view, of prime importance, that the preacher also makes his own personal experience of the truth of a bible text. He must include himself and be prepared to stand for questioning. He must personally be prepared to accept both the hurtful, the boring and the good and encouraging meaning of the text. He must courageously collect experi-
ences. The preacher should not and should not be allowed to withhold himself and just impersonally pass on the word. He must therefore confront the text with the world in which he lives vice versa. This theological, personally accepted, credible and humane contact with a biblical text is the competence the preacher needs if he himself want to further the process of religious communication. This dimension of experience of the Christian use of a language is absolutely necessary for the furtherence of Christian belief. I would like to explain this more exactly. I therefore come to the second point of the third section. How does the preacher fulfil his communicative competence in a religiously appropriate way?

3.2. What does "in a religiously adequate way" mean in the Christian sense? As we already seen above "religiousy appropriate" doesn't simply mean to use a religious form of language in speech. Furthermore we have stated that you need the reference to the Christian experience of God as expounded appropriately in the doctrine the the trinity: God is love, to communicate appropriately on the theological level. But what does this mean as regards the sermon? I think that Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher gives a very precise description. He, too, knows that religious speech isn't a special language, but it uses ordinary words, day to day language. Without going into details I'd like to point out to you what is most important to Schleiermacher. For him, religion has its place in the feeling of each person, in the most intimate relationship of each person and according to Schleiermacher it is everybodys own personal business and relationship. And so everyone will represent his own religion, his own experiences to exhaust the infinite subject of religion. The point concerning the religious use of the language is,
that without one's own religious initiative and excitement nothing can be communicated. In his personal religion each person has his own experiences and experiences everything outside him as a display of the infinity. Religious information is mainly subjective – says Schleiermacher. For, in the end religion is an intimate truth, not transferable, but still communicative. How? – by rousing feelings in one's innermost soul and in so doing being able to pass it on to others. Through the representation of the preacher's experiences with the text, other people should be animated to make their own individual Christian experiences in the Christian faith. Therefore, religious communication means a reciprocal exchange of personal experience. So the sermon doesn't just transmit objective facts like "the grave was deserted" but actually it's something extremely personal that the preacher shares. Schleiermacher gives some important hints about how a preacher should pass on this experience to his congregation. Because Schleiermacher didn't want only enthusiastic, edifying reports of personal experiences. He stresses the sermon ought to be an art. What does that mean? He distinguishes between an artless use of speech and an artful one. You recognize the artless way by experiences being transmitted in a direct way. Whereas the artful use contains an element of contemplation following the religious excitement/experience. And this element of contemplation is very important for the preparation of the sermon. However, Schleiermacher emphasises this religious excitement/conviction comes before the preaching of the sermon even though there should be a period of time between the experience and the sermon. These experiences and feelings must be able to mature so that they can be used in an orderly and meaningful fashion and in such a way as to reach as many people as possible.
In this context the result of the latest research are very helpful. They point out that there are favourite ways of speech in religious language. I shall briefly name three.

1. The Myth – it paint a picture of the next world by telling of stories of the saints.

2. The Symbol – the symbol is, on the other hand, inexhaustible and is able to start a never ending process of understanding.

3. The Methaphor – transfers a word into an unusual context. The well known is thus transfered. For example: Achill is a lion

All three forms have two thing is common: they aren’t religious structures in them­selves but by using them they provoke sense/meaningfullness. Whoever is willing to let himself accept this linguistic forms and will experience a process of transformation , finding a new meaning and new possibilites in his life. Some figures of speech can have priority, but not necessarily and not in a forced way. Telling a story cannot only open new ways of understanding for us but may also hold the danger of becoming boring everyday anecdotes. A sermon held in a chatty, narrative way can cause as much tyranny as a classical evangelical sermon. And a theoretical sermon can induce many thoughts in its listeners which enable them to see their lives differently – with the eyes of God.
What to me is most important is the religious qualification of the preacher. His sermons have to be credible with his own life – he has to find his own words, his own language. The living spirit being transformed into words of the Holy Bible, the hymn book and the confession must come to live in each new generation. It’s not important to recite the Bible word for word but one should speak of God in one’s own words like the early Christians did with their pictures and using their imagination. For example, to prove the healing meaning of Jesus’ death in modern speech it is not necessary to speak atonementally theologically. One must however, know exactly what the early Christians understood under the atonement. One must know the capabilities of the atonement. A mere imitation of this pattern does not today make a appropriate sermon. For this task the preacher will have to be contemporary, of today’s world, as well as well steeped in the Christian tradition. He will have to combine both elements within himself and his mode of expression.