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RELIGIOUS METAPHORS AS MEANS OF CONSTRUCTING ELON MUSK'S IMAGE IN BUSINESS MEDIA DISCOURSE

Summary. The research paper aims to show corpus-based evidence proving that the producers of business media discourse frequently tap into deep-seated religious belief systems in order to construct the mental image of centibillionaire Elon Musk. Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) serve as the theoretical basis for the study.

The data has been compiled from popular business media outlet *The Street* with the help of the LexisNexis. After compiling the data, the AntConc software was employed to identify keywords, concordance lines, and collocational clusters (bigrams/trigrams) based on potential «metaphoric triggers.» These triggers were then analyzed using frame-slot modeling to map the cross-domain correspondences between the source domain (RELIGION) and the target domain (BUSINESS/LEADERSHIP). The study distinguishes between conventionalized, semi-conventionalized, and novel metaphors to assess how deeply embedded these concepts are in current business discourse.

During the research, six distinct metaphoric frames that structure the discourse around Elon Musk: RELIGIOUS FIGURES, RELIGIOUS ACTS AND RITUALS, SACRED TEXTS, RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS, IDEAL OF LIFE, SIN AND THE UNDERWORLD. The first frame (RELIGIOUS FIGURES) is also structured by additional slots.

Religious schemas activated by metaphors have a tendency to carry emotional and moral weight. Business media discourse has a tendency to elevate Elon Musk beyond a mere CEO to a figure of cosmic significance. Religious metaphors shape how he is perceived by the consumers of business news, including Tesla shareholders. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of religious metaphors stem from the Christian tradition, but there are also some examples of metaphoric language originating from other religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and ancient Greek beliefs.

Key words: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, religious metaphors, corpus analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, frame-slot modeling.

INTRODUCTION

According to V. Koller, business has become the “defining power” of post-industrial societies due to the sheer amount of wealth and influence accumulated by global corporations [1, p. 116]. The market economy has replaced religion as the primary structuring force in modern societies. Despite its waning influence, the archaic institutional religious paradigm still provides readily available raw cognitive material for such domains as economy and corporate matters.

The issue of using religious metaphors in corporate settings remains a hotly debated topic. D. Ruth, for instance, has critically

assessed the metaphor of a leader as a priest, arguing that the “concept of a spiritually informed corporate leadership is flawed” [2, p. 174].

The English language is embedded with various religious concepts [3, p. 10]. Western settings, such as the U.S., have been specifically defined by Biblical concepts. While religious metaphors tend to be prevalent in the English language, this is not the case for some other languages. In French, for instance, metaphors from the domain of religion are not as common. As A. Augé points out, religious references have been considered to be counter-revolutionary in France since the capture of the Bastille [4, p. 114].

Metaphors borrowed from religious discourse have attracted some scholarly attention over the past few years. For instance, N. Seephephe used the framework provided by critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to determine how religious metaphors were used to portray the AIDS pandemic during its early stages [5, p. 325]. R. Woods et al. studied how religious metaphors were used in the British press to denigrate climate change science [6, p. 323]. J. Charteris-Black has also explored how metaphors from such domains as religion and morality were used by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to achieve her rhetorical goals. The scholar, who came up with the critical metaphor analysis (CMA) approach, argues that Thatcher used religious metaphors to portray the policies of the Conservative Party as “the cause of inherently good moral values”. [7, p. 402].

S. Jaworska has also found that RELIGION was one of the most productive source domains for metaphors in promotional tourist discourse [8, p. 161]. The usage of religious metaphors has also been explored in the obesity/weight loss discourse. For instance, some food tends to be demonized while some obesity medicine tends to be conceptualized as a “miracle cure” [9, p. 17].

The paper also aims to determine how prevalent metaphors with religion-related source domains are in business media discourse. A. Varga, for instance, has explored how the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was conceptualized in business media discourse as the snake from the Garden of Eden [10, p. 144]. Still, the topic of metaphor usage in business media discourse remains largely unexplored, which is why it deserves more attention.

The research effort aims to construct a frame-slot model of metaphoric expressions within the religious domain. Specifically, it shows how different frames within this domain are projected onto various aspects of business via the mechanism of cross-domain mappings.

Analyzing the frequency of a particular lemma also makes it possible to ascertain the level of conventionalization of a certain metaphor in business media discourse. Scholars distinguish

conventionalized, semi-conventionalized as well as novel metaphors [11, p. 125].

As noted by E. Semino, metaphor studies can rely either on pre-existing general-purpose corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC) or their own specially constructed corpora. Despite being smaller in size, such general construction corpora are generally big enough to make certain generalizations [12, p. 2-3].

The corpus was constructed with the help of the LexisNexis database, which makes it possible to access archives of various business media outlets. This paper examines articles published by the financial news and literary website called *TheStreet*. The news outlet was co-founded by prominent financial journalist Jim Cramer back in 1996.

The specific articles were compiled by searching specific lemmas within the corpus that are likely to be triggers for religious metaphors. A separate corpus file was created for each potential trigger. These files were then manually analyzed with the help of the AntConc software [13, p. 515-516]. Specifically, the concordance tool was utilized in order to determine how each potential metaphoric trigger word functions in a “KWIC” (KeyWord In Context) format.

The semantic domain of religion is likely to serve as the source domain for religious metaphors. That said, the analysis shows that there are some lexemes that have non-metaphoric meanings within the corpus.

AntConc’s “Clusters” tool was used in order to search for specific metaphoric patterns within the corpus. This tool allows searching for words or patterns of words that come immediately after a certain key term. It makes it possible to determine the conventionality of certain metaphoric expressions.

FRAME-SLOT STRUCTURES OF METAPHORS WITH THE “RELIGION” DOMAIN

Total Number of Metaphors (N): 1,510

Religious metaphors have been analyzed with the help of the frame-slot modeling methodology. A total of six frames have been identified. Corpus analysis has helped to determine the number of occurrences for each lemma as well as typical metaphoric clusters (bigrams, trigrams, and so on) based on up to 1,000 hits.

Frame 1 RELIGIOUS FIGURES (36 %, N=544)

Slot 1.1 RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The term “evangelical,” which is derived from the Greek language, means “being in agreement with the Christian gospel,” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. It became popularized in business discourse during the dot-com bubble in the late 1990s [14]. The term “evangelism marketing” refers to a form of marketing invented by Silicon Valley venture capitalist Takeo Kawasaki that relies on a customer base with a very strong level of conviction that is willing to promote a certain product for free.

(1)... *Elon Musk is a cryptocurrency evangelist. Under his leadership, Tesla invested \$1.5 billion in Bitcoin in February 2021* (TheStreet, 2022)

The religious term “prophet” refers to those who have some sort of direct communication with the divine. Prophets are particularly known for their predictive abilities.

(2)...*a retweet from Elon Musk, who really is a sort of modern prophet, don't you think?* (The Financial Post)

Business executives are metaphorically portrayed as religious saviors or redeemers. They are expected to bring salvation and protect the company from financial difficulties. This metaphor

helps to create a narrative of crisis and redemption in business media discourse, setting up strong expectations of success. Moreover, it performs a pragmatic function of amplifying the role of a business executive.

The two common metaphors that appear in the Bible are MESSIAH IS A LEADER and MESSIAH IS A GUIDE [3, p. 20]. The term “messiah” stems from the Hebrew Bible. The noun form is “mashiach” (the anointed one) and the verb form is “mashach” (to anoint). The term continues to exist beyond religious contexts in various types of discourses [3, p. 181].

(3)... *Elon Musk's messiah complex may bring him down* (The Economist, 05 Dec 2023)

The purpose of the servant is to guide those who strayed from the past. SERVANT IS UP and SERVANT IS GOOD are some examples of metaphors that conceptualize this guidance as an aspirational state of being. The MESSIAH concept has evolved from a servant or guide to its modern idea of a savior. The LEADERSHIP IS UP metaphor serves as the basis for MESSIAH IS GUIDE. LEADERSHIP IS UP is a blend of two conceptual metaphors: PROGRESS IS UP and GOOD IS UP [15, p. 175]. At the same time, MORALITY IS A GOOD PATH conceptualized morality as a journey.

The term “deity” also invokes notions of idolatry and divine authority with the help of the AUTHORITY IS DIVINITY conceptual metaphor. The Sydney Morning Herald highlights how polarizing Elon Musk’s image is.

(4) *It's a staggering sum of money and it lines the coffers of an entrepreneur who is a deity to some and evil incarnate by others* (The Sydney Morning Herald, 02 Oct 2025)

According to J. Charteris-Black, the idea of a visionary implies supernatural powers. It is activated with the help of the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor [7, p. 403]. Charismatic leaders of the likes of Elon Musk are often framed as visionaries in business media discourse.

(5) *Analysts think Tesla Inc. (TSLA) needs to start readying a replacement for its visionary founder and CEO, Elon Musk.*

Slot 1.2. BELIEVERS

According to the Longman Dictionary, lexeme “zealot” is specifically applied to those who have a strong conviction. For instance, someone who is referred to as a “Tesla zealot” is supposed to show unwavering support for the company’s products. In Example 7, the lexeme is used to show Musk’s desire to lead a cultural change in the US.

(6) *People expect a zealot, like Elon Musk, to drive the desired culture shift* (Inc.com).

Frame 2 RELIGIOUS ACTS AND RITUALS (23 %, N=347)

The usage of the lemma “worship” shows the perceived authority of business individuals, elevating them to some sort of quasi-religious status. Employees and investors could be portrayed as religious adherents. The metaphor draws on Max Weber’s concept of charismatic authority.

Worshipping is an act of high reverence and devotion that is performed in such religions as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and so on. Animism, the earliest form of religion, is believed to be associated with the first acts of worship. The metaphor implies that certain CEOs tend to attract the same level of veneration as religious figures. It also shows that such a level of admiration might be unwarranted, meaning that it has a negative connotation.

(7) *You know, there are people there who worship this guy. I mean, I think one difference between Elon Musk and Mark Cuban is Elon Musk has a huge audience of people* (CNN Transcripts)

Frame 3 SACRED TEXTS (3 %, N=45)

Religious texts are considered to be infallible, with followers typically viewing them as the ultimate authority. In these examples, religious imperatives are used for conceptualizing guidelines that are related to investment and trading. It specifically relies on the cognitive knowledge of religious imperatives in order to make it easier for those who consume business media discourse to understand complex trading phenomena. Moral and spiritual consequences are mapped onto possible financial losses.

In the religious context, the term “gospel” refers to the teaching of Christ. The framing also alludes to possible irrationality. Such devotion to the cause can become the target of criticism. The metaphor has a rather negative connotation since gospel teachings tend to be accepted by believers without any questions. In Example 8, the producer of the discourse is challenging the “cult of personality” surrounding tech moguls.

(8) *...his party outrightly dismisses charges of EVM manipulation and said that Elon Musk's statement was no gospel truth and that everyone has to fall for it* (MENAFN - Business & Finance News)

The word “mantra” originates from Sanskrit, meaning “a tool for thought.” It is used in Hinduism and Buddhism to refer to words that are believed to have magical powers. The religious term is used in relation to frequently repeated business ideas.

(9) *Tesla CEO Elon Musk has repeatedly endorsed that mantra* (Benzinga.com, October 2025)

Frame 4 RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS (14 %, N=211)

The metaphoric cluster “sacrificial lamb” is used a total of 20 times, which shows that it conventionalized. The phrase “like the lambs to slaughter” stems from the depiction of a suffering servant in the Hebrew Bible (specifically in the Book of Isaiah).

(10) *Peter Navarro says Elon Musk shouldn't treat the 'big, beautiful bill' like a 'sacrificial lamb'* (Fox Business, June 2025)

In Example 11, the “holy grail” metaphor, which has a rather high level of conventionalization, refers to the cup that Jesus allegedly drank out of at the Last Supper. It is mentioned in Arthurian legends that date back to the 13th century. Historians believe that the holy grail is historical fiction. The corpus analysis shows that the metaphor is quite conventionalized. The religious term is often used by reporters in order to describe a sought-after goal that can also be seen as quite elusive.

(11) *Elon Musk has called it the "holy grail" for space technology* (The New York Times, 2023)

Frame 5 IDEAL OF LIFE (5 %, N=76)

As noted by X. Gao and C. Lan, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is the main metaphor used by Christians for conceptualizing the ideal of life [15, p. 875]. At the same time, Buddhists rely on the NIRVANA IS A CONTAINER metaphor. In both cases, the ideal state tends to be conceptualized in terms of entering a container.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN shows the good/evil dichotomy. Notably, the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament of the Bible, frequently emphasizes that it is challenging to enter this container [15, p. 880].

(12) *Elon Musk's 'troll heaven' turned Twitter into advertiser hell* (The Sydney Morning Herald)

Frame 6 PUNISHMENT AND HEREAFTER (19 %, N=287)

Religious metaphors that are located within this slot tend to evoke extreme images to conceptualize the consequences of bankruptcy, economic crises, stock market crashes, and so on. The culturally embedded term “hell” is used for describing extremely challenging situations.

The semantic field of this particular term is filled with negative connotations. The metaphor makes it possible for the consumers of business media discourse to grasp the emotional weight of various stressful scenarios in business media discourse. It tends to be expanded with various images (“a circle of hell”, “gateway to hell”, “descent into hell”). The term has the following prepositional attributive word combinations: “jobs hell”, “living hell” and so on. There are other terms like “torment” and “damnation” that could be used in business contexts.

(13) *...because there isn't a real political will at this point to really stand up to President Trump and to Elon Musk because of, frankly, the hellfire that rains down on members of Congress* (CNN International)

The “apocalypse” metaphor is frequently employed in business media discourse in order to describe events that are considered to be disastrous and catastrophic. Corpus analysis shows that the metaphor is often used in market analysis articles (especially when it comes to severe market downturns). The metaphor helps to evoke an image of doom and destruction.

(14) *A survival guide for Elon Musk's AI apocalypse* (July 2022)

The metaphor can also be a prime target for resistance given that it can paint an overly dramatic picture of events. Such framing can substantially intensify market participants' perception of certain challenges. This sort of media framing could potentially influence decision-making.

The “Armageddon” metaphor is used to describe market crashes, company failures, global regulatory risks, and so on. The term denotes a Biblical concept, which shows the final battle between good and evil. The metaphor performs such pragmatic functions as exaggeration and evocation of urgency.

(15) *Musk said it would take "Armageddon," or what he described as "Ragnarok next level," for him to be reduced to such limited resources* (Yahoo Finance, December 2025)

Conclusions

Corpus analysis demonstrates that business media discourse is replete with religious metaphors. In this type of discourse, religious metaphors have to simplify and clarify various concepts for their audiences. They tend to have strong cultural resonance (especially in religious societies such as the US). Such metaphors typically rely on shared cultural knowledge.

The persuasive effect of such metaphors could be aimed at investors, employees, policymakers, and so on. In addition, the deification of economic/business power via metaphorization could be used for legitimizing authority given that they draw upon some readily available cognitive material. Elon Musk can be elevated to a divine level, which can be viewed as a form of secular idolatry.

At the same time, religious metaphors could be potentially used for undermining and dismantling authority instead of reinforcing it if they are used with a sarcastic tone. For instance, such metaphors could be potentially used to expose the excessive zeal and dogmatism of some business executives who have skin in the game.

Within Van Dijk's framework of the "ideological sphere," religious metaphors with an explicitly negative connotation can also be used as a form of other-presentation. Positive or negative aspects can be foregrounded with the help of a headline.

Religious metaphors that are activated with such terms as "apocalypse" also tend to significantly dramatize various business scenarios. Hence, traders and investors can use affective heuristics to make decisions based on strong emotional responses.

Future research might explore the use of religious metaphors in other types of media discourse. Scholars might also focus on the cross-cultural comparisons of religious metaphors.

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Довбня О. Релігійні метафори як засіб конструювання образу Ілона Маска в дискурсі бізнес-медіа

Анотація. У цій дослідницькій роботі на основі корпусних даних демонструється, що у англomовному дискурсі бізнес-медіа часто звертаються до глибинних систем релігійних вірувань з метою конструювання ментального образу мільярдера Ілона Маска. Теоретичним підґрунтям дослідження слугують корпусно-орієнтований критичний дискурс-аналіз (КДА) та теорія концептуальної метафори (ТКМ). Матеріал було зібрано з популярних бізнес-видань на кшталт *The Street* та *The Financial Times* за допомогою бази даних LexisNexis. Після збору даних було використано програмне забезпечення AntConc для ідентифікації ключових слів, рядків конкордансу та колокаційних кластерів (біграм/триграм) на основі потенційних «метафоричних тригерів». Ці тригери згодом було проаналізовано за допомогою фреймово-слотового моделювання для відображення міждомених відповідностей між корелятивним доменом (РЕЛІГІЯ) та референтним доменом (БІЗНЕС/ЛІДЕРСТВО). На основі отриманих корпусних даних у дослідженні розмежовуються конвенціональні, напівконвенціональні та оригінальні метафори для оцінки того, наскільки глибоко ці концепти вкорінені в сучасному діловому дискурсі. У ході дослідження було виокремлено шість чітких метафоричних фреймів, що структурують дискурс навколо Ілона Маска: РЕЛІГІЙНІ ПОСТАТІ, РЕЛІГІЙНІ ДІЇ ТА РИТУАЛИ, СВЯЩЕННІ ТЕКСТИ, РЕЛІГІЙНІ СИМВОЛИ, ІДЕЯ БУТТЯ, ГРІХ ТА ПОТОЙБІЧНИЙ СВІТ. Перший фрейм (РЕЛІГІЙНІ ПОСТАТІ) також структурований додатковими слотами. Релігійні схеми, що активуються метафорами, мають емоційне та моральне навантаження. Діловий медіа-дискурс схильний підносити Ілона Маска над рівнем простого генерального директора до статусу фігури космічного масштабу. Релігійні метафори формують те, як його сприймають споживачі ділових новин, зокрема акціонери Tesla. Не дивно, що переважна більшість релігійних метафор походить із християнської традиції, однак трапляються приклади метафоричної мови, що бере початок в інших релігійних традиціях, зокрема буддизмі, індуїзмі та давньогрецьких віруваннях.

Ключові слова: теорія концептуальної метафори, релігійні метафори, корпусний аналіз, критичний дискурс-аналіз, фреймово-слотове моделювання.

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