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A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS FROM THE RELIGIOUS FIELD

Introduction

The main cognitive evidence that manifests itself, in relation to the religious lexicon, is the one that has to do with the experience of each individual. The diachronic evolution of a word or phraseological unit[1] in terms of meaning may show an important link with another basic element in cognitivism, imagination, whose meaning has been widely recognised (Johnson 1987, 1993). At this point, not only the appearance of new meanings and new non-literal ones, but also the disappearance of those that become obsolete, has to be considered. Thus, individual experiences, besides everyone's imaginative faculties, become rather attractive arguments to face any kind of lexical analysis from a cognitive perspective.

In the case of the English religious lexicon, an emergence can be appreciated; not only of the experience that has been lived, but also of what we have named *imagined experience* (Fernández de la Torre Madueño 1999). Thus, imagination has a lot to do with human experiences and mental faculties. We could argue that imagination is, in fact, a synthesis of both, as there is an interrelation between experiences and the way human mind processes categorise them. In the case of many words having to do with religion, as it happens with every abstract notion, experience may not always be a tangible part of the linguistic community's background, as part of religious knowledge widely relies on metaphysics, the "superhuman" and the "beyond".

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[1] Phraseological units in both English and Spanish are contrastively studied in different works by Corpas Pastor, some of the most recent ones being 1998, 2000.

1. A triple vision of metaphor as a means of categorising religion

A cognitive perspective of religion highlights the role of imagination as an essential element in the categorisation of the events of life. A series of mental processes are necessarily present in such a categorisation, which shows the relevance of imagination:
1. in using the metaphor as a means of trying to explain the complexity of religious mysteries;
2. in understanding the most sublime, non-tangible concepts, those to which humankind is not accessible;
3. in creating either colloquial meanings from religious ones, or religious meanings from colloquial ones.

1.1. Metaphor as an explanation of the mysteries of religion

In religion, imagination does work as a nexus between two, more or less logical, ideas. However, imagination may be considered the only way of possibly understanding the complexity of certain ideas. That would be the case of the parables in the Gospels, told by Jesus to explain God's doctrine, or the case of the metaphors used as a means to explain dogmas and mysteries of mythology. In this case, metaphor should be understood, not in cognitive terms, but in its traditional sense in literature: a rhetorical device, a figure of speech. So the metaphor would be the whole explanatory parable or tale.

1.2. Access to the most elevated concepts by means of metaphors

When a certain member of a religious community uses his/her imagination at a given moment, a theologically complex notion can be reached. Consequently, there is an access from the known to the unknown, as well as an alteration in the informative effectiveness – either by lacking or by having another type of information – only possible through figurative language.

Likewise, for an already established religious concept, the appearance of a new focus may give rise to its reconsideration from another perspective – fantastic, artistic, childish, etc. – always different from the original notion. Now, the metaphor is not only a story to explain what heaven is, but also a rather distinct idea within the human experience.

The use of metaphorical projections in religion allows us to get, not only upper, but lower levels of knowledge in different dimensions, and, in any case, always in the "beyond". The daily goes to the divine. Thus, metaphors, in harmony with imagination and faith, become practically the only way to get to

such levels. Once such levels have been reached, human experience would appear as a rather isolated, or even non-existent, parameter.

1.3. Increasing meanings: From the colloquial to the religious and vice versa

However, imagination becomes an essential element in the constitution of those metaphorical processes that generate non-literal meanings from the religious field; thus, the significant role that imagination plays in the religious field deserves to be particularly remarked and accepted. Non-literal meanings are the result of projections between two domains but, in the cases we are focusing on, religious connotations are essential. The way the members of a community cope with their religion will determine their daily language as a mirror of their religion, and vice versa.

At this point, there are projections of meaning from the colloquial to the religious field, and from the religious to the colloquial one. Religion is a part of everyday life, and such a fact is unavoidable when new words and meanings have to be coined. In this sense, religion itself becomes secondary: apparently, the goal does not seem to be the religious entity, but a colloquial one.

2. Human mind and metaphor: Towards a conceptualisation of models in religion

In the origins of Judaeo-Christian tradition, all the conceptually new ideological material constituted a progressively assimilated experience, which no doubt incorporated a great deal of innovation. The religions from Asia and the East were the basis for this tradition, so elements coming from there were necessarily present in the ways the Judaeo-Christian religions evolved and were assimilated. Previous religious knowledge and mental images developed in a new vision, as well as there was an increasing desire and necessity of understanding and explaining all this. Thus, revelation brought along a certain number of metaphorical processes, taking common images of the daily lives of the first Judaeo-Christians, and consequently, the most familiar image schemas being present in them (Soskice 1985; Gerhart 1984).

In the case of superhuman entities, every time an individual considers them, a double-sided reference may be unavoidably present in any of the three former perspectives suggested for metaphor as a means of categorising religion.[2] On one hand, the personal experience, either as a believer or as a non-believer, is necessarily present, and it will determine the way metaphors are focused and

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[2] See sections 1.1., 1.2., and 1.3. of this article.

understood. On the other hand, both the experiences of the whole linguistic community and the way they have been traditionally focused are part of each member's personal experience.

This double perspective of experience is present as well in every religious community. As a series of religious models have been built, metaphorical language has become unavoidably necessary for all the members of the community – past, present and future – to reach such models. A context and an environment of shared feelings and assumptions have been complementary elements in the global interaction between religious models, metaphor and community. This situation takes place in the core of certain members suitably prepared and disposed to it. In other words, religion may have not been possible without the help and release of metaphors.

We could argue that religion becomes a science (or at least a sort of it) if a theological perspective is applied. This way, metaphors have been widely employed to explain dogmas and mysteries. In her work, Garfield (1986:6–7) raises the importance of metaphors describing science, because *metaphors have been used to describe various facets of the scientific process*, and besides *metaphors provide a means for popularising science*. It may be inferred that the use of linguistic metaphors in religion makes feasible the access to a field of knowledge which, otherwise, would not exist in the linguistic community. Religious dogmas and mysteries become traditional elements in religious linguistic communities, and by means of mental cognitive processes, they are possible to be grasped. It is important to remark that, in a linguistic community, there exists a conscience of such an assimilation of that "reality" which is neither literally nor absolutely apprehended.

However, this superhuman and unreachable dimension may remain in human minds, as far as individuals reconsider it. Thus, metaphor, as a manifestation of imagination, could be focused as a link between the superhuman and the human, apart from faith. Natural language is the tool for using metaphors in religion. The language of religion is full of metaphors, and, at the same time, it becomes a part of the daily linguistic routine, without any kind of conscience on the part of the users.

Such premises are parallel to science and the scientific fields. Both in religion and science, there are people implied in them, who become aware of deeper aspects of reality, as individual intuitions, being one of the consequences of the rise of many metaphors (cf. Soskice (1985)).

We could add that, in studying superhuman elements in Christianity, this awareness is the result of God's revelation to humans, or at least that it is one of the mainstays of Christian religion. As there is an increasing sophistication and complexity in the evolution of Christianity, models have been devised for an understanding of theological concepts, by means of cognitive processes in our minds. Metaphors do not only explain mysteries, unveiling this unknown world;

they also map new dimensions of people's lives, probably unexpected, in principle (cf. Soskice (1985); Gerhart (1984)).

In the production of non-literal meanings, a scientific perspective of religion may be pointed out: when non-literal meanings arise, the projection is, in most cases, connected to popular rather than purely theological aspects of religion. Nevertheless, these non-literal meanings – which, for the users, may seem literally religious no more – may help the comprehension and understanding of the scientific side of religion.

To finish with this section, Dirven's statement seems to prove the way Christianity becomes more and more complex, and metaphors become an essential tool in communicating such complexity:

> *It is because of the new categories and distinctions discovered in an increasingly socialised, technical and scientific world that new linguistic expressions for the denotation of the new experiences had to be found. The linguistic means par excellence is then the metaphorical process* (Dirven 1985:24).

2.1. The "beyond" from a metaphorical perspective

Metaphorical meanings allow cognitive, semantic, aesthetic or emotive functions (Chamizo Domínguez 1998:95–118). This line of implications are closely connected with all the religious parameters which are necessarily present and intertwined in the heart of any Christian linguistic community. As metaphors and non-literal language introduce us into the mysteries of religion and the entities of the "beyond", these entities, once assimilated by the community, become instruments and vehicles to evoke the common and daily reality of our world. That is, there is a two-way process by which reality denotes the "beyond" and then the very reality again.

The genesis of this concatenation lies in people's knowledge of the world, beliefs, and contextual considerations. Apart from being part of language, non-literal meanings concerning religion fulfil the role of increasing our knowledge about both this world and the other, the world of the superhuman. And one of the essential basis of our comprehension of religious mysteries is precisely the projection of our worldly reality onto the unknown: the way hierarchies exist on earth; the definitive, arbitrary and classic good-evil antagonism; the presence of pagan religions in Christian rituals, etc.

All these rather worldly realities have shaped our knowledge of the superhuman Christian "beyond", up to the point that Christians can hardly appreciate the "presence" of ancestral social structures in the human arrangement of the beyond. In any approximation to angels, devils or any kind of superhuman entity there is an atmosphere of mystery and esotericism. This is present, in many cases, from the very world itself and the daily realities of people, although

the community may admit all these entities as non-human, even without any kind of link with humans. After this removal, there is a "return" to the human world, when the use of forms which name superhuman elements are used to name human and earthly entities.

With these considerations in mind, we may state that the use of non-literal meanings in religion is a way of increasing our knowledge of the world. It is also a way to project our world in a dimension we have been introduced, experienced and "known" by revelation and faith, if it is the case, and, of course, by the configuration of a linguistic – literal and non-literal – access to it. The apparent static nature of literal meanings turns into dynamic and non-static when they participate in the production of non-literal meanings. A non-literal meaning denotes an entity which exists in the real world, or in any other intangible dimension – the "beyond", fairy tales, monsters, etc. – already accepted as existing in the community's culture and traditions. For Chamizo Domínguez (1998:53–60) the use of metaphors yields, not only true or false information about an entity, but a specific assertiveness and a determined conceptualisation.

We may add to this that there exists a separation from the religious atmosphere when the second part of the process is taking place. That is, the non-literal meaning, which is produced from the superhuman world to the human one, becomes non-religious in meaning, but religious connotations are obviously present in the new non-literal meaning. Thus, conventional images of superhuman entities provide a link between the meaning, which is considered as literal, and every non-literal meaning originated by mappings. Every person's mental images for such non-literal, figurative meanings are constrained in a varying degree, since particular conceptual metaphors influence people's intuitions and their understanding of images. Speaker's mental images for these intangible entities may be rather similar, although they are usually constrained by the conceptual metaphors that influence people's intuition and understanding of their images (cf. Gibbs and O'Brien (1990:61–62)).

In the case of the superhuman and the "beyond", we believe that cognitive considerations should be especially and carefully dealt with. In a community (both linguistic and religious) there exist many image schemata that are based on the community's bodily experiences, in close connection with the individual perceptual understanding of the world (cf. Gibbs and Colston (1995)). Since the beyond and the superhuman world have emerged from cultural and religious myths or traditions, the direct perception of the world seems to be totally absent, at least, from the most fundamental considerations – that is, dogmas and incomprehensible mysteries. According to all this, human experience would have nothing to do with the spiritual and divine upper – and lower – worlds of the "beyond".

Through the analysis of how superhuman hierarchies are set out, we can get a vision of the social structures of the past. Thus, the various meanings for the term *angel* make us feel nearer our own society than the divine and superhuman world represented by angels, archangels or thrones.[3] But is there any link between that set of creatures, carefully drawn, and the present manner of focusing life and organising Western society? Is the whole community prepared to understand why a certain meaning exists, and what is the reason for a word to have lexicalised a certain sense? In close connection with this, we would like to reconsider Payne's (1991:59) unanswered questions concerning the Holy Communion Service of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the social vision underlying such a modern rite: *What is the role of divine power **vis-à-vis** secular power? What are the bonds of evil […] from which the worshipper is set free?* Either linguistic or purely religious views deserve being reviewed in order to update traditionally accepted considerations, so that new perspectives, probably closer to present-day communities, should be applied from the point of view of a new century.

The world of the "beyond" should apparently be categorised according to non-human parameters. Apart from everyone's faith in this world and in the Sacred Scriptures, we have no more possibilities of connecting and going into it, so human structures and cognitive processes are used in order to make feasible the access to a humanly inaccessible dimension. That is why there exists a two-sided feeling, implying both nearness and distance; as they correspond to our bodily structures and experiences on one side, and to the unknown and unreachable entities, on the other (Gorayska 1993).

2.2. Humanisation of the superhuman

However, we may argue that the general vision, and then the image schemata, of the "beyond" is rather of human nature. Our bodily perceptions, experiences and understanding of the world include, not only the abstract and psychological side of the individuals but other elements. The bases of religion are both abstract and foreign to every human being, but the assimilation of these floating concepts takes place thanks to the way people

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[3] In the *O.E.D.*, the entry *order* offers the following information: "II. Rank in specific departments. 5. Each of the nine ranks or grades of angels, according to mediæval angelology. Also, any analogous class of spiritual or demonic beings. The nine orders of angels are enumerated first in the Pseudo-Dionysius (4th c.), according to which there are three hierarchies, each including three orders: these are seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominations, principalities, powers; virtues, archangels, angels. (The names are derived from the mention of cherubim and seraphim in the O.T., and from words used by St. Paul in enumerating things in heaven and in the earth, in Coloss. i. 16, Ephes. i. 21.)".

perceive their world around. As a result, there is a human perception of a non-human world, and a physically worldly atmosphere can be observed in such a perception.

The image schemata characterising that world come to coincide with certain social structures: hierarchies (angelic triads, devils), heroes (archangels), adversaries (devils), families (Godfather and the Son), human roles (tasks, responsibilities, charges, missions), etc. Human features characterise these superhuman entities, as a result of having applied the human image schemata to such superhuman entities the community has been understanding and assimilating for centuries.

We can see that the use of 'angel' in metaphors (*My child is an angel*) as a series of key features of the item 'angel' have been applied to the word 'my child'. But to make this application possible, a few aspects from other different domains were necessary, especially if the concept 'angel' was obscure and seemed distant for the Judaeo-Christian linguistic community of a few centuries ago.

One of the premises of Lakoff's Invariance Hypothesis (1990) is that the mappings that take place between different domains must be done in a way inconsistent with inherent target domain structure. If we apply this idea to superhuman beings, the members of the Christian linguistic community may infer what angels are, or at least are supposed to be or which features characterise them. Thus, a few mappings and new meanings will be produced into the constraints established by the boundaries of knowledge; in this case, not the kind of knowledge the person has got as a result of direct connection with the environment and real world. On the contrary, there is neither direct reality nor tangible features nor natural perception of these beings, as there are for birds or tables.

The members of the linguistic community may use both their metaphorical and non-metaphorical meanings[4] of the words for superhuman beings. But the mappings from the 'superhuman domain' are, in turn, possible because of the mappings that took place previously from the domains of humankind. Every sort of implication, either subsidiary or central, which seems to be originated in superhuman domains, will have been necessarily produced in real, human ones. Although the users of language may have the impression that an inherent superhuman domain, parallel to the rest of human ones, has always existed, a consciousness about the true origin of such a domain must be recognised. Thus, human traces will be noticed on it, in fact, the human social structures, feelings, organisations, features, etc. which characterise mankind in a varying degree.

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[4] We have deliberately avoided using 'literal', considering Lakoff (1986). About the meanings of 'literal' and 'literally', see Nerlich and Chamizo Domínguez (2001).

3. Epilogue. Linguistic dimension: New meanings and the reconceptualisation of religion

The new meanings, which can be mostly found in colloquial language, may be considered an interesting field of research that might even re-determine the present perspective of:

- religion or, at least, of certain lexical subfields of religion;
- the hierarchy that has been established for such subfields (institutions, feelings, names, etc.);
- the importance of the different entities that constitute every one of these subfields;
- the divisions in these subfields, etc.

The criteria of value and judgement of the linguistic community have been traditionally applied to religion as a whole. As well, its ideological elements are enriched with this new version of the lexical field, of the metaphorical processes, and the non-literal utterances. This particular linguistic perspective of religion is necessarily based on imagination, as previously mentioned.

People's experiences belong obviously to the domains of humankind. It is precisely imagination that projects those conceptions – which do not belong to human experience – to such domains from other non-experienced domains, but not necessarily unknown. From the projections of unknown concepts and unlived experiences, in the domains of humankind, it is possible to experience events never lived before by the linguistic community as a whole or by any of its members. However, it is feasible by means of imagination and the way knowledge may help. When we talk about "imagined experience" we refer to those ideas and concepts which form part of legend, tradition or theological doctrines, without purely human bases. Thus, *the Holy Spirit/Ghost*, *the devil*, *a seraph* or *Pandemonium*, considered in their original meaning, seem to be far enough from the domains of humankind to be found, on the contrary, in the superhuman domains.

As an internal and deeper relationship between humans and their god, religion implies an expression of the emotions at a very particular level. Metaphorical language has been largely used as a linking tool of cognition between human understanding and feeling, and the revealed mysterious concepts. In order to conceptualise their unfamiliarity, we could state the presence of emotions, in a varying degree, in the exchange of associations both from non-religious to religious domains and vice versa.

As an "intense emotional experience" (Fainsilber and Ortony (1987:242)), more metaphorical language is expected than in less intense experiences (Fainsilber and Ortony (1987:249)). As a subjective experience, a literal explanation becomes rather difficult, if not impossible. In the case of the accessibility to superhuman knowledge, literal words may lack any sense for

most, or even all, members of the linguistic community. In other words, the apparent literality of the Bible needs an explanation. Love for God, confusion, faith, necessity to understand, etc., all being emotions and individual feelings as well as starting points of metaphorical reasoning in religion, we can argue how metaphorical language becomes even more present than the religious words, since the former can practically reach everybody's minds.[5] Certain religious terms have practically no metaphorical extensions, so they become considered properly literal.

The creation of new meanings is closely connected with people's, more or less great, range of experiences. The world offers a specific number of categories, which are differentiated and determined by many different ways (Gerrig and Gibbs (1988:5–7)). Thus, the creation of new meanings – or, at least, understood as such – from literal meanings in the religious field allows religion to take root in the community.[6] The use of certain non-literal meanings in religion may reveal, many times, the deeper feelings and beliefs of the speaker. We can find many different non-literal examples in slang, some of them far from religious considerations, even disgusting for a believer.[7] On the contrary, such utterances may denounce, in certain cases, an attitude towards life, which may be a parameter for people to establish their beliefs.

To finish with, we would like to grasp Wierzbicka's (1990) plastic apprehension of the world categories through her view of colours, and how they are universal to humankind:

> *[…] color concepts are anchored in certain 'universals of human experience', and that these universals can be identified, roughly speaking, as day and night, fire, the sun, vegetation, the sky, and the ground. Although the color sensations occur in our brains, not in the world outside, and their nature is probably determined to a large extent by our human biology, to be able to communicate about these sensations, we project them onto something in our shared environments* (Wierzbicka 1990:99).

She continues:

> *To my mind, the question of mechanics of color* PERCEPTION *has very little to do with the question of color* CONCEPTUALIZATION*. Color perception is, by and large, the same for all human groupings […] But color conceptualization is different in different cultures, although there are some striking similarities […] Whatever happens in the retina, and in the brain, it is not reflected*

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[5] The work by Adam Smith (1989) on linguistic changes in the Revised Anglican Liturgy offers how new forms have been devised in Anglican liturgy. Alterations in language respond to the purpose of making the liturgy betterly understood and shared by people (p. 269). If we consider the example of God (pp. 274–276) we can find many images which correspond to the idea the Christian community has of God.

[6] For establishing of intimacy, informing others about one's attitudes and beliefs, etc., see Gerrig and Gibbs (1988:7–10 and references).

[7] Many examples, taken from several European languages, can be found in Burgen (1996: 34–55).

directly in language. Language reflects what happens in the mind, not what happens in the brain; and our minds are shaped, partly, by our particular culture. Conceptual universals […] can be found through conceptual analysis, based on data from many different languages of the world, not through research in neurophysiology (p. 102).

In the following pages, Wierzbicka deals with the contrast black/white (p. 114–115), and reminds us the different kinds of levels in linguistic consciousness, as for instance tacit knowledge and scientific knowledge (p. 107). She offers a general overview of perception as a universal experience, however linked to cultural aspects. Language appears as a purely mental phenomenon.

However, if we try to apply a religious dimension to her views, religion could be focused as a type of conceptual universals, as there is some type of religion in any human grouping. The colour perception black/white – dark/light can be found in the conceptualisation of superhuman beings, not only in Christianity. With regard to superhuman beings in religion, there is no doubt a link between positive and light (white) and another between negative and dark (black). In positive beings (angels, God, Jesus, Virgin Mary, the saints, etc.) light implies the absence of sins, the presence of God, the inner transparency of their bodies, the eternal light, and so on. The meaning of darkness is linked to sin, the devils, and the eternal damnation.

Thus, there is a plastic vision of Christianity as something worldly and directly accessible to the community. All these form part of an image schema with different aspects of life joining in and intertwining in order to conceptualise specific religious environments.

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