

*How do the metaphors we use shape our relationships
with God and those around us?*

CULTIVATING IDENTITIES: REFLECTIONS ON OUR MORMON ROOT METAPHORS

By Barry Laga

Dreaming and desiring, praying and weeping . . . are a passion for the beyond, au-delà, the tout-autre, the impossible, the unimaginable, un-foreseeable, un-believable ab-solute surprise. . . .

—John Caputo¹

LIKE ALL RELIGIOUS PEOPLES, WE LATTER-DAY Saints immerse ourselves in metaphor, swimming in figurative language the way a fish swims in water that it doesn't quite perceive. We compare scriptures to iron rods, bodies to temples, and missionary work to sowing seeds. Baptism is analogous to death and resurrection; white clothes suggest purity; and we clothe ourselves with the "armor of righteousness." In the temple, we figuratively move from one realm to another, and the sun, moon, and stars invoke post-mortal kingdoms. Feeling the Spirit is like a "burning in the bosom," a "small voice," or a "gentle wind." I have not exhausted the possibilities here, and we can easily recognize that we employ metaphor at every level of our liturgy and even in our casual conversations. From sacred texts to *Ensign* articles, from conference talks to sacrament meeting talks, we convey our spiritual experiences through metaphorical language.

Despite its omnipresence, metaphor is not a mere matter of ornamental embellishment or poetic flourish. Instead, metaphor identifies who we are, defines our relationships with others, and marks at once an inability and a desire to touch the divine.

FRAMING OUR EXPERIENCES: CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND IDEOLOGY

THE USE OF metaphor, the attempt to express intangible, abstract, spiritual experience by comparing it to something more familiar, seems inevitable, for we



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make spiritual experience accessible to others by using language. Language is the link that mediates between nature and society, our biological existence and our cultural experience, our spiritual experience and our temporal experience. Put another way, when we use metaphor, we are translating an elusive, raw, and emotive experience into a tangible, orderly, and concrete experience. We often compare the unfamiliar event with a familiar experience, guiding and assisting our readers or listeners in the process.

The analogies we hear over the pulpit are often modeled for us in sacred texts. As David Tracy points out, "most of the major New Testament parables are introduced by the words, 'The kingdom of God is like...'"² A parable, or any form of comparison or classification, is a "*mythos* (a heuristic fiction) which has the *mimetic* power of redescribing human existence."³ The "re" of "redescribing" is significant in that the "re" reminds us that *mimesis*, the act of imitating or representing raw experience, involves an act of mediation. We are always and inevitably one step removed from the raw event, no matter how vivid, how sensory, how tangible our description. We can understand why Plato was wary of language and its inability to represent the "real." While language enables us, it simultaneously limits us, for we cannot avoid language's mediating influence.

Although metaphor is the fundamental building block of language, I'm less interested in localized or specific metaphors, metaphors that we often associate with poetic speech. Instead, I want to focus on "root" or "conceptual metaphors." This form of metaphor frames our identity, guides our behavior, and mediates our experience in less conscious ways. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out that

our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities.⁴

To demonstrate conceptual metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson provide the example of “argument is war,” pointing out how we will often say: “Your choices are *indefensible*. He *attacked* every weak point in my argument. His criticisms were *right on target*. I *demolished* his argument. I’ve never *won* an argument with him. You disagree? Ok, *shoot*. If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*. He *shot down* all my arguments.”⁵ What we need to recognize is that this way of speaking is the normal way of talking about arguments. Despite the implicit use of metaphor, we are not being self-consciously poetic if we say, “I lost an argument. My ideas were weak.” Rather, we talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way, and we act according to the way we conceive of things. We can, for example, imagine how arguments themselves—the very way we argue with each other—would change if we replaced war metaphors with dance metaphors: “He *side-stepped* my argument. That was a *graceful* point. Her ideas made a *pirouette* after my *clumsy leap* in logic. His points *stumbled* before he could *dip* his final idea. He lost his *balance*. Her organization is *out of line*.” The point of “arguing” would change from beating or subduing an opponent, boot in the face, to working harmoniously with a partner, hand in hand. Argument would be an art form, and, if we had to proclaim a winner, the criteria would be based on elegance, grace, and movement instead of, say, an inability to respond with a counterattack. Because the idea of “argument as war” has grown so natural, normal, and commonsensical to us, it’s not surprising that a switch in metaphor would change how we experience arguments. These sorts of shifts and their effects should interest us, for they define and shape our relationships with others. Like a director during a stage production, a conceptual metaphor asks us to play a role within a larger drama.

Gospel commentary is a rich source of these kinds of conceptual metaphors. For instance, during the 1997 sesquicentennial celebrations, we were inundated with encouragement to become “pioneers.” This does not mean we are supposed to rewalk the plains (although many did), but we are supposed to be pioneers in our schoolwork, Church tasks, jobs, and families. “Pioneer” is a clear example of a conceptual metaphor because it answers, “Who am I?” “What is my relationship to others?” and “How should I behave?”

While Church leaders have foregrounded the metaphor “pioneer” in recent years, we certainly have a range of choices when it comes to root metaphors. Tracy reminds us that books codify conceptual metaphors. In particular, because scriptures are shared texts, they present certain metaphors as normative for the religious community. Sacred texts guide a community’s “basic understanding and control of its root metaphors and thereby its vision of reality.”⁶ We need not look far to recognize these metaphors: Among other identities and roles, Christ is *father, lord, shepherd, lamb, king, wise counselor, gardener, captain, brother, son, carpenter, and bridegroom*. Based on these comparisons, we in turn become *children, servants, sheep, fellow lambs, vassals, petitioners, plants, soldiers, brothers and sisters, tools, and brides*. But there are more abstract analogies that convey mere qualities—Christ is *light, truth, the way, life, love, wisdom,*

charity, or sacrifice—and these metaphors make it easier to view ourselves (or others) as *dark, false, lost, dead, hateful, foolish, greedy, and selfish*. And worshippers are also often compared to *saints and pioneers* without necessarily creating a corresponding identity for God or Christ.

Although scripture provides metaphorical norms, we are producers in our own right, generating metaphors that classify Christ and assign value. For example, we need not stray far to hear people compare Christ to a *warrior, pilot, coach, friend, boss*, or, in the fiction of Levi Peterson, a *cowboy*. We generate these new metaphors because, among other factors, changes in our economic structure and technology encourage us to reclassify and reconceptualize our relationship with Christ using more familiar experiences. The notion of “lord” was certainly more meaningful to those who worked within a feudal economic system than the term is to us. On the other hand, I have heard Christ being compared to a great CEO, a comparison that reflects our contemporary historical context but preserves something of the sense of “lord” or “master.”

We need to recognize that each conceptual metaphor we employ suggests its own set of attributes. If we are pioneers, ideally we lead others and blaze trails, marking the way for others to follow. We should be brave, courageous, and hard working. We must be willing to sacrifice personal ambitions for the good of the community as we seek out and explore new frontiers. If we see ourselves as Christian soldiers, then we will defend the faith and justify being aggressive and even combative. We must confront the enemy, wielding our scriptures and teachings as weapons against an adversary who seeks to destroy us. If we see ourselves as sheep, we remain weak and willingly follow our loving shepherd who cares for us. If we are subjects to a heavenly king, we should foremost be loyal and submissive servants. If we are children, we should be attentive to the teachings of our heavenly parents.

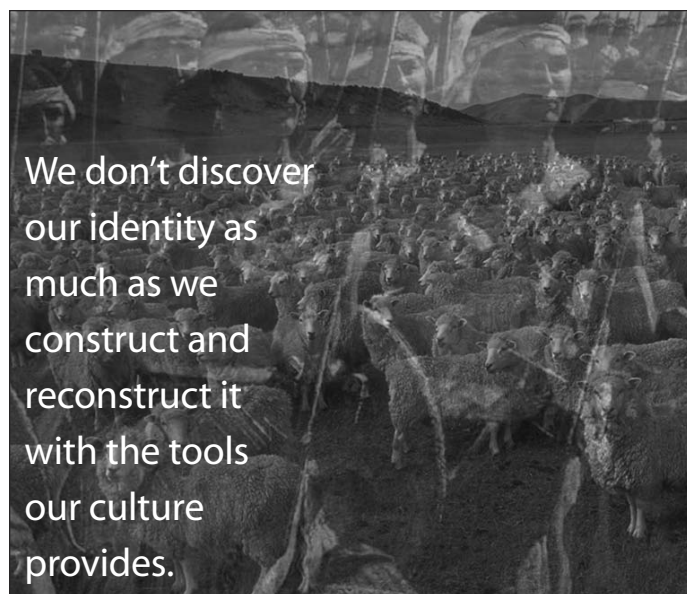
Consider a hypothetical example. Imagine three missionaries. One sees herself as a Christian soldier, the other sees herself as a sheep following her shepherd, and the other sees himself as a submissive child. If these missionaries encounter someone who is antagonistic to their evangelizing efforts, they will respond differently because the conceptual metaphor they embrace will shape their responses. The soldier will fight, using her scriptures as weapons. The sheep will be passive, awaiting protection from her shepherd, and the child might patiently suffer, humbly seeking guidance while expecting protection. In other words, each missionary will justify and legitimize a response based on her or his conception of Christ, for that conceptual framework defines a role to play and encourages specific forms of behavior. This process is often subconscious, so subtle and ingrained that one’s own approach seems commonsensical, natural, or normal.

We could multiply examples, of course, but what I want to stress is that how we envision God and Christ, how we conceptualize our relationship with them, determines how we see ourselves; and how we see ourselves shapes the way we respond to Deity and to others around us. Again, metaphor is not a mere matter of ornamental flourish. Instead, metaphor

defines who we are and encourages us to act in certain ways. Metaphor becomes ideological in that it valorizes a particular set of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, and hierarchies.

LANGUAGE MATTERS: CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS
AND EVERYDAY LIFE

IN SOME WAYS, the conceptual metaphors that we embrace seem like rather benign affairs. These metaphors almost seem analogous to the clothes we wear. Who cares if one sports a charcoal gray suit or a navy blue skirt? Who cares if we wear a scarf with the blouse or not? We choose, voluntarily and freely. What counts is that we wear clothes, right? But, as I have tried to point out above, the clothes metaphor is misleading because it does not acknowledge how profoundly conceptual metaphors shape our identity, our relationships, and our reality. Root metaphors don't hang on us like ornaments on a Christmas tree; instead, and as "root" implies, they define who we are and provide the source of our actions and



values. I want to draw attention to several ripple effects.

One consequence is how the conceptual metaphors we use to define ourselves affect our estimation of others. In his "What the Church Means to People Like Me," Richard Poll wrote what could be the seminal talk on how members use the iron rod and the liahona as conceptual metaphors.

To the person with his hand on the rod, each step of the journey to the tree of life is plainly defined; he had only to hold on as he moved forward. The way was *not easy* but it was *clear*. . . . The Iron Rod Saint does not look for questions, but for answers, and in the Gospel—as he understands it—he finds or is confident that he can find the answer to every important question.⁷

As a compass, however, the Liahona pointed to the destination but did not fully mark the path; indeed, the clarity of its directions varies with

the circumstances of the user. . . . The Liahona Saint . . . is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers; he finds in the Gospel—as he understands it—answers to enough questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest.⁸

Poll is careful to remind us that neither metaphor should be equated with "good" members versus hypocrites, nor "active" versus "inactive" members, for both the Iron Rod Saint and the Liahona Saint are committed, involved, and faithful members of the Church.

Poll suggests that competing conceptual metaphors make us prone "towards misgivings about the legitimacy, adequacy, or serviceability of the commitment of the other."⁹ In other words, we often think less of those who do not share our own conceptual metaphor. "To the Iron Rod, a questioning attitude suggests an imperfect faith; to the Liahona, an unquestioning spirit betokens a closed mind. Neither frequent association nor even prior personal involvement with the other group guarantees empathy."¹⁰

I can certainly identify with Poll's description. I must admit that I see myself as a Liahona, and I struggle with those who insist on being an Iron Rod. "Can't you see," I say to my Iron Rod friends, "that God values listening to the Spirit more than mere obedience?" "Can't you see," my Iron Rod friends reply, "that obedience is the first law of heaven and is all that God asks?" Even as I write, I can hear echoes of acquaintances who deny the mediating force of language, who tell me that "I'm on dangerous ground" the moment I question their literal reading of the scriptures, ponder the purity of divine revelation, or multiply the meanings embedded in a metaphor. Poll concludes that despite the differences in perspective, Liahonas and Iron Rods are ultimately united in that they are part of "an association of kindred spirits, a sub-culture, a 'folk'—and this is the tie which binds Iron Rods and Liahonas together as strongly as the shared testimony of Joseph Smith."¹¹

But Poll's observations also make me wonder if we are all as united as he claims. I wonder if the shared statement "I have a testimony of Joseph Smith" really indicates shared views. I wonder if we really express gratitude to the same modern-day prophet and if we worship the same God or same mediator. Some worship a banker to whom we are all in debt. Some pray to a kind, gentle, and forgiving Father. Some bend their knee to a king, a ruler, a magistrate, or judge. Others see God as a great creator, a gift-giver, or even a disciplinarian, rod in hand, who demands our strict attention. Therefore, if someone invokes the name of Christ in sacrament meeting, the person sitting next to me potentially sees Christ in a way that radically departs from my own vision. This process of personalizing Christ is inevitable, if not healthy and productive, but it certainly makes me question the possibility of creating a unified community, of being "one in Christ," for the term "Christ" becomes metaphorical in its own right, and as a result, the term encourages a proliferation in meaning. For example, if someone pointed out that, say, "Emma" is "Christ-like," we wouldn't agree as to what that comparison suggests. Is Emma kind, forgiving, or self-sacrificing, or is Emma brutally honest,

indirect to the point of evasion, or all-powerful and all-knowing? Metaphors, so vital to understanding and communication, make the term “Christ” ambiguous and indeterminate.

While awareness of root metaphors helps us make sense of our relationships with others, it also complicates our relationship with Deity. Knowledge is always, only, and inevitably approximate. We are reminded yet again that we see through a “glass, darkly” (I Cor. 13:12). As with translation, the use of metaphor is a process of substitution of non-identical items. To complicate matters, as noted above, different readers make sense of metaphors differently, thus multiplying meaning. I can think of no better example than Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” (1987), a photograph that created no small stir among traditionalists. On the one hand, the photograph is rather conventional. An eerie yellowish-red tint surrounds a kitschy plastic Jesus on a wood cross. Bubble clusters are scattered across the image. The cross itself seems dramatically luminescent, offering us diffused boundaries instead of hard and recognizable edges. The photo seems honorific and reverential, part of a long line of sympathetic representations of Christ. On the other hand, the rub is that the yellowish-red glow is the result of photographing a crucifix submerged in Serrano’s own urine and animal blood. It doesn’t take an art expert to see why, in 1989, Jesse Helms and the American Family Association wanted to withdraw public funding from the NEA.

But urine and blood are complex metaphors. Urine is a waste product, a liquid we need to expel. People often urinate on objects and on other people as a sign of degradation, for the act of urination desacralizes what it touches. It turns whatever it touches into a toilet, a waste receptacle. Many perceive “Piss Christ” as blasphemous because Serrano pries free or liberates the crucifix from its original context—that of the church altar—and represents it in new ways and in a new context that recodes its original meaning. However, I can’t help but think of how conventional the image still is. Urine and blood are natural, normal, and necessary. Urine and blood are universal. We may speak different languages, live in different areas, eat different foods, but blood flows through all of us, and we all produce urine and blood.¹² They are signs of our shared humanity, a shared humanity in which Christ participates. As a result, we can read “Piss Christ” as yet another homage to a long tradition of honorific representations of Christ that celebrate his universality and our humanity. Wasn’t it Augustine who said that we are all born between urine and feces? The glass we peer through may be dark, but the indeterminacy of “Piss Christ” also illustrates to a degree the “catch-me-if-you-can” quality of the divine. Like pushing mercury on a sweaty palm, or like trying to find a friend in a funhouse hall of mirrors, our use of metaphor always foregrounds one aspect as it hides another.¹³

But the ripples fan out even wider. While metaphor may cloud our vision or multiply possibilities, metaphor is also always and inevitably incomplete. In other words, even if we could somehow catalogue the multiple meanings within the same metaphor, a quixotic quest at best, we must acknowledge that one metaphor is never comprehensive or complete. For

example, we may compare Christ to a shepherd, highlighting his role as loving steward, but that metaphor blinds us to, say, Christ’s role as sacrificial lamb as well as his role as judge, law-giver, and brother. We can sympathize with Isaiah who gives us a long, breathless list: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). One metaphor, one comparison, is not comprehensive enough. Christ is worthy of astonishment and admiration. He is wise, powerful, authoritative and propagator of divine offspring, and the source of peace and harmony; therefore, we choose metaphors that suggest those different traits. But Isaiah’s list merely reminds us of the incompleteness of comparisons. Isaiah merely reinforces one aspect of what I am suggesting: metaphors are limited and limiting. If not so, why the long list?

But if we are to be “Christ-like,” if we are to emulate Christ, then Isaiah’s list, along with other scripturally based metaphors, cannot help but suggest a form of situational ethics. In his discussion of Richard Rorty and the notion of contingency, Scott Abbott notes that “an awareness of contingency in fact enables ethics, delivering us from the dominating, dehumanizing insistence on exclusive views of absolute truth.”¹⁴ Conversely, insisting on a code of ethics based on what is natural, normal, or commonsensical actually encourages us to take *less* responsibility for our actions. We therefore become less accountable for our behavior: we don’t make the laws; we merely enforce them. Jane Flax points out that “one of the dangerous consequences of transcendental notions of justice or knowledge is that they release us as discrete persons from full responsibilities for our actions.”¹⁵ As a result, if we recognize that we actively contribute to the shaping of social attitudes, behavior, and values that justify our economic systems, inform our foreign and domestic policies, and influence our educational systems, then we are always complicit and therefore responsible for those social arrangements.

This ability to selectively choose and construct an identity is simultaneously liberating and troubling, for it suggests that our identity is constantly in flux, that we are not tied to one mode of being or ethical approach. As a professor who teaches courses on postmodern culture, I find this familiar and appealing territory. The “self” is not an inert product, but a process that experiences constant reconstruction. We don’t discover our identity as much as we construct and reconstruct it with the tools our culture provides. The familiar archaeological metaphors that encourage us to *find* ourselves, look *deeply* within ourselves, and look beyond the *surface*, no longer satisfy in this postmodern world.

While I find the notions of a continually reconstructed self and situational ethics appealing, necessary, and even healthy, for several reasons, I don’t find them comforting. I flinch at the potentially dangerous consequences. For example, is it possible to embrace more than one conceptual metaphor at the same time or even the same day? Why can’t I, for example, be a sheep in the morning and a soldier in the afternoon? This po-

sition is appealing to those who contextualize their behavior and ethical codes. Different situations demand different responses. There are moments when I need to lead and moments when I need to follow. We need to envision ourselves differently so that we can respond to ever-changing situations.

I remember a vivid scene from my experience as a student in the teacher education program at BYU. We were discussing ways to handle discipline problems, and the conversation focused, appropriately enough, on disciplining as Christ would discipline. We discussed the usual metaphors, especially Christ as shepherd, an analogy that would ask us as future teachers to see ourselves as loving and caring stewards who lead students to green pastures. Our task is to guide, but also prod and recover those left behind. As the conversation developed, our professor contributed by saying, “But don’t forget: Christ used a whip on the temple grounds!” Given that reading of that biblical reference, we have license to be coercive disciplinarians, our violence justified by righteous indignation.¹⁶

While this anecdote illustrates the flexibility of situational



ethics, it also demonstrates the dangers. We need to look closely at ourselves to make sure that we are not switching our identity to serve selfish purposes: Do we ask others to be sheep so we can become their shepherds?

The ability to be a sheep one day, a soldier another, and a pioneer yet another allows us to feel smugly righteous no matter what we do—for we take on different identities to serve our own interests, legitimizing our behavior with gospel metaphors. I can use metaphors offered by sacred texts to justify any action I dare to commit. Historically, we would not be the first to justify atrocities in the name of God, for post-Constantine Romans, Crusaders, Nazis, Operation Rescue devotees, among others, have used the metaphor of “Christian soldier” to legitimize a great number of violent acts. This situation is vexing, for there is not a single, proper, or true conceptual metaphor that can contain the others. The number of con-

ceptual metaphors available to us reminds me of a postmodern novel—accumulation with no hierarchy. All of these common conceptual metaphors—Christ as brother, lord, shepherd, lamb, counselor, prince of peace, and so on—are no more, or less, true and accurate than any other, for they are all, inevitably, mere approximations. We can only make sense of the world and ourselves by representing experience through language, but of course, these representations are highly problematic because as a “re-presentation,” they are thoroughly dependent on and infiltrated by prior concepts, figures, codes, unconscious practices, conventions, and other texts. As a result, a search for origins, a search for a definitive answer, amounts to an endless search. We do not have unmediated access to a stable, unchanging, and unitary Truth, and, as a result, we cannot test our notions of Truth. Put another way, we can never “know ourselves” or “know Christ” because we never have *unmediated access* to an external measuring stick. Our knowledge is always and forever filtered, and our metaphors are never innocent or neutral. They cannot help but privilege a particular way of seeing that was developed in a particular time and place.

And this list of choices often leads to contradictory messages. We tell our youth to be meek as children as we tell them to put on the armor of God and fight the infidels. How can one be a pioneer and a follower at the same time? Should we celebrate obedience, loyalty, submissiveness, justice, charity, humility, leadership, action, or mercy? Is the Christian soldier compatible with the peacemakers, the obedient sheep, the trusting child, the growing and tender seed? Do we find our metaphors, our identities, in the Old Testament or the New, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, Church history, or in metaphors we generate ourselves? The scriptures offer contradictory identities that cannot, in my view, be reconciled because the scriptures are a compilation of different writers who value, understand, and celebrate different attributes and qualities. I’m not surprised that Moroni and Mormon have a penchant for war metaphors, and I’m not surprised that an agrarian like Alma uses agricultural metaphors to explain gospel principles. I am no less surprised when my computer science friends compare God’s plan to some kind of mega-computer, all decisions governed by 1 and 0, while my colleagues in biology trace their own spiritual “evolution.” These insights are not revolutionary, for I am, in many ways, merely echoing Stephen L. Richards. In “An Open Letter to College Students,” Richards encourages students to acknowledge the limiting effect of language:

What if Hebrew prophets, conversant with only a small fraction of the surface of the earth, thinking and writing in terms of their own limited geography and tribal relations did interpret Him in terms of a tribal king and so limit His personality and the laws of the universe under His control to the dominion with which they were familiar? Can any interpreter even though he be inspired present his interpretation and conception in terms other than those with which he has had experience and acquaintance? Even under

the assumption that Divinity may manifest to the prophet higher and more exalted truths than he has ever before known and unfold to his spiritual eyes visions of the past, forecasts of the future and circumstances of the utmost novelty, how will the inspired man interpret? Manifestly, I think, in the language he knows and in the terms of expression with which his knowledge and experience have made him familiar.¹⁷

We can conclude that the metaphors we employ—whether originating from the mouths of prophets or Primary teachers—reveal more about us and our cultural baggage than they do about the divine. And so, the phrase, “We make God in our own image,” seems to make a little more sense, especially if we rewrite that sentence along the lines of, “We make sense of the unfamiliar by associating it with the familiar.” I can understand why Jewish law prohibited the making of graven images, for not only do we have a penchant for worshiping our own concepts of the divine, but a graven image is but a suggestion of a possibility. We need only observe a sampling of western paintings of Christ to identify a Euro-American bias in terms of physical attributes. As a result, we never experience the divine. We merely experience what we already know. We merely experience more of the same.

For some believers, the fact that we can and do embrace multiple conceptual metaphors testifies to the complexity and mystery of religious faith: God and Christ exist in the gaps. We could reformulate the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s famous phrase, “I am where I think not” as “God and Christ are where we think not.” They are beyond language, beyond knowing, beyond articulation. While this way of conceptualizing the divine may add to the mystery and perhaps power of godly beings, it also challenges direct experience. We should never be so presumptuous as to think that our metaphors, our attempts to confine the divine, can contain anything that we find around us. Our comparisons are nothing but pale versions, creative fictions, familiar but incomplete associations. In a beautiful but haunting description, Jean Améry reminds us of language’s limitations, of its inability to fully convey physical sensations. As a victim of the Holocaust, Améry was often asked to describe the torture he experienced. He responded by pointing out that

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it ‘like a red-hot iron in my shoulders,’ and was another ‘like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head’? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.¹⁸

At the bare minimum, we are left with raw, unarticulated, unassimilated, incomprehensible experience, and the moment we begin to articulate, assimilate, and comprehend that experience, we begin to change and alter it. Truth—if we mean

“complete accuracy”—is forever deferred. In other words, saying that “I learned X and Y from the Spirit” is simply naive, for cultural baggage—language, discourse, previous experiences—comes between ourselves and raw experience as well as our expression of that experience.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE, THE INEVITABILITY OF FAITH

THIS IMPOSSIBILITY OF knowing Truth because of all that we bring with us to every encounter with the divine is yet another reminder that faith is the most fundamental principle of a spiritual life. There is no “knowledge” if by “knowledge” we mean certainty, for language and the conceptual systems language creates always limit our experience and our understanding. John Caputo helps us see the necessity and value of uncertainty when he reminds us that uncertainty actually serves religious causes. Uncertainty is not the antithesis of religion, but the essence of it. Caputo echoes Meister Eckhart, who asserts that love is “letting the other be” and then offers this clarification:

To love is to respect the invisibility of the other, to keep the other safe. . . . To love is to give oneself to the other in such a way that this would really be giving and not taking, a gift, a way of letting the other remain other, that is, be loved, rather than a stratagem, a ruse of jealousy, a way of winning. . . .¹⁹

Perhaps another way to phrase this insight is to suggest that when we attempt to make sense of the divine by using language, we are changing the nature of the divine. We are not loving God or Christ on their own terms, but changing them to fit our own notions, our own conceptual or interpretive frameworks. We are comforted when we talk about Christ as our brother, as our shepherd, or as our guide, for these roles are familiar to us. We are not bewildered when we are asked to be pioneers, or sheep, or plants that need cultivation. My concern, however, is that these terms become too solidified, and they become seemingly literal descriptions rather than earnest but limited attempts to make sense of the otherworldly, the surprising, the unimaginable, the unforeseeable.

I must confess that I often feel paralyzed as well as lonely by accepting such a conclusion. I’ve certainly built my house on sand instead of stone, but I would build on stone if I could find some. Again, the very notion that reality is thoroughly contaminated by my own cultural baggage makes me uneasy, but it reminds me of a rather ordinary conclusion that bears repeating: we need to be humble.

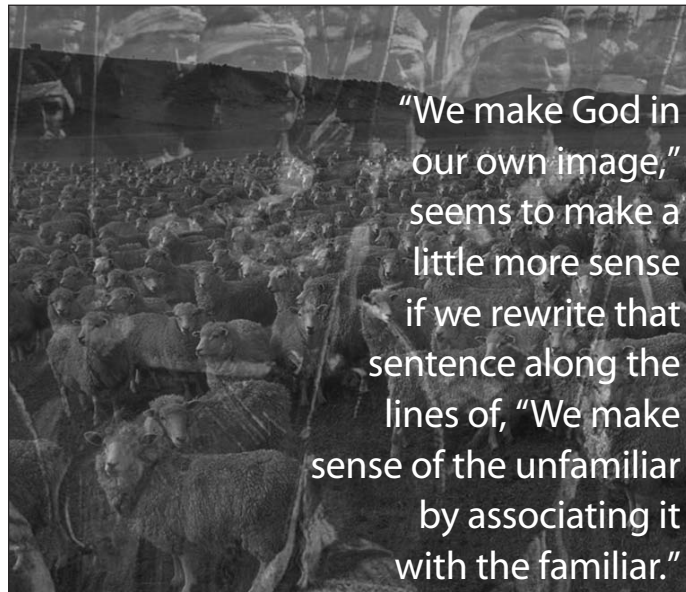
Landing on familiar territory does not necessarily lead to worn-out responses. That is, recognizing our limitations, even our exile from Truth, need not celebrate self-flagellation, escort us to an empty plain where we annihilate the self, or submit ourselves to a brooding darkness. Acknowledging that our root metaphors misguide us or at least provide incomplete understanding encourages us to consider at least three more potential paths.

Recognizing our inability to escape metaphor, accepting the

slipperiness of Deity, we might be tempted to become iconoclasts, destroying all representations in an effort to preserve the *au-delà* nature of the divine. We extend the second commandment's prohibition of images to all representations:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them . . . (Exodus 2:4).

Following this precept, we resist the urge to generate, use, and revere our linguistic or visual representations, for any metaphor is a mere image of the divine, a mere copy with no original against which to measure the accuracy of our copy. The divine remains present only in its conspicuous absence. We do have a model for this practice: nearly every celestial room in the temple system is void of any representation of the



divine. At most, the divine is conveyed abstractly in that the rooms merely express simple utility and order (chairs, couches, tables with flower arrangements) and fine craftsmanship (albeit a bit baroque) in furniture and architectural and interior design. Celestial rooms encourage participants to merely sit and reflect with a minimal amount of distraction or interference. The relatively sparse room is a striking departure from the previous rooms that present either a barrage of slick images and surround-sound available in newer temples or the elaborate, sensory-rich murals and live dramas in older temples.

While the use of abstraction in celestial rooms seems to work rather well, I doubt that iconoclasm is even possible outside that sanctuary. First, even if we could eliminate all representations of the divine, the practice is neither practical nor wise, for a "respectful silence" does not differ greatly from a "silence of neglect." As a result, the divine may simply, perhaps inevitably, fade from view and thought. Second, destroying images of the divine, as the Taliban regime did in Afghanistan,

amounts to destroying our history, our complex and contradictory identity. Purging ourselves of contaminants leaves us with nothing, for we are little more than a collection of our past. Worse still, this empty space is prey to nostalgic manipulation. As Eva Hoffman points out, a "lost homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only 'another country' but a space of projection and fantasies."²⁰

If iconoclasm silences, erases, and distorts us, we can, perhaps, respond to indeterminacy by focusing on process, not product. That is, rather than seek out absolute "truth," "knowledge," and "wisdom," as heavy weights capable of anchoring our drifting boats, we should question our very methods of inquiry and modes of expression, shifting the question from "What do I know?" to "How do I know?" We should engage in a constant process of self-examination and self-reflexive behavior. However, we must go about this analysis keenly aware that we are not outside looking in, but inside looking around, thus shaping and being shaped by what we see and what sees us. Put another way, although we can ever fully "know" our selves, intentions, desires, and motives, we can always acknowledge that any claim we make, any behavior we engage in, is justified only by our own desires and needs and the social and linguistic contexts that give them form and meaning. We need to be ever vigilant as we trace the source of those desires, needs, and behaviors, always keeping in mind that Church practices and leaders are equally implicated and complicit in this process. While we cannot rely on the "true" to help us out, we can at least become hyper self-conscious, always in a state of reflection and wariness.

And if an attention to process makes us feel too claustrophobic and paralyzed, even weary from intense and constant introspection, we can then expand outward, multiplying metaphors, reveling in the sheer abundance of our creative ability to construct reality and relationships. Isaiah's long list of conceptual metaphors drives us toward the conclusion that a multifaceted identity is the reason we need to multiply the metaphors we use to describe Christ. Multiplying metaphors helps us gain a better sense of Christ's complex identity as well as of our own, and the practice may extend our community by offering metaphors that encourage others to join us. We need not ask, "Is this metaphor true?" We ask instead, "Is this metaphor useful? What are the gains and limitations of this particular way of seeing? What is the effect on me and the community if I embrace this particular conceptual metaphor? Why does this or that person want me to accept this representation as true?"

We thus give up the need and desire for absolutes, keeping in mind that truth is contingent, negotiable, and laden with heavy baggage. But saying that truth is contingent doesn't mean that "anything goes" or that constructed knowledge is not binding. Instead, the insight simply suggests that truth grows out of a specific situation and will inevitably celebrate some values while demoting others. And acknowledging complicity is vital to an ethical community: We must, at every turn,

practice a degree of humility, for knowledge and authority are in a constant state of negotiation, flux, and revelation. And what is a belief in revelation but a radical awareness that our language and perspectives are limited and require additional language and ways of seeing? Eva Hoffman reminds us that “To lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid,”²¹ an insight that encourages us to take upon ourselves the role of revelators, never ceasing to generate root metaphors that render the world ever more vibrant, ever more luminous. ☞

NOTES

1. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 73.
2. David Tracy, “Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 96.
3. *Ibid.*, 98.
4. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.
5. *Ibid.* 3.
6. Tracy, 96.
7. Richard Poll, “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” *SUNSTONE* (July–Aug. 1980): 15-16.
8. *Ibid.*, 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
10. *Ibid.*, 16.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary” displayed at the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art is an even more recent example of ambiguity and multiple meaning. Elephant dung is as multivalent as urine and blood.
13. I can’t help but think of the *Ensign*’s attempt to prevent this proliferation of meaning. In their presentation of magazine art work, *Ensign* editors consistently tell readers what an artist intended, what the art work is supposed to mean, thus limiting a reader’s response.
14. Scott Abbott, “Will We Find Zion or Make It? An Essay on Postmodernity and Revelation,” *SUNSTONE* (Dec. 1994): 17.
15. Jane Flax, “The End of Innocence,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Scott and Judith Butler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 459.
16. I’m reminded as well of Nazi concentration camp commandants who read Goethe and listened to Wagner in the morning, then executed Jews in the afternoon—art aficionado one minute, agent of genocide another.
17. Stephen L. Richards, “An Open Letter to College Students,” *Improvement Era* 36 (1933): 453, 484.
18. Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 33.
19. Caputo, 49.
20. Eva Hoffman, “The New Nomads,” in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, André Aciman, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1999), 52.
21. *Ibid.*, 48.

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