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**"God, my mother". Linguistics and Religious Language**

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## "God, my mother". Linguistics and Religious Language<sup>1</sup>

*In the beginning the Word already was.*  
John  
*Metaphor is the dreamwork of language*  
Donald Davidson

### Abstract

An exercise of interpretation of two metaphorical sentences in religious language is a means towards the aim of this essay: a reflection about the way Linguistics conceives the relation between language/thought and reality. The first section introduces a theory of metaphor that distinguishes the process of projection from metaphorical utterances. Metaphors are judged to be fictional and their semantic process is projection. The second section develops an exercise of interpretation for two metaphorical sentences: "god is the father" and "god is the mother". The former belongs to our cultural background, thus it has a systematic interpretation, while the latter, suggested by McFague (1986), is a living metaphor. A living metaphor prompts a wide range of interpretations. How Linguistics would answer to McFague's claim that the mother metaphor best fits our contemporary world is the question that motivates our last section. We will argue that Linguistics may contribute to an examination of the issue. Its contribution is made possible through a description of the way words relate to world in a communicative interaction.

If Religion and Metaphor, the title of this Symposium, were weighed against my own background, the balance would certainly tilt towards metaphor. It was not a desire to think about God that pushed me towards this investigation. Rather on the contrary, it was my interest as a linguist in language, and specifically in metaphors, that moved me towards the theme "metaphors in religious language". My research into this subject has taught me how deep is the theological reflection about metaphorical language. McFague's (1982) work is just one among many good examples. It has also taught me that Linguistics has a lot to learn from a study about religious language. The impressive theological reflection on metaphor is hardly mentioned in linguistic inquiries probably due to our scientific tradition. Indeed semanticists have avoided studying language about God.<sup>2</sup> Given the full-blooded

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1 My gratitude to Frans Gistelinck for helping me getting into such a difficult subject and to Lieve Boevens for introducing me to McFague's work. To my sister Flavia, all my love and gratitude. My acknowledgements to CNPq for financially supporting my research.

2 It is always good to remember that van Noppen proposed a branch in linguistics, called theolinguistics, which would deal specifically with language about god. It is not that easy, however, to implement his proposal, for many reasons, among them the fact that linguistics nowadays has turned to formal, syntactic aspects of language.

theological reflection on metaphor, and the lack of linguistic reflection about God, my own contribution to the theme cannot be but a grain of linguistic analysis.

In the first section of this paper, a clarification of the distinction between the (meta) concepts of 'metaphorical utterance' and 'process of projection' casts light on our object of study: metaphorical sentences about God. If in contemporary metaphorology the epistemic/cognitive relevance of metaphors is taken for granted - due to its identification with an operation of projection -,<sup>3</sup> the hypothesis that its interpretation involves a judgment of fictionality has been disregarded. Thus it is common sense in today's metaphorology to examine the "metaphorical", i.e. projectional, structure of a sentence like "I spent twelve hours to arrive here" without taking into account that it is not invested with fictionality. Metaphors are projections that are judged to be fictions, i.e. they are invested with a belief that what is said is meant to be a sort of hypothesis about how things could be. Judgments of literality and metaphoricity then are framed by the lay(wo)man's beliefs about relations between words and world.

The second part offers an exercise of interpretation of two metaphorical sentences: "God is the father" and "God is the mother". It shows that the logical structure underlying these sentences are dependent on an existential statement concerning something called God. The first section deals with the referential issue. It is followed by a syntactic analysis. The verb *to be* may uncover different syntactic configurations: from tautological identification to comparative structures introduced by operators like 'as' and 'as if'. A semantic reconstruction of possible interpretations of each sentence ends this chapter. The analysis shows that there are several differences between "God is the father" and "God is the mother". These differences may be explained by the systematic character of the former metaphor opposed to the novelty of the latter.

Our linguistic analysis is challenged by McFague's claim that a motherly view of God best fits our contemporary society. It is a challenge because it poses the problem of an evaluation concerning the efficacy of two metaphors. Is Linguistics able to answer this challenge or is it outside the scope of Linguistics? Although the most prominent models in Linguistics - Structuralism and Generativism - cannot answer this issue, a linguistic reflection about the relation between words and world may contribute to the issue.

## **1. Projection, Metaphorical Utterance and Metaphorical Sentence**

By the end of the XX century, after the end of so many certitudes, the epistemological importance of metaphors is patently assured, although a few Logical-Positive minded researches still deny their significance. In a philosophical environment highly inspired by Logical Positivism, even if several criticisms among them Wittgenstein's were already coming into sight, Black claims the cognitive significance of metaphors. In "Metaphor"

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3 The reader should see Black, M. (1962) Paprotté, W. & R. Dirven (1985); Lakoff & Johnson (1980) for defenses of the ubiquitouness of metaphors.

(1962 - first published in 1954), he attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of the claim that a metaphor is interpreted through its translation to a literal paraphrase. Black shows that in interpreting metaphors the object being described - the principal subject - is organized from a new angle. A metaphor may disclose hidden aspects of the principal subject. This is precisely the reason why metaphorical statements cannot be reduced to non-metaphorical or literal paraphrases. Their "presentational" aspect - this is my terminology - reveals the ever-present incompleteness of our descriptions of the world.

Possibly influenced by the latter Wittgenstein's reflection on the language-games of "seeing" and "seeing as",<sup>4</sup> Black talks about metaphor as the ability to see something as something else. It is, therefore, a far-reaching process of interpretation, because it is not restricted to linguistic metaphors and it turns into a way of organizing the flux of events in which we are immersed. The possibility of describing this, pointing to a particular tree, as *tree* is warranted by our ability to detach similarities from differences. Thus, metaphor becomes a ubiquitous and essential process of categorization. Black does not explicitly reach such a conclusion, although he does not vacillate in claiming that "the world is necessarily a world under a certain description - or a world seen from a certain perspective" (1979:39-40). He denies the existence of a level of reality that is organized independently. It is through our linguistic practices that aspects of the world are revealed. This is the reason why there is no such thing as the description of things out-there, rather there are ways of bringing events to our awareness. A novel projection may disclose an original way of conceiving an event. It may be a way of revelation.

Ascribing such a strong epistemological force to the process of projection may lead us to the slogan "language as a whole is metaphorical". This is the route followed by Hesse (1988), for instance. She claims that there are no essences in the world - in the physical as well as in the "platonic" world - underlying our concepts. Thus, we decide to name this, pointing to an event, and to name that, pointing to another event, as *x* and by doing so we organize our experiences. It is not surprising that Passmore (1985) calls her a relativist. Aren't we joining the circle of linguistic relativism when we claim that our conceptualizations depend essentially on the operation of projection? In a sense our answer is yes, although at least two remarks must be added.

First of all, we are talking about a semantic process of making sense of the flux of events in which we are immersed. It is the process of projection that is ubiquitous. Thus we deny the existence of fundamental, ahistorical truths. Nonetheless, it does not follow from the claim that the process of projection is an essential operation of conceptualization that our conceptualizations are not constrained. We are not free to conceptualize as we want to. Indeed, our conceptualizations are constrained by the way the world is and by the presence

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4 Black does not explicitly refer to the latter Wittgenstein's reflection on 'seeing as', but it is hard not to recognize the similarities. See Wittgenstein (1991), and also Gill's article (1979) about metaphor and 'seeing as'.

of the Other. Thus such and such a conceptualization may prove to fit the world better - consider, for instance, the predictions made possible by seeing Earth as rotating in elliptical movement around the Sun in contrast to the Medieval way of conceiving the movement of the planets. Or it may prove to better fit the way we live.

My second remark refers to the fact that the ubiquitous presence of the process of projection does not necessarily undermine the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, although it cannot be drawn based on concepts like originality, primitiveness or basicness. This is a necessary distinction if we want to separate what we believe to be the case from what we believe is not the case, even if we believe that such a hypothesis may prompt true insights. Notice that what is believed to be the case emerges from interactions among people in a world. Thus it depends on our linguistic practices, on whether it is carried out in accordance with our beliefs and theories about the world.

Indurkha (1992) faces the same problem of conciliating the hypothesis that metaphor is an essential cognitive process and the necessity of maintaining a distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, without postulating a level of reality which is independently given. His solution depends on the feature 'conventionality': metaphors are non-conventional projections. Nonetheless, from a linguistic point of view, the parameter of 'conventionality' is neither necessary nor sufficient to distinguish the literal and the metaphorical. Consider the word *father*. If we look for it in a dictionary, we find an entrance referring to God: In the Oxford Dictionary (1986), "12 - the Father, the first person of the Trinity." Indeed, *father* has a quite conventional, and regular interpretation, if it is used with respect to God. However, in some interpretative communities it is invested with metaphorical force.

The validity of the distinction between the literal and the fictional may also be found in our language practices. Consider the following two sentences:

- (1) God is God.
- (2) God is the father.

If we insert the phrase "it is as if" as an introduction to each of the above sentences, we arrive at the following pair:

- (1') It is as if God were God.
- (2') It is as if God were the father.

It is quite clear that the inferences drawn from (1) and (1') are totally different: (1) is a tautology while (1') it is a hypothesis about a tautology. With respect to sentence (2) and (2'), the situation of incompatible inferences does not arise, at least concerning an interpretation of (2). This is so, because, (1) is not currently invested with an evaluation of fictionality. This is the reason why when we force a fictional reading, as in (1'), the inferences change completely. The same does not occur when the original sentence is already invested with fictionality.

Based upon phenomena such as the one described above, we have proposed elsewhere (Pires de Oliveira, 1995) that the (meta)term metaphorical utterance should apply to interpretative events, while the process of projection is accompanied by a judgment of fictionality.<sup>5</sup> A metaphorical utterance then is an occurrence of projection invested with fictionality. Fictionality refers to the interpreter's judgment that such-and-such an utterance (said by such-and-such a person, in such-and-such situation) was not meant to state how the speaker believes words relate to things, but to convey by means of her/his ordinary words something that s/he considers insightful. There are several ways of transcending our ordinary linguistic practices, metaphor is one of them. Thus a literal evaluation refers to the belief that the speaker is describing what s/he believes to be a relation between words and world. Metaphorical utterances are believed not to express the current relation between words and world, although by hypothesising this relation an insight may emerge.<sup>6</sup>

Judgments of literality or fictionality then are influenced by the meaning of the terms, i.e. by systematically using certain combinations of words in certain contexts of utterance. Let me briefly make this point. Suppose we are dealing with (2) above where *father* is used to talk about god. We have already seen that it is a systematic use, so systematic that it is included in dictionaries. If we ask someone about its metaphoricity, s/he might answer that it is not a metaphor, because it expresses what s/he believes to be a true relation between language and reality. Not because s/he believes that God is the father, *if father* means biological progenitor, but because s/he believes that God has in fact created humanity. Thus, s/he takes *father* to be a synonymous of *creator*. Here we are close to some type of catachresis: the meaning of the term *father* broadens in a way to include talks about fathers, God, creators.

Our analysis will not be dealing directly with utterances, speech events, but with must sentences. Sentences are theoretical reconstructions from speech events. Our methodological procedure parallels the methodology developed in Cognitive Semantics: the analysis of utterances may lead us to uncover an abstract schema. Thus (I) below is a token of the type "god is the father":

- (I) Jesus said to them, 'He who has God for his father listens to the words of God'  
(John)

Our analysis will centers around the following two metaphorical sentences:

- (2) God is the father.  
(3) God is the mother.

It should be noted, contrary to the psychological status of the metaphorical sentences advocated by Cognitive Semantics, a metaphorical sentence here is treated as a theoretical/logical sentence.

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5 For a detailed discussion about the notion of 'fictionality', see Pires de Oliveira (1995).

6 It seems that psychotic patients are not able to draw such a distinction, although they conceptualize. See Searles (1962).

## 2. Defining God Metaphorically: *The Father* and *The Mother*

### 2.1 The Problem of Existence

Describing the way metaphors in religious language are interpreted immediately raises the issue concerning the existence of an extra-linguistic entity called God.<sup>7</sup> This is so, because both sentences - (2) and (3) - may be decomposed into two statements:

(2') 'there is something called God' & 'God is the father'.

(3') 'there is something called God' & 'God is the mother'.

A non-believer would deny the first statement. The addition of a negation operator before the existential statement - 'it is not the case that there is something called god' - would turn the second statement into nonsense since it would be predicating proprieties to something that does not exist. This is, perhaps, the reason why metaphysical statements cause so many problems. However, one may describe the situation of the non-believer differently: it is not the case that there is something extra-linguistic called *God*, but it is the case that there is something, i.e. a linguistic entity, called *God*. God then is treated as a linguistic construct; a fictional character. God exists because we talk about him/her/it. Our non-believer may believe that god is a fiction created by men and women to give meaning to their lives. Thus, s/he may say "God, what a nice metaphor for human existence!", precisely because at the same time s/he denies the existential commitment and ascribes to God a linguistic reality. Thus, although such an existential commitment towards God is a fundamental axiom of Catholic system of belief, its absence does not change the way a sentence about god may be interpreted. With respect to the first statement we end up with two possibilities:

A Belief (there is God) & God refers to an extra-linguistic entity.

B Belief (there is God) & God refers to a linguistic entity.

What about the second statement? It may be the case of an interpreter for whom every single statement about God is metaphorical, since, s/he would claim, there is no way of reaching god through our human speech. Even when we attribute to god predicates such as "is immortal", "is omnipotent", we are not talking literally. Perhaps only tautological statements like (1) are literally true. In other words, every property we attribute to God is a human property attributed to god. In this paradigm, our relationship with god is a never-ending story of (re)describing Him/Her/It.

There are, however, those for whom it is possible to truly describe God, because they believe that some predicates may in fact be applied to God, as a real or a fictional entity. Such a posture may be easily found in our ordinary talk about God; in our folk theories we believe that she/he/it is, truly speaking, immortal. Here is a first difference between (2) and

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<sup>7</sup> This is a difficult topic; we will approach it from a linguistic point of view. See Hughes (1995) for an introduction.

(3): regarding (2) the situation of an interpreter who believes that fatherly properties really apply to God in possible; but a literal interpretation of (3) is blocked by its novelty.

Consider the following quotation from John's Gospel:

(II) So Jesus said to them, 'I do nothing on my own authority, but in all I say, have been taught by my Father'. (John 7, 8:88)

The word *father* begins with capital letter. This simple typographic index may be a clue for the interpreter: s/he should identify father and god. The identification of God to Jesus of Nazareth's father is sustained by folk narratives that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of Virgin Mary and of God. Thus, in some mysterious way God is Jesus's father. However, it is possible to glimpse a position that takes Jesus's utterances as metaphorically calling God his *father*. In this case the coming of the Angel Gabriel, the holy virginity of Mary would be interpreted as myth. With respect to the Jesus's utterances about his Father, we may find two interpretative postures: Some believe that 'God is Jesus's father', Some believe fictionally that 'God is Jesus's father'. Notice that the same analysis cannot be applied to 'God is the mother'. In this case, the only alternative is to take motherhood as metaphorically applying to God. Two reasons support this difference: first of all, occurrences of (2) in the Bible may be taken to be literal, especially those utterances uttered by Jesus of Nazareth regarding his Father. We find no support in biblical narratives for interpreting literally (3). Secondly, as we shall see throughout our analysis, the word *father* referring to God may have undergone a change in meaning. There may be interpreters who take *father* to refer exclusively to worldly entities, to real fathers, and interpreters who take *father* to be a hyperonymy. With respect to (3), because we do not have a systematic use of *mother* with respect to God, it will be interpreted metaphorically.

We arrive at the following possibilities with respect to the second logical statement underlying (2) and (3):

Literally (some properties of fatherhood apply to God)

Metaphorically (some properties of fatherhood apply to God)

Metaphorically (some properties of motherhood apply to God)

## 2.2 The Syntactic Structure of 'God is the NS'

Although Linguistics has not a consensus about whether it is syntax that determines semantics or vice-versa, it is certain that form and content are closely connected.<sup>8</sup> What is the syntactic form of (2) and (3)?

The literature on the syntax of the verb *to be* ascribes to it two syntactic configurations: referential and attributive. The former is the classical case of identification through co-referentiality. The most paradigmatic case is that of tautology but it also

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<sup>8</sup> We find both positions in Linguistics: Chomsky claims the centrality of syntax; Lakoff, the centrality of semantics/pragmatics.

accounts for the classical problem raised by Frege with respect to the morning star being the evening star. Referential configurations are currently introduced by a definite article. The following sentence, if it is taken within its traditional narrative, exemplifies this configuration:

(4) Jesus of Nazareth is God.

In (4) there is an identification, since both Jesus of Nazareth and God refer to the same entity. The verb *to be* may be substituted by a sign of equality.

The attributive *to be* is composed of a small clause, formally marked by the presence of an indefinite article. A classical example of this type of syntactic structure is:

(5) God is an entity.

Attributive structures are characterized by the fact that predicates raised by the nominal syntagm are applied to the subject term. Notice that in the case of (5) we have a relation of hyperonymy: *entity* is superordinate with respect to *god*. It could well be paraphrased by:

(5') God is a type of entity.

'A type of' should be interpreted in a restricted reading.

Metaphorical sentences show an attributive relation even when the second nominal syntagma is introduced by a definite article.<sup>9</sup> Consider first (3). It is not the case that a strict identification between god and mother is proposed, even if the definite article introduces the second nominal syntagm. With respect to (3) it is odd to conceive that it expresses a relation of hyperonymy.

(3') God is a type of mother.

If we paraphrase (3) by (3'), the meaning of the predicate 'a type of' would change. A better translation is:

(3'') Somehow, God is a mother.

The syntax of (3) is not rigorously the same as that of (2), however. As we have already pointed out, it may be that *father* has undergone a change of meaning; thus it generalizes over systematic uses which include god, fathers, creators. Thus, (2) could be described as having a structure like (5):

(2') God is a type of father.

Here again it all depends on the meaning attributed to *father*. If *father* is a hyperonymy, then (2') is the structure of (2). If *father* is taken to refer exclusively to the parental figure, then (2'') is its structure:

(2'') Somehow, God is a father.

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9 See Pires de Oliveira (1995).

Notice that the problem here has to do with the interpreter's choice of conceptualization: if we take God and father to delineate different categories, then we have structure (2"). If they are seen as belonging to the same category, *Father*, then the structure is that of (2'). The existence of both alternatives with respect to (2) is justified by its systematic character, which sustains the difference between (2) and (3).

## 2.3 The Semantics of Metaphorical Sentences

### 2.3.1 "God, the Father"

If our approach is right, then in interpreting a metaphor what one experientially knows/believes about fathers is activated by the word *father* and then projected into a different experience, named *God*.<sup>10</sup> The challenge of interpretation does not arise with respect to (2), because it already has a "default" interpretation. We know which predicates are ruled out, and which are projected. We do not conceive god as a father who abuses his children, although this is a logical possibility - we all know of fathers who abuse their children. We do not conceive God as our ancestor, although this is a possibility. Indurkha (1991) correctly points out that projection is constrained by the structure of the target domain, i.e. by the way the world is. If this constraint helps when we are talking about concrete categories, it does not help when we are dealing with God. With respect to God, our conceptualizations are not constrained by the structure of the world, but by our inherited social and cultural reality within which we were born. Indeed, (2) they are constrained by the way we talk about God.

We know that *father* does not mean biological progenitor, because our narratives about creation tells us that God molded man similar to him/her/itself. Physical associations raised by *father* are also commonly blocked. We do not imagine God's phallos, even if folk beliefs are impregnated by male sexual language: God's words are semen, are seed, for instance. Sexual references also appears, in a covered way, in the narrative of Virgin Mary's pregnancy. McFague claims that "one has to realize how not to apply a metaphor (to say God is the father does not mean that God has a beard!)" (1896: 70) Although it is certainly true that interpretation is constrained, it is rather hard to determine precisely the nature of this constraint. One should always remember Micheangelo's painting where God, in his almighty anatomy, is pictured with a beard in a clear resemblance with Moses and Jewish rabbis. We do have a "folk" picture of God, the father.

The systematic interpretation of (2) brings about the possibility of ascribing a meaning to it. This is a traditional topic in metaphorology. In opposition to Positivism, Black dissolves the dichotomy cognitive versus emotional meanings and states that metaphors have metaphorical meanings. Nonetheless, if we try to pin down what 'metaphorical

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10 Projection may either highlight common properties of the two experiences or create properties in the target domain.

meaning' means in Black, we find ourselves in trouble, either because it turns into another dichotomy - between literal and metaphorical meaning - or because it turns into an identification between meaning and intention. Davidson's papers present a better way of describing the relation between meaning and metaphors. Davidson (1979) argues extensively against the idea of metaphorical meaning, because he wants to preserve the epistemological insight prompted by metaphors: a metaphor, like an oracle, does not say, it intimates. In recent papers, Davidson (1993) affirms that conventional metaphors may be said to have meaning. There must then be a distinction between systematic, recurrent metaphorical uses - these are the ones to be accounted for by a semantic theory -, and non-systematic uses. We have already pointed some differences concerning these two types of metaphor.

The fact that in some linguistic contexts *father* and *creator* are synonymous is an argument in favour of our claim about the conventionality of (2) and its having a meaning. Consider for instance the following example:

(6) Einstein is the father of relativity.

It is systematically translated by:

(7) Einstein is the creator/inventor of relativity.

There is a relation of synonymy linking *god*, *creator*, and *father*<sup>11</sup>

*Father* also refers to a social place in family. At least in Portuguese, we say that fathers are the *head* of a family. *Head* is commonly associated with rational enterprises, with government, with control. Fathers are responsible for introducing the law and for sustaining the needs of the family. In our ordinary interactions, the father is the authority whose wife and children must respect and obey. He is the one who punishes his children for not following the rules. The same respect and obeisance we have towards our father, we must have towards God. God, the father, will save those who obey Him. He is the Judge, who separates the right from the wrong. Fathers also supply the needs of their families. God is the great provider, too. He fulfils all our needs, and He is the one who gives us life. God, the father, is here the King who owns all we have, even our lives. Both the Judge and the King are based upon a vertical model where father/man are seen as the head, i.e. superior to women, children, and nature.

*Father* is also the term we used to refer to priests. In Brazilian Portuguese, we call priests *padres*, the Latin word for father. The word *Pope* also comes from father, and in Portuguese we call the Pope, the Holy Father. This brings us to a relevant aspect of (2): we act and live constrained by the structure it imposes. The model of God as father is incarnate to such an extent in our ordinary lives that it stakes out our religious and worldly practices.

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11 The problem of different although related meanings appears: if the meaning of a term is a function of its systematic place within other terms, should we treat father as ambiguous or as polysemous? Although this is an important issue, it will not be developed here.

The incarnation is present in other practices: the secondary role nuns play in Liturgy; the forbiddance of women to be priests - this is even stronger in countries like Brazil with a full-blooded machismo tradition; the linguistic fact that God is always referred to by masculine pronouns -indeed, it is quite funny to call God *she* -; finally, the Pope's authority who like a father takes care of the church. Shouldn't we remember Nietzsche's warning about the illusion of living metaphors as if they were the truth? The word becomes flesh

It is not only *father* that has a systematic meaning, (2) has also a systematic interpretation. When we talk about interpretation we go well beyond the semantic meaning of a term; we must take into account "encyclopaedic" and "narrative" knowledge/beliefs activated by a sentence. Father, the creator of life, the king and the judge finds support in the folk narratives. The narrative of creation, for instance: God created the world, the plants and the animals. Then, he molded Adam his image and from Adam's rib created Eve. Our "folk" myth of creation, the Final Judgment and the King all represent a vertical structure: God is superior to man, who is superior to woman and to nature. They also present God as something, a spirit, external to, and detached from his creation.

We cannot but remember Freud's analysis of the figure of the father as instituting culture by forbidding incest. The Taboo of Incest is anchored in the figure of the Father. The father represents our passage from the symbiotic relation with nature, our mother to culture, the domain of the symbol. The psychoanalytic father is not authoritarian, it is not phalocratic, but represents the law that affirms our being symbolic animals. The narrative of the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise may then be re-read as a myth of the creation of culture: the discovery of sex as metaphorically representing our knowledge of the forbiddance of incest, our condition of "incompleteness". It may represent the passage from nature, where we do not know sex, to culture, the world of symbols. However, the psychoanalytic interpretation just outlined here is not a folk theory prompted by (2), at least not in a conscious manner. We may use it as an instrument of analysis, since it certainly belongs to our scientific explanations about human behaviour.

### **2.3.2 "God, the mother"**

Surprise is our first reaction to (3). We are touched by its novelty like by a new game. As Davidson has remarked when we face a living metaphor it is as if we had no words to explain it. It demands our personal engagement, because it carries an enigma of interpretation: what is it to see this as that? Davidson rightly claims that interpreting metaphors is an aesthetic experience; it is not solely propositional. Perhaps time corrodes the freshness of a living metaphor, and it fades away and reaches the realm of ordinary conversation. Perhaps it remains as a dream.

The non-propositional character of interpreting living metaphors does not invalidate our task of reconstructing interpretations to (3), but it challenges it. Living metaphors raise different interpretations in different interpreters. In order to reduce the degree of subjectivity of living metaphors, our interpretation is constrained by references to folk beliefs and

theories, and by answers given by ordinary people.<sup>12</sup>

The open-endedness of living metaphors is partially due to its focus terms having no systematic uses with respect to the other words that compose the metaphorical sentence. A proof is that the entry *mother* in dictionaries does make reference to God. If this is so, then interpreters rely on its systematic linguistic relations within other linguistic contexts. However, *mother* has many relations. It is a quite complex word, perhaps because our survival - as species and as individuals - depends on mothers.

At the threshold of interpretation lies the refusal to interpret. Asked about (3), a middle-aged woman, with little schooling, Catholic believer, refused to give an answer. She argued that the sentence was not true because "God is the father". This is an interesting answer since it shows the strength of the traditional metaphor of God as the father. The interpretation is blocked by the force of axiom that the father metaphor has: God cannot be the mother, because He is the father. Some young college people from quite a traditional Catholic trend to whom I asked the same question also refused to answer it. Perhaps their reasons are due to the fact that (3) challenges the way the Catholic institution is structured.

An interesting answer was provided by a middle-aged woman, poorly educated, Catholic: "It means that God is a person, who has sex, which is not true because God is a spirit." Her answer shows two movements: the conventionality of (2), which does not allow her to take *father* as referring to a person, and the possibility of attributing to *mother* concrete predicates, precisely because its interpretation demands the interpreter's engagement and it depends upon the systematic uses of the focus term *mother*. This reading of *mother* as a person even when it is referring to God - a spirit as the interpreter herself emphasizes - proves that Davidson is right: in living metaphors the focus term means what it means in its systematic contexts of use. It also shows that some theologians are not right when they claim that in interpreting metaphorical sentences about God concrete predicates are blocked.<sup>13</sup>

The association of God to mother brings immediately to the mind the figure of the Virgin Mary. This is probably due to the biblical narrative of Jesus' birth. The cult of Virgin Mary is very strong in Brazilian society. She is conceived as the mother who implores for us, who benevolently pleads on our behalfs. She is the intermediary to God, perhaps because she is half human and half divine, so she may understand our sufferings. This representation of the Virgin Mary correlates with the way mothers are prototypically seen: mothers talk to fathers to smooth their furious wishes; she intercedes in children's favour. The biblical association with Mary constrains the interpretation of (3), by attributing to *mother* the Virgin's attributes. If we take this interpretative path, then we will probably not read in (3) a

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12 We have asked more than 30 people about the interpretation of (3). Their answers will stake out boundaries to our own analysis.

13 See for instance Geurst, J.P.M., A.W.M. Meijers and J.van Brakel "Operational identity of meaning, metaphor and religious discourse".

principle of life creation. It will be our relationship to God that is salient.

There is a folk belief linking women to Eve. We are acquainted with the folk narrative about Eve's mortal sin, which caused our banishment from Paradise. In this biblical narrative - at least as it is a piece of our folk imaginary - Eve did not obey God's commandments concerning the forbidden fruit of knowledge. She became associated with the evil, and in a dissimulated manner seduced Adam. Their eyes were then open to sinful sex. Indeed there is a long standing tradition linking women, sexual desire, evil, seduction - it is just too easy to remember witches. Could these predicates be projected into God? Hypothetically yes. Seeing God, however, as a woman associated with sex and sin certainly defies the hard core of a model of God by presenting God in a devilish light. Thus, the projection of predicates prompted by Eve are blocked by our concept of God and by a reference to mother. If there is a link between the Virgin Mary and mother, then the image of Eve is blocked.

The reading of a woman through the prism of motherhood fits folk beliefs about women being more sensitive than men. Men are associated with rationality, while women are thought to be driven by their sensibility, and emotions. Men represent order, women seduce the order. Emotions, passions belong to women, and the Virgin conforms to this image. A mother passionately loves her children. This is precisely the reason why she may intercede in their favour. Women are linked to mystery; her sensuality relies on their close touch with ethereal things. God, the mother, then, is passionately in love with its creation and she is closely linked with it: she feels what it feels. Friendship defines the relationship mothers have with their children. If God is described as our mother, we trust him/her/it as we trust our mothers.

*Mother* is also systematically used as an adjective, at least in Portuguese. For instance: mother language, mother country. In these cases, *mother* refers to origin, to 'from where we all come'. *Mother* represents the beginning of things. In Brazilian Portuguese, we find proverbs like: "Courage is the mother of creativity". God, the father, synonymous with *creator*, carries us in the direction of a rational enterprise, a discovery - Einstein's theory of relativity, for instance. Whereas, *mother* is associated with a natural, irrational origin. Notice how funny it is to say:

(8) Marie Curie is the mother of radioactivity.

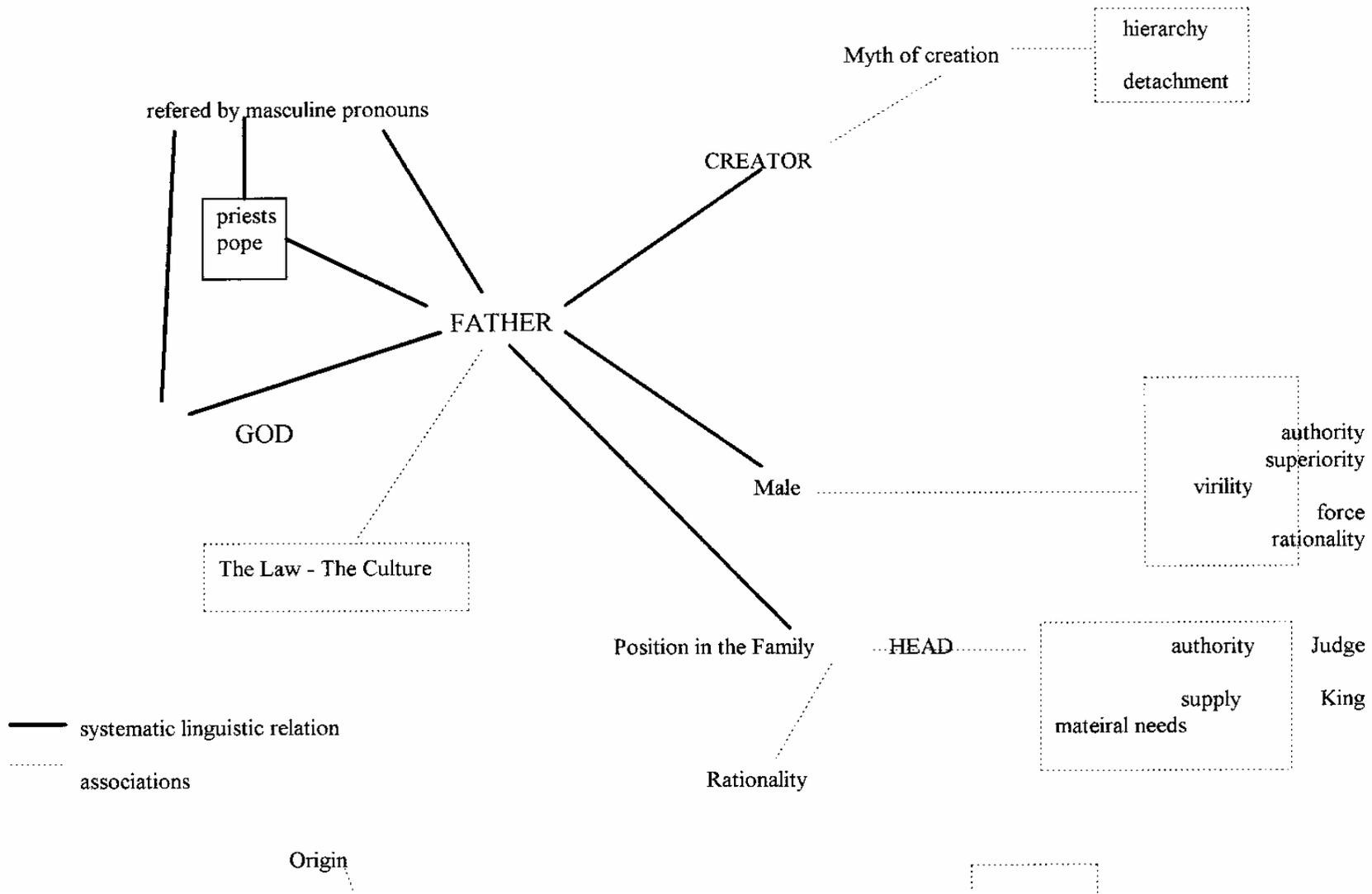
The interference here seems to be due to the division between rationality, ascribed to men, and sensibility, ascribed to women. *Mother* may be applied to non-rational events, at least in Brazilian Portuguese. If we project this into God, God is seen as the natural, irrational origin from which we all spring.

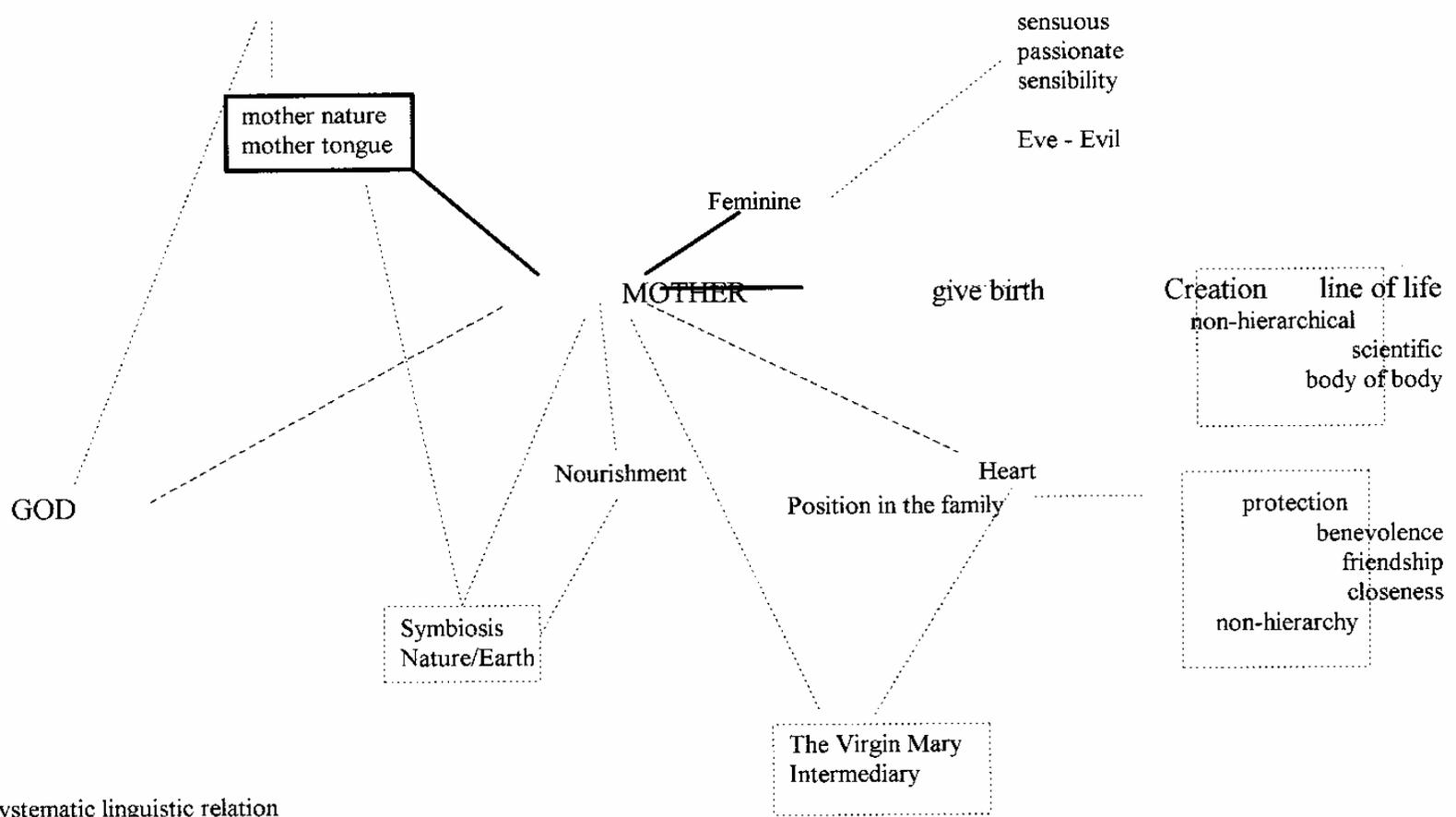
Although "giving birth to someone" is a salient predicate prompted by *mother*, none of interpreters I have asked easily accepted the reading of God giving birth to the universe. This restriction may be due to the systematic way of conceiving God. Perhaps it is also due to the fact that this is a rather innovative way of describing creation, one that does not find

support in folk narratives or beliefs. It is, however, close to our scientific explanations about the beginning of the universe. It is not too difficult to relate God's giving birth to the universe as a metaphorical way of talking about the fact that matter/energy generates matter/energy: one thing generates another thing that generates.... Here we may recover a folk belief: the line of life. Life creates life. The mother metaphor then is in consonance with our contemporary theories of evolution. If God's body generates the universe body, then there is no longer the dichotomy body/mind(soul), because there is no spiritual entity who created the world. God is not detached from creation; creation is part of Her.

The hypothesis of God being mother, and of its link to the universe finds a correlate in folk beliefs about a close link between mother-women and earth. We have already seen the relation of mother to origin. We know that in traditional agricultural societies women symbolize agriculture, and the earth. Women are thought to have their "feet on the ground" - in a Brazilian expression. There are mythologies that impose on women in their menstrual periods different sorts of prohibitive impediments. We also talk metaphorically about the mother Earth, and mother Nature. The imaginary here may be established by a link with creation: it is from earth that plants grow. There is a popular proverb from a biblical passage that says: we came from the earth, to it we will return. Women and nature are described as mysterious. There is a folk link between mother and nature which may invite us towards a responsible relation to our mother Nature, because we are nourished from our mother's body. If we kill our mothers, we kill existence itself.

It is also good to remember that we all live by negative folk beliefs about mothers. Mothers are thought to be selfish, to desire their children to stay close to them forever; to be jealous and proud of their offspring. The mothers' desire of being completely fulfilled by their children comes to foreground. Although in folk readings these interpretations are blocked, because of the reference to God, they may be uncsciously playing a role. The following graphs summarize our interpretations of (2) and (3)





### 3. Word and World

Interweaving a socio-historical analysis of our contemporary world to a cognitive theory of metaphor, McFague (1986) suggests an internally coherent set of metaphorical descriptions which would better fit our world. She argues that the work of a theologian is not limited to the hermeneutic task of interpreting the Scriptures, but is also the search for the most appropriate and sound metaphors for a certain community. The father model of God is anachronistic, she claims, since it refers to a patriarchal community that it is no longer alive. This is also the reason why calling God the Shepherd is no longer efficacious, even if it might have been a sound metaphor in rural societies. Seeing God as a mother, she argues, fits our post-modern mentality.

From the point of view of a linguist, McFague proposes a change in religious language in order to achieve a more coherent relation between what we think about the world and how we conceive our relationship to God. In other words, a change in language may lead to a change in the world. A way of helping solve our contemporary problems - poverty due to bad money distribution, ecological disasters, the holocaust of nuclear power, overpopulation -, McFague believes, is through a change in the way we conceive of our relationship to God - instead of seeing Him as an authority hierarchically superior, detached from our mundane affairs, instead of seeing our relation to nature as hierarchical, let us see the world as God's body and God as passionately suffering and fighting with us for a fairer and freer world. Jesus of Nazareth, Marther Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi were all prophets of a freer and fairer world. McFague is advancing the hypothesis that a change in our way of conceiving our relation to the mystical due to a change in our linguistic practices may reflect on our way of acting. How would Linguistics answer to McFague's belief about the relation between words and world?

Linguistics is not an homogeneous discipline. Our review concerns only the main trends within contemporary linguistics. Saussure, the father of Linguistics, maintained that language (*la langue*), i.e. an abstract, algebraic system of combinations by difference and similitude's is the object of study of Linguistics. Following this approach, *God* does not mean anything at all; it only means as a product of its interactions with other terms. Paradigmatically, *God* is related to *creator* by similarity, and it is opposed to *Devil*. Syntagmatically, *God* relates to terms like *exist*, *is the father*, ... The meaning of *God* is a negative function of what it is not. From the point of view of semantics, this model is not adequate for several reasons. Structuralist semantics is a description of internal, and synchronic relations. It describes a closed system with no link to the world. The most such an approach could do to McFague's project is a comparison between the two semantic "fields" raised by the metaphors.

However, Saussure claims that a sign results from gluing together a "signifiant", an acoustic image, to a "signifier", a mental image. In order to explain the relation between these two sides of a sign Saussure uses the metaphor of the piece of paper. When you cut a

piece of paper you cut it both sides. Thus, language and world are inseparable. This brings us to a quite problematic issue in Saussurean tradition: the relation signifiant/signifier is arbitrary.<sup>14</sup> If this is so, then we are led to solipsism - or to incomensurability: Each language cuts the world differently. This position is not too far from Sapir and Whorf's classical linguistic relativism: our thoughts, sensations and acts are molded by our linguistic practices.

What about McFague's project? If the relation word/world is arbitrary, then each metaphor builds its own world. Perhaps this is what McFague has in mind when she proclaims that a change in our way of conceiving God, through a change in language, may lead to a change in our world view. Some feminist approaches have stressed that language is an expression of chauvinism, and have proclaimed that a change in our linguistic practices would change our way of being - thus, modifying our generic terms so as to remove masculine bias, would help freeing women from its long oppression. This approach is based on a naive belief: the belief that language is transparent with respect to our thoughts and to our practices. There is no guarantee that a change in language corresponds to a change in our practices. The worst consequence of this posture is that it leads to deep and complex ethical issues. If language/culture cuts its own reality and mentality, then how are we going to judge acts that although internally coherent within a language/culture go against basic rights of human beings? Or are we going to say that there is no such thing as basic rights?

In opposition to Structuralism, Generative Grammar has allocated the study of language within Cognitive Sciences. Language is not a public affair, but it is the internal, innate set of principles that engenders, from a finite stock of elements, an infinitude of possibilities. Linguistics has turned its eyes to our innate mental organ. This approach leaves McFague's issue outside the scope of Linguistics.

Cognitive Semantics also depends on the existence of innate concepts. However, language is not an innate organ, it is a manifestation of our mental concepts and schemata. Some of our mental concepts and schemata are directly derived from our physical/bodily interactions within the world, because of the structure of our bodies and the structure of the world. Metaphorical concepts are mappings from our direct experiences into domains of experience with which we have no direct contact. Thus, our concept of Love, for instance,<sup>15</sup> is derived from the Path schemata: Love is a Journey, orientated towards an end. What would Cognitive Semantics say about McFague's project? Probably it would agree with it, because her description may be easily incorporated into Cognitive Semantics. Moreover, Cognitive Semantics is increasingly advancing the idea that changes in the metaphors we live by, - in our mental schemes - correspond to changes in our way of living.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Although there has been some dispute concerning this topic; many authors - have emphasized the arbitrariness of the relation word/world in Saussure.

15 Capital letters indicate that we are no longer talking about language, but about concepts.

16 Lakoff in a conference held in Leuven 1991 talked enthusiastically about a research that helped people not seeing other people as numbers.

If McFague's project belongs to Cognitive Semantics, then it must answer some criticism that threatens the whole enterprise. Firstly, as Wierzbicka (1986) correctly argues, Cognitive Semantics relies upon the hypothesis that the external world is easier to grasp than our feelings, as if it were easier to learn about space than it is to learn about love. Perhaps we have direct contact with love; perhaps we also experience God. If we believe so, then Cognitive Semantics is profoundly wrong, because it sees the body as matter in movement, a physical entity that may balance, move towards something, but a body without a soul, a body that neither feels, nor loves passionately. Secondly, Levinson (1992) argues, against Cognitive Semantics, that the assumption that space is conceptualized in the same way regardless of cultural constraints is disputable. The author shows that there are cultures/languages that structure space in a manner that is totally different from our own way of organizing spatial relations. Thus, we cannot be sure that we are all endowed with the same conceptual schemes. Finally, if a change in our conceptual schemes may be reflected in a change in our practices, then we must be able to justify that such and such a mental scheme is better than another one. To my knowledge, there has not been such a discussion.

It may be useful to recall Voltaire's thoughts about metaphysics: a dance with elegant moves, in which you end up where you started. We have attempted to show the necessity of dissolving the dichotomy between mental schemata/language and world. The notion of interpretation may help us get out of this vicious circle. With it we avoid the problem of relativism, without having to postulate highly structured innate concepts. It allows for cultural diversity, and at the same time for the possibility of meeting the other in communication. This is so because in interpretation we maximize agreement on beliefs about the world, about the other, and about language. We are charitable: I see the other as another "I".

What about McFague's issue if it is seen from a theory of interpretation? It cannot be read as an attempt at changing our way of being in the world. If it is like this, then it has fallen on the side of mental structures determining the world. However, her proposal is not devoid of significance for our practices. If it were so, then language would have no place in the building of our world. Thus, her proposal may be evaluated within a tension: its relation to our linguistic practices - folk beliefs and theories; and its relation to the our way of living.

If we recall our semantic analysis and compare it to McFague's reading of the mother metaphor, we will see that there is considerable correspondence between them. In McFague's model, God is the mother, the lover and the friend of the universe, which is God's own body. The mysterious power of creation (agape) is represented by the mother's body giving birth to another body: God, from this very body, gives birth to the universe. This reading finds no support in our folk theories, although it fits our contemporary scientific theories of evolution and creation of the universe. We have shown that although giving birth is a salient predicate prompted by *mother*, its projection to God seems to be

blocked. Perhaps it is blocked because of the force of conventionality of the father metaphor, perhaps because it does not find support in our folk narratives. However, the link between mother and earth, not fully explored by McFague, may lead us to the same moral attitudes towards nature.

God, claims McFague, is passionately in love (Eros) with creation. Passion, sensuous feelings towards the other are easily retrieved from folk readings of the mother metaphor. Finally, in McFague's model, God is our friend, we trust him (salvific). This association also has a parallel in our folk interpretation. Indeed, it seems that the mother metaphor propitiates the projection of feminine attributes to God. Thus, the idea of sensitivity, sensuality, horizontal relationships, consoling, benevolence are all projected to God.

Does the coherence between our folk reading of the mother metaphor and McFague's proposal correspond to our practices in the world? Horizontal relationships are more and more our way of relationship; ecological concerns and practices are increasingly become a part of everyday activities, the search for freedom from oppressive institutions may be exemplified by contemporary non-governmental organizations; our scientific mentality better fits a naturalistic description of creation, a feminine approach to problems is more and more prominent. As Baudrillard remarks: "This is the reason why in our society, everything is feminized, sexualized in a feminine manner." (1981:34) Would the feminization of our societies lead to a better world? Baudrillard warns us about our contemporary emptiness of feminine seduction, and about the fact that the feminine turned into a principle of production, into a body that sells everything.

Thus, if it is true that our world practices are organized under the feminine sign, it may also be that such an organization hides some sort of perverse logic. Perhaps we are just maintaining the dichotomy of our Occidental minds.

Is the announcement of a feminine world the sound of trumpets proclaiming our redemption? The mother God fulfills our imaginary desire of a matriarchy, a place free from oppression, full of completeness, as if in a dream of re-integration into nature. It answers our deep desire of reincarnating a symbiotic relation to nature, our delightful dissolution into our mother womb. Nonetheless, the mother metaphor could be read as a myth of creation without violating our conventional beliefs about God. Perhaps it is possible to unite God, the mother, the principle of everything, and God, the father, the beginning of culture. Couldn't God be the masculine and the feminine - the womb and the phallos?

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