Metaphor, Religious Language and Religious Experience

Victoria S. Harrison

University of Glasgow

Dr V. Harrison

Department of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

Glasgow G12 8QQ

Scotland

UK

E-mail: V.Harrison@philosophy.arts.gla.ac.uk

Abstract:

Is it possible to talk about God without either misrepresentation or failing to assert anything of significance? The article begins by reviewing how, in attempting to answer this question, traditional theories of religious language have failed to sidestep both potential pitfalls adequately. After arguing that recently developed theories of metaphor seem better able to shed light on the nature of religious language, it considers the claim that huge areas of our language and, consequently, of our experience are shaped by metaphors. Finally, it considers some of the more significant implications of this claim for our understanding of both religious language and religious experience.

Metaphor, Religious Language and Religious Experience

Is it possible to talk about God[1] without either misrepresentation or failing to assert anything of significance? In an attempt to answer this question, I begin by reviewing how traditional theories of religious language have failed to sidestep both potential pitfalls adequately. I then turn to recent developments in the theory of metaphor—developments that seem better able to explain how speakers are capable of referring to God successfully without having to misrepresent the divine.

Before proceeding, however, some clarification of the term 'religious language' is required. 'Religious language', as employed by religious scholars in the everyday sense, refers to the written and spoken language typically used by religious believers when they talk about their religious beliefs and their religious experiences. The term also covers the language used in sacred texts and in worship and prayer.[2] Use of the term 'religious language' might suggest that there is a special 'religious' component of natural languages, which is easily distinguishable from the normal, secular component of these languages. This, however, is clearly not the case. For when believers employ 'religious language', they do not use completely different words to those uttered by their non-religious contemporaries.[3] While certain words may be uttered by believers with greater frequency than by atheists, nonetheless, the words that feature in 'religious language' are the same words that are used in 'non-religious language'.[4] Even a word as quintessentially religious as 'God' appears in the language of many non-religious people in the context of a variety of commonly used curses. Moreover, if one were to open a page of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity or Islam most of the words on that page would seem to bear the same mundane meaning as they do in ordinary, 'secular' discourse. In short, it would seem that the religiosity of language cannot lie in the actual words used but in something else. I suggest that that the 'something else' consists principally, although not exclusively, in two factors: first, the 'religious' purpose some language serves, and, secondly, the overtly 'religious' context of some linguistic uses. The term 'religious language', as used here, then, should be regarded as shorthand for 'language that is used either to serve a religious purpose or in a religious context, or both'.[5]

Given how much 'religious language' and 'ordinary language' have in common, it should not surprise us that, at the level of theory and interpretation, many people tend to regard them as on a par. So, for example, in a culture in which ordinary language is regarded as primarily descriptive of what is 'literally' the case, it is likely that religious language will be viewed as similarly oriented. Indeed, it seems that whichever theory of ordinary language is popular at

any given time effects the way that religious language is conceived. This notwithstanding, throughout the ages religious thinkers have found it necessary to develop distinctive theories of religious language. What is it, then, about religious language that seems to require a special account? A significant portion of the religious language used by traditional Jews, Christians and Muslims concerns a God that is conceived to be transcendent to the world. How can human languages, which seem better suited to describing the mundane world of our everyday experiences, purport to describe or refer to something that transcends this world? Many religious thinkers, both traditional and modern, have been deeply puzzled by this question, and their theories of religious language attempt to provide an answer to it.

I. Traditional theories of religious language

Martin Luther was certainly not the first to be a literalist about religious language, particularly with respect to the language of religious texts. Nevertheless, he is held by many to be responsible for the increased prominence given, from the onset of the modern period, to the literal meaning of religious language. As an example of this literalism, consider Luther's insistence that

> [n]o violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel; but they are to be retained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids, lest we give our adversaries occasion to make a mockery of all the Scriptures.[6]

Clearly, the emphasis placed on the literal meaning of the Christian Scriptures by Luther and his contemporary reformers was part of their wider agenda, the intention being to shift the responsibility for interpreting the sacred texts away from the established Church and onto the individual (male) Christian. Instead of the Church evaluating the meaning of the Scriptures, the reformers hoped that the Scriptures could be used to judge what was of value in the Church. Luther held that ordinary literate people should be able to read and understand the Bible without the help of the interpretation authorized by the religious establishment. Consequently, he argued that the words of the Bible are to be understood in their literal sense, that is, in the sense that they possess in other areas of discourse. On this view, when the Bible refers to God as 'Father', for example, then the word 'Father' means exactly what it means when it is used with reference to a non-divine patriarch.

The view of religious language popularized by Luther became dominant in the Protestant churches of Northern Europe, from where it eventually spread to the Protestant churches of North America. And in North America, particularly, and despite growing recognition that some interpretation is inevitable even when one is committed to reading the Bible as literally as possible, this view remained influential throughout the twentieth century. Its popularity notwithstanding, biblical literalism (as, within the context of Christianity, this view is often called today) has been subjected to vigorous criticism. Russell McCutcheon, for example, remarks that 'it should be apparent that, when reading a document that reflects the entrenched cultural and historical context of people half a world away and reaching back thousands of years, it is utterly impossible to take the entire document literally'.[7] Furthermore, in the twentieth century, there was increased sensitivity to, what appeared to many as, the hypocrisy of those claiming to interpret the Bible literally while nevertheless being highly selective in the parts they chose to take seriously.[8] Despite the problems a religious group exposes itself to when it claims to interpret the Bible literally, the view that Scripture, as the Word of God, does not stand in need of interpretation dies hard. Moreover, emphasis on the literal meaning of religious language has not been limited to Protestant Christians. It has also been the dominant view of religious language in the Muslim tradition, as well as having enjoyed some popularity among certain sectors of the Jewish community. Indeed, in segments of each of these traditions it remained a powerful force at the end of the twentieth century.

However, there is, surely, a certain oddity about the claim that religious language, particularly language that purports to refer to a world-transcendent God, literally describes the way things are, and that the words used have the same literal meaning as they do when applied to things that are 'of this world'. The oddity is caused by the fact that language which purports to be about God inevitably involves words whose meaning would seem to derive from the world of our experience; whereas a world-transcendent God is not within the range of what we can possibly experience. When theists claim to use language about God literally, then, how can they avoid undermining the firm conceptual distinction between God and the world—a distinction maintained by all the traditional forms of Abrahamic monotheism? The claim that language can be used literally in a religious context can easily give the impression that the God theists believe in is just like us, only better: more knowledgeable, more powerful, and so on.

Those who are most sensitive to this difficulty have tended to adopt some form of *via negativa*, an extreme form of which having been popularized in the Middle Ages by the influential Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides.[9] Maimonides claims that statements

predicating 'positive attributes' to the divine being—that is, statements of the form 'God is…'—are theologically illegitimate and should never be employed. Only statements of the form 'God is not…' are, Maimonides argues, legitimate.

At first sight, though, it may seem strange that adherents of the *via negativa* should attempt to speak about God at all. If one cannot say anything about God except regarding what God is not, then why not remain silent? Maimonides, however, clearly believes that language can play a role in leading to an understanding of God. For at one point he states that by considering God's negative attributes 'you will come nearer to the knowledge and comprehension of God'.[10] How precisely, though, does religious language work? In Maimonides' view, language about God is valuable only insofar as it is capable of evoking an experience of the divine. The purpose of religious language is not, then, to provide a definite description of God or to convey information about the divine in propositional form. Rather, it is to facilitate religious experience and to inspire prayer. Furthermore, Maimonides does not merely claim that one would be mistaken if one were to make statements predicating 'positive attributes' of God; he also claims that one would thereby lose one's belief in God. What might motivate this extraordinary claim? What is the connection, in his view, between predicating 'positive attributes' of God and losing one's belief in God? The idea would seem to be that the result of predicating 'positive attributes' of God is that one arrives at an image of God that is formed by compiling together a number of concepts that denote finite qualities—and the 'God' represented by such limited concepts could not inspire belief. Thus, only by limiting one's claims about God to statements about what God is not can one preserve a concept 'God' that is both responsible to the purported reality and, at the same time, credible.[11]

However, in their efforts to avoid misrepresenting God, those who adopt the *via negativa* seem to court another danger—that of saying nothing at all about God. Moreover, if all one can say is that God is not this, that, or the other, it may well be difficult for one's interlocutor to resist the conclusion that God is nothing at all. Despite this danger, the *via negativa* has struck many religious thinkers as the best available theory of religious language. Indeed, it enjoyed something of a renaissance in the twentieth century.

A third traditional theory of religious language was developed by Thomas Aquinas, who was convinced that, because the divinity is radically different from all other beings, little of our language could be applied univocally (or, literally) to God. However, Aquinas felt compelled to reject the obvious alternative: namely, the view that most of the words used in religious language are equivocal, having an entirely different meaning to the one they possess

when employed in non-religious discourse—these two different meanings being as unrelated as, for example, the various meanings of the word 'bat'. The problem with this alternative view is that, if religious language were simply equivocal, then it seems that we could never know whether or not we were describing God correctly. For, whereas we can certainly acquire the mundane meanings of words, what would enable us to grasp the religious meanings? And if we do not understand the religious meanings, we would not be able to make true statements about God. And hence, we would lack all knowledge of the divinity. But we do possess some knowledge of God through revelation. Therefore, Aquinas concluded that when we refer to God, we cannot be employing words equivocally.

As an alternative both to the view that religious language was univocal and to the view that it was equivocal, Aquinas proposed that religious discourse was analogical, placing particular emphasis on a variety of analogy that he terms 'analogy of attribution'. Aquinas illustrates analogy of attribution with the following example. Consider the word 'health'. When we think of healthy people we attribute health to them in a literal sense. But we might also think of medicine as healthy. However, it is clear that medicine is not healthy in the same way in which people are healthy. By means of this example, Aquinas identified a use of words that he believed falls somewhere between the univocal and the equivocal. And it is by speaking in this manner—by employing analogies of attribution—that, Aquinas holds, we can talk meaningfully about God. As he writes:

> some words are used neither univocally nor purely equivocally of God and creatures, but analogically, for we cannot speak of God at all except in the language we use of creatures, and so whatever is said both of God and creatures is said *in virtue of the order* that creatures have to God as to their source and cause in which all perfections of things pre-exist transcendentally.[12]

Clearly, Aquinas conceived of God as the first, or uncaused, cause of everything that is. He also believed that causes must bear some similarity to their effects—or, in other words, that whatever quality an effect possessed had to be present in its cause. As an example, he thought that whatever causes goodness in the world must itself be good. Because God is the cause of everything that exists, we can, therefore, correctly attribute to the divinity properties of worldly things—goodness, for example.

Of course, there is an obvious problem here, which Aquinas anticipated. His theory would seem to allow that all our terms are equally applicable to God, and it would therefore appear to provide no grounds for deciding what may, and what may not, be correctly said of God.

Thus, there would be no significant difference between saying 'God is a rose' and saying 'God is a father', because God is the cause of both roses and fathers. Aquinas attempted to sidestep this difficulty by arguing that, since God is infinite, terms that are capable of referring to the infinite are the ones most suitable for applying to the divine. While this excludes words like 'rose', it allows words like 'good' to be used in describing God. However, this strategy also excludes words like 'father'—words that Aquinas clearly is interested in retaining. So, he further modifies the theory to include metaphors, which he regarded as a valuable means of genuinely saying something about God. Nevertheless, he maintained that metaphor was not as important within religious language as analogy. Because of the primacy he accorded to analogy over metaphor, he failed to develop a detailed account of the way that metaphor functions in religious language.

Moreover, there appears to be a serious flaw in Aquinas' account of analogy. The problem lies in Aquinas' understanding of causation—a notion that plays a key role in his theory. For the reason why certain terms can be applied to God analogically, he argues, is because God is the *cause* of all things. In short, Aquinas assumes that whatever qualities an effect had must be present transcendentally in the cause of that effect. And he took this to entail that effects must bear some likeness to their causes. Consequently, given his belief that God is the cause of everything that exists, Aquinas held that there is a certain qualified likeness between God the creator and God's creatures. In technical theological terms, this likeness is known as the *analogia entis*. It is because of this special likeness between God and 'His' creation that, according to Aquinas, we are able to use words analogically in order to speak about God. So, Aquinas' theory of analogy depends upon a specific understanding of what causation involves. Clearly, if one rejects this view of causation, and most people today would reject the assumption that whatever qualities an effect possesses must be present transcendentally in its cause, then Aquinas' theory loses its power to explain how words can be used analogically to refer to God. Indeed, in the twentieth century, the theory of religious language as analogical struck many people as unpersuasive precisely because they no longer shared Aquinas' beliefs about causation, and hence no longer subscribed to a worldview that recognized the *analogia entis*.

Each of the three traditional theories of religious language was developed as a response to the question: how can religious language meaningfully refer to a God who, if such exists, is radically different from everything else to which our language refers? Both Aquinas' analogical theory of religious language and the *via negativa* were attempts to find a middle way between the twin dangers of misrepresenting God, on the one hand, and failing to talk

meaningfully, on the other. The fear underlying this seeming dilemma is that the gap between God and any human conceptual scheme is so great that anything we might attempt to say about God would be either meaningless or a complete misrepresentation. Moreover, the avoidance of one danger seems to lead to the other: for in order to prevent language about God appearing meaningless, some have felt the need to try to make it as precise as possible. But the more precise religious language becomes, and as a result, the more specific becomes one's conception of God, the greater is the risk of misrepresenting the divinity. Theories of religious language, both traditional and modern, have thus been shaped by their framer's perception of where the greatest danger lies.

Aquinas clearly feared that meaninglessness posed the greatest danger to religious belief. And while avoiding the pitfall of possible misrepresentation by pointing out that language is not univocal (or literal), he set about trying to show how non-literal language can nevertheless be meaningful: it can convey meaning through analogy. Thus his theory of religious language served to explain the way in which it could be meaningful without appealing to the univocal commitments of those who understood religious language literally. Advocates of the *via negativa*, in contrast, took misrepresentation to be the greatest danger. While seeking to avoid the pitfall of meaningless talk—though how successfully is moot—by making literally true claims (such as 'God is not material'), they avoided misrepresenting God by refusing to say anything positive about the divine. It is notable how the problem of religious language, as it persisted in twentieth-century philosophy of religion, retained the same basic form that it held in the Middle Ages: how one can meaningfully use language about God without wholesale misrepresentation of the divinity.

However, the charge that all language purporting to refer to God was meaningless, advanced in the early-twentieth century by the logical positivists, stimulated a renewed interest in certain quarters in theories, such as that of Aquinas, which attempted to explain how religious language could, nevertheless, be meaningful. However, given that Aquinas' theory is unacceptable to many modern people because of its seemingly antiquated metaphysical presuppositions, a number of religious believers began to search for alternative ways of understanding the language they employed to talk about their religious beliefs and experiences. One seemingly fecund approach is to treat religious discourse as metaphorical.

II. Religious language as metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which we speak about one thing in terms that are usually

employed to talk about something else.[13] Although metaphor is ubiquitous within ordinary, as well as within explicitly poetic, speech and writing, until the twentieth century metaphorical expressions were commonly regarded as inferior to non-figurative ones. The belief that only literal language is capable of being true, which is commonly attributed to Plato, has been held responsible for the view that metaphors only play a minor linguistic role. Until recently, most philosophers assumed that metaphors were merely ornamental, and were, moreover, translatable into literal language without loss of meaning. In other words, they subscribed to the 'substitution theory', according to which, in metaphorical uses of language, certain figurative words are substituted for other non-figurative words. Thus, the metaphor can be eliminated by simply substituting back the original word.[14]

It was only in the twentieth century, when people began to think about language in new ways, that certain philosophers began to develop more adequate theories of metaphor. Given the importance of metaphor within religious texts, it is no surprise that these new theories can be employed to shed light on the nature of religious language.

Richards and Black on Metaphor

I. A. Richards was the first to reconsider the role metaphors play in language, and hence the first to reject the substitution theory,[15] with Max Black following his lead. Both insist that, far from being merely ornamental and reducible to literal language (as the substitution theory claimed), metaphors can be used to say things that cannot be said in any other way. Consequently, they play an irreplaceable role in our language.[16] In arguing against the substitution theory, both Richards and Black reject the view that individual words are the bearers of meaning. Instead, the relationship between words and meaning is far more complex, which Richards sought to elucidate by means of, what he calls, an 'interanimative' theory of metaphor.

Rather than construe individual words as possessing a meaning that is fixed independently both of the way they are used and of the context of their utterance, Richards proposes that the meaning of words can only be arrived at through considering 'the interplay of the interpretive possibilities of the whole utterance' in which the words are lodged.[17] In the case of metaphor, the interpretive possibilities are extended. Consider the use of 'pig' as a metaphor for 'glutton'. When we call someone a pig, we elicit both the thought of a pig and the thought of a glutton. In Richards' view, 'when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word or phrase, *whose meaning is the result*

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of their interaction.[18] A metaphor, then, does not work simply by bringing together two words, each with its own fixed meaning, and thereby somehow producing a meaning that is a fusion of the two original meanings. Rather, a successful metaphor, in Richards' view, creates a new meaning from the interaction, or 'interanimation', of the two original meanings. In other words, metaphors operate by drawing together pairs of meaning that are not usually thought of together. Richards' key idea is that both are essential to the success of the metaphor as a generator of meaning.

Black developed a similar theory, which he calls the 'interactive theory of metaphor', but adds that metaphors make certain features prominent, and that this then shapes our perception. As he argues by means of the metaphor 'Man is a wolf': 'Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in "wolf-language" will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, *organizes* our view of man.'[19] Hence, Black holds that, in bringing together the complex frameworks of meaning invoked by the terms 'man' and 'wolf', the metaphor works in a much more subtle way than the traditional substitution theory acknowledges. In forcing us to select which aspects of talk about wolves can be applied to man and which cannot, the metaphor changes the way in which we think about man. If the metaphor succeeds, henceforth the meanings associated with the word 'man' will, in part, be structured by the meanings associated with wolves. Thus, an important change will have taken place in the way we think about men—a change that cannot be irreducibly expressed in literal language. Moreover, our thinking about wolves will not remain unchanged for, 'if to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would.'[20]

Soskice on Metaphor and Religious Language

Janet Martin Soskice has employed the theories of both Richards and Black to develop what is, perhaps, the most influential account of metaphor and religious language to appear to date.[21] Like Richards and Black, she rejects the substitution theory of metaphor, and emphasizes the role metaphors play in generating new perspectives capable of increasing our understanding. In her view, by generating new perspectives, successful metaphors expand our descriptive powers in a way that other types of linguistic expressions do not.[22] In short, metaphors 'disclose' to view what has not been previously available.[23] Consider the following example:

> When we speak of the camel as 'the ship of the desert', the relational irreducibility of the metaphor lies in the potentially limitless suggestions that are evoked by considering the camel on the model of a ship: the implied corollaries of a swaying motion, a heavy and precious cargo, a broad wilderness, a route mapped by stars, distant ports of call, and so on. Saying merely 'camel' does not bring in these associations at all....[24]

Thus, the metaphor of the camel as 'the ship of the desert' genuinely tells us something about camels that we would not have been able to learn without the help of the metaphor. The range of associations evoked by metaphors such as this one is, then, one of their principal advantages and, according to Soskice, one of the chief reasons why they are indispensable. Moreover, the evocative function of metaphors can, she stresses, be particularly important within religious language, where it might serve to facilitate a new range of experiences—ones for which there may be no established literal description.

This might suggest that Soskice regards the principal function of metaphor as evocative. However, she argues strongly that it is a mistake to view metaphors and models (in other words, extended metaphors) as having a primarily evocative function. Rather, a 'model in religious language may evoke an emotional, moral, or spiritual response but this does not mean that the model has no cognitive or explanatory function. In fact the reverse is true; the model can only be affective because it is taken as explanatory.... The cognitive function is primary.'[25]

Soskice further claims that in order to explain the cognitive function of metaphors and models within religious language, we must consider the way in which they are actually employed. So, using the model of God as 'father', which is so prominent within Christianity, to illustrate how models function in religious language, she points out that those who use this particular model implicitly base further convictions upon it.[26] For example, the use of this model presumes that 'if God is our father, he will hear us when we cry to him; if God is our father, then as children and heirs we come to him without fear; if God is our father, he will not give us stones when we ask for bread'.[27] Such convictions are, she argues, action-guiding—and therein lies their cognitive content.

Soskice also argues that metaphorical terms can 'be seen as denoting candidates for real existence', and that such terms can be reality depicting despite the fact that they are not 'exhaustively descriptive'.[28] Indeed, metaphorical terms are characteristically vague, and this, Soskice argues, is one of their virtues. In both religion and science, Soskice avers,

metaphorical terms are indispensable precisely because they are vague. Without this vagueness, there would be a tendency for people to regard the terms as expressing a complete understanding of the aspect of reality in question. They would thus be prone to dogmatism and resistant to any proposed changes to the theory expressed by these terms. In consequence, their theories might cease to be responsive to any new knowledge which comes to light. Thus, the great virtue of metaphor in the context of religious and scientific theories is that it allows us to refer to what really exists, while conceding that our knowledge of the relevant aspects of reality might be incomplete. And metaphor makes this possible because it is a way of using language that allows us to refer to things without defining them. Soskice:

> This is the fine edge at which negative theology and positive theology meet, for the apophatic insight that we say nothing of God, but only point towards Him, is the basis for the tentative and avowedly inadequate stammerings by which we attempt to speak of God and His acts. And…this separation of referring and defining is at the very heart of metaphorical speaking and is what makes it not only possible but necessary that in our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all.[29]

The great advantage of metaphor, then, is that it allows people to refer to God without their having to define 'God'. Thus, metaphorical uses of language would seem to allow religious believers to talk meaningfully about God (supposing that they do in fact succeed in referring), while simultaneously avoiding the danger of misrepresentation. For example, a theist might employ the phrase 'God is a rock'. A statement such as this, if Soskice is correct, can refer to God but should not be understood as either defining or describing the divine. Thus, it can be true that 'God is a rock', without having to be literally true. The claim can be true insofar it tells us something about God's supposed characteristics—but we should not understand it as the claim that God is literally a rock.

Promising as this approach has seemed to many, there is an apparent difficulty with the claim that religious language is metaphorical. When we use metaphor to talk about everyday things—for example, using 'pig' to refer to gluttons—both are not usually too far removed from our experience. But in the case of religious language this is not so. Consider again the example, 'God is a rock'. Clearly, we know what a rock is. But does this really tell us anything at all about God? The problem is that what one of the terms refers to is unknown.

Soskice responds to this objection by pointing out how important metaphor has been in the development of scientific theories. Let me give an example. When people started using the word 'electron', they did not know much about electrons or their properties. And clearly,

electrons are not accessible to our experience in the way that rocks are. Initially, scientists referred to an electron as a particle, despite the fact that electrons are, in a number of crucial respects, not at all like the particles we encounter in our immediate experience. In certain respects, electrons are nothing like grains of sand, for example. Other scientists then began referring to electrons as waves. But again, the use of 'wave' was clearly metaphorical. In several crucial respects, an electron is nothing like the surface of the sea. Seemingly worse, what, exactly, is a wave-particle supposed to be? Yet the metaphors of wave and particle were indispensable in enabling scientists to pick out the objects they wished to study. The term 'wave-particle' was able to refer to electrons without literally describing them. And once those particles were referred to, they could be studied empirically.

Electrons, then, provide an example of how metaphors allow us to refer to things outside of our immediate experience without literally describing them. If scientists can do that with respect to things like electrons, then surely believers can do the same with respect to God. In short, metaphors can enable us to refer to entities that we would be unable to refer to were our uses of language exclusively literal.

This seems a very strong response because, if Soskice is right, it implies that theologians are not doing anything significantly different, in a sense, from what scientists are doing. Both require metaphors to refer to the objects that concern them. However, it could be objected against Soskice that scientists can conduct experiments that give us some reason for thinking that the phenomena they are able to study directly are caused by electrons. New data often requires some revision in what we take electrons to be. And this suggests that we are learning more about electrons. But what is the parallel evidence that suggests we are successfully referring to God? Soskice argues that the theist's confidence in the existence of that to which his or her 'God-talk' aims to refer is grounded in religious experience.[30] Moreover, she believes that the experience of saintly individuals is likely to carry the most weight.[31] Such people may be the best placed to instil in others confidence that their talk about God has a real referent. Moreover, there is a sense in which a religious tradition embodies the cumulative experiences of its participants through the ages. It is a tradition of experience and of interpretation, against the background of which metaphorical religious language is used and understood. Soskice argues, then, that religious traditions, scriptures and the experience upon which they are based can provide sufficient background information to give us an idea of that for which the unknown term in religious language stands. But this response clearly presupposes some degree of faith, and is therefore of little use to a sceptic. Moreover, any reliance on private experiences, as religious experiences tend to be, seems to make religious

claims immune to public testability. Yet it is surely the public testability, at least in principle, of certain of the claims made about electrons that appears to justify our ever-increasing confidence that we are successful in referring to them.

Nevertheless, in drawing attention to the relation between metaphor and religious experience, Soskice has pointed to a possible explanation of the vital importance of metaphors within religious language. Let us, finally, turn to a theory of metaphor that—although it has, surprisingly, not yet been employed by philosophers of religion—offers the prospect of according a central role to this relation.

An Alternative Approach to Metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, like Soskice, have developed a theory of metaphor that builds on the work of Richards and Black. They accord metaphors a far greater role in our cognitive structure than do any of the theories examined so far. For they argue not only that metaphors play a significant and irreplaceable role in the way we think but also that huge areas of our language are structured by them. Hence, in their influential book entitled *Metaphors We Live By*,[32] they aim to undermine the view that literal language is primary and that metaphorical language is dependent upon it. Indeed, they go so far as to argue that what many people regard as literal language only functions within a context that is deeply structured by metaphor: 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature', they aver.[33] With this claim, Lakoff and Johnson go far beyond the views of metaphor we have thus far considered. Soskice, Richards and Black regarded metaphor as a figure of speech, albeit a potent one that enables the creation of meaning. Lakoff and Johnson clearly regard metaphor as much more than this, for, in their view, it is constitutive of our thought.

Moreover, they argue that the claim that our conceptual experience is pervasively metaphorical has two further implications. First, given the widely accepted view that our conceptual system affects our experience, and given that our conceptual system is structured by metaphor, then if we are to understand our experience, we must understand how the metaphors we employ function. Second, given that reality is presented to us only in our experience, and given that our experience is shaped by our conceptual system, then metaphors play a crucial part in defining what is to count as reality. Given these convictions, it is unsurprising that Lakoff and Johnson argue that the notion of metaphor should be recognized as a central philosophical concept. It is the key, they claim, to comprehending how conceptual

systems are related to our experience, and to how understanding emerges from this relationship.

The primary focus of interest within the work of Lakoff and Johnson is on our conceptual systems—in other words, on the 'concepts that structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people'.[34] They take it for granted, however, that we cannot simply look inward and thereby study our conceptual system. Put another way, we cannot make it an object of direct knowledge. Nevertheless, they assume that our conceptual system can be studied; namely, by means of the language we use. Because our language, they claim, is based upon our conceptual system, then the structure of our language provides evidence regarding the structure of our conceptual system. And the linguistic evidence, they maintain, establishes 'that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature'.[35]

The force of the argument Lakoff and Johnson present derives from the many examples they provide in support of their case. One of the most persuasive of these, which is often referred to by subsequent authors, is the metaphor 'argument is war'. Lakoff and Johnson use this metaphor as an illustration of a 'conceptual metaphor', which is a metaphor that exercises a structural effect both on our thought and on our everyday activity. They begin by drawing attention to a variety of metaphors that are subsidiary to the conceptual metaphor 'argument is war', and which, themselves, form part of our ordinary way of talking about arguments. Consider, for example: 'Your claims are *indefensible*', 'He *attacked every weak point* in my argument', 'His criticisms were *right on target*', 'He *shot down* all of my arguments'. Commenting on these common metaphorical ways of speaking, they claim:

> It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.[36]

In understanding arguments in terms of war, then, we thereby stipulate what arguments consist in within our culture. And anyone who did not employ the metaphor 'argument is war' would not experience 'arguments' in the way that those who accept the metaphor clearly do.

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In fact, such a person would be unable to engage in arguments as they are conceived within our culture.

Hence, the activity of arguing, and the experience one has while doing it, are, Lakoff and Johnson aver, metaphorically structured. Without the metaphor, one cannot engage in the activity, and hence one cannot have the experience that goes with it. Because conceptual metaphors, like 'argument is war', have the function of structuring our thought, activity and experience, metaphor cannot simply constitute the peripheral feature of our language use that traditional theorists had presumed. Rather, conceptual metaphors consist in structuring concepts that control whole networks of our thought and activity. Moreover, there are numerous conceptual metaphors, and together they structure most of what we think, say and do. And only *within* such networks, Lakoff and Johnson argue, does literal language function.

Metaphors, then, can structure not only our thinking but also our activities. And Lakoff and Johnson insist that a large number of our activities are 'metaphorical'; in other words, our performance of those activities is structured by metaphor. Indeed, there is a very real sense in which our use of metaphorical concepts has created these 'metaphorical' activities. Thus, as Lakoff and Johnson argue:

> New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to.[37]

So, consider love—an example frequently deployed by Lakoff and Johnson to illustrate the extent to which metaphors can shape our experience. Most people would surely agree that love, like most, if not all, of our emotions, defies full conceptualization in non-metaphorical terms. In order to talk and think adequately about love, we therefore require conceptual metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson provide as examples: 'Love is a physical force'; 'Love is patient'; 'Love is madness'; 'Love is magic'; and 'Love is war'.[38] Each of these metaphors structures a possible way of thinking and talking about love. Thus, by adopting the 'Love is a physical force' conceptual metaphor, we are able to say things like: 'I could feel the *electricity* between us'; or 'His whole life *revolves* around her'. Adopting a different conceptual metaphor would enable us to talk in a very different way about love. We could, instead, adopt the 'Love is war' conceptual metaphor, and thus say such things as: 'He is

known for his many rapid *conquests*'; 'He *won* her hand in marriage'; or 'He *overpowered* her'.

But if Lakoff and Johnson are correct, these conceptual metaphors do more than merely allow us to think and talk about love in novel ways. A new conceptual metaphor will also enable us to experience love in a new manner. In other words, the alteration in our conceptual system caused by the introduction of a new conceptual metaphor is such as to change what we experience. Consequently, when people began to think of love as war, Lakoff and Johnson argue, they also began to experience love as war—their reality had begun to change. Therefore, when different people come to diverge in the conceptual metaphors they employ to structure their thought, language and experience, then there is a sense in which they will no longer share the same reality. And this way of understanding how it might be that different people experience different 'realities' may shed light on cultural diversity, given that many striking differences between conceptual metaphors can be found across cultures.

As users of metaphor, then, we can transform 'reality', at least in the sense of bringing about significant changes to the 'perceptions, conceptualizations, motivations, and actions that constitute most of what we experience'.[39] And as Lakoff and Johnson point out, this makes metaphor a political concern.[40] For people in power—and in the twenty-first century, those in control of the media might be thought to be some of the chief wielders of power— can control which metaphors become dominant, and hence can strongly influence how we experience our world.[41] Once a metaphor has become accepted, people will experience the world in the terms it suggests, and thus will view what it entails as true. Consequently, those who shape the metaphors dominant within a culture will thereby exercise a disproportionate influence on what is regarded as true within that culture.

Despite the tremendous significance of this conclusion, Lakoff and Johnson regard issues concerning truth as secondary to what they consider to be the deeper issue: namely, that conceptual metaphors structure our understanding of our experience, and, through that experience, they structure our understanding of the world. Hence, those who can persuade us to adopt their metaphors will, if Lakoff and Johnson are right, be able to lure us into accepting their worldview. And it is this that Lakoff and Johnson take to be of prime importance. We shall consider the relevance of this for religious language shortly. But first, it is worth noting that this is not the only danger inherent in the use of successful conceptual metaphors.

As we noted earlier, the substitution theory held that metaphors were incapable of communicating anything that could not equally be said by means of non-figurative language. But Lakoff and Johnson argue that the account of non-figurative language presumed by the

substitution theory is itself based upon a conceptual metaphor: namely, that of a 'conduit'.[42] This conceptual metaphor has three subsidiary metaphors: 'ideas (or meanings) are objects'; 'linguistic expressions are containers'; and 'communication is sending'. According to Lakoff and Johnson, these metaphors structure the way in which many people think about language.[43] And the image this pattern of metaphors yields is that '[t]he speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea/objects out of the word/containers.'[44] Obvious examples of this way of thinking are 'It's hard to *get* that idea *across* to him', 'I *gave* you that idea', 'It's difficult to *put* my ideas *into* words', and so on.[45] Such common linguistic expressions, which seem to be structured by the conduit metaphor-complex, would appear to provide considerable support for the theory Lakoff and Johnson defend.

Thinking about language in terms of the conduit metaphor would seem to present us with a structured pattern for understanding what it is that we do with words. But, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, this particular metaphor well illustrates how powerful conceptual metaphors can be so successful in structuring our experience that they leave us quite unaware of what is omitted from the worldview they shape—a further feature of conceptual metaphors that should cause us to be wary of them. In other words, through entailing, for example, that words and sentences bear meaning independently of the speaker or context, the conduit metaphor can effectively blind us to the role that speakers and contexts play in the process of communication. Hence, this particular metaphor leaves us without any resources for explaining, or even recognizing, situations in which the meaning is not carried by the words used but by the context in which they are uttered. Furthermore, the conduit metaphor may structure our understanding of language in such a way that we become insensitive to cases in which the same sentence will mean entirely different things to different people because of their different backgrounds, expectations, and so on. Thus, in structuring our thought, action and language, metaphors also screen out various alternatives.[46] The important moral that Lakoff and Johnson draw from this feature of conceptual metaphors is that such metaphors only ever provide us with a partial 'reality'—but one that, fortunately, may be extended by the use of complementary metaphors. Clearly, the claim that a conceptual metaphor can hide aspects of reality as well as reveal them is of tremendous relevance to an adequate theory of religious language, even though this implication of the work of Lakoff and Johnson has not been pursued to date.

How might this thought be developed, then? As we have seen, conceptual metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, are essential if we are to talk and think about things that

defy conceptualization in straightforwardly non-metaphorical terms. Many theists, of course, with the obvious exception of the literalists, are in agreement that the divine—the mooted object of much religious discourse—defies all such conceptualization. God is, therefore, a prime candidate for conceptualization through metaphor. Moreover, analysis of what religious believers actually say about God would appear to bear out the claim that the content of their thought and speech regarding this mooted object is structured by organizing, or conceptual, metaphors. Think of 'God is love'. Not only does this particular conceptual metaphor shape a 'reality' in which God stands as divine carer for all creation but it also excludes a whole host of alternatives, such as everything that is implied by conceptualizing the world as ruled by a vengeful God. And this, if the theory propounded by Lakoff and Johnson is correct, shapes the experiences that the faithful have of their relationship to God.

Now, as we have seen, Lakoff and Johnson claim that people who use different conceptual metaphors may actually experience different 'realities'; for, by structuring speech, thought and activity, conceptual metaphors create their own possibilities of experience, thereby potentially creating new 'realities'. It may well be, then, that a new metaphor within religious language would enable people to experience the divine in ways that were unavailable prior to the introduction of that metaphor. Consider, once again, the metaphor 'God is love'. By utilising the analysis advanced by Lakoff and Johnson, we could argue that when people first began to think of God as love they also began to experience a loving God— in short, their 'reality' had changed. But a similar 'change in reality' may have occurred when the metaphor 'God as father' was introduced into Semitic monotheism by Jesus. Likewise, the metaphors employed in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur'ān could be regarded as opening up new ways of experiencing the divine, and hence as generating new 'realities'.

However, this way of thinking about metaphor in religious language also highlights a problematic facet of religious experience. As we have seen, metaphors work, according to Lakoff and Johnson, by drawing our attention to certain features of things, while simultaneously screening certain other aspects from our attention. Thus, the conceptual metaphor 'God as father' draws attention to certain features of God (power, providential care, and so on), while screening from us certain other purported features that cannot so easily be associated with fatherhood (God as nurturer, for example). The metaphor 'God as father' may, then, facilitate a certain way of experiencing the divine, while closing off numerous other possibilities. These observations would seem to converge with the analyses of religious language developed by those feminist theologians who have pointed to the negative consequences of the almost exclusive use of male metaphors for God within the monotheistic

traditions[47]—which is one reason for not relegating the study of metaphor within religious language to the exclusive, abstract concern of a few scholars. For if Lakoff and Johnson are correct, then we have grounds for thinking that specific conceptual metaphors have shaped whole religious traditions. We would have reason to think that such metaphors have determined how religious people experience what they take to be the divine, and how they understand the language that they use in their attempts to talk about it. And a wariness with respect to how specific conceptual metaphors have shaped whole religious traditions could have far-reaching consequences for how the divine is conceived in the future.

III. Concluding remarks

While each of the three traditional approaches to religious language continues to find advocates, recent theories of metaphor may well provide far superior theoretical accounts of religious discourse.[48]

Moreover, the view that religious language is principally metaphorical rather than literal might well facilitate regarding a range of metaphors or models of the divine as possessing equal value, even if, at first sight, they appear to be mutually exclusive (for example, the metaphors of father and mother when applied to the deity). And drawing attention to the range of possible metaphors could make it harder for one construal of God to trump all others, especially when each may be regarded as having something to contribute to a fuller religious understanding. This observation could pave the way for an appreciation of how much religious people might stand to gain from exploring the metaphors deployed in a range of religious traditions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for example, all attempt to refer to God using distinct, but overlapping, metaphors and models. Viewing these as complementary, rather than as rivals, would seem to become a more acceptable option once religious language is regarded as functioning in the manner outlined above. And clearly, this could be of considerable advantage to the denizens of an increasingly multicultural world.[49]

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[1]Rather than exploring the ways in which different conceptions of God might influence thought about religious language, I presuppose a particular view of God—that view which is dominant within Semitic monotheism—and consider religious language as it is employed

within the context of belief in that God.

[2]It is common to distinguish between, what we might call, 'general religious language', on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a specialised category of religious language called 'theological language'. General religious language includes the language used in religious texts (parables, stories, myths and so on), as well as the language employed by believers in prayer and worship, etc. Such language tends to be replete with images and metaphors, and is sometimes referred to as 'first-order' language. Theological language, by contrast, tends to contain a high proportion of abstract concepts; that is, concepts that are far removed from our direct experience. Thus, it is sometimes referred to as 'second-order' language. In what follows, we shall be concerned principally with general religious language.

[3]For example, compare the word 'passion' employed in the phrase 'the passion of Christ' to its usage in the phrase 'the passion of Henry for Annaïs'. Notice that even if 'passion' has two quite different meanings (or more), it is nevertheless one word.

[4]The shared vocabulary of 'religious' and 'secular' language can, however, be camouflaged by the fact that the former is peppered by antiquated terms and expressions that have long since passed out of everyday parlance.

[5]It would, of course, be a further matter to stipulate exactly what constitutes 'a religious context'. Indeed, to attempt to do so would require us to address the topic of how religion is to be defined. Nevertheless, perhaps we can suggest that a 'religious context' typically includes references to such things as scripture, prayer, worship, religious experiences, and so on. See Harrison, Victoria S., 'The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-cultural World', *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006): 133–152.

[6]Luther, Martin, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Works of Martin Luther (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1982), volume 2, p. 189. A thorough account of Luther's approach to religious language would have to consider the impact of his Christological and Pneumatological views upon his hermeneutical theory.

[7]McCutcheon, Russell T., *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 51.

[8]See ibid.

[9]Within the Christian tradition, Pseudo-Dionysius, author of *The Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*, is a key early exponent of the *via negativa*. The German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) was another well-known proponent of this theory of religious language. This apophatic approach is also represented in Asian religious thought, particularly with reference

to *nirguna Brahman* (Brahman without qualities).

[10]Maimonides, Moses, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by M. Friedlander (London: 1936), p. 86.

[11]Maimonides did, however, allow that a partial conception of God can be arrived at through considering God's manifestations in the world; even though it may be the case that not everyone is able to achieve knowledge of God this way. Ehud Ben-Or interprets Maimonides as claiming that God's manifestations in the world could only be recognized as such by the virtuous. If this is right, then Maimonides believes that the conception a person might form of God is limited by that person's character. See Ben-Or, Ehud, *Worship of the Heart: A Study of Maimonides' Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[12]Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by H. McCabe (London and New York: Blackfriars edition, 1964), Volume 3, 1a, 13, 5. My italics.

[13]See Soskice, Janet M., *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 15.

[14]The substitution theory of metaphor is often attributed to Aristotle (e.g., by Max Black). However, Soskice has challenged this common reading of Aristotle. See ibid., pp. 8–14.

[15]See Richards, I. A., *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

[16]See the essays in Johnson, Mark (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

[17]Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 55.

[18]Ibid., p. 93. My italics.

[19]Black, Max, 'Metaphor' in Johnson (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, op. cit., p. 75.

[20]Ibid., p. 77.

[21]Soskice was not the first to explore the metaphorical dimensions of religious language. Sallie McFague had already done so in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Soskice criticizes McFague, however, for employing an insufficiently sophisticated view of metaphor.

[22]Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, op. cit., p. 66.

[23]See, for example, ibid., p. 89.

[24]Ibid., p. 95.

[25]Ibid., p. 109.

[26]Sallie McFague also uses 'God the Father' as an example of a model within religious language, which she regards as a dominant metaphor that has established itself as a model through its staying power. 'As a model,' she writes, 'it not only retains characteristics of metaphor but also reaches toward qualities of conceptual thought. It suggests a comprehensive, ordering structure with impressive interpretative potential. As a rich model with many associated common-places as well as a host of supporting metaphors, an entire theology can be worked out from this model. Thus, if God is understood on the model of "father", human beings are understood as "children", sin is rebellion against the "father", redemption is sacrifice by the "elder son" on behalf of the "brothers and sisters" for the guilt against the "father" and so on'. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, op. cit., p. 23. Ironically, as McFague points out, it is the very comprehensiveness of successful models that leads people to take them too literally.

[27]Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, op. cit., p. 112.

[28]Ibid., p. 133.

[29]Ibid., p. 140.

[30]See ibid., pp. 139f.

[31]Hans Urs von Balthasar argues extensively in favour of the type of position advanced by Soskice. He claims that the experience of the saints should be used as a primary resource within Christian theology. On this aspect of von Balthasar's thought, see Harrison, Victoria S., *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology*, Studies in Philosophy and Religion, volume 21 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000).

[32]Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[33]Ibid., p. 3. Also see Turner, M., *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mnd, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), for an example of the research generated by Lakoff and Johnson's ground-breaking approach.

[34]Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, op. cit., p. 3.

[35]Ibid., p. 4.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p. 145.

[38]See ibid., p. 49.

[39]Ibid., p. 146.

[40]See ibid., pp. 157f.

[41]Michel Foucault has also written extensively about the close ties between language and power.

[42]Here Lakoff and Johnson are indebted to Michael Reddy. See Reddy, M., 'The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language' in Ortony, A. (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 164–201.

[43]See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, op. cit., Chapter 3.

[44]Ibid., p. 10.

[45]Ibid., p. 11.

[46]For one illustration of such screening, see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, op. cit., p. x.

[47]See, for example, Plaskow, Judith, *Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), Jantzen, Grace M., *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), and Mernissi, Fatima, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[48]I have not examined structuralist or poststructuralist understandings of religious language. While these theoretical approaches enjoyed considerable influence on European intellectual life in the mid-twentieth century, they did not focus attention on the particular questions raised by religious language that are the concern of this paper.

[49] I am indebted to Alan Carter for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.