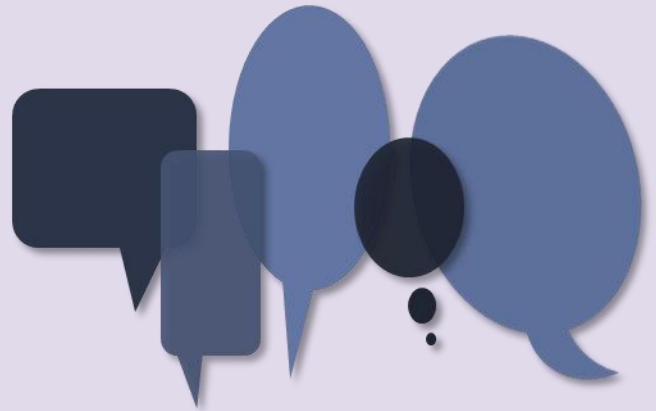


# Edexcel GCE A level Religious Studies

## A Spotlight on...

### Analogy

This section of the specification requires students to explore several concepts. They should investigate the *via negativa*, which suggests knowing God by understanding what God is not. They also need to examine univocal language and its issues, such as anthropomorphism, and equivocal language with its attribution problems. Finally, they must delve into the significance of proportional similarities and dissimilarities, with reference to Aquinas' ideas.



#### Introduction

The topic of religious language as a whole considers the meaning (or lack of meaning) of religious statements. Whereas the other two aspects of this topic look at the dialogue between believers and atheists on religious language, this first section (4.1) looks at ways in which religious believers attempt to describe God. The main difficulty being that, just as other significant things in life cannot be truly captured in words, God as the ultimate and greatest being is to some extent beyond description. The theories of analogy and symbol attempt to respond to this difficulty by suggesting ways in which human language may bring some knowledge of God.

Topics	What students need to learn	
4 Religious language	4.1	<p>Analogy and Symbol</p> <p>a) Analogy: <i>via negativa</i>, knowledge about God may be gained by what God is not like, univocal language and problems of anthropomorphism, equivocal language and problems of attribution, significance of proportional similarities and dissimilarities.</p> <p>With reference to the ideas of Aquinas.</p>

## 4.1 (a) Analogy

### Via Negativa

The via negativa takes a very unusual approach to the problem outlined above. As words are unable to adequately describe God, the only possible statements that can be made are negative statements; statements about what God is not. When we say that 'God is Good' we cannot help but understand the word 'good' in terms of human goodness. Yet God is not 'good' in this sense, his goodness is beyond our comprehension. But we can say that God is not evil, not wicked, not unjust etc and this may eventually give us some understanding of what God is. The Jewish Philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) argued for the use of the via negativa in his 'Guide for the Perplexed.' The only positive statement that can be made about God is that he exists. He argues that the negative can bring us some knowledge of God. He uses the example of a ship. If we say that the ship is not an accident, not a mineral, not a plant, not a natural body etc. then he argues that by the tenth statement we will have some knowledge of what a ship is. In the same way the via negativa allows us to gain some knowledge of God.

### Resource

Chapter 60 of Moses Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed is entitled 'On the difference between positive and negative attributes.' It covers the example of the ship and goes on to explain how the method of negation can be used to describe God.



### The Problems of univocal and equivocal language

A key insight of the via negativa is that it seems impossible to suggest that words when applied to God cannot be univocal (having the same meaning as when they are applied elsewhere). When we say that 'God is good' and then say that 'Amir is good', we are not saying the same thing. This is the danger of univocal language. It risks anthropomorphism as it reduces God to a human level. Hence it can be seen as almost disrespectful to God

However, the via negativa has the opposite problem. It holds an equivocal understanding of religious language. This means that words have a completely different meaning when applied elsewhere. So, when we say 'God is good' we learn absolutely nothing as the word carries a different meaning when applied to God. This leads to a problem of agnosticism as we are unable to know anything about God using this method.

Aquinas does not completely reject the via negativa, he regards it as a prelude to understanding God; it tells us something important even if it is not a great deal. In putting forward the idea that religious language should be understood analogically, Aquinas and other thinkers aim to find a 'middle ground' that avoids the problems produced by the two extremes of applying words univocally or equivocally.

## 4.1 (a) Analogy

### Resource



The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy contains a good overview of the issues of univocal and equivocal language <https://iep.utm.edu/rel-lang/>

### Aquinas and Attribution

As in everyday life analogies are comparisons that are helpful to a point. In describing an unfamiliar term, we may find ourselves saying 'It is like... but.' In terms of religious language, the idea of analogy suggests that any word we use of God has a meaning that is similar to its ordinary use but not the same as it is God that is being described. To say that God is good and that 'Amir is good' or 'exercise is good' we are not using the word completely differently, there is some similarity in its use in all contexts. Aquinas (1224-1274) has two different ways of thinking about analogy: the analogy of attribution and the analogy of proportion.

The analogy of attribution states that the qualities that we ascribe to each other are a reflection of the qualities of God. Essentially properties such as wisdom, love and goodness that we see in others are reflections of the properties of the creator God. Hence when we see these attributes in others, we are able to make analogies with the attributes of God. Aquinas uses an interesting example to illustrate this. 'If the urine is good, then the bull is good' which is based on a medieval belief that you could assess an animal's health this way. Modern Philosopher Brian Davies illustrates this with a pleasanter example: in saying that 'the bread is good' we gain some understanding of the fact that 'the baker is good'. The goodness is different in both cases but is connected as the baker's attributes are seen in the bread.

### Resource



Aquinas' ideas on analogy can be found in Summa Theologica Part 1 Question 13 Article 5. In this he explains the difficulty of using words equivocally of God and outlines the analogy of attribution.

### Aquinas and Proportion

Aquinas' second way of approaching analogy uses the idea of proportion. The type of properties that something has depends on the nature of the being that possesses the properties. If I were to say that a child is good guitarist, I am thinking in relation to his age. However, if I were to pay money to see a professional guitarist playing to the child's standard, I would be disappointed as I am expecting them to be 'good' according to the standard of a professional musician.

## 4.1 (a) Analogy

Similarly, when we use words to describe God, we are describing an infinite being. When we use words of each other, we are describing finite beings. The meaning cannot be the same, it changes in proportion to the thing that is being described.

The modern philosopher John Hick offers the helpful example of the term 'faithfulness.' This is a word that we might use of a dog, a human or God. If we compare the faithfulness that humans have to that of a dog, the dog's faithfulness is limited. Yet when we assert that God is faithful, we are using the word in a way that makes our faithfulness seem quite tiny by comparison. This approach requires that we are able to filter the qualities into relevant similarities and dissimilarities. Just as we understand that the dog having 4 legs and barking is not relevant to our understanding but a dog remaining by an injured owner is relevant, so too we have to consider which human traits may have some relevance when applied to God and which do not.

### Resource

There is a good explanation of the ideas of Aquinas on religious language and some hint of Hick's own ideas in chapter 2 of John Hick's 'Philosophy of Religion.'



### Summary of key ideas

- The Via Negativa regards religious language as equivocal – words have completely different meanings – and this leads to a lack of knowledge about God
- Univocal language – where words have the same meaning when applied to God – gives the opposite problem as this leads to anthropomorphic idea of God
- The theory of analogy aims to avoid these extremes by suggesting that words applied to God have some similarity with their original use but do not mean the same thing.
- Aquinas' analogy of attribution states that words have a connection to their original context due to the fact that the attributes or qualities that we have are a reflection of those same properties in our creator God
- Aquinas' analogy of proportion states that words applied to God have a connection with their original context but that the word's meaning is in relation to the type of being that possesses that attribute
- John Hick gives a good example of analogy of proportion by suggesting that just as we reduce the proportion of faithfulness when considering a dog, so too we greatly increase it when thinking about God



### Discussion Questions

1. What problem is the idea of Via Negativa attempting to solve?
2. What is the problem for believers if religious language is equivocal?
3. What is the problem for religious believers if religious language is univocal?
4. How does Aquinas' theory of analogy solve the issues of univocal and equivocal language?
5. What human attributes might be a reflection of the attributes of the creator God? Are there any attributes that are not a good reflection?
6. How does Hick's example of the dog help us to understand the idea of analogy of proportion? What issues might there be with this idea?

### Useful introductions to Analogy



The following resources give a useful introduction to Analogy and the ideas of Aquinas:

- Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part 1 Question 13 Article 5. Widely available online
- Hick, J 'Philosophy of Religion' Prentice Hall 1983 (chapter 2)

### Wider Reading



Wider reading on the topic of Analogy and wider discussions about theories of religious language can be found in a number of sources including those below:

- Maimonides, M 'A Guide for the Perplexed' (chapter 60) widely available online
- Davies, B 'Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion' Oxford 2004
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy 'Religious Language' contains a good overview of the issues of univocal and equivocal language  
<https://iep.utm.edu/rel-lang/>
- Peterson M et al, 'Reason and Religious Belief' Oxford 1991 (ch 8)