

Religion and metaphor

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Abstract

I use the gospel of Mark and the gospel of John to demonstrate that religion uses a lot of metaphors. I then turn to Lacan to analyze the conditions required to be able to deal with metaphors. Lacan argues that the child originally forms a symbiotic relationship with the mother. When the child sees that the mother has an interest in the father, the child then tries to find out what mark in the father is of interest to the mother. The child then identifies with that mark and makes it the center of its identity. The child thereby becomes psychologically a different child. Still the child remains John Smith. To be the same and be different is the definition of a metaphor. The presence of a paternal figure in the life of a child is the reason why such a child can deal with metaphors and is ready for religious metaphors. The question then arises what happens to children of single mothers? Do such children lack the connection with metaphors such that they will be less religious or do they have other sources for being religious like the experience that they lack something important as they have no biological father.

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Introduction

Religious language uses many metaphors (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/sermonsfromthemound/2016/05/metaphors-for-religion>). The psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan argues that the ability to understand metaphors comes with the introduction of the paternal function in the life of the individual. These two ideas lead to the question if children of single mothers and thus without fathers, can be expected statistically to be less religious? Or should we listen to Ricoeur who argues in his book *Symbolism of Evil* that the experience of evil has been the main source of religious movements in the ancient Middle East.

I. Religion and metaphorical language.

When we look at the gospels, a central place for religious messages, we find proof that the religious language uses many metaphors to get its ideas across to people. Let me enumerate some examples.

In the gospel of Mark, we find the following texts.

1. Jesus said to them "Come after me and I'll make you fishers for men" (Reynolds 1997, 88).
2. In response to the question from the Pharisees, "Jesus said to them ...But days shall come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them and they'll fast on that day. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on old clothes otherwise the new pulls on the old and a worse tear starts. And no one puts new wine in to old skins or the new wine splits the skins and the wine is lost and the skins. No new wine is put in fresh skins" (Reynolds 1996, 90-1).
3. "Going out he saw a great crowd, pitied them since they were like sheep having no shepherd and began to teach them many things (Reynolds 1996, 99).
4. "if anyone wants to come after me let him disown himself and lift his cross and follow me" (Reynolds 1996, 105).
5. "And he said 'Amen I tell you that there are some of those standing here who shall never taste death till they see the reign of God come in power" (Reynolds 1996, 105).
6. Jesus said to them "...He made them male and female and because of that man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall be one flesh" (Reynolds 1996, 108).

7. "But Jesus speaking again said to them" Children, how strenuous it is to enter the reign of God! It's easier for a camel to go through the needle's eye than for the rich man to enter the reign of God" (Reynolds 1996, 109).
8. "Jesus said to them 'Neither will I tell you by what right I do these things', and he started speaking to them in parables" (Reynolds 1996, 113).
9. "As they were eating the loaf and blessing it, he broke and gave it to them and said 'This my body.' And taking a cup and giving thanks he gave it to them.
 All drank it.
 He said to them 'This is my blood of the promise poured out for many. Amen, I tell you never in no way will I drink of the fruit of the vine till that day when I drink it new in the reign of God' (Reynolds 1996, 118-9).
10. "he said to them 'My soul is anguished to death. Stay here and watch.' Going on a little he fell on the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might turn away and he said 'Abba, Father, everything is possible to you. Take this cup from me –still not what I want but you'" (Reynolds 1996, 119).

In the gospel according to John we find the following metaphors.

1. "The life was the light of humankind" (Reynolds 1996, 181).
2. "Still as many as took him he gave them the right to be children of God" (Reynolds 1996, 181)
3. "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said 'Look, the lamb of God who cancels the wrongs of the world" (Reynolds 1996, 183).
4. "Nathanael answered 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You 're king of Israel" (Reynolds 1996, 183).
5. "Jesus answered 'Amen amen I tell you unless a person is born from water and Spirit, he can't enter the reign of God'" (Reynolds 1996, 185).
6. "Jesus answered 'If you knew of God's gift and who's saying to you 'Give me drink' you'd have asked him and he'd have given you living water." (Reynolds 1996, 187).
7. "Jesus answered 'Everyone drinking this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty again. The water I give him will be a spring gushing into eternal life" (Reynolds 1996, 187).
8. "Jesus said to them 'My food is to do the will of who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you say, 'Four more months and the harvest comes?' Look, I tell you raise your eyes and see the fields since they're white for harvest. Already the reaper's taking his pay and gathering fruit for eternal life so the sower and reaper may be glad together for here the saying is true 'One sows, another reaps.' I sent you to reap what you never worked on. Others worked and you've entered their work" (Reynolds 1996, 189).

II. Human development and metaphors.

Understanding metaphors is a psychological achievement. Some mentally ill patients have difficulties with metaphors as was the case with one Dutch patient. When coming to her therapist she said that she had no hands. To the therapist's question as to how she knew that she had no hands, the patient responded that her father had said so this morning. To the further question of the therapist as to what her father had said, the patient responded: "My father said that I was handicapped." The patient was a Dutch speaking person. The Dutch word for "handicapt" translates literally as "handicut" (Moyaert 1988).

The above example shows that the use of metaphorical language is indeed an achievement because some mentally ill patients wrongly reduce metaphors to their literal meaning. The question which I will now address is the following: what is required from a person so that they can master the challenge of understanding metaphors.

The answer to this question is given by Lacan's theory of human development. Lacan argues that the introduction of the function of the father in the psychic life of the child is, in effect, a metaphoric move, which makes such a child ready for understanding linguistic metaphors (Lacan 2005, 465).

Lacan and his followers start by describing the psychic world of the newborn child (Aulagnier 1964). Such a child is completely dependent on another, a mother figure (Ver Eecke 2019, 27-29). But as soon as such a child develops consciousness, the feeling of complete dependency is unacceptable. Still, that dependency is a

reality. The question now arises as to what human beings do, when a reality is unacceptable. We will look at two cases where the experienced reality is unacceptable and see how people deal with such an experience.

Our first case concerns a student who is faced with a coming exam when he received a call from a friend asking him to join him for a drink in a bar. The student accepts the invitation to go to the bar and misses a lot of sleep that day. Being sleepy during the exam, the student does not perform well. When he receives the result of his exam which is much worse than he had expected and which he dislikes, the student reacts by imagining that the next time he has an exam, he will not go to a bar and he decides to make sure that in all future exams he will have had a good night's sleep. This student uses his imagination to create an alternative reality which erases his current disappointing reality.

Our second example concerns a person who lives from paycheck to paycheck. As soon as some people receive their paycheck, they feel the need to satisfy the wants they could not satisfy when they lacked money. They like to have a nice dinner in a restaurant, they like a massage and/or like to visit the beach. But when the last days arrive before they get their next paycheck, some of those people do not have enough money to buy food. Or if their car breaks down, they do not have the money to pay for the repair of their car. Some of those people then use their imagination and imagine that next time they receive their paycheck they will limit their immediate spending so that they have money left to use up to the last day before the next paycheck. They might even imagine that they will save money for unforeseen emergencies.

In our two examples we see that people do not just accept passively realities they do not like. They make use of their imagination to create an alternative reality they like. Lacan and his followers claim that the young child also uses its imagination to deal with the unacceptable reality of total dependency upon another, the mother figure.

The first product of a young child's imagination is the idea that the mother is perfect and omnipotent, otherwise the child cannot feel safe (Lacan 2005, 576). The second product of the child's imagination is that the child feels that it is everything the mother could want, otherwise the mother might not be motivated to take care of the child (Ver Eecke 2019, 27-31). A child who can produce those two fantasies flourishes. But if such a child continues having those two fantasies as an adult, it is not a good candidate for becoming a friend or a partner in a lifelong commitment. The question then becomes as to how the self-centered attitude of a child is changed into a socially acceptable attitude as an adult.

The answer by Lacan and his followers is that a radical change is introduced in the psychic life of the narcissistic child by the introduction of a third, often the father, in the life of the child. The introduction of a third in the life of the young child is facilitated by the "no-saying" period (Ver Eecke 1984). When the child approaches the age of one year it starts to crawl and then to walk. This means that the child is out of reach of the hands of the protecting adult. The protecting adult, more often the mother, needs to use words to protect the child from hurting itself and from breaking objects. The mother needs to say multiple times "no" (Ver Eecke 1984, 68-70). But prohibitions frustrate. To deal with that frustration the child uses the frustrating word and turns it towards the adult who tells him often no. By saying no to his mother, the child creates some distance from the mother. That distance from the mother allows the child to discover that there are other people. One of those other people is the partner of the mother, mostly the father (Ver Eecke 1984, 78-84; 2006, 82-89).

When the child then discovers that the mother shows an interest in the father its two original fantasies are destroyed. Indeed, if the mother shows an interest in the father, then the mother must not have it all. She must be missing something. She is therefore not perfect. Second, if the mother misses something and relates to the father, it means that the child is not everything for the mother. Some needs of the mother are satisfied by someone else than the child.

If the relation of the mother to the father destroys the two fundamental fantasies of the child (Ver Eecke 2019, 30 & 65), it is not surprising that the child tries to disrupt the relationship of the mother to the father. If the attempt to disrupt the relationship of the mother with the father fails, then the child must accept the reality that the mother has an interest in the father. The child thereby gives up its two fantasies and becomes a different child (Ver Eecke 2019, 66).

In what way is the child who has psychologically incorporated the figure of the father different from the child who has not yet psychologically incorporated the figure of the father? The first difference is the relation towards time (Ver Eecke 2019, 66). For the very young child the now is the most important dimension of time. A very young child given the choice between one candy now or two candies after finishing dinner will most often choose a candy now even if it is only one. An older child might more often choose two candies even if it must

wait until after dinner. A second difference is that the very young child expects to receive what it wants. The older child accepts that what it wants will not come to it without effort. This older child accepts that it will have to work (Ver Eecke 2019, 66).

The older child notices that the mother has an interest in the father. That older child starts to wonder why the mother has an interest in the father. That older child looks for signs as to what characteristics in the father are attractive to the mother. The child then unconsciously decides to acquire the mark in the father which seems attractive to the mother (Ver Eecke 2019, 201). The child knows that it cannot immediately acquire those characteristics and therefore is willing to work to acquire those characteristics. But acquiring those characteristics requires time. Hence for that older child the future becomes the most essential dimension of time (Ver Eecke 2019, 202).

By the introduction of the function of the father in the psychic life of the child the child has become a totally different child. Here are some of the differences. First, the young child has often a hard time accepting a refusal of its demands. It often responds with a temper tantrum. An older child more often can accept a refusal of its demand, specifically if it is given a reason. Second, the young child wants to be given what it wants. The older child accepts that it might have to work to receive what it wants (Ver Eecke 2019, 201). Third, the young child relates almost exclusively to the mother. The older child more often situates itself in the triangle mother-father-child. Fourth, the now is the dominant dimension of the experience of time for the young child while it is the future which is the dominant aspect of time for the older child (Ver Eecke 2019, 202).

Still, over time the same person, say, John Smith is first a young child and then an older child. Still John Smith was a different kind of person as a young child than he was as an older child. What word can we use to refer to a situation where there is both similarity and difference? In linguistics there is a word for such a situation. That word is the word “metaphor”. And indeed, Lacan refers to the cause of the change in psychic structure of the older child by the expression: paternal metaphor (Ver Eecke 2019, 30).

Human beings, who have undergone the psychic change imposed by the paternal metaphor, have the psychic structure which allows them to comprehend linguistic metaphors. The question now becomes if people who did not have a father (or a third like in the case of a lesbian couple) then have challenges in understanding and using metaphors. A further question then arises as to whether people lacking access to metaphors can be religious given that religious language is full of metaphors. We can conclude that people without psychic access to metaphors lack a tool to understand an important part of the religious message. We cannot conclude that children from single mothers, lacking the psychological foundation for experiencing metaphors, are necessarily less religious. The reason is that a deep motivation for religious devotion is the human experience of lack. We do not have it all. Missing a father might therefore create in children of single mothers an experience of lacking something important. That deep experience of a lack in children of single mothers might therefore more than compensate the diminished metaphoric capability of such children.

From the analysis in this paper we can conclude that the religious experience of children of single mothers might have two characteristics that are different from the religious experience from children of two parents. First, such children might statistically be more religious given their deep experience of lack. Second, such children might be less sensitive to the metaphorical messages of religion.

III. Ricoeur and the problem of evil

In his book *Symbolism of Evil* Ricoeur demonstrates that people in the Middle East, in the millennia before Christ, when faced with evil, developed religion. The exception is Greece, where the Greeks developed multiple gods and goddesses but did not give them divine power over their lives.

Is there evidence that, at that time, the family structure was such that the metaphoric dimension of facing the reality was present? Could we find in the religious text of the Middle East, in the millennia before Christ, documentation that metaphoric language was a crucial dimension of their religious language? I am not competent to answer this question.

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