

**SŁAWOMIR SZTAJER**

## **HOW IS RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE POSSIBLE? The Constitutive Role of Metaphors in Religious Discourse**

The creation and use of metaphors is an indispensable element of our mental skills and our ability to use language. Modern studies of metaphor underline its almost unlimited range. Perceived this way, a metaphor is not only a rhetorical figure occurring in poetical language and in several different specific types of discourse. The ability to create and use metaphors is used in everyday and scientific language, in political and religious discourse. Probably, there is no such a field in human life in which a metaphor does not bear some or even significant role. This is the case in religious discourse, where metaphor occurs not only as a stylistic trick to beautify sacral texts but also plays a fundamental role indispensable for thinking and religious experience.

Studying metaphors, their importance for religious language and a religious person's life, I will refer mainly to the theory of metaphor formed within cognitive linguistics. Cognitive theory of metaphor is not the only valuable theory that has been formed for the last two thousand years.<sup>1</sup> However, I find it especially useful for the religious language analysis.

Cognitive theory of metaphor was based on a well-known work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By*.<sup>2</sup> It initiated some interesting reflection not

---

<sup>1</sup> The most important theories of metaphor are the theory of substitution and comparison (Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero), interaction theory (Ivor A. Richards, Max Black) and pragmatic theory (John R. Searle).

<sup>2</sup> G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, London 2003.

only on the nature of metaphor - the question what a metaphor really is, still remains the subject of arguments – but also on its role in the field of culture. Most of all, it should be emphasized that the authors, just like supporters of the interaction theory, finish with traditional understanding of metaphor as a literary trope with ornamental function merely. Metaphor is not solely a phenomenon that appears in poetical discourse; it commonly occurs in everyday life, in the speech of scientists, politicians, advertisement experts, etc. “Metaphors are so commonplace we often fail to notice them.”<sup>3</sup> Lakoff and Johnson discuss also conceptual metaphor which forms the basis of metaphorical use of language. It combines two different conceptual domains: source and target ones. It means that some experience can be understood in the categories of different experience belonging to different conceptual domain. For example, in the metaphor “Time is money” we deal with abstract notion of the time concept using more specific concept from the field of finance and the practice of everyday life. As a rule, target domains are more abstract in comparison to source domains. Thanks to that, abstract conceptual domains are anchored in empirical experience, becoming more comprehensible and understandable. In other words, a metaphor can have a cognitive function as well: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”<sup>4</sup>. However, the process of creating metaphors is not limited to understanding or explaining some fields of experience. Metaphor can transform experience, totally changing the nature of its character. It is a tool used for creating some aspects of the reality, especially those which are dependant on language and thoughts, as it takes place in the social and cultural world.<sup>5</sup> The ubiquity of metaphors is due to the fact that they are unavoidable. Some very abstract domains may be described only metaphorically. Studies on metaphor present its key role in revealing those fields of reality that are difficult to grasp due to their abstract nature.<sup>6</sup>

This is metaphor in this sense that I would like to relate to religion, focusing on religious discourse as in important element of religious life. For an observer from the outside, metaphoric nature of religious discourse cannot be doubted. This does not mean that all expressions of religious language are metaphorical. It seems to be that religious discourse does not have any clearly stated borders in that sense; it contains utterances of merely religious character relating to some reality that is impossible to be grasped, in the believers’ opinion, as well as utterances relating to reality that can be comprehended in common experience. Metaphorical expressions are present in both kinds of religious reality; however, in relation to transcendent reality they perform specific functions, since they become the only means of access to sacrum, on the same level as symbols do. On the other hand, in the field of religious discourse where communication of cognitive and directly concerning reality concepts takes place, metaphorical language use seems to be non-specific and can be compared to analogical use of metaphors in everyday language. Moreover, it co-exists with literal way of speaking that cannot be always distinguished from metaphorical language.

<sup>3</sup> G. Lakoff, M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago 1989, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago 1987, p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> See O. Jäkel, *Metaphern in abstrakten Diskurs-Domänen. Eine kognitiv-linguistische Untrsuchung anhand der Bereiche Geistestätigkeit, Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

From the philosophical point of view, a language use that refers to transcendent dimensions of religious world view seems to be the most interesting. I will refer to those dimensions as the sacral domain of religious discourse. This area of religious world is the most problematic from the point of view of studies on religious language's meaning. Yet, is it possible to talk about reality that is neither accessible for immediate experience nor can be reduced to such experience? If so, how is such religious speech possible? Why does it happen that religious language presents ideas that are beyond human cognitive abilities, and that cannot be described due to its nature? Why does a religious man ascribe special truth to religious statements?

Theologians and philosophers studying religious beliefs and utterances have been troubled by such questions for ages. Many of them concluded that religious speech is not possible at all or it has to make use of negation, contradiction, or paradox.<sup>7</sup> Others referred to symbolic and metaphorical character of religious language that enables us to grasp reality that cannot be grasped literally in any other way. Irrespective of the above mentioned opinions we must agree that religious language bases on the assumption that a religious man is making a claim while speaking. He is convinced that his words have certain sense and relate to some kind of transcendent reality (that is beyond human cognitive abilities and abilities of human language). A sacral domain of discourse is the mysterious world which a religious man wants to make contact with, using human language only. How is it possible to comprehend a world which goes beyond human cognitive abilities and which cannot be grasped by means of any kind of cognition available? The answer is: thanks to metaphor.

As stated before, metaphor combines a target domain, which is usually less defined and more abstract, and a source domain, which is more specific and easier to grasp in experience. In religious discourse the source domain is the sacral domain, viz., the reality to which religious people ascribed, generally speaking, the superhuman power. Target domains can comprise everything that is comprehensible and can form basis for metaphorical "explanation" of primarily mysterious sacral domain. Just like any material object can become a hierophany or symbol, we can find almost all objects of direct experience in the case of source domain. Such metaphorical mapping of certain elements from source to sacral domain enables us to understand the latter one by ascribing to it some structure and content borrowed from the area of experience that is basically understandable and thus non-problematic.

The expression "God is our Father" that is common in the Christian religion can serve as an example of a typical religious metaphor. Thanks to a metaphor, a transcendent religious concept is put into categories of common experience that is obvious for every member of a religious community. It will fulfill its function of „explanation” of cognitively problematic reality in categories of common experience irrespective of the fact if it is interpreted by a religious person literally or metaphorically.

However, there is a problem in such an approach to the understanding of religious metaphor. It is connected with the specific nature of sacral domain which, as target

---

<sup>7</sup> In theology such concepts occur within so called negative theology; in relation to philosophy an approach should be mentioned – sometimes identified with logical empiricism – which, on the basis of certain specific criteria of sense, claimed that religious language does not bear any cognitive sense but made its function equivalent to expressing emotions only. On the meaninglessness of religious language see A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London 1946, pp. 114-120.

domain, is difficult to compare to different domains of similar types. In everyday language or language of science metaphors are used in order to specify some aspects of experience or for better understanding of certain phenomena that are usually abstract but always given in some way (such as emotions and complex natural phenomena). However, in religious language we deal with reality that cannot be comprehended irrespective of images created by metaphors and symbols. Religious experience has a problematic nature because it does not have an equivalent in any other known kinds of experience. In religion we deal with "Wholly Other," as Rudolf Otto says.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, metaphor in religion cannot be created by comparison of objective features of two types of experience, namely by comparison between sacral domain experience and certain source domain experience. For the following reason such a comparison of different kinds of experience is impossible. First of all, the subject matter of the two kinds of experience cannot be compared - there is a dissonance between the spheres of *sacrum* and *profanum* that can never disappear, and that is visible in phenomenological analysis of religious experience.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, no religious experience comes before a language, i.e. independently of a language. According to Louis Dupré, "In religion like in aesthetics only symbolizing gives the experience its specific character. No religious experience existed before religious symbolizing."<sup>10</sup> Thus, metaphorical mapping is at the same time a process of creating some kind of religious world view and reflecting in it assumed transcendent reality. It should not be surprising that a creative function of metaphor is also present in religious discourse.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, a religious man does not compare God to father, and then preserves the similarity using a metaphor. God would have to be given in order to be compared. Yet, this is a metaphor (just like a symbol) that is supposed to provide His cognition. Therefore, it is more sensible to say that metaphor creates the similarity between father and God, beginning from the concept of a father, existing in everyday life and thus easily comprehensible, and mapping this concept onto directly inaccessible object which is God.

Both in common thinking and in theories of metaphor, it is assumed that metaphor is a special way of description of existing reality, i.e. in which a new unknown aspect or part of the world is depicted on the basis of what is already known. Such an understanding of metaphor assumes a preceding reality that is then described in a language. Yet, the use of metaphor is often a creation of a new aspect or part of the world. Metaphor performs the function of constructing reality, similar e.g. to the process of categorization. In the case of metaphor we deal not with passive depiction of extra-linguistic world, but with active process of its linguistic constitution.

Religious metaphor seems to serve as a good example. Thanks to anchoring experience in more tangible and specific domain of reality, metaphors create a sense of presence and reality of a sacred universe. The reality of everyday life, which is characterized by the

<sup>8</sup> R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford 1950.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York 1959

<sup>10</sup> L. Dupré, *Inny wymiar. Filozofia religii*, Kraków 1991, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Cf: G. Lakoff, M. Johnson on the creative role of metaphor. „New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones.” (*Metaphors We Live By*, p. 145)

“natural attitude” and obviousness and thus “taken for granted”, seems to be the most convenient starting point for religious metaphorical expressions.<sup>12</sup> In other words, metaphor in religious use projects its subject matter, its own world that is subjected to religious beliefs, in order to make it “tangible” and close to the believer. Thus, metaphor always projects transcendence in connection with immanence, i.e. comprehensible elements of everyday life, which makes *sacrum* more familiar and acceptable for man. The saying “God is our Father” is an example of such a construction of some aspects of God's reality in terms of categories that emerge from our everyday experience.

The fundamental role of metaphor in religious discourse is visible when we realize that religious language function is not only description of reality that is the subject of religion. Religious language has a range of psychological and social functions. Using religious language is an important medium of religious commitment. Furthermore, religious man acts with a language. The linguistic action is not limited to communication only but comprises “creating” certain things – social phenomena – and regulating human behavior, maintaining a reality of religious world view, construction of some definitions of situations, induction of emotional states, the sense of community, etc. We have to admit that religious language basically does not function separately from the context of religious life, especially the ritual, but it is a form of religious action itself. It can be seen clearly in the case of symbol, metaphor, and myth that are interrelated with a system of ritual actions, and only in this context can be fully understandable.

Not all metaphors occurring in religious discourse can be described using the well-known term of “live metaphors”. This is because metaphors are subjected to conventionalization, which often happens through reduction of ambiguity to one of meanings. As a result of this process, a metaphorical character of religious expressions is partially erased, and this can be changed only with renewal of religious language, which introduces new metaphors or enables us to understand the old ones in a different way. Without the renewal, religious language may become a relic that ceases to mean anything at all. Metaphors are not understood beyond a social and cultural context - in fact it is quite the opposite – their meaning is shaped in relation to cultural models; thus it is limited to some community sharing similar experience.<sup>13</sup> The Christian metaphor “God is our Father” would not be comprehensible in a matriarchal society.

The following question, a fundamental from a philosophical point of view, emerges in relation to the role of metaphor in religious discourse, namely, do religious metaphors relate to extra-linguistic reality apart from bearing a meaning? Is the metaphorical construction of the sacral domain in any way limited by a reality other than a linguistic and mental reality? For a theologian interpreting a metaphor realistically the answer seems obvious: though in an imperfect and incomplete way, metaphors say something about a sacral reality. From the critical point of view, the problem seems to be much more complicated because creativity of metaphors indicates a human factor which takes

---

<sup>12</sup> A. Schütz, *Collected Papers*, t. 1: *The Problem of Social Reality*, M. Natanson (ed.), The Hague 1962, p. 229-233. See also P. L. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York 1966.

<sup>13</sup> On cultural models see: R. W. Gibbs, *Metaphor and Culture*, in: R.W. Gibbs, G.J. Steen (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1999, p. 145-166. “Cultural models are intersubjectively shared cultural schemas that function to interpret experience and guide action in a wide variety of domains including events, institutions, and physical and mental objects.” (Ibidem, p. 153)

part in the construction of religious universe. It must be noticed, however, that the representation of religious reality is not necessarily a basic function of a religious metaphor. It can be most of all not merely a tool of cognitive approach to sacrum, but a means that gives a believer a feeling of participation in sacral reality, which is fundamental for every religion. The latter is carried out according to the rule which says that religious discourse is at the same time a kind of religious action.

Also, the role of metaphorical language in shaping religious experience should be mentioned. Although it is often associated with subjectivity of an individual, it is not a phenomenon that takes place in vacuum. It is fully shaped only in a linguistic context, which not only introduces experience into discourse but also makes it more understandable for the experiencing subject. Metaphor forms a frame for religious experience to be fully shaped and comprehensible for religious man. As a structure anchoring experiences not tangible in any other way, metaphor becomes a means of objectivation of religious world.

## References

- Ayer A.J., *Language, Truth and Logic*, London 1946.
- Balaban V., *Self and Agency in Religious Discourse*, in: R.W. Gibbs, G.J. Steen (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 125-144.
- Berger P.L., Luckmann Th., *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York 1966.
- Bisschops R., Francis J. (ed.), *Metaphor, Canon and Community. Jewish, Christian and Islamic Approaches*, Bern 1999.
- Boeve L., Feyaerts K. (ed.), *Metaphor and God-talk*, Bern 1999.
- Dupré L., *Inny wymiar. Filozofia religii*, Kraków 1991.
- Eliade M., *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York, 1959.
- Gibbs R.W., *Metaphor and Culture*, in: R.W. Gibbs, G.J. Steen (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 145-166.
- Jabłoński P., van der Lans J., Hermans Ch., *Metaphor Theories and Religious Language Understanding*, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 13(4), p. 287-292.
- Jäkel O., *Metaphern in abstrakten Diskurs-Domänen. Eine kognitiv-linguistische Untersuchung anhand der Bereiche Geistestätigkeit, Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.
- Johnson M., *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago 1987.
- Lakoff G., Johnson M., *Metaphors We Live By*, London 2003.
- Lakoff G., Turner M., *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago 1989.
- Ortony A. (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge 1993.
- Otto R., *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford 1950.
- Schütz A., *Collected Papers*, t. 1: *The Problem of Social Reality*, M. Natanson (red.), The Hague 1962.
- Wheeler C.J., *The Magic of Metaphor: A Perspective on Reality Construction*, *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 2(4), 1987, pp. 223-237.