



Religious Metonymies Used in Modern English

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Abstract

Religious metonymies, which involve substituting one concept for another based on a close association, play a significant role in shaping the meanings of various expressions in modern language. The study explores common examples of religious metonymy such as "the cross" for Christianity, "heaven" as a metaphor for ultimate success or peace, and "sin" to refer to moral failure or wrongdoing. These expressions, though rooted in religious traditions, have evolved beyond their original sacred contexts, becoming part of the wider secular lexicon. The paper delves into the historical origins of these metonymies, tracing their transformation from religious symbols to widely accepted cultural references. It also addresses the implications of using religious metonymies in various social and cultural settings, including literature, media, and politics, where they serve as powerful tools for conveying complex ideas and emotions. Moreover, the research highlights how these metonymies maintain their relevance in a post-religious society, continuing to offer insight into human experiences, values, and ethical considerations.

Key words: *religious metonymies, contemporary English, linguistic devices, secular language, cultural references, moral concepts, symbolism, language evolution*

1. Introduction

Metonymy, as a fundamental figure of speech, involves the substitution of one concept for another based on a close and often conventional association between the two. Unlike metaphor, which is based on resemblance, metonymy is grounded in contiguity—where meaning is transferred through proximity within cognitive or cultural domains (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). In semantics and discourse, metonymy plays a pivotal role in shaping how individuals conceptualize the world,

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often functioning beneath the level of conscious awareness to encode shared cultural knowledge and inferencing patterns (Panther & Thornburg, 2003).

Within this broader framework, **religious metonymy** emerges as a particularly rich subcategory. Religious metonymies are expressions that originate from sacred texts, rituals, figures, and symbols, yet they transcend their original theological contexts to operate as communicative shortcuts in modern secular language. Expressions such as “*the cross*,” “*a Good Samaritan*,” or “*the promised land*” illustrate how religiously anchored terms acquire extended metaphorical lives in social, political, and literary discourses.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how religious metonymies function in contemporary English across a range of registers—from informal speech to formal writing, from mass media to political rhetoric. In doing so, it explores not only the semantic and cognitive mechanisms underpinning these expressions but also the cultural narratives they encapsulate and propagate. Particular attention is given to how these expressions function as linguistic tools for evoking ethical stances, emotional states, and ideological positions.

This paper argues that, although religious metonymies are rooted in sacred traditions, they have evolved into secular linguistic instruments that reflect deeply embedded cultural worldviews. These expressions continue to shape thought and communication in increasingly pluralistic and post-religious societies, thereby reinforcing their relevance in both individual cognition and collective discourse.

A **descriptive, corpus-based methodology** is adopted to investigate the current usage of religious metonymies in contemporary English. Examples are drawn from various sources, including fiction, journalism, political speech, and popular media. The analysis combines qualitative linguistic description with cultural commentary to illuminate how religious metonymies are employed, interpreted, and repurposed in modern contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

To explore religious metonymy as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, it is essential to distinguish between **metonymy** and **metaphor**, two central mechanisms in cognitive linguistics. Metaphor is traditionally defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another, typically based on perceived similarity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, in “*Life is a journey*,” the abstract concept of life is structured by the more concrete schema of a physical journey.

Metonymy, by contrast, is based on **contiguity** or closeness rather than similarity. It involves the mapping of one element within a domain onto another element within the same domain. For instance, “*the crown*” may be used to refer to monarchy or sovereign authority—not because of resemblance, but because of their spatial or cultural co-occurrence (Kövecses, 2002; Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Unlike metaphor, which often restructures meaning across conceptual domains, metonymy tends to preserve internal coherence within a single domain, thereby offering a more context-sensitive linguistic shortcut.



Religious Metonymy as a Cultural and Cognitive Phenomenon

Religious metonymy operates within the **conceptual domain of religion**, which encompasses sacred texts, figures, rituals, places, symbols, and values. These metonymies serve as linguistic condensations of complex belief systems and communal experiences. In this sense, they are not merely rhetorical devices but culturally encoded symbols of memory, authority, virtue, and morality.

From a **schema-theoretic perspective**, religious metonymies can be seen as manifestations of **pre-existing mental structures**—schemas—that are constructed through repeated exposure to religious narratives (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980). For example, the phrase “*the prodigal son*” activates a narrative schema involving guilt, redemption, and familial forgiveness, even outside overtly religious discourse. These schemas guide interpretation, filling in missing information based on shared cultural knowledge.

Additionally, **prototype theory** (Rosch, 1975) plays a role in the interpretation of religious metonymies. Prototypes are central, cognitively salient instances within a category. In the religious domain, figures like Jesus, Mary, Satan, or the Good Samaritan often function as **prototypical embodiments of concepts** such as sacrifice, purity, evil, and compassion. When these figures are invoked metonymically, they activate a network of related moral or emotional concepts that resonate across secular and spiritual contexts alike.

Moreover, Kövecses (2002) emphasizes the **cultural embedding of figurative language**, arguing that both metaphor and metonymy are shaped by sociocultural environments. In the case of religious metonymy, the expressions used in English are deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions, which have historically shaped Western modes of reasoning, emotional framing, and linguistic expression.

Thus, religious metonymies are not just stylistic features; they are cognitive-cultural constructs. They enable speakers to invoke complex ethical or existential ideas through familiar, compact references—illustrating how language operates as a repository of shared social knowledge and symbolic thought.

3. Classification of Religious Metonymies

Religious metonymies in English are not arbitrary idiomatic expressions but reflect underlying conceptual mappings between elements of religious experience and broader cultural values. This section classifies these metonymies based on their **semantic function and linguistic form**, demonstrating how religious discourse continues to shape secular language through symbolic substitution. Each example reveals how a **religious source concept** stands for an **abstract social, moral, or emotional target concept**.

3.1. Religious Figures and Narratives



Expressions such as “*Good Samaritan*,” “*Pilate’s hands*,” and “*Prodigal Son*” represent metonymic mappings from character to moral value.

- “**Good Samaritan**” metonymically evokes compassion and altruism. The phrase originates from the parable in Luke 10:25–37, where a Samaritan helps a wounded stranger. In contemporary use, it stands for any person who shows kindness to others, especially strangers or the marginalized.
- “**Pilate’s hands**” refers to Pontius Pilate’s act of washing his hands to symbolically reject responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion. Today, the phrase implies **moral evasion** or avoidance of decision-making, demonstrating metonymy of character for ethical failure.
- “**Prodigal Son**” comes from Luke 15:11–32 and denotes someone who strays but returns, symbolizing **repentance and reconciliation**. It encapsulates the narrative arc of error, return, and forgiveness.

In each case, the character becomes a **prototype for a moral script**, illustrating how religious figures are cognitively available to express complex emotional or ethical states.

3.2. Sacred Places and Institutions

In this category, sacred geographical or institutional entities function metonymically to express abstract authority or aspirational states.

- “**The Holy See**” metonymically represents the Roman Catholic Church’s governing authority. Literally referring to the episcopal jurisdiction of the Pope, it now extends to a broader symbol of ecclesiastical and even moral leadership.
- “**The Promised Land**”, though originally denoting Canaan in the Hebrew Bible, now signifies any goal or **ideal state of fulfillment**, particularly after hardship. It functions as a **metonymy of place for achievement or liberation**.

These examples illustrate how place names rooted in religious cosmologies are abstracted into expressions of **spiritual authority** or **life milestones**.

3.3. Ritual Objects and Symbols

Metonymies in this category substitute **sacred objects** to represent broader **ideological or emotional constructs**.

- “**The Cross**” in Christian theology symbolizes Christ’s crucifixion and the associated themes of **sacrifice, salvation, and suffering**. In secular usage, it may refer to any burden or personal challenge, reinforcing a metaphorical and metonymic blend.
- “**Lamb of God**” denotes Jesus Christ as the sacrificial lamb, drawing on the Old Testament image of ritual offering. Metonymically, it embodies purity, meekness, and **atonement**.



Here, the physical object or title becomes the **index of a wider doctrinal or emotional idea**, demonstrating the power of **iconic metonymy**.

3.4. Religious Beliefs and Practices

Common idioms derived from religious practice often encode **social attitudes or cognitive frames**.

- **“Preach to the choir”** implies redundancy—telling something to an audience that already agrees. This metonymy of **action for communicative futility** reveals how church practice is repurposed in everyday discourse.
- **“Faith moves mountains”** captures the empowering potential of belief. While it originates from Matthew 17:20, it now refers to any situation where strong conviction overcomes difficulty, thus functioning as **belief for efficacy**.

These idioms reinforce how religious acts are abstracted to capture rhetorical or motivational functions in secular communication.

3.5. States of Afterlife

Expressions like *“heaven on earth,” “hell on earth,”* and *“taste of heaven”* use metonymies of **cosmic destination for human experience**.

- **“Heaven on earth”** metonymically implies ideal conditions—joy, peace, or beauty in earthly life.
- **“Hell on earth”** represents intense suffering, whether emotional or environmental.
- **“Taste of heaven”** highlights fleeting pleasure, evoking sensory and emotional richness.

These expressions use the **place of final judgment or reward** as a metaphorical container for real-world experiences, revealing how **eschatological concepts** enter emotional discourse.

3.6. Biblical Textual References

Certain expressions metonymically use scriptural teachings or events to express contemporary realities.

- **“The Golden Rule”**, derived from Matthew 7:12, represents **ethical reciprocity**—“Do unto others...”—and is often cited in moral and civic education.
- **“The writing on the wall”**, from Daniel 5:5–31, has become a secular warning sign, denoting **imminent failure or doom**. The metonymy lies in the **text for prophecy or omen**.

These expressions demonstrate how **scriptural language** is transferred into moral argument or prognostication, preserving the **authority of origin** while shedding religious obligation.



This classification highlights the **rich cognitive and cultural layering** of religious metonymies in English. Each type functions as a linguistic shortcut that compresses **theological, emotional, and moral content** into accessible expressions—bridging the sacred and the secular, the past and the present.

4. Pragmatic and Discursive Functions

Religious metonymies are not merely fixed expressions stored in the lexicon—they are dynamically employed in **pragmatic and discursive contexts** to enhance communicative impact. By invoking deep cultural associations and moral schemas, these expressions function as **rhetorical accelerators**, allowing speakers and writers to **amplify emotional resonance, heighten expressiveness, and signal ethical positioning** with economy and force.

In **political rhetoric**, for instance, religious metonymy is frequently used to construct narratives of victimhood or martyrdom. A phrase like “*a crucifixion in the media*” leverages Christian imagery of Jesus' suffering to frame public criticism or scandal as unjust persecution. This usage not only dramatizes the event but also aligns the speaker or subject with **moral innocence**, positioning them as symbolic martyrs (Charteris-Black, 2011).

In **literature and film**, expressions such as “*a redemption arc*” draw upon religious narratives of sin, guilt, and atonement. Though secular in application, the trope of personal transformation through suffering echoes **salvific structures** present in Christian soteriology. Characters described as “redeemed” are metaphorically re-entering a state of grace, even in genres far removed from religious settings (Frow, 2006).

Journalistic language also adapts religious metonymy to frame contemporary events. Headlines like “*resurrecting a scandal*” imply that a previously forgotten or resolved issue has been brought back to life, drawing on the central Christian concept of resurrection. Such usage offers not just descriptive power, but **evaluative nuance**, as it implies not just revival but **potential trouble or unresolved tension**.

Thus, religious metonymies serve important **pragmatic functions** across discourse types:

- **Expressive:** They evoke moral gravitas or emotional weight.
- **Evaluative:** They position events or people along ethical axes.
- **Intertextual:** They activate culturally shared references, enhancing intelligibility and resonance.

Their continued use in modern communication reveals how religious language remains **discursively productive**, offering powerful frames for persuasion, storytelling, and critique.

5. Cultural Shift: From Sacred to Secular

Over the past two centuries, much of the Western world has undergone a process of **secularization**, wherein religious institutions have lost influence over public life, and theological beliefs have



declined in prominence. Yet paradoxically, **religious language**, particularly in the form of metaphor and metonymy, continues to **permeate secular discourse**.

This phenomenon reflects not contradiction but **transformation**. As observed by Casanova (1994), secularization is not always a wholesale abandonment of religion but often a **reconfiguration of religious elements** into new cultural forms. Religious metonymies like “*the promised land*” or “*hell on earth*” no longer require theological belief to function—they operate as **cultural shorthand** for aspiration or suffering, embedded in collective consciousness.

The **mass media** has played a key role in this transition. Through cinema, television, digital journalism, and social platforms, religious expressions have been **decontextualized from liturgical settings** and recontextualized within popular culture. For instance, a political campaign might use “*resurrection*” to denote a comeback, or a sports announcer might call a team’s win “*a miracle*”, echoing religious registers to boost drama and emotional impact.

Moreover, **globalization** has diffused these expressions beyond their original Christian settings. In multicultural societies, such expressions are often used **idiomatically**, regardless of the speaker’s religious identity or belief system. This signals a broader cultural shift: from religion as **dogma** to religion as **memory and metaphor**—a symbolic reservoir from which language continues to draw.

In post-religious societies, religious metonymy functions as a **moral and cultural framework**, allowing speakers to express values like justice, compassion, and sacrifice in a language that resonates across historical and ideological boundaries. The persistence of such language highlights the **deep imprint of religious imagination** on the linguistic fabric of secular life.

6. Linguistic and Pedagogical Implications

Teaching metonymy and metaphor is essential for advancing learners’ **figurative competence**—the ability to interpret and produce language that operates beyond literal meaning. For **ESL learners**, particularly those at intermediate and advanced levels, understanding **religious metonymies** can significantly enhance **idiom comprehension, cultural literacy, and critical reading skills**.

While metonymy is often underrepresented in English language instruction compared to metaphor, it plays a vital role in idiomatic and pragmatic usage. Phrases like “*the writing on the wall*” or “*a Good Samaritan*” are frequent in media, literature, and everyday conversation. Without cultural or religious context, these expressions may seem opaque. Therefore, explicit instruction in religious metonymy helps bridge the gap between linguistic form and cultural meaning (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008).

Benefits for ESL Learners:

- **Idiomatic Awareness:** Learners decode meaning behind expressions that cannot be interpreted literally, increasing listening and reading comprehension.



- **Cultural Fluency:** Metonymies rooted in Judeo-Christian narratives offer insight into Western cultural values, especially in moral reasoning and media discourse.
- **Critical Literacy:** Understanding the origin and evolution of such expressions fosters a deeper engagement with language as a social and ideological tool.

Suggested Classroom Applications:

1. Contextual Analysis Tasks

Students analyze newspaper articles or short texts containing religious metonymies, identifying literal vs. figurative meanings.

2. Comparative Interpretation

Learners compare religious metonymies in English to similar expressions in their L1, promoting cross-cultural awareness.

3. Role-Play & Story Expansion

Students expand or modernize biblical parables to fit contemporary settings using relevant expressions (e.g., reinventing the story of the Prodigal Son).

4. Corpus Exploration

Using tools like COCA or BNC, students research real-life usage of metonymies such as “*cross to bear*” or “*crucify in the press*” and discuss their connotations.

5. Figurative Language Journals

Learners track figurative expressions they encounter over a week and classify them as metaphors or metonymies, analyzing context and emotional impact.

Introducing such pedagogical strategies encourages learners not only to understand English more deeply but also to participate in its **cultural and historical dialogues**.

7. Conclusion

Religious metonymies in modern English are more than remnants of theological discourse—they are living linguistic artifacts that continue to structure thought, emotion, and communication. Far from being obsolete or purely devotional, these expressions have migrated into **secular contexts**, where they function as tools of **cultural cognition**, **moral positioning**, and **discursive strategy**.

From “*Pilate’s hands*” to “*a taste of heaven*,” religious metonymies bridge sacred narratives and modern experiences, allowing speakers to convey complexity with precision and resonance. Their power lies not just in their metaphorical beauty but in their **cultural embeddedness**—as shared symbols that compress moral, emotional, and historical content into compact linguistic forms.



Future research may further investigate **comparative metonymy across religious traditions**, such as Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist symbolic expressions in English or other languages. Studies could also explore how religious metonymies are interpreted by speakers from non-Christian backgrounds, or how these expressions evolve within digital discourse and AI-generated content.

As language continues to adapt to global, multicultural, and interfaith realities, the enduring presence of religious metonymy reminds us that even in secular tongues, the sacred still speaks.

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