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Introduction.
Persuasion in Religious Discourse

Persuasion is fundamental to contemporary religious discourse, particularly in Western cultures. Whereas religious beliefs and practices may have historically been a fixed category, often tied to one's cultural, social, and national context, recent technological advancements and the ubiquity of mobile phones in daily life around the world have guaranteed that the religious beliefs and practices of others, often people from backgrounds completely dissimilar to one's own are now regularly present in one's life. At the same time, as algorithms and machine-learning influence what content people engage with online, content can become tailored to one's own preferences and interests, with little actual engagement with ideas, beliefs, and practices that fall outside of one's personal preferences.

Persuasion in religious discourse, therefore, exists in a complex space in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, where religious individuals have more reach and potential to spread their beliefs than ever before while at the same time, often speaking to people who already hold the same beliefs that they do. Thus, understanding persuasion in this context requires the wide-ranging toolkit linguistics offers to engage critically with language, identity, context, audience, and other factors in understanding what people are doing when they speak and write about religious beliefs and practice with some consideration of how their words might effect changes in others, either in shifting their beliefs or shoring up the beliefs of those within their religious community.

This special issue, therefore, addresses a range of texts and contexts wherein religious discourse and persuasion can be identified as a part of the interaction between people, either face-to-face or in texts. This introduction will start with a brief background on the notion of religious discourse in contrast to religious 'language' and the importance of context in discourse activity, before clarifying how persuasion can be defined and identified in discursive practices and, finally, providing an introduction to the empirical research in this special issue and how the different authors elaborate on these concepts to better understand what different religious leaders and figures are doing when they speak about their religion to people who may or may not share their own beliefs and practices.

1. Persuasive Language

Given the complex, overlapping, contextually determined, and interactional nature of religious discourse (outlined further in the following section), persuasion as a practice within such discourse can be best understood in broadly rhetorical, pragmatic and stylistic terms. Persuasion, understood linguistically, is not an inherently negative concept, despite the unpleasant connotations that it may evoke – such as 'manipulation' or coercion – rather, it is "a legitimate function of argumentation".[2] Indeed, strategies of persuasion and the power of argumentation to persuade or dissuade the hearer have stimulated linguistic

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[1] Both authors contributed equally to this "Introduction" in terms of the conception, drafting and editing of the work. Aoife Beville wrote sections 1, "Persuasive Language", and 3, "Overview of Issue" while Stephen Pihlaja wrote section 2 "Religious Discourse and Language".

[2] Douglas Walton, *Media Argumentation: Dialectic, Persuasion and Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2007), 46.

thought and given rise to metalinguistic reflections since antiquity.[3] The Sophists, and later Aristotle, provide evidence of humanity's endless fascination with how language can shape our ideas and change our minds. Persuasion, according to Francesca Piazza, is "an anthropological trait, not merely a special case of communication".[4]

Rhetorical theory and argumentation studies have, therefore, long studied persuasion as a part of the functions of language.[5] The new rhetoric – as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca[6] label their re-theorisation of rhetorical concepts, essentially restores and updates classical notions of argumentation, shifting the focus to the audience. They propose that the principal aim of argumentation is to secure the adherence of the addressees. Therefore, argumentation is entirely relative to the audience intended to be influenced. Indeed, the Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric was already concerned with the orientation of the message towards the addressees; as Piazza argues, classical rhetoric holds that "the speaker-hearers are within, and not without, the discourse, they are its constituent elements rather than its external users"[7]. Furthermore, "speaker and listener may alternate their respective roles, and the speaker is always also a listener (albeit listening to himself)".[8] Aristotle argues that the "function [of rhetoric] is not so much to persuade, as to find out in each case the existing means of persuasion", adding "that which is persuasive is persuasive in reference to someone".[9] Rhetoric, therefore, studies not the abstract art of persuasion in itself but the *attempt* to persuade a particular audience in a particular discourse context.[10] This implies, of course, that not all attempts at persuasion are successful.

Therefore, given the fundamentally interpersonal nature of persuasion – the need to understand how the addressee may interact with, infer meanings from and *be persuaded by* the speaker/author and their message – the matter is squarely within the domain of pragmatics.[11] From a pragmatic perspective, persuasion can be understood as a type of speech act.[12] Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* distinguishes between the illocutionary act (the act of saying), the locutionary act ("the *force* in saying something") and the perlocutionary act, "which is *the achieving of* certain *effects* by saying something.[13] Persuasion, understood within this framework, is the perlocutionary object of arguments which aim to achieve the effect of *convincing* and *persuading* the addressee. Of course, utterances which aim to persuade may not always produce the desired perlocutionary effect – attempts to persuade may result in undesirable perlocutionary sequels, such as persuading the listener in the opposite direction, alarming them or creating an atmosphere of distrust. Such mismatches between, in Austin's terms, the

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[3] For a brief history of the study of rhetoric and persuasion, see: Randy Allen Harris and Jeanne Fahnestock, "Rhetoric, Linguistics, and the Study of Persuasion", in Jeanne Fahnestock and Randy Allen Harris, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Persuasion* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1-24; Michael J. Hogan, "Persuasion in the Rhetorical Tradition" in James Dillard and Lijiang Shen, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Persuasion* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 2-19.

[4] Francesca Piazza, "L'arte retorica: antenata o sorella della pragmatica?", *Esercizi Filosofici*, 6.1 (2011), 121. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

[5] J. Michael Hogan, "Persuasion in the Rhetorical Tradition", in James Dillard and Lijiang Shen, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 2-19.

[6] Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame U.P, 1969).

[7] Piazza, "L'arte retorica", 119.

[8] Ibid., 125.

[9] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. by J. H. Freese (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1926), 1355b-1356b, www.perseus.tufts.edu/.

[10] Piazza, "L'arte retorica", 120.

[11] For more on pragmatics and rhetoric see Piazza, "L'arte retorica". Essentially, she suggests that a deeper engagement with classical rhetoric can enrich and expand the scope of pragmatics, offering valuable insights into the persuasive functions of human interaction.

[12] Walton, *Dialectic, Persuasion and Rhetoric*, especially the chapter "The Speech Act of Persuasion" (46-90); Piazza, "L'arte retorica", 130.

[13] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1962), 121.

"perlocutionary object" (the goal) and the "perlocutionary sequel" (the result) are relevant to our understanding of persuasion in religious discourse.[14]

While many scholars have explored the rhetorical aspects of persuasion, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding its relationship with style. A notable exception is Jeanne Fahnestock,[15] whose *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion* carefully dissects the persuasive functions of various formal language features (phonetics, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, etc.). Stylistics examines the specific linguistic choices made by speakers/authors to understand how meanings are constructed and conveyed through the text (whether oral or written).[16] The rigorous and replicable study of the linguistic features of a text aims to determine the functional significance of such features. Regarding the persuasive function of such linguistic patterns, "stylistics has evolved a detailed linguistic account of the kinds of persuasive techniques more generally covered by classical rhetoric. The use of stylistics for these purposes enables scholars to approach the explicitly persuasive aspects of style as linguistic phenomena".[17] Thus, in concert with both rhetorical studies and pragmatics, stylistics offers the tools necessary to determine the patterns of language present within religious discourses and to account for their persuasive function within the texts.

2. Religious Discourse and Language

Any discussion of the role of persuasion in religious or sacred language necessarily begins with a discussion of what we mean by religious language. Reviews on the meaning of these terms can be found in various recent and historical studies[18], but for the purposes of this special issue, rather than attempting to establish rules on what should or shouldn't be included, considering the contexts in which we see religion invoked, discussed, or displayed is a helping starting point. On a very basic level, religious practice and belief are often articulated through language is specific to one category of named religion. That way of articulating a specific belief about reality can differentiate people of different religious traditions in the words they use — Muslims in English will often use the Arabic word for God Allah, whereas Christians speaking English normally would not. Language can then be a key part of signalling one's commitment to a particular religious belief and used to maintain that belief as a part of a community of religious believers.

The most overt relationship between religion and language can be observed in religious practices and rituals that occur within the context of religious ceremonies, rituals, and meetings. Religious language includes words and lexico-grammatical structures used in an explicitly religious context for an explicitly religious purpose, including religious and sacred texts. These can include language of persuasion and be part of larger structures like sermons or khutbahs. Religious discourse, by contrast, encompasses all language that may relate to religious belief and practice. This can include parts of conversations where religion or belief becomes relevant, including outside of explicitly religious contexts.

Because religious belief and practice can also profoundly influence how people think and talk about their experiences of the world, understanding how it can be used in persuasion requires understanding

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[14] Ibid., 117.

[15] Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2011).

[16] Lesley Jeffries and Dan McIntyre, *Stylistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2010); Michael Burke, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[17] Jeffries and McIntyre, *Stylistics*, 8.

[18] Valerie Hobbs, *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Paul Chilton and Monika Kopytowska, eds., *Religion, Language, and the Human Mind* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2018); Stephen Pihlaja, *Talk about Faith: How Conversation Shapes Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2021); Robert Yelle et al., eds., *Language and Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); David Crystal, *Linguistics, Language, and Religion* (Philadelphia: Hawthorn Books, 1965); Stephen Pihlaja and Helen Ringrow, "Language and Religion", in Stephen Pihlaja and Helen Ringrow, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2024).

the variety of ways religion and language interact.[19] For example, metaphorical language about the divine, in terms of the language religious believers are comfortable using,[20] can reveal ways that speakers attempt to use analogy to convince others of their understanding of the divine, or how political and spiritual leaders speak and write about the world.[21] Moreover, given differences in religious language across religions, profound differences can also emerge in the way that people think about life and death, with evidence for these differences appearing in ritual and sacred language and in the narrative data about experience.[22] Religious language can also travel from sacred texts through other forms of literature, influencing how fictional worlds are understood and spoken about.[23] In these cases, there might be explicit reference to religious or sacred texts, or implicit reference through analogy or metaphor that draws to mind religious stories or structures.

Persuasion in religious discourse can appear in a variety of different contexts and be present in a range of written and spoken texts, which we will see specifically in this volume. In all the contexts noted in the previous paragraph, the presence of religious language, or discourse about religion, must be addressed to understand both the intentions of the authors and speakers, and how what they say is or is not effective for their audience. In many cases related to religious language, particularly when it occurs in a religious context, isolating and describing the interaction between the speaker and the audience can be done with a relatively narrow analysis of who is speaking to whom and what the shared understanding of belief is in that particular context.

Some specific forms of religious discourse orientate towards their audience, performing complex persuasive perlocutions, such as homiletics or apologetics, which seek the audience's adherence to specific doctrinal beliefs. Other forms may make appeals for almsgiving and financial donations and calls to social action, or may instruct adherents in devotional practices or ethical and political choices, seeking the audience's adoption of some behaviour or concrete action. Religious discourse can also include persuasive structures and narratives that can only be identified 'above the sentence'. This is common in the conversion narrative structure, which often includes a description of a person being persuaded to follow a new or different religion, with key features taken at times from stories of conversion in sacred texts.[24] Preachers can use rhetorical devices to make their own experiences more relatable to their audience, using, for example, personal experiences to draw comparisons with their audience and persuade them through familiarisation.[25]

Religious discourse can be intrinsically persuasive in its aims while not always persuasive in its outcomes. Evangelistic and apologetic discourses can be viewed as prototypical of the speech act of persuasion, as can requests for donations. In other cases, persuasion in religious discourse can be more implicit. Religious persuasion can include nuances that occur between religious belief and context, wherein persuasion might be present in the construction of the sentence but understanding the rhetorical effect requires an understanding of 'language above the sentence'.[26] This can be seen, for example, in

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[19] Pihlaja and Ringrow, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Religion*.

[20] Aletta Dorst and Marry-Loïse Klop, "Not a Holy Father: Dutch Muslim Teenagers' Metaphors for Allah", *Metaphor and the Social World*, 7.1 (2017), 65-85.

[21] Clara Neary, "Truth Is like a Vast Tree", *Metaphor and the Social World*, 7.1 (2017), 103-21.

[22] Peter Richardson, "A Closer Walk: A Study of the Interaction between Metaphors Related to Movement and Proximity and Presuppositions about the Reality of Belief in Christian and Muslim Testimonials", *Metaphor and the Social World*, 2.2 (2012), 233–61; Peter Richardson, Charles Mueller, and Stephen Pihlaja, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[23] Furzeen Ahmed, "Religion, Literature, and the Secondary Classroom", in Pihlaja and Ringrow, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Religion*, 151-65.

[24] David W Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2020).

[25] Clint Bryan and Mohammed Albakry, "'To Be Real Honest, I'm Just like You': Analyzing the Discourse of Personalization in Online Sermons", *Text & Talk*, 36.6 (2016), 683-703.

[26] Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panovic, *Working with Written Discourse* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 4.

the construction 'Jesus, Son of Mary' on an Islamic *dawah* (outreach or evangelical teaching) table. In the UK, and indeed in Christian contexts more generally, one might expect a reference to Jesus as the 'Son of God'. By replacing 'God' with 'Mary', the statement is accurate for both Christians and Muslims, and the focus on Jesus appeals to those with a Christian belief or background. Understanding the phrase and its use in this context requires an understanding of the interaction between Christian belief and Islam, and the goals of Muslims doing *dawah* in a predominately Christian context. Both overt and subtle, explicit and implicit forms of persuasion in religious discourse will be analysed throughout the issue.

Persuasion around religion can also occur in discourse about religious believers, for example in representations of religion or religious groups in news media,[27] and, in particular, reporting on and representations of minority religions and religious believers.[28] These studies show how media can influence how religious believers are viewed without explicitly writing about religious beliefs and practices but rather as social categories. For example, categories of 'Muslim' or 'Catholic' can be used to index certain common-sense beliefs about people and persuade readers about the goodness or badness of actors. In these instances, overt references to religious belief and practice can be completely absent, with the religion used to signal a range of other parts of a person or group's character or personality, for example, in the use of antisemitic tropes.[29]

In both explicit and implicit persuasion in religious discourse, and in media discourse about religious believers, linguistic style is an element used to isolate when and where in discourse persuasion is occurring. As stylistic frameworks underpin most of the contributions in this issue, including the hybridization of stylistic methods (pragma-stylistics, rhetorical stylistics, corpus stylistics, cognitive stylistics, etc.), the articles here contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic phenomenon of persuasion in religious discourse.

3. Overview of Issue

The contributions to this special issue employ a range of methodological approaches (stylistics, pragmatics, historical discourse, and comparative literary criticism) to engage with and understand the forms and functions of persuasion within varied genres of religious discourse (from sermons to autobiographical texts and TED talks), which represent an array of differing historical, cultural and religious contexts and, therefore, an array of audiences whose adherence is being sought. The issue is structured diachronically, integrating empirical and aesthetic perspectives on the forms and functions of persuasion within varieties of religious discourse.

Pasquale Pagano's paper "Persuasive Preaching. The *Books of Homilies* and the Reformation in England" investigates the rhetorical strategies employed in Early Modern English sermon collections. Pagano interprets the sermons' persuasive features by contextualising them within the English Reformation's volatile cultural and historical background. The comparative approach of the study not only reveals the divergent strategies employed by Catholic and Protestant preachers but demonstrates the multiple points of contact between the texts in their attempts to defend particular doctrines and persuade their readers.

Clara Neary's "'So much of Gandhi Stays within You after Finishing, That It Is as if the Book Never Ended'. Empathetic Engagement and Rhetoric in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*" analyses the

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[27] Gavin Brookes et al., "Representation of Religion in News Media Discourse", in Pihlaja and Ringrow, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Religion*, 180-93.

[28] Tayyiba Bruce, "New Technologies, Continuing Ideologies: Online Reader Comments as a Support for Media Perspectives of Minority Religions", *Discourse, Context & Media*, 24 (August 2018), 53-75.

[29] Daniel Allington and Tanvi Joshi, "'What Others Dare Not Say': An Antisemitic Conspiracy Fantasy and Its YouTube Audience", *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*, 3.1 (2020), 35-54.

linguistic means of evoking empathy in readers as a persuasive feature of Gandhi's autobiography. This contribution contextualises Gandhi's complex, multifaced figure as a political, social, religious and cultural phenomenon of the 20th century and investigates the enduring success of his autobiography. Neary posits that "autobiographical texts exhibit greater potential for empathetic engagement" and identifies empirical stylistic features in support of this hypothesis. Her corpus stylistic analysis reveals the persuasive force of empathetical engagement – activated through deictic markers of time, person, and place that blur the temporal, spatial, and psychological boundaries between the author and the reader. The stylistic features which promote identification with the author are thus understood as a powerful means to move, engage, and ultimately persuade the reader.

Aoife Beville presents a pragmastylistic analysis of the persuasive function of irony in C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters.* The analysis explores the complex discourse architecture of the text – a series of letters from a senior demon to an underling containing instructions on how to distract and torment a new convert to Christianity. The principal feature that emerges from the analysis is the text's distinctive ironic, at times sardonic, tone. The study examines the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features that contribute to the text's meaning and the creation of its ironic narrative voice. Beville argues that *The Screwtape Letters* is not only a witty experiment within the genre of epistolary fiction but also an engaging and persuasive work of Christian apologetics. Indeed, the persuasive function of irony is an intrinsic part of the text's aesthetic value.

Polina Shvanyukova adopts a Discourse Historical Approach in her analysis of religious language in Phyllis Schlafly's 1972 anti-feminist manifesto entitled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women". The paper examines the religiously charged rhetoric used by conservative activists in their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s USA. The analysis shows how Schlafy made use of overt religious expressions and covert intertextual references to present her conservative stance on gender roles as authoritative and to undermine the feminist movement. Shvanyukova's research uncovers how the manifesto leverages religious-infused language to mobilize the anti-feminist cause, demonstrating how religious discourse can be a persuasive political tool, a strategy still in use in contemporary US politics and beyond.

Chiara Ghezzi's contribution employs an approach informed by stylistics and rhetorical studies to understand the practices and patterns of argumentation utilized in three TED Talks given between the late 1990s and the early 2010s. The three talks span a scale of belief from Billy Graham, a renowned evangelical preacher, to Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary scientist and vocal atheist, to Lesley Hazelton, a successful journalist and author who advocates for doubt in faith. The rhetorical-stylistic analysis reveals that religious discourse, while often characterized by strong opinions and opposing viewpoints, can employ persuasive strategies to inspire conviction and trust. These strategies include rhetorical figures, such as the enallage of person and parataxis, to emphasize arguments and create a sense of urgency.

Emma Pasquali's paper examines the communicative strategies that pastor and televangelist Benny Hinn employs to engage his followers and maintain his ministry's financial viability. Pasquali first contextualises the public persona of Benny Hinn and examines the link between televangelism and deliberative rhetoric, then, using a pragmatic framework, she analyses a corpus of telepreaching from Hinn's 2021 "Healing Services". Through both quantitative and qualitative pragmastylistic analysis, this paper demonstrates that the persuasive methods of Hinn's televangelism transcend mere logic and credibility. It explores Hinn's persuasive strategies, especially his use of anecdotes and metaphors, which produce emotionally resonant appeals for financial support. Hinn's prosperity gospel approaches giving in a transactional way, reflected in his use of rhetorical and pragmatic techniques to encourage donations with promises of blessings.

These articles, focusing on different text types and using varied linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical approaches, all aim to account for the forms and functions of persuasion in religious discourse. The

collection as a whole aims to respond to "the perennial need for individuals and groups to be aware of the persuasive practices they use, or that are used upon them to produce or alter their beliefs and actions".[30] This is particularly important in the analysis of religious discourse, where empirical evidence is often lacking, and differences between religious beliefs can rely on how people present and talk about those beliefs. By understanding the strategies and approaches involved in speaking and thinking about religious belief, we can gain valuable insights into the nature of how those beliefs are held, experienced, and spread.

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[30] Fahnestock and Harris, *Language and Persuasion*, 1.