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## Religious Metaphor

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MICHAEL L. RAPOSA

*Religious Metaphor*

Contemporary theory of metaphor has supplied some extraordinary resources for unraveling the logic and determining the significance of particular types of religious utterances. Like poetry, *religious discourse often seems to draw its life-blood from metaphor.* Even the theologian is occasionally compelled, by the exigencies of his or her task, to abandon literal speech in favor of the metaphorical mode. Given the contemporary emphasis on the cognitive utility of metaphor, such a move may now be regarded as the pursuit of a positive option rather than a desperate maneuver or last resort.

The scholarly impact of Max Black's famous essay on "Metaphor"<sup>1</sup> is largely responsible for the renewed interest in this topic. In the second half of his essay, Black articulates and defends the "interaction view" of metaphor, citing as one of the primary sources of this modern theory the work of I.A. Richards.<sup>2</sup> In his own version of the interaction view, Black identifies two subjects in every metaphorical utterance; for example, in "the world is a stage," "world" is the principal and "stage" the subsidiary subject. Such utterances convey their meaning by causing the principal subject to be seen in terms of or "through" the subsidiary subject. In its literal usage the "M-word" (the metaphorical term or expression, in this case "stage") implies a "system of associated commonplaces" (a pattern of implied meanings, images, and feelings) that, when the word is used metaphorically, functions as a special kind of "lens" for viewing the principal subject. Commenting on his own example ("Man is a wolf"), Black explains that

A suitable hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject. But these implications will not be those comprised in the

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commonplaces normally implied by literal uses of "man." The new implications must be determined by the pattern of implications associated with literal uses of the word "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.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier in the essay, Black had distinguished between the "focus" and the "frame" of a metaphor, the former being the metaphorical expression itself and the latter its sentential context. Now he argues that the focal word receives from its frame a new, extended meaning. "Wolf" in its literal usage is not identical with "wolf" in a metaphorical context. Consequently, this metaphorical "interaction" results both in a special perspective on the principal subject (because it is viewed in terms of the subsidiary subject) and in a new meaning for the focal word (relative to its non-metaphorical usage).

Black's analysis suggests several ways in which metaphors might be seen to function. They might operate as instructions to see some actual thing *as* something else; that is, they could work to organize one's perception and comprehension of specific objects or phenomena. Black describes this function in detail, and it is directly analogous to what Wittgenstein calls "seeing an aspect" of something.<sup>4</sup> In addition, metaphors may operate to allow one to imagine possible objects and phenomena. This could happen in two ways:

1) The object of a metaphor could itself be possible rather than actual, in the sense that it could be fictional or general in character. Poems, novels, and plays are filled with metaphorical descriptions of non-actual objects, persons, and events, as are our discussions of such works of art. "War is hell" depicts not some specific, historical instance of war, but war in general (all possible as well as all actual wars).

2) The "interaction" between metaphor and object might alter one's perception of the object in such a way that it could no

longer be considered to actually exist as perceived; the metaphor would reveal (or allow one to entertain or contemplate) not some aspect of what a thing is, but rather features of how an actual thing *might possibly be*. (This might explain what Black is suggesting when he asserts that metaphors are not based upon but “create” similarities.<sup>5</sup>) Here the possible is rooted in the actual. The metaphor resembles what its object might be, exposes features that its object could possess, or would possess given certain circumstances. Such might-be’s, would-be’s, and could-be’s are part of the language of the imagination, the grammar of possibility. To assert, for example, that “all men are brothers” is to say, metaphorically, as much about what is possible for mankind as about what actually holds true in the present state of affairs.

Metaphors, then, may reveal both the actual and the possible aspects of things. They do so by establishing a perspective from which to consider their objects. Such a perspective will be useful and illuminating in certain ways and to a certain extent. Nevertheless, even a metaphor that seems to capture the “essence” of its object will fail to reveal that object in all of its aspects. Every perspective is finite; new metaphors are constantly being formulated and employed. Often one is being instructed by the metaphor to imagine the possibilities that are latent in things, or the way that things might exist in altered states of affairs. Such possibilities can be purely fanciful or “make-believe” and never actualized; on the other hand, this kind of revelation, as well as the type of metaphor that mediates it, can be and very often is extremely valuable. The metaphorical insight can constitute a genuine cognitive advance; imagined possibilities can shape and transform human action.

There is another way in which the imagination is involved in one’s interpretation of and response to metaphors. Black notes that when a word is used metaphorically not only is a new perspective provided concerning the principal subject, but the meaning of the metaphorical focus is itself altered. Clearly, there is a sense in which the relationship between the metaphorical and the literal usages of a word will be asymmetrical;<sup>6</sup> certain normal “presuppositions” concerning the nature of a given thing will be “cancelled” when the word for that thing is used in a metaphorical context. For example,

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compare "the ox is grazing" with "John is an ox." In the latter metaphorical context, the presupposition that "ox" is a label for a specific, non-human quadruped is excluded, even though many of the features and characteristics (bigness, clumsiness) that are implied by such a presupposition continue to be implied in the non-literal context. Consequently, a metaphorical expression can evoke an imaginative response with respect both to the object being depicted and to the metaphorical term itself. In the metaphorical "event," our concepts of "ox," "wolf," and "stage," as well as of "John," "man," and "the world" are imaginatively transfigured.

Given this kind of analysis of metaphors and of the role that the imagination plays in the formulation and interpretation of such expressions, how can the discussion now be focused on the problem of specifically religious verbal behavior? It might first be suggested that the special problem of religious metaphor may not be quite as "special" as one would automatically tend to assume. Much of what needs to be said about the religious use of metaphors will be implied directly or indirectly in any general discussion of metaphor. The task is to draw out those implications and expand upon them.

Black emphasizes the cognitive utility of metaphorical usage. In this respect, his analysis has clear implications for any theory of religious discourse. If whenever one wished to illuminate a religious phenomenon or describe it in a different fashion, it became necessary to "invent" new predicates, then half of one's time would be absorbed by such a task. The other half would be spent explaining the meaning of the new predicates to those with whom one wished to communicate. Fortunately, languages have their own creative resources. Words and expressions can be "borrowed" from specific verbal environments and placed in new contexts with amazing effectiveness. Religion is obviously not the only beneficiary here. The use of metaphors (as well as other types of "models") to describe natural phenomena is a strategy often discussed and debated by philosophers of science.<sup>7</sup> The scientific examples are similar to what occurs when metaphors are used as models to illuminate the religious experience or the objects of religious belief.<sup>8</sup> Black's description of this general function of metaphor applies quite accurately to particular religious usages:

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. . . there are powerful and irreplaceable uses of metaphor not adequately described by the old formula of "saying one thing and meaning another."

A memorable metaphor has the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to one as a lens for seeing the other; the implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with the literal use of the metaphorical expression enable us to see a subject matter in a new way. The extended meanings that result, the relation between initially disparate realms created, can neither be antecedently predicted nor subsequently paraphrased in prose. We can comment upon the metaphor, but the metaphor itself neither needs nor invites explanation or paraphrase. Metaphorical thought is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought.<sup>9</sup>

Black's emphasis on the unique and unsubstitutable nature of metaphorical occurrences is especially important. The claim that religion uses metaphors to express truths that cannot be expressed literally (a claim often enough made by both philosophers and religious believers) is not a special claim about religious language. It is the case with all interaction metaphors (Black does allow that certain "trivial" metaphors do not fall under this category) that they are not subject to literal paraphrase.

Arguments for the cognitive economy and utility of religious metaphors prevent any simplified understanding of such occurrences as being merely "ornamental" or pleasurable. Nonetheless, this is not to deny that good metaphors are colorful, evocative, pleasing, and sometimes produce a powerful emotional effect. In a recent discussion of religious language, James F. Ross observes that such language is "craftbound" and, therefore, that "it functions to motivate and often to modulate human behavior in pursuit of characteristic, craft-identifying objectives."<sup>10</sup> This type of "motivation" or "modulation"

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requires a language that is both meaningful and evocative (i.e., “inspirational”). Metaphorical expressions often seem to fit the bill. Saying that “God is our loving father” not only tells something about the deity, but also evokes a certain kind of emotional response that may be lacking when one is told that “God is the supreme being” or “God is the first, uncaused cause.” Of course the metaphorical focus — “loving father” — acquires a new meaning within this frame. Not all of the conventional presuppositions about fathers will be applicable here; God is no ordinary “father,” nor is God’s love an ordinary love.

λ Nelson Goodman’s observation that effective metaphors always “startle”<sup>11</sup> bears an analogy to certain notions prevalent in contemporary biblical scholarship concerning one of the special functions of the gospel parables. Many of the parables, like certain metaphorical occurrences, are designed to produce a startling, disorienting effect upon the listener or reader. One is forced to recast old ways of thinking and believing into the contexts created by new images and new sets of categories. (These categories are often “borrowed” from the accounts of ordinary human events and experiences.) It would seem reasonable, then, to argue that many of the parables serve a definite metaphorical function, that they are, in a sense, extended metaphors.

The comprehension of both parables and metaphors is certainly a cognitive exercise, but clearly it often engages the whole person. Generally speaking, the sense of an unambiguous, literal assertion can be quickly grasped and then “tucked away” for future reference. The chances that the task of “processing” such an assertion will require total engagement are relatively slim. If religion is a phenomenon that ideally involves “whole” persons and personalities, however, the users of religious language will tend to find metaphorical expressions particularly helpful. Good metaphors can never be cognitively “processed” (or paraphrased) in the same way that literal statements often are. “Cognitive playing” might provide a more appropriate model for what takes place here: the testing or “trying out” of contrasts and associations, the “playing” with the various ideas, meanings, images, and feelings that metaphors express and evoke.<sup>12</sup> The pleasure that is generally associated with all kinds of playful activity might account for the pleasing effect of many

metaphors. In any event, a good deal has been written and said about the play-element in religious ritual and behavior, but there has been relatively little discussion concerning the potentially religious significance of this activity of cognitive play. The American philosopher Charles Peirce is an exception here, arguing that “abductive” or hypothetical reasoning, under certain circumstances, can take the form of “Pure Play” or “Musement.”<sup>13</sup> This sort of cognitive play, Peirce suggested, will inevitably tend, if unrestricted, to result in the contemplation of the God-hypothesis; Musement becomes a type of religious meditation. Interestingly enough, Peirce’s analysis of “abduction” resonates with Black’s discussion of metaphorical thinking; it involves the formulation and exploration of hypotheses, the identification of objects and phenomena as being certain “sorts” of things. It should be noted that a hypothesis can have considerable explanatory power regardless of its truth-value. A given metaphor, regarded as a “hypothesis” that one can entertain even though it is actually or literally false, can function as a source of insight precisely because it involves the contemplation of a particular thing in terms of or with respect to a specific class or “rule.” Peirce’s analysis of such rules as “habits of thought” anticipates the contemporary psychological investigation of perceptual and conceptual “sets.”<sup>14</sup> One’s habitual way of thinking about a certain type of thing organizes one’s perception of anything that is classified (“correctly” or not) as being of that type (e.g., the classification of “the world” as a “stage”).

Whatever the “metaphorical truth” of an utterance, if it is a genuine case of metaphor it is clearly also *not* true in a literal sense. This negative aspect of metaphor has been carefully analyzed by Colin Turbayne, who portrays metaphors as a type of intentional “category mistake.”<sup>15</sup> Here the emphasis is on the duplicity of metaphor, on its character as a pretense. Men are not literally wolves; one is being asked to regard them *as if* they were wolves. Consequently, there is a certain risk as well as an advantage involved in the employment of a metaphor. Turbayne describes this risk as the potential confusion of the “mask” with the “face,” the danger of treating metaphorical expressions as if they were literal utterances. Taken (i.e., “mis-taken”) literally, metaphors cease to function as sources of insight, but rather they blind and they limit us; they lose their cognitive utility and we instead are “used” by them.

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The startling effect of many religious parables and metaphors is the result of this negative factor. Such an effect, when achieved, may function as a preparation for grasping some deeper religious insight. That is to say, perceiving the obvious literal falsity of the metaphorical utterance may pave the way for comprehending a more profound, "metaphorical truth." Disorientation precedes reorientation; the negative effect of metaphor is essential.

It may also be the case, however, that this negative function is preeminent. In such instances, religious metaphor serves the same purpose as some religious paradoxes; it is not a positive description of the religious object that is intended, but rather a forceful demonstration of the inappropriateness of all such descriptions. Consequently, one should be cautious about inferring the meanings of specific religious metaphors. The actual meaning, in a given case, may be that all inferred "meanings" are misleading or inadequate.

Turbayne's project of exposing "hidden" metaphors resonates with certain strands of contemporary theological reflection. Rudolph Bultmann's understanding of the task of "demythologization" and Paul Tillich's vigorous attack on "literalism" represent attempts to sensitize believers to the symbolic complexities of religious utterances. More recently, feminist theologians have sought to "expose" the masculine metaphors that dominate western religious discourse. The resistance to such projects, both lively and widespread, indicates the striking relevance of Turbayne's analysis to the religious realm. The confusion between "mask" and "face" in the case of some religious metaphors may have occurred over a long or a short period of time, but once entrenched in the religious consciousness it becomes extremely difficult to dislodge. The power of metaphor to illuminate is matched by the power of hidden metaphor to blind and to limit one's vision. Of course, certain approaches to "demythologization" or to the "exposure" of hidden metaphors may be based on faulty theoretical premises, and may be conducted with little sensitivity to the real meaning of specific religious utterances. The confusion between the "literal" and the "metaphorical" can cut both ways. For an utterance to be metaphorical, it must be framed or intended as such; for it to be a "hidden" metaphor it must have been originally regarded as metaphorical. It is hardly enlightening to designate as

"metaphors" all utterances that one regards as false. It is more honest simply to refute them.

Despite the fact that metaphorical expressions often appear in the form of truth-claims and not as comparisons, the relationship between similes and metaphors is quite complex. Even Black, who denies that metaphor is simply a case of "condensed or elliptical simile," is willing to admit this. There is clearly a sense in which comparison might be said to constitute a "moment" in the interpretation of metaphorical expressions. Understanding a metaphor may involve much more than this act of comparison, but it does not preclude comparison as a part of the complete process of understanding. In the case of similes then, it is unreasonable to assert that they never function analogously to metaphors. Here it is useful to turn again to the examples provided by the New Testament. At various points in the gospel narratives one reads that "the Kingdom of Heaven is like X." *The purpose of such similes is to teach the reader or listener something about the Kingdom, as well as to evoke a particular kind of response. X provides a perspective on the Kingdom; knowledge of X shapes and informs the reader's perception of a reality that is not directly accessible to the senses. Here Wittgenstein is right on target;<sup>16</sup> the description of the negative function of metaphor is paralleled in his discussion of the imagination by the observation that, in imagining something, one does not listen or look about, but concentrates inwardly, closes one's eyes and blocks one's ears in an attempt to suspend or "negate" actual sense perception and its distractions. The best evidence that these biblical "similes" function metaphorically rather than as simple comparisons is that the "Kingdom of Heaven" is not available for inspection, and therefore not directly available for or accessible to an act of comparison. One is being told to perform an imaginative act in this case. Something may already be known about the Kingdom, but this knowledge is now being imaginatively reshaped and reorganized, new possibilities evoked. Here one encounters as clear a case of "seeing as" as any explicit metaphor would provide.*

Of course, religious discourse manifests a wide variety of explicit metaphors: "God is love," "The Lord is my shepherd," "I am the light of the world," "Brahman is both near and far," and so on.

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Furthermore, it is not being suggested that all or even most of religious language is figurative or metaphorical. Nonetheless, the religious impulse remains rooted in the possible, particularly in the eschatological possibility of the not-yet-but-hoped-for. Such possibilities can only be apprehended imaginatively; consequently, the religious imagination will inevitably find for itself a language congenial to its own special purposes, a language enriched and extended by metaphors.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1962), ch. III.

<sup>2</sup>See I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), ch. V and VI.

<sup>3</sup>Black, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. E.L. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 213.

<sup>5</sup>Black, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>See James F. Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 4.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

<sup>8</sup>See Frederick Ferre, "Mapping the Logic of Models in Science and Theology," in *New Essays in Religious Language*, ed. Dallas High (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 54-96; and Earl MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup>Black, pp. 236-37.

<sup>10</sup>Ross, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup>Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of cognitive play as an element of aesthetic experience, see Barbara H. Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 119-26.

<sup>13</sup>Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Hartshorne and Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), VI, pp. 452 ff.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, the psychological theory of Jerome Bruner in *Beyond the Information Given*, ed. Jeremy Anglin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

<sup>15</sup>Colin M. Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

<sup>16</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. Anscombe and von Wright (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 622 ff.