

Conclusion

Jonathan Charteris-Black

University of the West of England

The purpose of religion is to offer a unified way of thinking about the world so that it has a meaning in its totality; it makes connections between nature, man's behaviour and the cosmic order. Since metaphor is also concerned with making connections and associations it is not surprising that it is commonly drawn on in the creation of meaning in religion. Some have gone as far as to propose that the religious language is inherently metaphoric (e.g. Tacey 2015). However, we should exercise caution; within the domain of religious belief it is ultimately a matter of theological perspective whether a particular word or phrase is a literal statement or whether it is a metaphor – as Weber (1965: 9) reminds us “The sacred is the uniquely unalterable”.

There has been no shortage of metaphors for religion: Karl Marx famously referred to it as “the opium of the people”, and – developing Bourdieu's notion of “cultural capital” – Verter (2003) proposes that it is a form of “spiritual capital”; Berger (1969) describes religion as a “sacred canopy” (see McKinnon, 2012 for other metaphors). In general terms, a literal interpretation characterises the earlier or fundamentalist stages of a religion, while metaphors characterise evolving religious discourse. Weber (1965: 9–10) comments on the transition from pre-animistic naturalism to symbolism that characterises the rise of religions and emphasises the importance of analogy in the development of “mythological thinking”.

In my recent study of fire metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2017) I illustrate how the symbolic meanings of fire – for example as an expression of divine punishment – are replaced over time by fire metaphors, but this process is irregular and represents “a discourse of awe”. In Christianity, the symbolism of fire in the Old Testament was replaced by light metaphors in the New Testament, while in Islam the meaning of fire has retained its symbolism as a force for divine punishment of non-believers. Similarly, Eastern Christianity and Pentecostalism sustain a belief in the symbolism of Sacred Fire. Metaphor is therefore associated with a chrono-

logically later stage in the development of a religion when more importance is placed on spreading the word and on exegesis – or discourse.

I would like to frame this edition on religion and metaphor by summarising the seven possible attributes of a religion (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A model of religion

The fundamental principle of any religion is the belief in a God (or Gods) since it is founded on a commitment to a superhuman source of authority and power. In this respect religion differs from science because science requires evidence for holding something to be true. Since a religious belief entails commitment to a code of behaviour, its second attribute is the precepts or the rules that regulate behaviour or thought. Precepts are typically commandments such as “do not kill”, “do not steal”, “do not lust” etc. While principles and precepts both provide the theory of a religion, religion also requires practice: this can be anything from observing the precepts in one’s daily life, or undertaking forms of ritual that express the belief in the God(s) through making offerings, burning candles, wearing special clothes, observing special days, fasting, or other forms of dietary constraint. Practice is about *doing* religion rather than about religious discourse.

“Prayer” is concerned with speech or with thought, and entails some form of direct address to the God(s). This can be conducted in private, by reflection, or by imploring, thanking or otherwise acknowledging a divinity; there can also be social forms of worship in which prayer is accompanied by sound, movement and gesture. Attribute five is preaching: this is some form of explicit verbal expression

of religious conviction with the purpose of explaining religious principles, precepts or practice or instructing how to pray.

The sixth attribute of a religion is its prophets and priests. As Weber (1965: 46) notes "...the personal calling is the decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma". Prophets are those divinely inspired individuals who are inspired to proclaim the will of God and even to predict the future. Priests are specialists in a religion, who are expert in its principles, precepts and practice and, through their training and knowledge, have the authority to conduct rituals or prayers, or to preach.

The seventh and final attribute of a religion is proselytization: the explicit attempt to convert others to follow the religion. Proselytization is not a necessary condition of a religion, because some religions such as Hinduism are ones that an individual enters by their birth rather than through conversion. Other religions, such as Islam, seek to convert all of humanity to one religion. For such religions proselytization is a requirement rather than an option and discourse is at the core of their action. Some religions are appealing to non-believers because they refrain from the act of compulsion that is implied by proselytization, while others see proselytization as following God's will.

I have tried to sequence these attributes according to how necessary each one is to a religion: so a religion necessarily implies "principles" and nearly always entails "precepts" and "practice". We think of followers of a religion as necessarily committed to a set of beliefs and behaviours that are based on the view of the divine that characterises that religion. "Prayer" may take different forms in some religions, for example is Buddhist "meditation" the same as "prayer" in the Abrahamic religions? Should prayer be social or private? Religions vary in the extent to which they have holy places: temples or churches or whether they consider the natural world to be an appropriate site of prayer.

Surely, there are omissions from my attempt to identify the attributes of "religion": to consider the concept in the abstract is an intellectual exercise that may be accused of ignoring the particular colours and meanings that accrue from a particular religion: an ethnographer may claim that it implies a false objectivity, as a religion may *only* be something that can be fully experienced from the inside – as part of lived experience. But let us keep it in mind in considering the fascinating range of papers in this issue.

In the first paper, Koller demonstrates that "there is a large group of metaphors which are maximally consistent, recording the same domains, scenarios and lexical realisations", which include LIGHT & DARK, CONTAINER, PLANT, BODY and JOURNEY metaphors. Given the importance placed on individual, personal revelation rather than on abstract, scriptural authority it seems that metaphor itself

became a stylistic marker of religious identity. In religions for whom a particular text constitutes a set of doctrinal beliefs there is perhaps less need for metaphor than in one that is seeking to adapt to the ongoing potential for revelation among believers. The shared metaphor of “the light within”, “the seed” within the human soul and “high” and “low” metaphors create a distinctly aesthetic discourse that effectively replaces practices such as prayer or proselytizing. In this respect Quakerism is grounded very much in discourse and is well captured by the concept of a set of scenarios that permeate Quaker literature. Rather than relying on precepts, prophets and proselytizing, Quakerism is firmly grounded in a style of discourse.

In their original and systematic analysis of metaphor in two Buddhist instructional texts, Silvestre-López and Navarro i Ferrando explore attribute 4: prayer. The work is positioned within research into mindfulness and is considered as having applications to therapies for mental and general health. The article proposes a number of conceptual metaphors for a range of target domains including the mind, thought, meditation, emotion and the meditator. The purpose of the analysis of metaphor, and the identification of conceptual metaphors is, presumably, to interpret a set of beliefs so as to make them accessible to those who seek to learn about Buddhism. Interesting questions concern how useful conceptual metaphors are in this endeavour: how would therapists and others actually employ conceptual metaphors? Or is it the metaphors themselves that are likely to be therapeutic?

Richardson’s study concerns how far Muslim principles influence attitudes towards Christian metaphors and vice versa. The analysis of appropriation treated more broadly as an indicator of acceptance of, or resistance to empathy is convincing. A difficulty with this type of inter-faith exploration is that it assumes that what is a metaphor in one religion will necessarily be a metaphor in another. As I indicated in the introduction, this can be problematic. For example, expressions such as “get to heaven”, God “sending” his son, or “sending” the Prophet Mohammed and the Qu’ran are treated as metaphors, and yet some people would treat them as quite literal. In a similar way I am not sure that it is possible to treat the notion of a “relationship with God” as a metaphor and a relationship between two humans as literal because the relationship between two human beings is not necessarily physical – for example it continues to exist when neither party are present. I’d suggest the value of using the term “story” rather than “metaphor”, as it does not introduce notions of transference: a “story” can denote a worldview that may be simultaneously literal and metaphoric.

The framing of Dorst and Klop’s paper also adopts an inter-faith approach, by gauging how appropriate Christian metaphors for God are to Muslim teenagers when applied to their understanding of Allah. FATHER and HUSBAND metaphors were rejected while MASTER and JUDGE were deemed acceptable. The authors note



early on that “many believers interpret religious notions literally rather than metaphorically”. The same might be said when the author writes: “The SERVANTS metaphor had in fact been used by the participants themselves when they described believers and their relationship with Allah” – it may be that they view themselves quite literally as servants. The value of this research is that by conducting empirical research into different conceptualisations of God, one gains insight into how metaphor is dependent on the principles of the religion. If God is literally held by Christians as the father of Jesus this is a different principle from one where he is metaphorically a father; again where God is unfatherlike, as for Muslims, this again gives insight into the principles and beliefs of the religion.

In a fascinating study of online Facebook evangelical postings, Pihlaja explores attributes 5 and 7: preaching and proselytization. Pihlaja uses Facebook comments on short videos as evidence for how readers position themselves in relation to the videos identifying correspondences between the metaphors, biblical narratives and subsequent postings. Pihlaja shows how an evangelical preacher uses biblical narrative that, through the allegorical impulse (Gibbs, 2015), becomes integrated with common daily experiences. Rather than quoting the Bible word for word, or describing the actual events of daily events literally, the evangelical preacher creates an allegorical frame in which there are roles and events that correspond with his audience’s experience in daily life.

What is interesting in Pihlaja’s account is that there is no attempt to formulate conceptual metaphors – the terms “source” and “target” do not occur in his article. These terms imply that one semantic field is more concrete or more embodied, whereas this does not seem to be relevant in the case of these videos, where it is the process of finding correspondences between the biblical narratives and events in the viewers’ lives that is crucial. Rather than beginning with a biblical narrative the preacher anticipates certain psycho-emotional states that might typically be experienced where religion can offer assistance or emotional support; providing such support in the form of a biblical allegory is a way of bringing a new perspective on these psycho-emotional states so that they are no longer mundane or profane but become elevated through religious language. The fact that some terms and words from biblical narratives then occur in viewers’ comments reflects the extent to which these narratives have become allegories: their meaning is revealed through their application to people’s daily lives.

One imagines that *all* types of religious language must become more persuasive when it incorporates familiar experiences and psychological states of its audience and that metaphor is likely to play a role in this transfer of meanings that derive from a sacred text so that they become readily applicable to daily life. The experiences that are accessed in these texts are quite familiar ones, but in other historical contexts they can become compelling.

The discourse of other fundamentalism Islamic preachers such as Osama bin Laden was characterised by finding an appropriate allegorical framework of interpretation (see Chilton, 2004). Shi-ism offers a narrative of oppression that allows current oppression to be interpreted in terms of a struggle that has gone since the massacre of Hussein in The Battle of Karbala. Ritual re-enactment by Shi-ites creates a historical memory in which the allegory becomes the lived experience. The importance of allegory in all these religions is that it creates a sense of community and of identity, in the case of Feuerstein, an online discourse community contributes to a sense of identity. This manifests itself in the comments made by viewers who are thereby participating in a discourse, in which they interpret their own experiences in the allegorical framework that is provided by the videos. It would certainly be worth applying this combination of the “allegoric impulse” with “narrative positioning” to other types of proselytizing texts to establish whether there is a discourse of proselytization characterised by such methods.

Neary’s article takes as its focus proselytization – my seventh attribute – but also in a limited way to prophets and priests. The author argues that Gandhi “appropriated” Biblical metaphors when presenting  an English-speaking audience with the intention of reforming Hinduism and countering resistance . While he did not seek to convert his audience to Hinduism, the objective of making Hinduism more attractive can be interpreted as a type of proselytization. There is no doubt the Gandhi was a master exponent of metaphor; it occurs extensively in his writings. Gandhi’s choice of metaphors gives them a distinctively Indian flavour that reflected native cultural values and rejected colonialism. Neary shows that around half of his conceptual metaphors derive from the source domain of nature, these include TRUTH IS A PLANT, MORALITY IS A PLANT and EMOTIONS ARE PLANTS. I have argued elsewhere that a major motivation for explaining processes by using metaphors based on the natural world is to imply that they are inevitable – they are effectively “naturalised”. We should also remind ourselves that the choice of this source domain is also motivated by the proselytizing purpose of such writing: given that at this time the Indian economy was primarily agricultural, plant metaphors were the ones that were most likely to make his philosophy readily understood. Similarly, Jesus sought to explain abstract principles and precepts of religion within the terms of reference that would be familiar to an audience who were cultivators, pastoral nomads or fishermen.

Neary offers several plausible explanations of the Gandhi’s appropriation of biblical metaphors. The first purpose is that of reforming Hinduism and to arrest moral and spiritual degeneration of Indians; by metaphors that had the purpose of spiritual purification Gandhi was able to assume a type of prophetic voice that incorporated a more humanist and cosmopolitan outlook. The second purpose of resisting Hindu-Christian conversion is equally plausible; certainly the caste

system would have motivated conversion to Buddhism, Christianity and Islam on the part of those deemed untouchable and such conversion would have undermined an Indian nationalism to which Hindu identity was central. Neary provides robust evidence of the rhetorical motivation for Gandhi's metaphors in the form of four Biblical quotations that are found only in the English translation of Gandhi's autobiography: there is no clearer example than this of what I mean by "purposeful metaphor" (Charteris-Black, 2012).

Ways forward

The issue of beauty is a crucial one in understanding religion: religious topics were the only appropriate ones for art in the medieval period, and since then theological aesthetics has proposed that an appreciation of beauty – through the senses and through the imagination – is also a means to understanding God. Religious buildings – churches, mosques or temples – are irresistible to seekers of beauty. Perhaps for this reason future research could also address religious aesthetics from a multimodal perspective: if religions derive from particular times and in particular locations in their history, it is perhaps their aesthetic expressions – whether in literature, painting, engraving, sculpture or architecture – that offer their most accessible grounds for intercultural and inter-faith exploration.

References

- Berger, P. (1969). *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2017) *Fire Metaphors: discourses of awe and authority*. London & New York: Bloomsbury
- Chen, R. (2015) The allegorical character of political metaphors in discourse. *Metaphor and the Social World* 5(2): 264–282. doi: 10.1075/msw.5.2.05gib
- McKinnon, A. M. (2012) Metaphors in and for the Sociology of Religion: Towards a Theory after Nietzsche, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27:2, 203–216. doi: 10.1080/13537903.2012.675688
- Tacey, D. (2015) *Religion as Metaphor: beyond literal belief*. Mulgrave VIC. Garratt Publishing.
- Verter, B (2003) "Spiritual capital: Theorizing religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu". *Sociological Theory* 21.2: 150–174. doi: 10.1111/1467-9558.00182
- Weber, M. (1965) *The Sociology of Religion*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd (Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff)

Author's address

Jonathan Charteris-Black
University of the West of England
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 1QY
UK

jonathan.charteris-black@uwe.ac.uk

Biographical notes

Jonathan Charteris-Black is Professor of Linguistics at the University of the West of England, UK. His research interests are metaphor, rhetoric and political discourse. He is the author of *Fire Metaphors: discourses of awe and authority* (Bloomsbury, 2017); *Analysing Political Speeches: Rhetoric, Discourse and Metaphor* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2014); *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2005/ 2011); *Gender and the Language of Illness* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2010); *The Communication of Leadership: The Design of Leadership Style* (Routledge, 2007); *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2004) as well as numerous other articles and book chapters.

Author query

Please provide a complete reference for the citation (Charteris-Black, 2012)' in this article.