

THE VAGUENESS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

DANIELE BERTINI
UNIVERSITY OF ROME TOR VERGATA

Abstract. My paper characterizes religious beliefs in terms of vagueness. I introduce my topic by providing a general overview of my main claims. In the subsequent section, I develop basic distinctions and terminology for handling the notion of religious tradition and capturing (religious) vagueness. In the following sections, I make the case for my claim that religious beliefs are vague by developing a general argument from the interconnection between the referential opacity of religious belief content and the long-term communitarian history of the precisification of what such content means. I start from describing an empirical example in the third section, and I then move to settle the matter in a conceptually argumentative frame in the fourth one. My conclusions in the final section address some consequences relevant to debates about religious epistemology and religious diversity.

I. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, REFERENTIAL OPACITY, AND VAGUENESS

Mainstream approaches to faith and religious life ordinarily assume that adherents to a tradition accept at least a few basic beliefs which specify the doctrinal system of their tradition. According to such approaches, any of these beliefs, namely, any fundamental belief for a certain religion, individuates an exact content to which all coreligionist assent. As a consequence, fundamental religious beliefs would give a strict description of their referential target, and religious beliefs of different traditions would give voice to alternative views which compete within the religious marketplace (call this assumption *Religious Beliefs Have an Exact Meaning*, EM for short).

Influential theories working within such a characterisation include, to name just a few, William Alston's analysis of religions as doxastic practices¹ and Richard Swinburne's defense of the rationality of theism². Other relevant examples are Plantinga's and van Inwagen's arguments for the claim that religious beliefs of one tradition stand in a logical relation of incompatibility with beliefs of other traditions.³ In any case, pre-philosophical or non-philosophical conceptions of religious beliefs stand in the neighborhood of these ones.⁴

My view is that EM is not a satisfying strategy for reasoning about faith. On the one hand, EM shapes religious beliefs in a highly idealised way with results that are irrelevant to understanding how these work; on the other hand, EM equates beliefs in the domain of religion with beliefs in any other doxastic field, and does not give any convincing reason in support of such identity claim.

My experience shows me that religious beliefs are structurally ambiguous and, accordingly, constitutively open to a plurality of legitimate and alternative readings. More importantly, they are sui generis beliefs. As a consequence, my proposal consists in characterising religious beliefs in terms of vagueness.

1 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

2 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

3 Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism", in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Ph. L. Quinn and K. Meeker (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Peter van Inwagen, "We're Right. They're Wrong", in *Disagreement*, ed. R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

4 Daniele Bertini, "On What a Religion Is Not", *Religions* 10, no. 1 (2019), 1 and the following.

The idea is that an adherent to a religious tradition believes something which is partly indeterminate in content, and that such indeterminacy is constitutive in a manner which is peculiar to the domain of religious discourse.

Such understanding of religious beliefs may prove to be an useful instrument for giving a correct account of this kind of beliefs and of the doxastic features of religions. However, my purpose is also to argue that, contrary to philosophical doubts about the epistemic admissibility of vague claims as authentic pieces of reliable knowledge, the cognitive reliability of religious beliefs may be defended despite their vagueness. Consequently, I will address objections to my proposal which may follow from seminal assumptions about the rational necessity that mental contents should be transparent in order to be epistemically viable.

To put my cards on the table, I will succinctly summarise how I see the story about religious vagueness. The content of religious beliefs is a referentially opaque experience. Opacity implies a slippery ground wherein similarity changes into identity. What I mean is that, within one and the same tradition, a few similar but different experiences of one (or more) alleged divine entity (or entities) support a single belief about one and the same entity (or group of entities). Accordingly, the difference among experiences comes to be understood by adherents to the same tradition in terms of a plurality of different representations of one and the same divinity. Such a plurality, plus the unity of reference, generates a continuous field of representations. However, continuity involves a problem in articulating what counts as a sound exemplar of something because it involves borderline cases and blurred boundaries among entities, which are, in fact, clearly distinct. Consequently, once a religious feature is defined, then a version of the sorites paradox is generated. Such a paradox asserts that, given that little differences in degree have no epistemic relevance, things which resemble each other, for something which is continuous over a range of features, turn out to be indiscernible as regards to that something, contrary to the evidence that they are overall discernible. The conclusion is then that religious beliefs make claims whose assessment involves wrestling with propositions which are not fully determinate in content, that is to say, which are vague.

II. A FRAMEWORK TO HANDLE VAGUE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In order to articulate precisely my views and give an argument in support of them, I need a framework with which to address both religious matters and vagueness.

Broadly speaking, a religious tradition is a cluster of ritual practices, doxastic systems, and institutional bodies and devices. All these things target a referent. This referent is individuated by a corpus of revealed texts, a historically cumulative mass of interpretations of such texts, and institutional or scholarly declarations on the faith which emerges from both the texts and their interpretations. Each religion names this referent in its own language. I will use the umbrella expression *divine realm* to capture indeterminately the object of different religious discourses. It is worth noting that by using such an umbrella expression, I do not want to endorse any kind of Kantian views on the epistemology of religious belief,⁵ that is to say, I do not think that a noumenal entity, namely the *divine realm*, is differently expressed by the phenomenal world-religions. On the contrary, I hold that, in religion, difference is much more fundamental than identity.⁶ What I am doing is simply making use of a conceptual abstraction in order to not be obliged to specify each time any different referential target of a religious belief.

The *divine realm* bears some relationships to ordinary everyday experience. By *ordinary everyday experience*, I mean the acquaintance with those common things constituting the content of human lives: relations to others; daily activities such as working, eating, walking through an environment, having free

5 Abdolkarim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge", in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. C. Kurzmann (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

6 Daniele Bertini, "The Anecdotal Nature of Religious Disagreements", *The International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80, no. 3 (2019).

time, and so on; and an awareness of events, objects, and properties of things. In other words, ordinary everyday experience is the content of the *mundane reality*. To make a long story short, a great number of religions appear to be practical and conceptual instruments for making sense of the mundane reality in terms of the divine realm.

Usually, religions express such a meaning by a particular *religious belief system*. I do not assume that such a system is homogeneously shared among adherents to the same religion, nor that a religion holds one and only one religious belief system. Further, I do not suppose either that a religious belief system is a consistent conceptual network of beliefs. In speaking of a religious belief system, I simply refer to a body of somehow interconnected beliefs in the domain of religious discourse. *Somehow* here means: a mixture of social, historical, genealogical, contextual, and logical features.

What I find important to observe is that a religious belief system is a complex conceptual apparatus containing two radically different kinds of beliefs, namely, religious and auxiliary.⁷ Religious beliefs directly concern the divine realm and how to engage with it. They may be highly generic (e.g. There is a plurality of Gods) or specific (e.g. you should perform an action such and such in order to worship X). Auxiliary beliefs concern non-religious assumptions which have some logical, epistemic or interpretive relations to the content of religious beliefs (e.g. if every A is a B, then there cannot be fewer B's than A's). Their importance consists in that, while they do not directly bear on religious matters, they specify what a certain religious belief means. For example, Christians assume that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. According to the principle that if every A is a B, then there cannot be fewer B's than A's, it would result that there are at least three Gods. Consequently, Christians should not assume the principle and should count entities by alternative criteria; that is, the principle is not an auxiliary belief for the Christian system of beliefs. Two further elements of religious belief systems are that they involve a large amount of concepts, and that they assess, establish, and convey values.

In light of these distinctions, I am now able to state my claim about the constitutive vagueness of religious beliefs. First, vagueness is a property of highly generic religious beliefs. Evidently, it might be a property of many other kinds of religious beliefs, but I do not consider this possibility because, while highly generic religious beliefs are constitutively vague, specific religious beliefs may be vague or not (e.g., a ritual prescription may be non-vague). This means that highly generic religious beliefs and vague religious beliefs are not coextensive terms, and, therefore, religious high genericity and religious vagueness are not synonymous. Second, vagueness is due to understanding the relationship between the experiences which support a plurality of different representations in terms of continuity. Third, vagueness generates from experiences of how the divine realm relates to the mundane reality, and, ultimately, makes sense of this. It is precisely such an originating vagueness which promotes the doxastic complexity of any tradition. Pluralities of revealed texts, historical growth of exegetical activities, confessional statements and revisions of these: all these phenomena depend on the emergence of vagueness from the referential opacity of the encounter between the divine realm and the mundane reality. Fourth, the vagueness of religious beliefs is clearly a semantic fact: it depends on the possibility that a number of different precisifications of meaning result simultaneously working.

The preceding statements set the groundwork for introducing the conceptual tools for the treatment of vagueness. Basically, vagueness is related to the imprecision of meaning. Different scholars disagree about how to characterize such imprecision. The core dividing line is between those who think that vagueness is a semantic fact and those who think that it is an ontic one. Theorists belonging to the former kind claim, while those belonging to the latter one deny, that the world is determinate. Accordingly, the semantic view holds that the description of the world is imprecise, and this is the end of the story; the ontic view holds that the description is imprecise because at least some facts about the world present

7 Katherine Dormandy, "Disagreement from the Religious Margin", *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3 (2018).

fluctuating items. B. Russell⁸, K. Fine⁹, G. Evans¹⁰, D. Lewis¹¹, and A. Varzi¹² are leading figures of the first group; P. van Inwagen and E. Barnes¹³ are proponents of the second approach.

A further distinction captures a subtler difference among semantic theorists. Some of these hold that imprecision is a consequence of the epistemic inadequacy of cognitive capabilities.¹⁴ As a consequence, vagueness itself is a matter of degree: although imprecision is a constitutive character of any cognitive fact, the more theoreticians work toward strictly defining and assessing the meaning of terms, the more vagueness can be resolved into precise descriptions. On the contrary, others maintain that imprecision is a matter of not having socially established and commonly shared methods to provide precisifications of meaning. This means that vagueness is global indeterminacy in reference, and cannot find a point of arrest.¹⁵

Supervaluationism is the view of those who adhere to this approach. According to the supervaluationist, a vague statement admits a set of precisifications of its meaning. Let P be a vague statement, and K be the set of precisifications of the meaning of P . There are three cases.

- a) P is true under whichever precisification;
- b) P is false under whichever precisification;
- c) P is true for some precisifications and false for some others.

For example, assume that *God* is a vague proper name, and that the predicates *is eternal*, *is impermanent*, and *is tri-personal* apply to the entity which is named *God*. Consider the propositions:

- a') God is eternal;
- b') God is impermanent;
- c') God is tri-personal.

Evidently, (a') is true whichever precisification of the proper name *God* holds; (b') is always false; (c') is true for some precisifications (for example, the Christian understanding of *God* in terms of the Trinity) and false for others (for example, the Muslim understanding of *God* in terms of the unicity of Allah).

It is obvious to me that the theoretically interesting cases of vagueness relate to propositions which fall under type (c). In my example, vagueness relies on a proper name, and propagates to any propositions consisting in predicating a vague proper name. However, there are different linguistic items which can be said to be vague. I will list here those which are relevant to my argument:

- (1) Proper names (Russell 1923)
- (2) Predicates (Russell 1923; Fine 1975; Varzi 2007);
- (3) Identity claims (Evans 1978; Thomason 1981¹⁶; Lewis 1988).

What is common to all categories (1)-(3) is that they generate taxonomical problems. Broadly speaking, a proper name, a predicate, or an identity claim is vague if it is used imprecisely, has borderline cases of application, and generates fuzzy boundaries between what certainly falls under the relevant trait and what certainly does not. When this occurs, vagueness leads to a sorites paradox.¹⁷

8 Bertrand Russell, "Vagueness", *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1923).

9 Kit Fine, "Vagueness, Truth, and Logics", *Synthese* 30, no. 3-4 (1975).

10 Gareth Evans, "Can There Be Vague Objects?", *Analysis* 38, no. 4 (1978).

11 David Lewis, "Vague Identity: Evans Misunderstood", *Analysis* 48, no. 3 (1988).

12 Achille Varzi, "Supervaluationism and His Logic", *Mind*, no. 116 (2007).

13 Elizabeth Barnes, "Metaphysically Indeterminate Existence", *Philosophical Studies* 166, no. 3 (2013).

14 Russell, "Vagueness", Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (Routledge, 1994).

15 Fine, "Vagueness, Truth, and Logics", Varzi, "Supervaluationism and His Logic".

16 Richmond H. Thomason, "Identity and Vagueness", *Philosophical Studies* 42, no. 3 (1982).

17 Silvia Gaio, "Vaghezza", *APHEx. Portale italiano di filosofia analitica* 1 (2010).

A religious proper name (e.g. a name for a divine entity) ordinarily raises problems of application. Consider the name of a religious figure within a tradition, for example, the Virgin Mary within Christian Catholicism. From times to times, certain individuals claim to be mystically acquainted with her. All these appearances constitute a set of representations of the Virgin Mary. Some members of this set are evidently inauthentic Marian appearances; that is to say, there is a common agreement among Christian Catholics that the content of the appearance is not the Virgin Mary. It would be then inappropriate to apply the name *Virgin Mary* to the content of these representations. On the contrary, some other Marian appearances are thought to be authentic for the large majority of Christian Catholics. Accordingly, the name *Virgin Mary* applies to these ones. Finally, there is a debated zone of disagreement as to whether a subset of Marian appearances are authentic. Members of such a subset constitute borderline cases for the application of the name *Virgin Mary*. As a consequence, the subset of non-authentic Marian appearances and the subset of authentic Marian appearances have fuzzy boundaries. Suppose to order Marian appearances from surely inauthentic to surely authentic. Evidently, a sorites paradox can be construed. Now, any religious tradition provides cases of popular appearances of their own religious figures. Folk faith is imbued everywhere by beliefs about divine entities which interact with common people through visions, dreams, auditory experiences, and so on. Therefore, what holds for the example of Virgin Mary can be generalised to any tradition.

That the application of predicates may fall under the veil of vagueness is a trivial claim. However, since theorists endorsing EM think the contrary, I provide a few evidence in support. Consider a proposition like *x achieved enlightenment and acquired Buddhahood*. Such a proposition can be logically interpreted as *x is Buddha-like*. The reason why the predicate ... *is Buddha-like* is vague can be spelt out as follows. All the different Buddhist denominations define what Buddha is in terms of their own viewpoint. Disagreements abound over the metaphysical, cosmological, soteriological, and existential nature of Buddha. Furthermore, different rituals, meditation practices, and cultic performances address different understandings of Buddha's role and nature even within the same denomination. As a result, a variety of different ways to individuate Buddha make the content of the religious belief about its nature indeterminate. Such a difference is not completely semantic ambiguity. All the facts about Buddha stem from a common source which has generated a number of overlapping representations with little differences in content. As a consequence, Buddhahood is a property continuous over a range of different phenomena. The conclusion follows: beliefs concerning such a notion are vague, because their imprecision gives rise to taxonomical difficulties (e.g. a school may assume that Buddhahood has the feature F and does not have the feature G; another school attributes the feature G but not F to Buddhahood; F slightly changes into G; as a consequence, the notion of Buddhahood has fuzzy cases of application according to the two schools). Since any religion makes predicative claims about its referential target, and such predicates vary over a continuous field of differences, examples of vague (c) type propositions of predicative form may be found in any tradition.

The clearer case of identity claims is a proposition which asserts that two names apply to the same individuals (e.g. Rudra is Shiva; God is the Trinity; Vishnu is Brahman). Each term of the couple refers to the same entity, but says something different about it. Vagueness of identity claims is parasitic in respect to the eventual vagueness of the proper names involved. It is worth noting that, in the religious domain, most beliefs are identity claims because of the propensity to understanding divine properties as proper names of the referential target of the relevant tradition.

According to Evans, vague identity claims seem to generate a contradiction.¹⁸ The longstanding debate about his argument is a lively field of logical and theoretical research. I do not mean to address any of the questions therein involved. I will confine myself to setting forth an account of the minimal outcomes of Evans' proof (my hope is that my interpretation precedes the issues at stake in the debate, which concerns which assumptions eventually justify the steps of the proof and whether the proof soundly concludes anything). Suppose that it is indeterminate whether A is identical to B. In Evans' views, this means that B has a property such that it is indeterminate whether B is identical to A. However, it is not

18 Evans, "Can There Be Vague Objects?"

indeterminate whether A is identical to A. Consequently, A does not have one of the properties which B has. Now, whenever two terms possess different proprieties, they are discernible. Therefore, it is not indeterminate whether A is identical to B. Differently from the starting premise, it is false.

What does it mean that assuming the indeterminacy of identity between A and B involves a contradiction? Suppose that A and B are precise designators (say that a designator is precise if and only if there is something determinately denoted thereby, and so it is not vague what the designator picks out¹⁹). If they are such a way, namely, if A precisely denotes a vague object, and B precisely denotes a vague object, from the fact that it is indeterminate whether A is identical to B, it can be inferred that B has a property according to which it is indeterminate whether B is identical to A. Actually, since the reference of B is rigidly established, whichever statement about B concerns always the same object. Consequently, saying that it is not indeterminate that B is identical to B is equivalent to saying that it is not indeterminate that B has the property of being identical to B: since precise designation is a one-to-one relation, it allows for the legitimacy of inferences from logical fact (as a fact about identity) to the attribution of properties which an entity has by reason of the logical facts which concern it (e.g., having the property of being indeterminate whether a terms is identical to another whenever it is indeterminate whether they are identical). This being the case, Evans' argument follows.²⁰ The conclusion is thus that assuming that vague identity claims are about precise designators logically leads to a contradiction and states something implausible, namely, that there are no vague identity claims.

This suggests that Evans' argument is diagnostic: vague identity claims cannot be about precise designators, on pain of generating a contradiction. It follows from this that the vagueness of identity claims depends on the imprecision of the designators involved. That is to say, vagueness is related to using terms in an indeterminate manner.²¹ A natural implication of such a use is that the boundaries between the application of A and B are fuzzy.

Most commentators hold that such a diagnosis has a deep impact on the evaluation of whether vagueness is semantic or ontic. Friends of the semantic view claim that, if vagueness is ontic, then the designators for vague objects should be precise. Now, given that precise designators in vague identity claims lead to a contradiction, it cannot be the case that designators in vague statements are precise. As a consequence, vagueness is not ontic. Replies from friends of the ontic view pursue two different strategies. On the one hand, they aim at stopping Evans' argument by denying that it is a proof, namely, they deny that one or the other step of the argument is soundly assumed. On the other hand, they develop (allegedly intuitive) narratives which provide counterexamples to the validity of proof.

My reading of Evans' argument questions the common assumption of the two parties in the debate, that is, that ontic vagueness involves precision in designation. On the contrary, if terms for objects involving vagueness are referentially imprecise (this is Evans' conclusion), the description of these objects is imprecise too. The plain consequence from an epistemic viewpoint should be that imprecision in descriptive propositions cannot be a reason in support of the semantic view. If I cannot know precisely what a certain X is because of the imprecision of my description of X, I cannot either conclude that X is not a fluctuating object. Therefore, the assumption that Evans' argument shows how vagueness in identity claims requires that designators are imprecise does not have any metaphysical consequence concerning the nature of vagueness, and appears to be supportive both of the semantic and ontic views. Apply such a reading to the religious case: religious vagueness is compatible with both parties of the contemporary debate concerning the nature of vagueness. Indeed, if the content of beliefs about the divine realm is vague, given the referential opacity assumption, adherents to a religion have no means to settle whether the divine realm is a fluctuating object or simply transcends the possibility of human understanding. The semantic nature of religious vagueness may then be grounded on the ontic indeterminacy of the divine realm or on the imprecision of any description thereof.

19 Dominic Hyde, *Vagueness, Logic, and Ontology* (Routledge, 2016), 116–17.

20 Thomason, "Identity and Vagueness", 331.

21 Lewis, "Vague Identity", 129.

III. A VEDIC BELIEF ABOUT DIVINE LORDSHIP.

It is now time to move to my argument for the claim that the content of religious belief is vague. I will discuss a belief from the ancient Indo-Aryan tradition, namely, that *Indra is the Lord of Gods* (*Rigveda* 7.21.6–7; hereafter I will refer to this belief as ILG). To my intuition, the example is a clear case of an identity claim, whose vagueness depends on the vagueness of the proper names involved. While Indra is no doubt a proper name, *Lord of Gods* is a divine title. As such, it behaves prima facie like a property predicate. However, the basic, foundational, and constitutive properties of the referential target of any tradition are thought to be necessary to it, and conflate with its nature. Evidently, divine titles fall into this category of properties. Now, between a divine name and the divine nature, there is an expressive relation, that is to say, the name represents verbally the nature. Within the religious field, such an expressive relation is a particular case of identity: the name is what a nature is once it is grasped in the verbal domain of experience. Therefore, I will assume that divine titles are names for the divine nature. A plain consequence of the preceding lines of reasoning is that, since such titles are necessary to the referential target of a certain tradition, divine titles are to be treated as proper names. This being the case, *Lord of Gods* is a proper name, and therefore ILG can be evaluated as an identity claim.

With this characterisation in mind, let us move to comment on the figure of Indra and his kingship. Early Vedic sources, such as the *Rigveda*, depict Indra as a warrior God. Some of his capabilities, properties, and actions are described in the same manner in different hymns. For example, a group of narratives focus on his fight with a primordial serpent, Vritra. As a result of Indra's winning over his adversary, Indra gets a complete control over the waters by separating the earths, the seas, and the rivers (*Rigveda*, 1.32.1–2, 7.21). This fact is intended to benefit human kind: the creation of the world consists in regulating the cycle of water flows for the advantage of human beings (*Rigveda*, 2.12; 2.20.7; 3.34.4). Since he does not run away from Vritra, and fights the snake until he defeats it, Indra is made King of the Gods by the other characters of the Indo-Aryan pantheon (*Rigveda*, 3–32.4; 4.19.1; 6.20.2). However, such texts do not converge on the same representation of Indra. While he is acknowledged to be an elective King throughout all the hymns which concern his lordship, the symbols of his power vary: some hymns claim that Indra is the God of thunderbolt (*Rigveda*, 1.57.2, 1.73.10, 1.101.1, 4.19.1), others describe him as related simply to storms (*Rigveda* 2.12, 4.18.9), and some others qualify him as the giver of agriculture due to his control of river flows (*Rigveda*, 4.23, 5.39, 8.24). Naturally, all texts have historical and representational relations. That is, such a variety of images is not dependent on random ambiguity. Indeed, all images inhere in the iconic context of the phenomena of rain, and in the semantic context of the power to manipulate rains for human agricultural and safety purposes, and they partially overlap. As a consequence, the representations of Indra can be ordered by reason of how much a certain feature is present or absent. By articulating his different features within a conceptual web, Indra will appear as specified into a multiplicity of similar images which gradually differ for their particularities. Gradually here involves continuity. This means that a certain feature is differently present within a number of different representations (e.g., contrary to those texts addressing Indra's governance of Gods and the world, texts which focus on Indra as ally of Indo-Aryans in war do mention him as thunderer, but do not give importance to this attribution, *Rigveda*, 1.7, 1.8, 6.19; the same holds for those texts which depicts Indra in terms of the Soma-sacrifice, *Rigveda* 1.10, 5.38).

If my reading of Indra is sufficiently sound, the name *Indra* is to be qualified as a vague term. The main reason in support of this claim is that the attribution of the name Indra to a set of alleged manifestations of Indra is imprecise and may accordingly raise taxonomical difficulties, due to the fact that the experiences which have Indra for content are continuous over the range of phenomena related to rains and the control of these (although they also vary on different topics), and such a continuity generates a plurality of different representations which slightly differ one from the other for the degree of the relevant feature.

Consider a devotee of Indra. For him, rains which are beneficial to agricultural practices are the effect of Indra's agency. Now, while it is true that some rains are beneficial to agriculture and others are not,

there are no established, commonly shared, and precise ways to assess whether a determinate quantity of rain is beneficial to agricultural practices or not. This is a consequence of the fact that, given that a certain amount of rain — say R_i — is beneficial to agricultural practices, any amount of rain R_i+1 is still beneficial to agriculture practices. Then, any R_k too is beneficial to agriculture, and so on. However, it is the case that beyond a certain threshold, the amount of rain is not beneficial to agriculture anymore. Since it is not defined what such a threshold is, conclusion follows: the notion of rain beneficial to agricultural practices is vague. However, these kinds of rains are the effect of Indra's agency, namely, the devotee of Indra experiences such rains as manifestations of him. It seems natural to assume that if an experience has a vague content, the name for that experience is vague, provided that a proper name applies to that experience. Consequently, Indra is then a vague proper name.

The divine title *Lord of Gods* is in a similar position. Similar to the case of texts concerning Indra, Vedic hymns attribute liberally Lordship of Gods to the deities which they address, that is, most of the hymns declares that the God to whom the hymn is dedicated is a Lord. Actually, *Rigveda* spirituality is an example of henotheism, i.e. worship of a God while not denying the existence of others. It is a matter of fact that a difference between the deities involves different conceptions of kingship (however, the assumption that Indra is the prominent God within the Vedic pantheon is justified by the high number of hymns which are dedicated to him). For example, Indra's brother is called Agni, and he is explicitly invoked as the prominent deity (*Rigveda* 1.68.1). By reason of his perfect knowledge, he is the messenger of the Gods, and the link between the divine realm and the mundane reality (*Rigveda* 1.12, 4.1, 4.8.4, 4.15). Related to such a function, he exercises his linkage activities by shaping sacrifice effectiveness: he warrants that human offerings reach the Gods (*Rigveda*, 3.29), and that worship is officiated in the right way (*Rigveda* 1.1, 6.15.13, 10.122). As a consequence, he also embodies the iconic image of perfect priesthood (*Rigveda* 9.66.20).

Evidently, Agni's lordship is qualitatively different from Indra's one. Both of them are warriors (*Rigveda* 5.4.6 is a statement about Agni being a warrior). However, while cosmogonic narratives concerning Indra give voice to a conception of the legitimacy of power based on military strength (e.g. Indra defeats Vritra and is accordingly declared Lord of Gods by the other deities), hymns focused on Agni testify to an authority which stems from the capability of performing effective sacrifices, namely, having control over cosmic powers (e.g. Agni manages sacrifices, and obtains the relevant powers for humans, which is the goal of the sacrifice itself). Anyway, while these conceptions are certainly distinct, they have overlapping features as well. For example, having power implies the exercise of coercitive capabilities or a submissive acknowledgment by the dominated (Indra: *Rigveda* 7.21; Agni: *Rigveda* 6.9.7). A few hymns testify to a possible confusion between Indra and Agni (*Rigveda* 1.164.46, 2.1.3, 5.3.1), and others attribute to Agni the title of Vritra slayer, which is a basic and essential characteristic of Indra (*Rigveda* 6.16.14). As a consequence, Indra's lordship and Agni's lordship have fuzzy boundaries. They express different conceptions of being *Lord of Gods*, but such conceptions partially overlap and appear to generate a field of blurred applications of one or the other notion. *Lord of Gods* is thus a vague divine title.

Now, since both terms in ILG are vague, the identity claim turns out to be vague too. This seems in line with the fact that ILG is an highly generic religious belief; the identity claim involves that both the identified things have a feature which varies continuously over a range of degrees, the religious context within which ILG is confessed addresses how the mundane reality depends on the divine realm, and the resulting descriptive value of ILG is subject to ambiguity.

A couple of interesting consequences of such a conclusion are that both *Indra* and *Lord of Gods* should be evaluated as imprecise designators (a) and that, given such imprecision, ILG requires an assessment in order to obtain a meaning (b).

Actually, unless one is ready to accept that ILG leads to a contradiction (or one has an undisputed strategy for answering Evans' challenge, which is not the case), accepting (a) seems to be the most reasonable move in analysing the semantic value of the names involved in ILG. As a matter of fact, exegetical studies of Vedic mythologies provide unquestionable evidence in support of the claim that *Indra*, *Agni*, *divine lordship*, and alike, are terms which swing in between a number of confusing representations and

features; that is to say, they are imprecise in designation.²² Consequently, ILG requires a few semantic decisions about how to read the terms involved.

Believers that *Indra is the Lord of the Gods* are in verbal agreement over a doxastic utterance.²³ This means that believers assenting to ILG assume a set of different understandings of *Indra*, *divine lordship*, and the relation between them. Evidently, some of these views conflict at least to the extent that there are no socially established and shared methods for determining whether a case to which the name *Indra* (or *Lord of Gods*, or the relation between the two) may apply should actually be counted among experiences concerning Indra (or experiences concerning divine lordship or the relation between Indra and divine lordship). As a consequence, adherents to Indra's lordship develop an interpretive mass of beliefs which aim at resolving vague claims about the matter at dispute. Since the traditional context for Vedic hymns provides such believers with a multiplicity of imprecise designations, the doxastic effort consists in turning imprecision in designation into precision, i.e. removing vagueness from claims about religious targets. Such a process leads to determining a plurality of continuous contents of belief. The result is then that the imprecision in designation produces a set of determinate contents. Since each determinate content arises from a cluster of representations which prove to conflict with one another, it follows that resolving vagueness originates ambiguity in religious beliefs. Literally identical claims acquire different meanings: verbal agreement among believers changes into pseudo-agreement, and global ambiguity originates from vagueness.

Let us consider how the supervaluationist and the ontic theorist might account for ILG. According to the former, a vague proposition requires a precisification of meaning. ILG is vague because it is true for some precisifications and false for others. For example, if divine lordship is understood in terms of possession of a warrior strength, which all the Gods acknowledge to Indra (W), ILG is true. On the contrary, if divine lordship is understood in terms of the capacity of warranting that a sacrifice is fully effective (S), ILG is false. Since W may gradually change into S (e.g. warranting the effectiveness of a sacrifice implies having a warrior strength to subdue the elements involved), and it is not easy to individuate a boundary which separates an exclusive reading of W and S (i.e. having a warrior strength is a completely different matter from assuring the effectiveness of a sacrifice), alternative precisifications of ILG come to have different truth-values. The problem here is that a boundary among the exclusive readings of W and S must exist (either W and S have the same meaning or W and S have distinct meanings, but the first disjunct is not the case according to the exclusive reading): therefore, if W and S are read this way, divine lordship is either W or S, but not both. Nonetheless, adherents to Indra's lordship have no common intuitions about such a matter, and are not in the position of establishing precisely what a similar boundary consists in. As a consequence, Indra and his divine lordship are not fluctuating, oscillating, or fuzzy things: they are existentially determined in an absolute manner, but this absolute determination is beyond the realm of common knowledge. Descriptions of who Indra is are defective; it is not his ontic nature to be imprecise.

The theorist who claims that vagueness in ILG is ontic contends a similar conclusion. A possible account for such a claim is that Indra might have an indefinite nature, because he fluctuates among different degrees of actualisation of his properties. This situation is not a fact due to contingent properties; rather, it is structural: Indra's identity is continuous over a range of actualisations of the features he possesses. For example, while Indra certainly has W, W partially overlaps with S, and, to the extent that such overlapping occurs, possession of W by Indra has something in common with S too. Consequently, while ILG is certainly false in case where it means that Indra has S, and certainly true in case where it means that Indra has W, there are precisifications of ILG for which it is indeterminate whether possession of W by Indra requires at least to some extent that he possesses a degree of S (such a situation occurs for those readings of W which imply that W partially overlaps with S).

22 Arthur A. Macdonnell, *Vedic Mythology* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1897), 54–67, 88, 101.

23 Dennis Potter, "Religious Disagreement: Internal and External", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2013).

IV. WHY THE CONTENT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IS VAGUE.

I will now make the case for the general claim that any highly generic religious belief behaves as ILG. My strategy is to develop an argument about how this kind of beliefs originates and works. In my view, if the argument is sound, it provides an explanation of religious vagueness.

Consider the following three-step argument:

(1. *De dicto* beliefs from referential opacity.

P1) Opaque contexts of reference promote beliefs in *de dicto* modality;

P2) Religious traditions are opaque contexts of reference;

C1) Religious traditions promote beliefs in *de dicto* modality.

(2. Rigidity in designation and the plurality of representations.

P1) Rigidity of designation of *de dicto* beliefs which stem from an opaque context of reference generates a plurality of continuous representations;

P2) Religious traditions promote beliefs in *de dicto* modality (C1).

P3) Religious traditions are opaque contexts of reference;

C2) Rigidity of designation of *de dicto* religious beliefs generates a plurality of continuous representations.

(3. Religious beliefs have vague content.

P1) Rigidity and imprecision in designation generate vague beliefs.

P2) Plurality of continuous representations of the same object implies that designators of that object are imprecise;

P3) Rigidity of designation of *de dicto* religious beliefs generates a plurality of continuous representations (C2);

P4) Designators occurring within *de dicto* religious beliefs are imprecise;

C3) *De dicto* religious beliefs are vague (i.e. they have vague content).

My clarification and defense of the argument start from the *de re/de dicto* distinction. Grossly speaking, a belief is in *de re* modality if it either attributes directly a property to the object which it concerns (metaphysical *de re* belief) or it permits substitution of co-designating terms *salva veritate* (semantic *de re* belief). Otherwise, a belief is *de dicto* (I will not consider the case of being syntactically *de re/de dicto* because the metaphysic and semantic approaches to the distinction suffice to handle my topic). All examples hereafter will obviously relate to ILG. The *de re* instance of such a belief sounds like this: *I believe of Indra being Lord of Gods*; the *de dicto* variety can be rendered as *I believe that Indra is the Lord of Gods*.

The idea is that the *de re* modality characterises beliefs which are about how things stand, and, on the contrary, the *de dicto* modality characterises how things should be in order to be treated in the way the belief asserts. This means that the former describes how reality is, the latter specifies how a doxastic agent speaks about how reality is.²⁴

An evident point is that while *de re* beliefs are referentially transparent, their *de dicto* form is opaque.²⁵ Indeed, if I think of x's having something (metaphysical *de re* belief) or it is at my disposal that a, b, c, ... i are co-designating terms for x (semantic *de re* belief), my belief directly refers to what I am thinking. There is no interposed frame between the content and reference of my belief. Naturally, this is not true of beliefs

24 Achille Varzi, "Vaghezza e ontologia", in *Storia dell'ontologia*, ed. M. Ferraris (Bompiani, 2008).

25 Willard Van Orman Quine, "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes", *The Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1956).

in the *de dicto* modality. Suppose I think that *x* has the property of being *F* (metaphysical *de dicto* belief), or I ignore whether *a* and *b* are co-designating *x* (semantic *de dicto* belief). The that-clause introducing my thought about *x*'s properties is ambiguous because it admits a reading of content which may consist in a quantification. As a consequence, *de dicto* beliefs concern kinds of objects, and it is a completely empirical fact whether generals are instantiated by a given particular, or terms for this one are co-designating or not the same referent. Such a fact is not accessible within beliefs, and this is why the referential context of this kind of belief is opaque: experience should stand in-between content and reference. This being the case, whenever referential opacity occurs, beliefs come in the *de dicto* modality. Such a conclusion suffices to establish the assumption of (1.P1).

The assumption of (2.P2) may be justified as follows. Any tradition admits that the content of seminal highly generic beliefs is a matter of revelation. However, such a revelation is not easy to understand, and doctrinal debates about a sound reading of it abound within any tradition. Particularly, exegetical disagreements concern alternative interpretations of revelation narratives. Typically, such interpretations reduce the content of faith to beliefs which are introduced by that-clauses or are about co-designating terms for the referential target of the relevant tradition. For example, religious thinking ordinarily justifies *de re* beliefs about the referential target of a tradition by translating them into their *de dicto* kind. Such an attitude is highlighted by standard processes of justification: believing of *x*'s having *F* consists in believing that an entity like *x* should have *F*. Accordingly, subsequent stages of doctrinal disagreements consist in debating about which terms are efficaciously co-designating the target of the relevant tradition.

Consider ILG. Hymns about Indra deal with him in a *de re* modality. By telling stories which concern his actions, powers, and capabilities, they directly attribute something to him. Nonetheless, these texts also qualify Indra by giving him titles characterizing high-God status in general, they depict him by a fluctuating symbolic imagery, and, finally, they identify his features with properties which most other divine characters introduced by the *Rigveda* possess. As a consequence, Indra's characterisation can be spelt out in terms of the actualisation of a general divine nature, which opaquely blends, blurs, and overlaps with most of the other objects of rituals established by alternative hymns.²⁶

Now, C3 logically follows from (1.P1) and (2.P2), and, accordingly, does not require any detailed comments. For this reason, I will move to the second step of my argument. The first premise is one of the most important of all my reasoning. The intuition at work is that once a religious experience individuates a target by establishing a name for the content of the experience, the rigidity of baptism warrants that all similar experiences fall under the same heading, that is, they all concern the referent named this way. Grossly speaking, the domain of religious discourse is an opaque context of reference wherein individuals' private experiences are mediated by a whole sum of hermeneutical presuppositions. Such presuppositions consist of a cumulative aggregation of partly overlapping testimonies which are shared in the space of public narratives. It is evident that my claim is far from an Alstonian-like approach to the belief-forming process.²⁷ Indeed, I do not hold that individuals adhering to the same doxastic practice adopt a common mechanism which cognitively processes informations in order to outcome a belief. If this were the case, disagreements among co-religionists would be improbable, contrary to the evidence that they are an ordinary item of any intra-religious exchange of opinion. In opposition to this view, my claim is that adherents to the same tradition testify to each others' slightly different version of the same stories because they refer to similar experiences by the use of a proper name for their religious target. What is relevant here is that such commonality of reference by naming favours the attribution of fundamental features to the object of the experience and, at the same time, varies by reason of the subjectivity of any personal experience. Consequently, the rigidity of designation warrants that experiences about the referential target of a tradition, although subjectively variable, all individuate the same content and take place within the same referential context, whereas subjectivity generates a plurality of representations which, even if they all inhere in the same context, vary over

26 Klaus K. Klostermayer, *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1984), 12–19.

27 Alston, *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.

a range of continuous differences. This implies that the opacity of context promotes a communitarian development of seminal beliefs. Differently from what happens with experiences relating to other doxastic fields, individuals enjoying religious experiences lack a transparent testing ground for the assessment of what they are experiencing. Rather, they need to work hard in order to understand the exact content of their faith: religious belief is a matter of interpretive efforts. This effort is communitarian and consists in precisifying a meaning for claims which admit a plurality of readings, due to their *de dicto* nature. As a consequence, the history of religious beliefs constitutes a field of endless doctrinal debates, wherein different approaches, viewpoints, doxastic proposals, ordinary intuitions, and metaphysical insights cooperate and conflict in amassing a cumulative body of different understandings of the propositional expression of a belief. For example, experiences of Indra as the controller of waters give rise to a belief about his divine lordship. However, such context of experience cannot prevent individual beliefs from slightly distancing each other into a plurality of different representations of similar phenomena.

Established this way reasons in support of (2.P1); given that (2.P2) is the conclusion of the previous step of the argument, and (2.P3) is the second premise of it, (C2) logically follows by substitution of the relevant expressions in (2.P1).

The first premise of the third step is the other crucial assumption for my argument. I will be as declarative as I can in summing my views on such matter. Once a term is rigidly introduced by baptism for referring to a thing, it is associated with a series of descriptions of that thing.²⁸ Notoriously, van Inwagen argues for the claim that attributing a proper name by baptism dispenses a doxastic subject from providing a description of the named thing, and that such a fact gives a reason in support of ontic vagueness in face of the semantic one (van Inwagen 1988). But, baptism is a performative act which requires understanding a wide extent of descriptive conditions (for example, anything which is necessary for individuating the thing which is baptised). Consequently, the occurrence of a baptism without description is a deceptive possibility.

Although the baptism confers rigidity, the descriptions are counterfactually variable. This variability leaves room for different choices as to which of these descriptions is the cutting line between belonging or not to the conceptual content rigidly designated by the relevant term. Whenever this variability admits precision in giving strict definitions, the work of individuals engaged in the relevant doxastic activity pushes vagueness away, and settles the dispute. On the contrary, in case where different intuitions about the precisification of meaning conflict and compete with each other in a manner which cannot find conclusive reasons in support of any of them, the plurality of slightly different descriptions for the same name generates a vague approach to the relevant thing, that is, it attests the impossibility of establishing common understanding about what counts as an instance of a kind, and which boundaries can be set for individuating this instance and discriminating it from near objects.

In my view, (3.P3) is an a priori truth concerning designators of continuous representations. It is evident that continuous representations are subject to a construal which produces sorites paradoxes. Since any term for each of these representations picks out a referent which slightly differs from the contiguous ones, such designators may efficaciously apply to any of these. As a result, different representations of the same objects are individuated by similar but differing designators, and this seems to be the definition of imprecise designators. Alternative narratives about Indra's symbols of power, together with the stories concerning his fight with Vritra, attest this kind of imprecision in designation which affects similar phenomena.

(3.P4) follows from the conjunction of (3.P3) and (3.P2). Consequently, given that religious contexts promote rigidity and imprecision of designation at once, and rigidity and imprecision of designation generate vague beliefs, this suffices for concluding that the content of religious beliefs (I mean: highly generic religious beliefs) is vague.

28 Daniele Bertini, "The Conflict of Rigidity and Precision in Designation", *Logos & Episteme*, 11(1), 2020, 19-27

V. VAGUENESS, RELIABILITY OF BELIEF, AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY.

A prima facie reaction to the vagueness of a belief is that such a belief is not reliable. Evidently, if I hold that a thing which is rigidly individuated swings between a range of precisifications, it may be the case that either that thing violates the laws of identity such as Leibniz' law (once they are provided different readings of its meaning), or that vagueness generates global ambiguity. The first problem affects the ontic views of vagueness, the second characterises the semantic views. Consider the former. According to the ontic theorist, two incompatible precisifications of the divine realm specified by a certain tradition are to be accounted for in terms of the fluctuating nature of the divine realm; that is to say, the divine realm has different degrees of actualisation of its features. Incompatibility excludes that both precisifications hold at one time. However, the divine realm on which both precisifications focus is identical. For example, Indra's relationship to Agni within Rigveda's hymns fluctuates between brotherhood and identity. Consider the belief that *Indra is related to Agni* (IRA). Call *B* the precisification according to which Indra's relationship to Agni is brotherhood and *Id* the precisification according to which their relation is identity. Evidently, none can be the brother of himself (at least in conformity to the ordinary meanings of *brotherhood* and *identity*). Consequently, *B* and *Id* are incompatible precisifications of IRA. This implies that *B* and *Id* cannot be substituted for *salva veritate* in any discursive context. However, the ontic theorist may want to claim that *B* and *Id* are both legitimate precisifications of IRA by reason of the fluctuating nature of Indra. The conclusion follows, ontic readings of the vagueness of religious beliefs assumes that the content of such belief violates Leibniz's law.

Now, consider the semantic option. If adherents to the same tradition confess a belief *P* (where *P* concerns a certain specification of the features of the divine realm and how it relates to the mundane reality), the vagueness of *P* implies that these co-religionists could precisify what the divine realm is by means of incompatible manners, due to the continuity among different representations of the content of their belief. When this occurs, since incompatibility excludes the truth of both precisifications, the truth of *P* under one precisification implies the falsity of *P* under the other. However, both co-religionists confess literally the same belief. This means that both readings of *P* are sound within their tradition. As a consequence, *P* is assumed according to incompatible valid readings which account for one and the same content. The outcome is that vagueness evidently promotes a plurality of different conceptual grasps of the divine realm and its relation to the mundane reality. Plurality here involves a wide diversity, namely, vagueness changes into global ambiguity.

This perplexing situation is not, however, enough to dismantle the reliability of religious belief. Vague beliefs may have informational content as much as any other kind of belief, and, accordingly, they can be true or false. Take into consideration the following belief:

(J) Jazz music originated at the beginning of the twentieth century from different sources.

Both *Jazz music* and *at the beginning of the twentieth century* are vague notions. Actually, different individuals may disagree over what counts as a valid instance of jazz music because, while certain bands are surely to be classified in a genre different from jazz, others stand within the in-between area separating non-jazz from jazz music. Such an area definitely has no precise boundaries, but fluctuates. Nonetheless, it would be completely irrational to say that the notion of *jazz music* is not a reliable and informative concept by reason of its vagueness. Similar considerations hold for the temporal expression *at the beginning of the twentieth century*. There is not any established manner to determine the exact moment when the twentieth century ceased to begin, but it is evident that the Second World War did not start at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Now, (J) is certainly vague as it is parasitical of the vagueness of the notions involved. However, it has informational content. This means that, although it is not sure the exact moment when jazz music originated, nor is it clear whether some musicians are to be classified as jazz artists, (J) asserts true bits of information: for example, that jazz music originated before the Second World War, and, while it had a lot

of different sources, this kind of music does not have any genealogical relationship to the music — say — of Vernon Dalhart.

For similar reasons, religious beliefs may be reliable even if they are vague. Vedic theologies are surely confusing, at least to the extent that they relate to their elder sources as Rigveda. However, it is certainly false that, by reason of this fact, any belief concerning Indra is unreliable or is not a truth-claim: within Brahminical contexts, rituals performed in conformity with the living Vedic tradition count as evidence to the contrary (Smith 2000).

In any case, a further complication ensues. Religious traditions are referentially opaque doxastic contexts. Co-religionists access a multifaceted body of beliefs differing in scope and content. Typically, these beliefs are variously compounded and assumed by different individuals and groups within one and the same tradition. Moreover, deductive relationships among beliefs are due to informal webs of inferences. A cognitive field structured this way admits justification practices which are alien to the standard processes for warranting beliefs.²⁹ Personal experiences, as much as testimonies by authoritative sources, play a seminal role here.³⁰ Trust in others and commitment to a form of life are relevant too. As a consequence, a sum of interpretive assumptions is interposed between the referential target of a religious tradition and the beliefs expressing the faith to which individuals adhere. I am not claiming that religious beliefs cannot be propositional overviews of true presentational experiences, according to a realist standpoint (i.e. belief with an epistemic value). On the contrary, I hold that they are something along these lines.³¹ However, differently than items from others cognitive domains, beliefs within the religious domain convey epistemic features by means of processes which are peculiar to such a domain. Particularly, since religions lacks unquestioned methods for strictly defining notions, intersubjectively imparting names and concepts, and assessing the content of a belief, they incline their adherents to assume highly generic beliefs in an anecdotal way.³² This means that experiences and disagreements within any tradition cannot be construed in the same public manner which prevails in other doxastic domains. Simply, a third-person perspective does not make any sense in religion: if two co-religionists sincerely intend to compare their alternative beliefs, what they typically experience does not consist in debating abstractly general arguments; rather, they mutually learn by testing one viewpoint over the other. This being the case, religious beliefs stand in a territory whose communitarian nature and endless development are characterised by an irreducible plurality, a constitutive polysemy, and a global ambiguity which cannot ever be fully overcome. The most relevant consequence is that religious beliefs have an unsurpassable and insurmountable first-person perspective feature.

The main problem of such a conception is that doxastic agents situated within a similar context may find it difficult to clearly establish the content of their beliefs. That is to say, the opacity of the religious domain, together with its doxastic complexity, implies a certain degree of inaccessibility of mental content. A descriptive way to unpack such an oddity is to say that religious believers do not have total control of the whole doxastic area containing the relevant beliefs of their tradition. They have just partial access to the main items, and assume such items in an anecdotal manner, which is to be investigated when required.

In a seminal paper, Boghossian advocates the view that either (epistemic) mental content is transparent or individuals are committed to a deep form of irrationality.³³ The main reason in support of his claim is that externalist contents are not able to promote the discrimination of sameness and difference among tokens of thoughts by an epistemic agent. This means that externalist contents violate the apparently evident principle according to which whenever an individual detects a difference among two of her thoughts, such an individual knows the difference a priori; and again, whenever an individual acknowledges that two of her thoughts are the same, such individual recognises sameness a priori. This requires that mental contents

29 Bertini, “The Anecdotal Nature of Religious Disagreements”.

30 Daniele Bertini, *Tradizioni religiose e diversità* (Edizioni Fondazione Centro Studi Campostini, 2016).

31 Daniele Bertini, “Esperienza religiosa e pratiche doxastiche”, *Hermeneutica* (2017).

32 Bertini, “The Anecdotal Nature of Religious Disagreements”.

33 Paul A. Boghossian, “The Transparency of Mental Content”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994).

should be transparent, namely, that mental contents endorsed in rational epistemic practices are known a priori. If this were not the case, a competent user of standard logic could come to believe contradictions, because the impossibility of detecting sameness among identical external contents and distinctness among contrary external ones might promote deductions of contradictions which are not acknowledged as such. Now, since opaque (epistemic) contents lead to contradictory thoughts, an epistemic agent which acts rationally evidently accesses transparent content. Naturally, it may be objected that epistemic practices could be non-rational. But if rationality is granted, mental contents must be transparent.

It follows from Boghossian's view that religious believers turn out to be irrational. Indeed, the content of religious belief is vague, and this implies that it is non-transparent, at least to some extent. Individuals holding religious beliefs are then assuming mental items which are non-transparent. The conclusion is that they are committed to a deep form of irrationalism.

However, Boghossian's argument is far from being convincing. Firstly, it assumes that any rational practice should be assessed by reason of standard logic. From a verbal viewpoint, this claim may sound elegant and is formally justified (I think that it asserts a triviality as the following: if something is P, then that something has some of the feature of P). Unfortunately, it is devoid of epistemic value, because it contains terms which are not semantically qualified: I doubt that *standard logic* is an unambiguous name, and that logic is a uniquely conceived cognitive technique for the representation of knowledge. This being the case, saying that the evaluation of the rationality of a practice is to be performed from the standpoint of standard logic is to say little. Secondly, Boghossian's argument requires that beliefs constitutes just one genre of propositional attitude, and different epistemic domains differ in their content alone. Such a view of belief is completely contrary to plain empirical evidence: people's doxastic life is enjoyed in a plurality of different manners, and different disciplinary approaches from various cognitive fields reflect the differences among doxastic practices from diverse contexts. Consequently, evaluating epistemic practices as if they were all the same thing in light of a single set of theoretical requirements turns out to be irrelevant, at best. It can possibly be objected that any belief domain should be modelled on the methods which warrant the epistemic success of the sciences and other formal ways of inquiry, because rationality consists in the use of such methods for obtaining knowledge. However, such an objection is identical with the absurd claim that any non-scientific doxastic domain is not rational in nature. Thirdly, Boghossian's reasoning implies a linear understanding of the evidential support relation among facts and propositions. The idea seems to be that epistemic agents access a priori mental contents, compare such contents with experiences, and deduce logically consequences from those comparisons. It appears that, for any given mental item, a block of evidence could be found out there which supports or does not support any belief about it. Now, while such a view is possibly useless in any domain of knowledge (for example, interpretive studies of scientific theories testify that, in many situations, facts support a proposition after that that evidence is acknowledged to count as such by reason of an appropriate construal of it,³⁴ it is certainly inappropriate in religion. Actually, facts about the divine realm certainly provide evidence for or against religious beliefs. Unfortunately, things do not stand in any linear way: individuating evidence is a matter of understanding experiences, and such understanding requires access to a complex and informal web of beliefs and inferences which differently represent and aim at capturing the content of such experiences.

All considered, Boghossian's view about the transparency of mental content consists in claiming that there exists just one kind of rationality, and epistemic domains not endorsing such a unique kind of justification are devoid of warranted cognitive relevancy. In my view, empirical evidence attests that belief domains different from those characterised by linearity in support relations apply peculiar rational strategies for forming and justifying beliefs. For example, religious believers ordinarily ask for argumentative practices in support of their articles of faith, and debate vividly whether a belief is supported by a revelation, or by a factual or interpretive tradition. This being the case, rationality should be acknowledged to be an equivocal term, and justification practices turn out to vary over different epistemic domains. There are then no reasons to assume that if mental contents are opaque, the beliefs involving such contents are not.

34 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (Harper & Row, 1962).

These considerations suggest three important consequences of the vagueness of religious beliefs. First, religious beliefs arise from a collective, dialogical, and historical effort of assessing, clarifying, and construing the semantic value of basic claims, which a community of faith accepts in reason of their alleged expressive force. Far from being a propositional attitude of acceptance or a refusal of a discrete and well-determined content, believing something in the field of religion is to become committed to a tentative and unfinished process of precisification of meaning. Second, religious beliefs appear quite different from how they are understood by mainstream approaches. Most analytic philosophers of religion characterise religious claims in terms of doxastic practices, epistemic insights, and theoretical features which are borrowed from other doxastic fields. The assumption is that strong parallels between religious and non-religious beliefs hold: accordingly, the cognitive dimension of religions is modelled on belief processes' formation of other belief domains. For example, disagreements are usually understood in terms of conflicting truth-claims, which allegedly incompatible traditions draw. Different beliefs are determined alternative views on the same object. Contrary to this approach, understanding religious beliefs by means of the notion of vagueness provides a reason in support of the evidence that intra-religious disagreements are constitutive features of any doxastic attitudes within the domain of religion, and that such disagreements drive believers to a better understanding of their stance. Third, if opacity in religious experience promotes vagueness in religious beliefs, religious diversity cannot be approached in terms of conflicting belief systems. On the contrary, since the content of religious beliefs is to be incessantly spelt out and investigated, the most rational response to diversity seems the prescription to inquire the content of alternative religious beliefs together with opponents, in order to learn from them.

In conclusion, my characterisation of religious beliefs highlights how faith is not the possession of a stable certainty about what we believe, but rather a process of collective inquiry which starts from questioning what we think we know and arrives at provisional sites wherein we think again and newly about what affects us most.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alston, William P. 1991. *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. 2013. "Metaphysically Indeterminate Existence". *Philosophical Studies* 166, no. 3: 495–510.
- Bertini, Daniele. 2016. *Tradizioni religiose e diversità*. Verona: Edizioni Fondazione Centro Studi Campostini.
- . 2017. "Esperienza religiosa e pratiche doxastiche". *Hermeneutica*: 211–36.
- . 2019. "On What a Religion Is Not". *Religions* 10, no. 1: 29–48. doi:10.3390/rel10010029.
- . 2019. "The Anecdotal Nature of Religious Disagreements". *The International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80, no. 3: 215–29.
- . 2020. "The Conflict of Rigidity and Precision in Designation", *Logos & Episteme*, 11(1), 2020, 19-27. doi:10.5840/logos-episteme20201112.
- Boghossian, Paul A. 1994. "The Transparency of Mental Content". *Philosophical Perspectives* 8: 33–50.
- Dormandy, Katherine. 2018. "Disagreement from the Religious Margin". *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3: 371–95.
- Evans, Gareth. 1978. "Can There Be Vague Objects?". *Analysis* 38, no. 4: 208.
- Fine, Kit. 1975. "Vagueness, Truth, and Logics". *Synthese* 30, no. 3–4: 265–300.
- Gaio, Silvia. 2010. "Vaghezza". *APhEx. Portale italiano di filosofia analitica* 1.
- Heisenberg, Werner. 1962. *Physics and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Hyde, Dominic. 2016. *Vagueness, Logic, and Ontology*. London: Routledge.
- Klostermayer, Klaus K. 1984. *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press.

- Lewis, David. 1988. "Vague Identity: Evans Misunderstood". *Analysis* 48, no. 3: 128–30.
- Macdonnell, Arthur A. 1897. *Vedic Mythology*. Strassbourg: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism". In *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, edited by Ph. L. Quinn and K. Meeker, 172–92. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Potter, Dennis. 2013. "Religious Disagreement: Internal and External". *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74, no. 1: 21–31. doi:10.1007/s11153-012-9393-y.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1956. "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes". *The Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1: 177–87.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1923. "Vagueness". *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 1, no. 1: 84–92.
- Soroush, Abdolkarim. 1998. "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge". In *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, edited by C. Kurzmann, 244–51. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2004. *The Existence of God*. Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Thomason, Richmond H. 1982. "Identity and Vagueness". *Philosophical Studies* 42, no. 3: 329–32.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2010. "We're Right. They're Wrong". In *Disagreements*, edited by R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield, 10–28. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Varzi, Achille. 2007. "Supervaluationism and His Logic". *Mind*, no. 116: 633–75.
- . 2008. "Vaghezza e ontologia". In *Storia dell'ontologia*, edited by M. Ferraris, 672–298. Milano: Bompiani.
- Williamson, Timothy. 1994. *Vagueness*. London: Routledge.

