Metaphors in and for the Sociology of Religion: Towards a Theory after Nietzsche

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Introduction

Even a cursory consideration of our discipline's vocabulary shows that metaphor has

played an important role in conceiving religion for sociological purposes. Sociologists

have thought of religion as a sacred "canopy" (Berger), as a "social cement" (Turner), as

a "chain of memory" (Hervieu-Léger), as a social "construction" (Beckford *A Social*

Theory), as "opium of the people" (Marx), as a spiritual "landscape" (Wuthnow), as a

"switchman" (Weber), as a social "field" (Bourdieu), and as a "market" for exchange

with the gods (Stark and Finke). This is by no means unique to sociology of religion;

indeed, John Urry has argued that all "sociology, like any other kind of thinking, cannot

be achieved non-metaphorically" (21); theorists and practitioners in any discipline need

metaphors, but they may even be more important for making sense of complex social

phenomena like religion (Tweed). Often, though, we become so accustomed to metaphors

that we lose the ability to see them as tropes, let alone understand what they mean (McKinnon *Reading 'Opium of the People'*, *Elective Affinities*).

Metaphors are no less important for religious belief and practice than for the theories we use to study them. The gods are commonly referred to in terms of metaphors drawn from the social (ie. Father, Mother, Friend, Lover, Lord, King, Judge) or the natural world (lion, lamb, elephant, storm, water, rock, tree), and metaphors represent the ways that human beings ought to relate to the gods (as the instrument, vessel, slave, or ambassador of the god, for example). Religious notions, like sin and salvation, devotion and sacrifice, are likewise composed of a complex network of metaphors that give them meaning and vitality. This is also what keeps the heavens connected to the earth; the most transcendent religious realities are discussed in mundane terms drawn from everyday experience. In short, religious worlds are built out of metaphors, just as the theories we use to analyse them are. Sociologists of religion, unlike some theologians (McFague *Metaphorical Theology*, Hick *Metaphor of God Incarnate*) have been slow to recognise the importance of metaphor and to theorise the way they work in sociological and religious discourse.

This paper develops a sociological theory of metaphor from an early essay by Friedrich Nietzsche, showing how his thoroughly sociological conception of metaphor is useful for thinking reflexively about both the way that we use metaphors analytically, and the role of religious metaphors in social relations. Metaphor, Nietzsche argues, is much more than decorative language; rather, it is an indispensable mode of human thought, and key to understanding both scientific practice and social organisation; metaphor, in fact, forms the basis of social order itself; I argue here that it has particularly useful ideas to

offer to the sociology of religion. My aim in this paper is not to develop a Nietzschean theory of religion, however; or rather, my aim is only to develop a limited part of such a theory, focused on Nietzsche's theory of metaphor. As such, I will forgo discussion, except in passing, to Nietzsche's better-known writings on religion, such as *The Genealogy of Morals* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Basic Writings*). Indeed, while my focus on Nietzsche's sociology of metaphors runs parallel to, and is not necessarily incompatible with, his later and better known writings on religion, it is by no means reducible to them, and could be employed by sociologies of religion quite at odds with the general thrust of Nietzsche's critiques of religious "degeneracy". In going back to Nietzsche's sociology of metaphor, we are picking up a thread that Nietzsche himself dropped—arguably to the detriment of some of his later theories of religion[1]. After providing an outline of Nietzsche's metaphorical sociology, I provide four methodological guidelines sociologists of religion could use to build on Nietzsche's foundation.

Nietzsche's Sociological Theory of Metaphors in, and of, Society

"On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral Sense" (dictated 1873, during the same period as 'Untimely Meditations') takes a fairly dim view of the pursuit of knowledge— something intellectuals have not often been inclined to do. In towing this line, Nietszche is pulling hard against a long and well-anchored philosophical tradition that has seen the pursuit of knowledge as the straight, pure and noble road to Truth. It was, Nietzsche admits, the invention of knowing that set humans apart from other animals, which turned us into "the clever beasts", but becoming clever beasts was no noble achievement.

Rather, seen in the context of nature as a whole, the human intellect looks "shadowy and transient… aimless and arbitrary" (80). Anticipating his later work on morality, Nietzsche argues that knowledge is the tool not of a strong, noble species, but rather the crutch of a weak one— and a support which is especially prized by the weakest of us. "Knowing" is a weapon for the weak to prevail over the strong:

> As a means for preserving the individual, the intellect unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation, which is the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves—since they have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of beasts of prey. This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man. Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendour, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself... ("On Truth and Lies" 80).

Given the way that we humans use "knowing" primarily as a means for sneaky self-preservation and advancement, it is extremely difficult, Nietzsche argues, to see where the "pure drive for truth" could possibly come from. We don't need to share Nietzsche's deep-seated pessimism on this point to appreciate his claim that knowledge in human history has primarily been a tool of interested wills put to practical purposes, or to share his view that knowledge is not a pursuit of the lone ivory-tower philosopher, but the product of relations between people. Nietzsche argues that the notion of "truth" itself is a social product with a profoundly moral dimension. He argues:

> from boredom and necessity, man wishes to exist socially and with the herd; therefore he needs to make peace and strives accordingly to banish from his world

at least the most flagrant *bellum omni contra omnes*. This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive: to wit, *that* which shall count as "truth" from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth (81).

Here is Nietzsche's answer to Hobbes, and the essence of his early socio-political theory. The *bellum omni contra omnes* is a real threat, but it does not take Leviathan to keep a lid on the war of all against all. What is needed, rather, is a means of putting *limits* on human dissimulation, agreeing to accept the (otherwise totally arbitrary) meaning of words—as the guarantors for social positions and relations. The names we have for things are social conventions; but that does not make them trivial; rather, semiotics makes social order possible, and is even more fundamental than Leviathan. This is why the moral and the true are inextricable (Kofman). While it may seem like a long way from semiotics to social order, Nietzsche closes that distance by means of morality:

The contrast between truth and lie emerges here for the first time. The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real. He says, for example, "I am rich" when the proper designation for his condition would be "poor". He misuses fixed conventions by means of arbitrary substitutions or even reversals of names. If he does this in a selfish, and moreover harmful manner, society will thereby exclude him (81).

What society hates, Nietzsche argues, is not so much deception (after all, we often prefer to lie to ourselves, rather than facing a disagreeable truth), but rather "the unpleasant…consequences of certain sorts of deception" (81).

By means of fixed "truths", hierarchy can be based on something other than sheer force—rich and poor have their proper designations, and thus appropriate stations. Everything that separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom depends on these fixed terms: "the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries" (84).

If "truth" provides the guarantee of social order, is this because words are "congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?" (81). While we may feel that they are somewhat different questions, for Nietzsche, they are questions joined at the hip. His answer to both is a resounding "No!" For Nietzsche, there is no causal connection between the objects we see and the images that they produce in the mind; that is, objects do not, of themselves, *produce* an image in the brain. Rather, to get from one to the other involves a "carrying over" (*übertragen*) or a "translation" from one domain into another, like translating music into painting, or describing colours in words for the blind. More plausibly, it is as a "stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue—for which there is required, in any case, a freely inventive mediating force" (86).

Nietzsche argues that a second "carrying over" or "translation" is required in order to get from the object we perceive and the word we use for it, and this is much more plausible—a matter of common sense, in fact. This second carrying-over, or translation, comes when the image in the brain becomes a sound, a word. Here, Nietzsche

is taking issue with the Socratic theory that the sounds of words correspond directly with their objects. One has simply to look at the diversity of languages, Nietzsche observes, to know that the words in each cannot simply spring from the same object. Words bear no correspondence to what they represent; they are conventions used to translate (more or less arbitrarily) the image that in its turn translates the nerve stimulation when we see an object. This carrying over – *meta-pherein* to play on the Greek etymology as Nietzsche does here— is the first sense in which all language is based on metaphor: "It is this way with all of us, concerning language: we believe we know something about things themselves, when we speak of trees, colours, snow and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors that correspond in no way to the original metaphors".

The idea that words are arbitrary and conventional designations for things in the world seems to us common sense, even if some of Nietzsche's ideas about the total detachment of the web of signifiers from the world they represent may go a bit far. There is nonetheless no reason why leaves have to be designated by the word "leaf", for example. This we can accept relatively easily without his argument about the double translations needed to mediate between the object and the word to which it corresponds. Nietzsche's argument about the role of metaphor, as the carrying-over, the translating, between different spheres is much more interesting—and his much more argument compelling. Nietzsche uses this example to show how metaphor (in its broadest sense, encompassing metonymy) is basic to the formation of all concepts:

> Every word instantly becomes a concept precisely insofar as it is not supposed to
> serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to

which it owes its origin; but rather, a word becomes a concept insofar as it

simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means

purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal.

Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things (83).

Thus, we have different things that are all "leaves", but each is different from all the

others. This is how we get the idea that there might not be just leaves, but "Leaf"—

exemplified in an extreme form by the platonic ideal. For Nietzsche this is not just a false

idea, but a pernicious one as well. Just as the word "leaf" must be translated from a

sensory perception and an image, and then between an image and a sound, concepts, such

as "leaf" come from the "translation" of unequal things. Technically, we might say that

Nietzsche is talking about metonymy (Murphy), but he treats this as a kind of metaphor,

as a carrying-over, the translating between two semantic spheres:

the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences

and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. This awakens the idea that, in

addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the "leaf": the original model

according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured,

coloured, curled and painted—but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has

turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original

model…(83).

The likeness of "leaves" is possible only by constituting each as a part that makes up a

whole—which is why this is technically metonymy—and it also means ignoring or

omitting differences between leaves. "We obtain the concept, as we do the form,"

Nietzsche writes,

by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and indefinable for us. For our contrast between individual and species is something anthropomorphic and does not correspond to the essence of things (83).

This argument is strikingly similar to one made by Émile Durkheim *Les formes élémentaire de la vie religiuse*, and particularly in subsequent defences of that book ("Dualism of Human Nature"). Not only do the fundamental categories of perception emerge from social relations, but all conceptions of nature are first social categories, and then the meaning is carried over (metaphor once again) to the natural world. We can leave Nietzsche's ghost to contend with botanists and sociologists of science about whether species exist in nature, and whether "the leaf" exists in nature independent of our anthropomorphising imaginations. Such questions would be distinctly secondary to my concern here, as we are looking at metaphors as means of understanding not the "natural" world, but the social world, in which everything is always already framed by social categories. As Durkheim puts it, society is constituted by its self-representations, and these have typically taken religious forms (*Formes élémentaires*).

Nietzsche's basic point should be clear enough. He argues that this translation between "unequal things" is what lies at the heart of our notion of the concept. This is fundamentally a function of the human capacity for metonymy, overlooking what is individual, and constructing a whole from the parts that make up the whole. I think this argument makes a great deal of sense when it comes to many concepts that we take for

granted in the social world, including the concept of "religion" itself (Beckford *A Social Theory*; McKinnon *Sociological Definitions*).

These reflections lead us directly to Nietzsche's oft-quoted quasi-definition of truth, which is usually torn from its context and used as evidence of his "relativism". Nietzsche writes:

> What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins (83).

As should be clear from our discussion so far, Nietzsche's concept of metaphor is quite different, and even opposed to the conventional understanding of metaphor (as developed by Aristotle) where it is understood as the deviation from literal truth for ornamental purposes. In this most traditional understanding of metaphor (which has long been abandoned by contemporary theorists), a word is used for something that it does not literally denote— it is used to designate something other than its proper meaning. Thus metaphor, in the traditional sense, involves a transfer of meaning between the "true" meaning of the word, and the new, metaphorical meaning: it creates meaning by drawing a comparison to the proper meaning of the word. This evidently presumes that there is a true and fixed meaning of the word, something Nietzsche is unwilling to accept: the "true" meaning of a word is its *conventional* meaning. Metaphor joins two semantic

domains (as Max Black will put it much later ("On Models and Metaphors")); we cannot take from that, however, that one is primary, literal and true, the other derivative, figurative and artificial (Murphy). The "literal" meaning of a word is simply its conventional designation; through metaphor we create new meaning by joining together two sets of conventional meanings.

As Sarah Kofman observes, Nietzsche's own metaphor for literal truth, the worn-out coin in the passage I quoted above, is not an especially good one for the theory that he is developing—nor does it resonate with his larger intellectual project. One of the major contributions of the *Genealogy of Morals*, after all, was that forgetting is an active force, not just the product of worn-down memory, of (passively) "not remembering". Nietzsche in fact makes much the same connection here between moral duties and the demands of "truth".

> To be truthful is to employ the usual metaphors… this is the duty to lie according
> to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone.
> Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies
> in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are
> centuries old; and precisely *by means of this unconsciousness* and forgetfulness he
> arrives at his sense of truth. As a "rational" being, he now places his behaviour
> under the control of abstractions. He will no longer tolerate being carried away by
> sudden impressions, by intuitions ("On Truth and Lies" 84).

Rationality, then, is a matter of adhering to the conventions that everyone else uses, of not straying from what others regard as the "literal" truth of things. It is a socially enforced duty to think and act rationally ("Be rational!"), to act in accordance with

conventional metaphors. In fact, Nietzsche suggests, such forgetting is essential for the experience of "truth"— and for the maintenance of social order—another theme that will take on renewed significance later, in his *Genealogy of Morals*.

In an argument that finds its parallel in Nietzsche's early published work, such as the *Birth of Tragedy*, there are both "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" forces at work in "On Truth and Lies" (Kofman 6-22). The Apollonian finds its rough equivalent in rationally forgetting truth's conventions, and the Dionysian in the power of new metaphors. This finds its fullest expression in the creativity of the poetic imagination. The drive to create new metaphors is, for Nietzsche (in this essay at least) *the* fundamental human impulse (89), which cannot be fully repressed, even by the "prison" constructed of concepts built to contain them. The drive to metaphor is suppressed by the rigid world of literal thought (science, philosophy, law), but it finds a new "channel" in myth, in art, and arguably, also in religion. The drive to metaphor thereby

> continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences, metaphors, metonymies. It continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself to waking man, so that there will be as colourful, irregular… and eternally new as the world of dreams ("On Truth and Lies" 89).

The "liberated intellect" Nietzsche's "Dionysian" figure in this essay wrecks havoc demolishing the hardened scaffolding of categories and creates out of the wreckage new ways of looking at things; with metaphor she paints new pictures of the world with abandon. New religious metaphors are potentially dangerous because they threaten to up-

end the social world as they re-configure the way in which the world is seen, understood and lived.

It may be that myth/religion, poetry, and love, forces that Nietzsche counter-poses to the dull, literal, conceptualising practices of science may be the primary creators of metaphor, but metaphors—both live and dead—play an important role in scientific explorations, as well. If there is anything to Thomas Kuhn's (*Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) claims about the revolutions of scientific paradigms, then we can see that metaphor may in fact play a far greater role than even Nietzsche allows. A paradigm is born when a new, more successful metaphor is minted, replacing an already well-worn coinage. Ludwig Wittgenstein saw this clearly when he wrote that what Freud and Einstein did was not to uncover pre-existing truths, but rather, they discovered a new way of looking at the world (*Culture and Value* 18). A new metaphor can bring about a paradigmatic crisis in the realm of science just as in that of salvation, and provide a new means of seeing the world; greater consciousness of the metaphors that we use—the ability to think of them *as metaphors*—nonetheless offers partial liberation from our own conceptual prisons (Brown *A Poetic for Sociology*).

A metaphor translates between two semantic domains; it does not simply replace a "proper" word for a different, more poetic one. Max Black ("Metaphors and Models"), probably the greatest theorist of metaphor after Nietzsche, explains how a metaphor works to connect two semantic domains. One of his most important contributions is to fill in some of the conceptual vocabulary that allow us to look at how metaphors work in semantic—and in social—contexts. In Black's famous example, "Man is a wolf", shows how metaphors work. This is a (now admittedly cliché) metaphor that associates "the

wolf-system of related commonplaces" with "man"[2]. When we use wolves as a metaphor

for thinking about "man", Black explains,

> [a] suitable hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a
>
> corresponding system of implications about the principle subject. But these
>
> implications will *not* be those comprised in the commonplaces *normally* implied
>
> by literal uses of "man". The new implications must be associated with the 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,
>
> emphasises others—in short, organizes our view of man (41).

This description of the cognitive interactions entailed in metaphor makes the distinction

between concepts, or even models, and metaphors less than total, which is, of course,

Black's point. Thus, like Nietzsche before him, Black argues that metaphors do not

compare things that are already "alike", rather they construct and highlight likenesses

between a source domain (wolves) and a target domain (men). Although a metaphor is

typically meant to make us better understand the target domain by means of the source

domain, inevitably the relationship will make us think about each in relation to the other.

As we feralize man, we begin also to humanize wolves.

A Metaphorical Sociology of Religion after Nietzsche

Nietzsche abandoned the trajectory of his early sociological theory of metaphors,

pursuing rather different lines of thought instead. As such, his later analyses of religion

(as developed, for example, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, or *The Genealogy of Morals*), do

not benefit from many of his early insights into the vital role of metaphor in religion and society (but see Murphy *Nietszche*). This constructivist sociology of religion, for which Nietzsche only ever built the foundations, has been abandoned to the criticism of the elements.

Since this is a theoretical tradition that has not (yet) been re-developed starting from Nietzsche's foundations—a task far too large for a brief article—in the remaining pages, I shall propose some concrete methodological proposals for empirical sociology of religion, which, if they were to be taken up, could re-start the building project. This is not, I argue, a project that calls for further abstract theorising (Nietzsche has given us enough of this already!), but research that builds the connections afforded by a close attention to metaphor; these can form the girders of the edifice Nietzsche only began to assemble. In fact, those of us who do empirical sociological research on religion (whether using interviews, analysis of contemporary or historical texts, participant observation) already have a great deal of the raw material we need to begin such a construction project; we only need to begin looking at these materials in a new way.

Attention to metaphor clearly does not require a subscription to Nietzsche's sociology, but it certainly can benefit from it. Nietzsche's early social theory puts the sociologist of religion's attention to metaphor on firmer intellectual ground, by locating the analysis of religious metaphors in a general theory of the social—one in which metaphor plays a central role. Nietzsche's argument, if we take it seriously, suggests that we can neither ignore metaphor, nor treat it as mere decoration that adorns 'real' (non-metaphorical) social forces; metaphor is an inextricable part of all social action, processes and structures, not to mention thought (both religious and social scientific).

If it is true that, following Nietzsche's line of thought, metaphors permeate all of the thinking we do as sociologists about religion, metaphors are certainly no less important in religious worlds themselves: these are worlds largely constructed of metaphor (just as other worlds are). Consider, for example, how Christians think about God. Using familial metaphors, God is Father or Mother of all people, but particularly to Jesus, the Son; using legal metaphors, God is Judge or Advocate; using natural metaphors, God is a storm, a rock, or a roaring lion. Christ's work, using economic metaphors, pays a debt; using a military metaphor, Christ is victorious over sin, death, and Satan; using medical metaphors, Christ is the physician, healer or medicine. Sin is— using corresponding metaphors—a great debt, bondage, filth or sickness.

These metaphors are by no means the preserve of theologians and professional religious thinkers: they are incarnated in rituals, experiences, life-conduct, religious architecture, and are often what gives these meaning and vitality. They are, much more often than not, jumbled up together, forming knots of mixed metaphors, moulded into semantic composites, and these form the bricks and mortar of religious constructions. Once we begin looking for metaphors in our interview transcripts, field notes, and archival materials, we find they permeate both the discourse of our informants, as well as our own thinking about their discourse. But what ought we to do with them, if we are interested in building on Nietzsche's unfinished foundations? What do we *do* with the metaphors people use? Here I provide four, primarily methodological, proposals:

1) The first task in the analysis of any metaphorical analysis is the most obvious and straightforward: it is to begin mapping out what semantic domains the metaphors we encounter bring into interaction with religion. This is may be a straightforward task, but it

is also a potentially endless one, as we start to realise that there are no specifically 'religious' metaphors. Rather *any* semantic domain can be, and often is, brought into interaction with religion—though some are undoubtedly more common than others. For those of us that worry about sociology of religion becoming an increasingly isolated endeavour (cf. Beckford *Insulation*; Riis *Recent Developments*) this is good news. Religion, as Nietzsche has shown us, is already connected by webs of signification to other social and semantic domains; it is the task of sociologists of religion to pull on those threads and see where they lead. Religion, even as a purely 'symbolic' system (and, as Nietzsche argues, and as I shall make clear below, it cannot *only* be symbolic), ought not to be considered in isolation from other semantic and social spheres. The practical implications of this will be further developed below.

2) The second question which must be posed of any particular metaphor comes in two parts: What comparisons does the metaphor (a) *create* for (b) the '*suitable hearer*'. If the first task, as I identified it above, is to identify what semantic domains a metaphor connects, this second task is to ask what similarities are created and highlighted by this connection. These are not simply pre-existing similarities, but are constructed by the relationship of the two terms. So, how does debt, used as a metaphor for sin, change the way that those who use it think about sin? We are so used to the metaphor that we almost need to be reminded that it is a metaphor, and one that shapes the way we think of sin in very particular ways. This is a question that calls for careful empirical examination in order to make sure that we get the implications right. Nietzsche himself sometimes got it quite spectacularly wrong. As brilliant and insightful a work as the Genealogy of Morals is, for example, Nietzsche seems to have been a bit careless in what it meant to the

ancients to be a slave of God or of the gods. In Pauline theology, Nietzsche's prime example of slavish *ressentiment,* to assert one's role as a slave of deity could also entail a claim of authority over other people, exercised on behalf of God (Martin *Slavery as Salvation*). This is not quite the implication Nietzsche had in mind!

For Max Black, the 'suitable hearer' (b) is a reasonable analytic concept (just as the 'reasonable person' is a viable legal standard), but this would not be good enough for Nietzsche, nor will it be sufficient for most sociologists of religion. The question of how a metaphor is used, and how it is understood, is an empirical question. To ask the question of the 'empirical hearer', therefore, pushes us back to re-read our transcripts, field notes or archival materials, again, and yet again. What does the speaker intend? What are they trying to make their audience (us, in the case of an interview) to hear and understand? What do the various hearers make of the metaphor, and what inferences do they draw from it?

3) Concrete experiences do not simply provide the means for talking about intangible religious worlds; the metaphors people use make a difference to how people live them (Gibbs; Lakoff and Johnson). Religious metaphors are *made concrete* (Smilde) in human institutions, practices, rituals, and even—to chose the most concrete example, architecture. A metaphorical sociology of religion after Nietzsche needs to ask: what difference do particular metaphors make? Although we are talking about semantic relations, it is vital that consideration of metaphors not become a consideration of ethereal symbols disentangled from the concrete, very tangible, mundane, and physical world. Indeed, one of the reasons that, I would suggest, metaphors are so important in religious discourse is that it grounds talk of the heavens in mundane experience (Gibbs

Costa Lima and Francozo; Lakoff and Johnson). It is difficult to imagine that anyone could find ways of talking about God for very long without returning to (metaphorical) reference of human relations (Father, Mother, Lover, Friend), the social order (King, Lord, Master), occupations (Judge, Physician), or the experience of human attributes (love, anger, jealousy, joy, sadness, hope, comfort). Only mystics have been capable of such escapes, but they tend to be pulled back to earth eventually, and end up making metaphorical references negatively—the *via negativa* is no less metaphorical for the fact that it says God is *not* like a father, a king, or a roaring lion.

The connection constructed by a metaphor is, in the words of Richard Harvey Brown (*A Poetic for Sociology*), a 'two way street'; when a metaphor connects two semantic domains it thereby creates a similarity between them that may make us think differently about *both domains*. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" makes sin a debt to be paid, but can also make debt a sin, as Weber noted in his analysis of John Bunyan (*Protestant Ethic* p. 84-85). While the implications of the debt/sin metaphor are different from those of the trespass/sin metaphor (for example), the precise nature of these implications cannot simply be derived logically, but will differ by culture and religious tradition, by historical period, and by the way that the metaphor is used. We cannot know in advance what the implications of a given metaphor will be; this becomes one of the crucial empirical questions of our research endeavours.

As Andrew Greely's important work has shown (*Religion as Poetry*), there are significant and substantial statistical correlations between the metaphors Americans use to describe God and other facets of their lives, including their political commitments and voting patterns (see also Lakoff *Moral Politics*). Metaphors used for how one ought to

relate to God likewise have implications for what Weber called *Lebensführung*—the way that people conduct their lives. To choose one example, Weber himself draws a sharp contrast between

> the active asceticism that is a God-willed *action* of the devout who are God's *tools*, and, on the other hand, the contemplative *possession* of the holy, as found in mysticism. Mysticism intends a state of 'possession' not action, and the individual is not a tool but a 'vessel' of the divine (*From Max Weber* 325).

If the effects of metaphor on *Lebensführung* are not sufficiently concrete to emphasise this point, it is perhaps worth considering one written in stone. The Gothic Cathedrals (and by implication all those churches that followed) were built to preach the God of light (Panofsky 1946). As Scott describes it:

> All the features we associate with Gothic architecture—pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, soaring ceilings, stained glass windows, pinnacles and turrets—were developed in the service of the desire to flood the interior space with as much light as possible (2003: 109).

Since churches across Europe flooded with light, western church architecture has never returned to the ordered but dimly lit mysteries of Romanesque chapels or Byzantine cathedrals. The content of any images which would later develop on stained glass are distinctly secondary to the fact of the big windows, and an architecture designed to convey light, to communicate God. What Marshall McLuhan did not discover until the twentieth century (1964), medieval ecclesiastics already understood in the twelfth sometimes the medium *is* the message: God is light. Churches in the Western tradition,

both Protestant and Catholic still reflect and refract this original metaphor, even if we seldom stop to think why it seems appropriate for churches to be light-filled spaces.

4) As Nietzsche and other theorists of metaphor argue (Black; Hesse; Gibbs *Poetics of Mind*) some metaphors prove to be more *apt* than others, which is to say some of them seem to 'work' while others never seem to find a job. A metaphor that works at one time may cease to be employable, while another's prospects may suddenly improve. Thus, we need to identify metaphors (1), to ask what they mean to the people involved (2), what difference they make in a particular discourse or context (3), but also ask *why* they work when they do (4), and this applies as much to the consideration of analytic sociological metaphors as to religious ones. To take a rather blatant example, it may have once seemed proper to use the metaphor of a 'crusade' for an intensive evangelistic effort; such a metaphor now seems at very least inappropriate to all but an increasingly small number of Christian fundamentalists. History has simply made the full implications of the metaphor a little too clear. Conversely, and to chose an example from amongst our repertoire of analytic metaphors, sociologists of religion have not always thought of what they do as analysing a religious 'economy'. In response to the rise of market metaphors in the sociology of religion, Roland Robertson (*Economization*) asked an incisive question: to what degree does this metaphor reflect the increasing commodification of religion? In other words, did the fact that the metaphor now seemed to work (at least for some scholars) indicate that something had changed in one or both of the two spheres being compared that now made the metaphor apt? To some degree, Robertson's question still awaits an answer—but it is an important question to ask whenever we notice the emergence of a new metaphor: why is this a metaphor that now works? Has something

changed about one or both of the semantic domains, such that it seems to make sense, at least to some people, to use a particular metaphor?

Conclusion

Nietzsche's early essay 'On Truth and Lies in the Non-moral sense' provides an excellent starting point for thinking sociologically about metaphors in both religious and scholarly discourse. Metaphors are not simply rhetorical flourish, but an essential part of all social relations, processes, structures, and are indispensible for human thought. Metaphors connect two different social and semantic domains, leading us to think differently about both of them. Tracing these connections helps us to better understand the ways that religious beliefs and practices are shaped by, and in turn also shape, non-religious beliefs and practices. To develop this fully requires more than theoretical consideration; to build upon Nietzsche's work requires empirical consideration of the way that metaphors are used, by whom, for what purpose, to what effect, and why. If we cannot think without metaphor, then it seems advisable to think both with and about them—and to do so with our full attention.

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[1] Tim Murphy develops some of the implications of metaphor for Nietzsche's late writings on religion in his book *Nietzsche, Religion, Metaphor* and argues for more continuity than I am inclined to grant.

[2] I was initially going to update Black's metaphor and make it gender-inclusive, then on subsequent reflection thought it was perhaps better left as it is. To say "human is wolf" is not only less graceful, it is arguably a less apt metaphor as well.