

Metaphoric Sense Developments in the Names of Places of Worship in Contemporary American English

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Abstract

This paper offers an account of the metaphorical extension of the names of religious houses of worship such as *temple*, *church*, *mosque*, and *synagogue* in contemporary American English, reflecting processes of linguistic secularization. Using data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), the study investigates how the meanings of religious terms enter into secular domains, signalling shifts in societal perceptions of religious experience. The findings show that *temple* and *church* frequently undergo metaphorization, appearing in phrases like *temple of learning* and *church of football*, where non-religious modifiers drive semantic extension. These terms increasingly denote secular places characterized by human passion, knowledge, and community, disclosing broader patterns of cultural engagement that evidently mirror religious practices and behaviours. In contrast, *mosque* and *synagogue* demonstrate greater resistance to metaphorical extension, retaining religious denotations more typically. The study identifies SOCIETY, CULTURE, and LIFESTYLE as the principal domains for metaphorical extension, suggesting an alignment between linguistic secularization and usage shifts into non-religious contexts. Conversely, domains such as SPORT, TECHNOLOGY, and MILITARY show minimal metaphorical usage, reflecting the selective nature of this process. The results underscore the role of metaphor in bridging sacred and secular spheres, demonstrating how language adapts in order to reflect evolving cultural frameworks. By applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory and insights from cultural linguistics, this research advances our understanding of linguistic metaphorization, and more particularly secularization, as significant drivers of semantic change.

Keywords: secularization; metaphor; semantics; corpus; culture

1. Introduction

Languages are living entities which evolve in response to cultural, societal, and ideological shifts. One striking reflection of such evolution is the development of secular metaphoric senses in lexemes that historically bore meanings specific to religious domains within lexicons. The names of places of worship, such as *temple*, *church*, *mosque*, and *synagogue*, have

long served to denote spiritual and communal places. However, in contemporary American English, these terms have exceeded their original religious spheres, and have entered into new areas of metaphorical usage that reveal broader linguistic, and perhaps cultural, transformations. This paper investigates these developments, and it also proposes that if American society is indeed undergoing general secularization, as some historians and sociologists have argued (Berger 2002; Moore 1989; van der Tol and Gorski 2022, etc.), the new metaphoric senses identified here can be considered linguistic evidence of that cultural transformation.

The primary focus of this study is on the metaphorical extensions observed in the nominal phrase type *RELIGIOUS-PLACE of NOUN*, such as *church of film*, *church of food*, or *church of football*. These constructions reflect a novel semantic shift where, in this case, *church* comes to signify ‘a centre or venue of an activity’ or ‘a facility dedicated to a specific purpose.’ Interestingly, while this usage of *church* is increasingly prevalent in contemporary discourse, it has yet to be formally recognized by major lexicographic sources. The phenomenon echoes a more established pattern observed in the lexeme *temple*, as seen in expressions like *temple of art*, *temple of learning*, and *temple of science*. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* already acknowledges this metaphorical extension for *temple*, defining it as ‘a place devoted to a special purpose.’

The historical roots of this metaphoric shift date back at least to the late 18th century. The earliest instance recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is seen in the phrase *temple of fame* (*The temple of fame is the shortest passage to riches and preferment* in ‘Junius’, Stat Nominis Umbra (1772) vol. II. lix. 275). Such verification shows something of the dynamic nature of linguistic metaphorization and its role in shaping contemporary meanings. That there are parallels between the metaphorical developments of *temple* and *church* begins to suggest that a broader cognitive and cultural mechanism is at work, wherein religious terminology is repurposed to describe secular domains of human activity.

Drawing on empirical data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), this study investigates the frequency, distribution, and conceptual domains associated with the metaphoric senses of *temple* and *church*, as well as those of *mosque*, *synagogue*, and certain other terms for places of worship. The evidence adduced indicates that while *temple* and *church* have readily adopted secular metaphors, the other terms examined have demonstrated greater resistance to such semantic shifts. These disparities highlight that lexical interrelations, religious and other, are determined in complex ways by frequency effects, collocational tendencies, and even extralinguistic, cultural forces.

2. Linguistic secularization and semantic change

The secularization of religious terminology has been the subject of increasing academic interest, though it has, in the main, been examined more as a sociological (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; Norris & Inglehart 2004; Davie 2007; Bruce 2011) or a historical process (Chadwick 1975; McLeod 2000; Taylor 2007), surmised to reflect broader societal shifts in which sacred concepts are appropriated into secular domains. Empirical research on the

semantic secularization of English terms is scarce. Most relevant studies have investigated other languages. Examples of such include Yadin and Zuckermann (2010), which, while focusing on Hebrew, demonstrates the ideological secularization of particular sacred terms. Rabin (1965) also explores secularization patterns in Hebrew, but does draw parallels with the evolution of religious terminology in English. Moreover, much of this research focuses on secularization in cultural or sociological contexts, leaving a notable gap in the linguistic examination of religious lexis, no less so in English terminology than elsewhere. Łodej and Newman (2014) as well as Newman and Łodej (2014) provide important analyses of this phenomenon, demonstrating how the adjectives *divine* and *holy* have transitioned from their original religious contexts to more secular and figurative uses. This highlights a gradual shift away from explicitly religious associations in these lexemes, and could be a reflection of a greater cultural secularization, that is, taken generally, a reduced significance of religion in society and in the minds of individuals (cf. Berger 2002). The hypothesis that American society at large has been undergoing secularization, at least as regards Christianity (and more debatably religiosity), dates back at least to the 19th century (Moore 1989), and has come to the fore among historians, sociologists, and other researchers in recent years (Parsons 1974; Moore 1989; Bruce 1996; Berger 2002; Smith 2003; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Casanova 2006; de Graaf 2013; Voas and Chaves 2016; van der Tol and Gorski 2022; etc.).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is a fundamental aspect of human cognition, with linguistic metaphors expressing deeper conceptual structures. Kövecses (2009) builds on these ideas, refining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to account for cultural and contextual variations in metaphor usage. More recent contributions, such as Kövecses's Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (2020), expand upon the dynamic role of metaphors in shaping human thought, language, and culture.

This progressive approach aligns with research in cultural linguistics, as advanced by Sapir (1921), Whorf (1940), Lévi-Strauss (1958 [1963]), Wierzbicka (1996) and Sharifian (2017). As Sapir (1921: Chapter X) plainly states: “language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives”. While Sapir laid the groundwork by asserting that language and culture are inseparable, Sharifian has expanded on this view to highlight culturally situated knowledge and collective cognitive structures. The century-long gap between their contributions, the maintenance of that proposition, confirms its utility for understanding how language reflects cultural frameworks.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as refined by Kövecses (2009), intersects with cultural linguistics by demonstrating how metaphors draw from shared cultural experiences. This theory suggests that metaphors map abstract experiences onto more concrete domains, informing the metaphorization of religious terms. For example, metaphors like *temple of learning* or *church of football* illustrate how sacred terms are recontextualized to describe secular activities and places. Cognitive semantics (Rosch 1978; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Jackendoff 1983; Langacker 1987; Sweetser 1990; Talmy 2000) provides a critical framework for understanding the metaphorical extension of religious lexis into secular domains. By emphasizing the relationship between language and experience, cognitive semantics allows for the analysis of how abstract concepts are grounded in concrete experiences. By combining

insights from cultural linguistics and conceptual metaphor theory, this study explores how religious lexemes of contemporary American English have semantically undergone secularization and suggests that this process may, supporting arguments for American secularization, evidence a parallel process at the societal level.

Historical perspectives on semantic change also provide valuable context for understanding the evolution of religious lexis. Although the adaptation of religious terms forms part of a broader trajectory of language evolution, the process reflects patterns observed across various domains. Foundational works by Meillet (1906), Stern (1931), and Ullmann (1957) outline general patterns of semantic shift influenced by societal and cultural factors. While these studies do not focus explicitly on religious terminology, their frameworks offer insights that can be applied to shifts in religious language.

Blank (1999) extends this discussion by exploring the cognitive and typological motivations behind lexical change, highlighting processes, some related to the respective prestige of innovative speakers, which may contribute to the secularization of religious terms. Traugott and Dasher (2001) further elaborate on semantic change theories, emphasizing the role of societal values in driving language evolution. Although their work addresses broader linguistic shifts, it provides indirect insights into the ways religious terminology may adapt over time.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-based methodology to investigate the metaphoric extensions of religious lexemes in contemporary American English. Drawing on the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), which encompasses over one billion words from diverse genres (spoken, fiction, newspapers, academic texts, TV/movie subtitles, blogs, and magazines), the research benefits from a rich dataset showing linguistic trends across registers and contexts. The corpus's diachronic structure (1990–2019) enables tracking of linguistic shifts over time, providing a robust foundation for identifying emerging patterns of metaphorical use.

This study investigates the lexical field of religious place names, and examines six common nouns representing such names: *temple*, *church*, *cathedral*, *shrine*, *mosque*, and *synagogue*, and it traces their metaphorical applications in secular domains. These particular nouns were selected because, unlike certain other terms of this small field (e.g. *sanctuary*), they were cross-listed as synonymous in both *The Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* (2004: 141, 917, etc.) and the *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>), and they yielded measurable *of*-phrase data in COCA. Key phrases such as *church of NOUN* and *temple of NOUN* serve as focal points, and with non-religious modifiers (e.g., *church of film*, *temple of music*) both represent and drive these semantic shifts. Through COCA's concordance and collocation tools, the study extracts instances of these metaphorical phrases, mapping their distribution across conceptual fields, including those of ART, CULTURE, LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS, EMOTION, SPORT, TECHNOLOGY, and SOCIETY. This

distribution highlights how religious terminology permeates multiple areas of life, reflecting the diverse ways in which the religious lexicon is repurposed in secular discourse.

The metaphorical senses identified are analysed within the frameworks of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Kövecses 2009; 2020) and cultural linguistics (Sapir 1921; Lucy 1992; Palmer 1996; Boroditsky 2011; Sharifian 2017). This dual approach ensures that metaphorization is examined from both cognitive and cultural perspectives, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how religious lexis adapts to secular contexts. Head-modifier combinations are scrutinized to reveal the mechanisms through which non-religious contexts facilitate the metaphorization process.

Preliminary inspection of the data indicates a significantly greater frequency of metaphorical extension in *temple* and *church* than in the other terms. The comparative token frequencies of the respective nouns are doubtless partly responsible for this mismatch. These two terms are by far the most frequent in the data, compared to the other lexemes. Domains such as SOCIETY and LIFESTYLE emerge as fertile sites for this metaphorization, reinforcing the notion that secular modifiers reveal and drive semantic extension from the religious to the secular.

4. Results and discussion

As a starting point for the analysis of the data culled, we set out the primary, pre-extension, religious meanings of the lexemes considered (definitions given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for places, not congregations, etc.). In the order treated in this section, the nouns of this study which represent places of worship are:

<u>temple</u>	<i>A building used for religious worship.</i>
<u>church</u>	<i>A building for public (Christian) worship.</i>
<u>cathedral</u>	<i>The principal church of a diocese.</i>
<u>shrine</u>	<i>A place where worship is offered or devotions are paid to a saint or deity.</i>
<u>mosque</u>	<i>A Muslim place of worship.</i>
<u>synagogue</u>	<i>A building or place of meeting for Jewish worship and religious instruction.</i>

Looking specifically to *church* and *temple*, the lexemes yielding by far the most secular-sense data (at 146 unique metaphorical head-modifier phrases and 129 such phrases respectively), we see the two leaders in the larger process of semantic sense extension in this set of lexemes. With the exception of *temple*, which is discussed first because it underwent metaphorization earliest, the subsections below are arranged in descending order of attested metaphorization. The total number of COCA data, including non-metaphorical instances, is given for each lexeme.

4.1. *temple* (201)

The term *temple* is frequently employed in metaphorical noun phrases such as *temple of literature*, *temple of photography*, *temple of music*, *temple of fame*, *temple of food*, *temple of*

decorum, *temple of meat*, *temple of success*, *temple of speed*, and *temple of amusement*. Again, from a cognitive semantics perspective, these expressions illustrate a conceptual mapping from, in this case, the source domain of *temple* - evoking veneration, sanctity, and communal gathering - to an array of target domains (e.g., cultural pursuits, personal ambition, and leisure activities). The entrenched phraseological pattern of *temple of X* leverages the high salience of the *temple* schema to frame diverse experiences in terms of sacredness, reverence, or ceremonial significance. For instance, *Temple of Literature* situates an environment of learning and scholarship within a sacralized conceptual place, or space:

- (1) She had a thick book in her hand, the place marked with her forefinger, and Manh suspected she'd spent the day at the **Temple of Literature**. (2004, FICTION: The Kenyon Review)

The phrase *temple of photography* spotlights the artistic devotion and specialized equipment that define a dedicated creative environment:

- (2) You've developed an eye. It'll serve you just as well with the living pictures, I suppose, he added with one of his characteristic sniffs. During October, equipment began to disappear from the **Temple of Photography**, a piece at a time. (1993, FICTION: Homeland)

Similarly, *temple of music* discloses the almost sacred status of musical performance venues in the cultural imagination:

- (3) Opera fans in Venice are growing anxious for a very, speedy reopening of the city's **temple of music**. (2000, SPOKEN: NPR Morning)

The expression *temple of fame* draws on the path-like quality of ambition, suggesting obstacles and ultimate glory:

- (4) The road that leads to the **temple of fame** has many setbacks and, for the same reason, it is so glorious to overcome them. (2018, ACADEMIC: Early American Literature)

Food-oriented metaphors such as *temple of food* elevate culinary experiences to quasi-religious rites:

- (5) A friend who finally dined at Chez Panisse, after trying unsuccessfully for two weeks to get a reservation, marveled at the bountiful display of immaculate produce on the entrance table. "I feel like we entered the holy **temple of food**, and this must be the holy water," he whispered as we went to our table. (1993, NEWS: San Francisco Chronicle)

In *temple of decorum*, the sanctification of social refinement and propriety becomes central:

- (6) The maitre d' here had wanted to stop them at the door, whether for lack of neckties or worse was unclear, but one look from his father, followed by her bright appeasing smile, convinced him it would be less fuss to seat and serve them. This **temple of decorum** was nowhere near the university or his surrounding stomping grounds. (2012, WEB: allaboutspike.com)

By contrast, *temple of meat* celebrates gastronomic indulgence and craftsmanship:

- (7) Chi Spacca, the country's most high-minded new **temple of meat**, has a peerless pedigree. In 2006, Mario Batali partnered with pasta doyenne Nancy Silverton to create L. A.'s Pizzeria Mozza. (2014, MAGAZINE: Esquire)

Meanwhile, the phrase *temple of success* frames personal or professional achievement as a hallowed pursuit:

- (8) There are no open doors to the **temple of success**. Everyone who enters must forge his own way. Grand success waits patiently for anyone who has the fortitude and determination to seize his share of the American dream. (1992, MAGAZINE: Black Enterprise)

The phrase *temple of speed* extends this sacralization to motorsport venues, portraying them as honoured grounds of racing:

- (9) Circuit organizers said that 65,360 spectators turned out for the Friday practice. Monza, the so-called **temple of speed** where the Italian Grand Prix takes place would be happy to see so many. (2012, BLOG: rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com)

Lastly, *temple of amusement* underlines the heightened status of places of entertainment:

- (10) The phrase 'The finest theater in Harlem' can be aptly applied to this redecorated and refurbished **temple of amusement**, read a newspaper ad announcing its opening. (1991, NEWS: Associated Press)

These *temple of X* constructions indicate how the lexis of sacred places of worship finds fertile ground in a variety of secular domains. By framing literature, music, food, or success in the language of devotion and sanctity, speakers highlight the communal or transcendent value of these pursuits, reinforcing a cultural model that frames certain worldly experiences as almost holy.

4.2. church (240)

As with *temple*, the term *church* appears in a broad range of secular metaphorical expressions, including *church of journalism*, *church of hype*, *church of champions*, *church of football*, *church of disco*, *church of technology*, *church of vinyl*, *church of writing*, and *church of pastry*. Drawing on the *church* schema, these constructions invoke a sense of communal belonging, ritualistic devotion, and doctrinal fervour - features mapped from the domain of religious worship onto various cultural, social, and even culinary contexts. By framing such activities as forms of "worship," these metaphors highlight the deep emotional and collective investment people place in media, sports, technology, or creative endeavours, paralleling the pattern observed with *temple*. For example, *church of journalism* characterizes a contentious media debate in quasi-religious terms:

- (11) Meantime, I'm puzzled by the holy war this debate has become. Mr. Owens dismissively refers to the **Church of Journalism**, but the religious fervor can be found almost exclusively among those like him, including Jeff Jarvis and Clay Shirky, who have nothing at stake themselves but are determined to convince those of us who do have skin in the game how wrong we are. (2012, WEB: www.cjr.org)

A playful sense of reverence emerges in *church of hype*, depicting the spectacle surrounding the Super Bowl:

- (12) Like every American over the age of 6 months, I feel a patriotic duty to the Super Bowl. I am an acolyte in the **church of hype** that precedes the game. (2007, NEWS: Houston Chronicle)

Meanwhile, *church of champions* invokes the dramatic public scrutiny of a prominent figure:

- (13) After an onslaught of social media criticism about offering prayers but no shelter in his **church of champions**, Osteen agreed to open Lakewood's doors. (2017, NEWS: Houston Chronicle)

In a similar way, *church of football* frames an enduring sports legacy within the language of priesthood and devotion:

- (14) Clearly, it is the conclusion of a former head of the FBI and the head of what will always be known at Penn State as the Freeh Commission, that these men looked the other way on Jerry Sandusky, a high priest of the **church of football** at Penn State for 30 years. (2012, WEB: articles.nydailynews.com)

An entertainment venue dubbed the *church of disco* signals a nocturnal, music-centered gathering place:

- (15) Late that night in the **Church of Disco**... Stanford invited everyone he knew to a party to introduce a new fragrance - Fallen Angel. (1998, TV: Sex and the City)

By contrast, *church of technology* underscores a clash between technological determinism and broader societal values:

- (16) All we are saying to you Technocrats is we don't belong to your **Church of Technology**. Saving the world with technology, at the expense of the health of the people, is not part of our religion. (2012, BLOG: www.dailypaul.com)

Cultural tastes and passions also find expression in *church of vinyl*, reflecting the communal reverence around the collection of music:

- (17) Money is in short supply. Brokeland Records, the **church of vinyl**, is threatened by a megastore to be built by the fifth-richest black man in America, an all-pro quarterback named Gibson? (2012: WEB: www.miamiherald.com)

An intellectual or creative pursuit gains almost spiritual stature in *church of writing and reading*:

- (18) They provoke and instruct and entertain, they even clarify, but a deeper means of thinking can often be expressed better in a story, a poem, a play, or a novel. I am aware that such a position is, perhaps, essentially romantic, but I believe in the **church of writing and reading**. (2012, BLOG: www.newyorker.com)

Finally, *church of pastry* elevates Viennese confections to a realm of sweet devotion:

- (19) And in every way - from a regenerative coffee and sweet roll at Cafe Landtmann (Sigmund Freud's favourite hangout, where he began scribbling notes for "On the Interpretation of Dreams") to a

communion-by-sugar at Demel, Vienna's legendary high **church of pastry**. (2003, NEWS: Atlanta Journal Constitution)

Collectively, these *church of X* examples highlight how religious lexis is co-opted to emphasize shared passion, communal participation, and the quasi-sacred nature of culturally prized activities. This pattern underscores the broader conceptual tendency to map elements of sanctity, ritual, and congregation onto secular pursuits, revealing both the adaptability of language and the cultural importance of these metaphorical formations.

4.3. *cathedral* (72)

As was seen of *temple* and *church*, the term *cathedral* is frequently employed metaphorically in various noun phrases, including *cathedral of art*, *cathedral of learning*, *cathedral of shopping*, *cathedral of trees*, and *cathedral of victuals*. From a cognitive semantics perspective, these metaphorical extensions illustrate conceptual mapping between the source domain of *cathedral* - as evoking grandeur, reverence, and structural significance - and different target domains (e.g., in education, commerce, nature, and consumption). The recurrent patterning of *cathedral of X* corresponds to entrenched phraseological structures, wherein the high salience of the *cathedral* schema supports the conceptualization of diverse experiential domains in terms of spatial, cultural, and affective magnitude.

For instance, *cathedral of learning* positions an educational institution as an intellectual and architectural monument, as illustrated in the following example:

- (20) Locally, the Czech-American community plans to mark the Hus anniversary in September with a program at the Czechoslovak Nationality Room - where a portrait of Hus is displayed - in the University of Pittsburgh's **Cathedral of Learning**. (2015, NEWS: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Similarly, the phrase *cathedral of art* frames a theater as a culturally sacralized space, reinforcing its status as an institution of aesthetic significance:

- (21) It was my mission in this first five years to make this community accept this theater as an important institution and to turn the bad feelings they had about Don around. [...] I mean here was this **cathedral of art** that I was just given, with enough money to run it well. (2003, NEWS: Denver Post)

In commercial discourse, the collocation *cathedral of shopping* capitalizes on the metaphorical extension of sacred spaces to consumer culture, conceptualizing high-end retail stores as places of ritualized consumption:

- (22) Aware of her husband's infidelities, Mrs. Santacruz apparently took her revenge on his bank account: she shopped. "Yeah, she said it was better than sex with her husband," Mr. Blarek testified. "Bloomingdale's was the mother **cathedral of shopping**. Saks Fifth Avenue, all the better stores. (1998, NEWS: New York Times)

Similarly, the phrase *cathedral of trees* draws on the grandeur associated with cathedrals, transferring the idea of a sacred space to the realm of towering trees:

- (23) But it was hard to take those whispers seriously amid the bucolic splendor of Edens Glen, and the whispers were too faint to scale the high, ivy-covered walls that girded the Oak Hollow Country Club, whose **cathedral of trees** seemed to buttress the very sky. (2010, FICTION: Club Rules)

Lastly, the expression *cathedral of victuals* extends the metaphor to the domain of food consumption, conceptualizing a supermarket as a vast space of culinary abundance:

- (24) Screeching to a halt mid-aisle in the vastly bright **cathedral of victuals** known as the Olney Shoppers Food Warehouse, the customer leans, elbows on cart handles, studying the merits of this unexpected benison. (1997, NEWS: Washington Post)

Taken together, these phraseological constructions illustrate the productive use of the *cathedral* schema in conceptual metaphor and lexicalized figurative expressions. The metaphor systematically extends across domains, reinforcing the pervasiveness of spatial and cultural salience in cognition and language.

4.4. *shrine* (60)

Similarly to *temple*, *church*, and *cathedral*, the term *shrine* also manifests metaphorical extensions in contemporary American English. While *shrine* typically denotes a sacred site dedicated to a holy person or entity, it also appears in secular contexts such as *shrine of democracy*, *shrine of flowers*, and *shrine of rock ‘n’ roll*. As with the other religious lexemes discussed, these constructions align with the broader process of semantic extension from a religious domain to secular spheres, highlighting how *shrine* can evoke reverence, devotion, and memorialization even in non-religious settings. For instance, *shrine of democracy* reimagines Mount Rushmore as a consecrated space symbolic of American political ideals:

- (25) And as work on Washington continued, tourists began making the trek to see the strange sight in the Black Hills. In the first year alone, 27,000 people visited Mount Rushmore, now billed as “the **shrine of democracy**.” (2002, TV: American Experience)

Likewise, a *shrine of flowers, balloons and teddy bears* constructed outside a nightclub in the wake of tragedy conveys a communal homage to loss and remembrance:

- (26) Civil rights leader and presidential candidate Al Sharpton visited the nightclub Monday night to console family who had erected a makeshift **shrine of flowers, balloons and teddy bears** outside. (2003, NEWS: Chicago Sun-Times)

In academic discourse, *shrine of facts* frames a highly regarded repository of information as an object of collective veneration:

- (27) To the contrary, now the center itself has been affected and so too the ‘**shrine of facts**’ most highly agreed upon by all community members (be they of a society or nation-state, an avant-garde movement, a Vienna Circle). (2017, ACADEMIC: Philosophy Today)

Lastly, *shrine of rock ‘n’ roll* casts a music-filled space as a sanctum for celebrating artistic performance:

- (28) I'm not sure I can relate. I have something to show you. Let's step in the room where it grows. A **shrine of rock 'n' roll**. (2009, TV: Cupid)

These *shrine of X* examples reveal a continuity in how religious terms can be repurposed to convey deep social or emotional significance. *Shrine* undergoes a secular shift, indicating that what was once primarily tied to ritual worship now transcends its original boundaries.

4.5. *mosque* (12)

In contrast to *temple*, *church*, *cathedral*, and *shrine*, the noun *mosque* preserves its distinctly religious meaning, exhibiting no extension into secular contexts within the data surveyed. The available attestations, such as *Mosque of al-Guyushi*, *Grand Mosque of al-Nuri*, and *mosque of Imam Husayn* (cf. 32–34), remain rooted in references to genuine Islamic sites, reflecting actual places of worship and their historical or cultural importance. In the examples here, *mosque* does not participate in broader secularization.

- (29) Fayoum Mosques The Mashhad of al-Guyushi (al-Juyushi): Known as the **Mosque of al-Guyushi** Known as the **Mosque of al-Guyushi** by Jimmy Dunn writing as Ismail Abaza. One of the oldest Muslim monuments in Egypt sits high up on the plateau of the Muqattam hills overlooking the cemetery of Cairo, as well as Cairo itself. (2012, WEB: www.touregypt.net)
- (30) This is where the Abbasids had built their city and where the **Grand Mosque of al-Nuri** had been, which ISIS had taken over, and where so many of the beautiful old mosques and buildings had been. And those will never be rebuilt. (2019, SPOKEN: NPR Fresh Air)
- (31) Visiting The Sacred Sites Of Shia Islam. "She wants you to take her picture," a man said when the old woman in the black abaya came up to me. We were standing in the **mosque of Imam Husayn** in Karbala, Iraq. This is one of the holiest shrines for Shia Islam. (2012, BLOG: www.gadling.com)

All of the references remain anchored in religious, historical, and cultural discourse specific to Islam, rather than adopting metaphorical or figurative usage in non-religious domains. Consequently, the case of *mosque* underscores how certain religious terms resist the sort of linguistic secularization seen with the other lexemes discussed above.

4.6. *synagogue* (10)

In a manner similar to that of *mosque*, the term *synagogue* does not exhibit secular extension in contemporary American English. While nouns like *temple* and *church* are often repurposed in phrases like *temple of food* or *church of football*, the term *synagogue* retains its traditional religious denotation in the COCA data. The limited instances of *synagogue* that do appear, such as *synagogue of Satan* and *synagogue of Anti-Semites*, continue to reference explicitly religious or doctrinal settings rather than metaphorical or cultural domains. For example:

- (32) "Jesus Christ tells John in Revelation 2:9 'I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are the **Synagogue of Satan**.'" (2012, WEB: assemblyoftrueisrael.com)

- (33) “[...] we have meditated on the ‘Bread of Life’ discourse that Jesus pronounced in the **synagogue of Capernaum** after feeding thousands of people with five loaves and two fishes.” (2012, WEB: wdtpers.com)
- (34) We pray to Moses here, Elder! If you guys love Moses so much, why don’t you marry him?! We accept all denominations of Judaism here at Scouts, Elder. But your **synagogue of Anti-Semites** is too strange! Get out and do not return! You are no longer welcome here!” (1999, TV: South Park)

Each of the instances reaffirms *synagogue* as a place, or space, of religious practice or conflict, indicating its resistance to metaphorical usage in secular contexts. Consequently, *synagogue* does not appear to undergo substantial linguistic secularization, maintaining its original denotation rather than branching into metaphorical or nonreligious domains.

4.7. Categorization of the target domains

Clearly, *temple* and *church* underwent the metaphorization in earnest before the other lexemes, and, if alignments like *temple of shopping* – *cathedral of shopping* and *church of liberalism* – *shrine of democracy* are any indication, the pair may well have been analogically targeted for secularization by *cathedral*, *shrine*, etc. For these reasons, and because the great bulk of the COCA data across conceptual domains features *temple* and *church*, we will detail only those two nouns in this section.

The COCA data revealing metaphorization in *temple* and *church*, *temple of SECULAR-CONTEXT-NOUN*, *church of SECULAR-CONTEXT-NOUN*, etc. fall into five conceptual domains, SOCIETY, CULTURE, LIFESTYLE, EMOTION, and MORALITY. Of these, only three registered more than 10 metaphorized phrases: **SOCIETY** (*temple* 17, *church* 30; total 47); **CULTURE** (*temple* 19, *church* 15; total 34); and **LIFESTYLE** (*temple* 16, *church* 12; total 28).

Domains showing the least amount of secular metaphor, those logging the fewest phrases in COCA (low single digits) are SPORT, TECHNOLOGY, TIME, and MILITARY. This may suggest that secular extension in religious lexis is less pervasive in contexts that emphasize precision and functionalism over symbolic expression.

As a final point here, it should be emphasized that the modifiers themselves play a crucial role in facilitating the metaphorical extension of religious terms. Non-religious modifiers, such as *music*, *food*, or *film*, act as catalysts that recontextualize *church* or *temple* into secular domains. For instance, *church of food* clearly evokes a space dedicated to culinary practices, conceivably paralleling the communal and reverential connotations of traditional religious institutions. These modifiers not only expand the semantic range of religious terms but also reflect societal trends that position secular interests within frameworks traditionally reserved for spiritual devotion. This pattern aligns with broader linguistic trends where domains of high personal or cultural significance adopt religious terminology to convey heightened importance.

5. Conclusions

The study highlights the increasing metaphorical extension of religious terminology, reflecting processes of linguistic secularization in contemporary American English. An analysis of the terms *temple*, *church*, *cathedral*, *shrine*, *mosque*, and *synagogue* reveals distinct patterns in their semantic evolutions.

The data adduced indicate that *temple* and *church* are significantly more productive in the process of metaphorization than are any of the other four lexemes examined, appearing frequently in non-religious contexts with modifiers such as *of food*, *of music*, and *of football*. These metaphorical extensions signal a shift whereby the religious terms are appropriated to signify places of communal or passionate activity in secular life.

In contrast, *mosque* and *synagogue* have largely resisted metaphorical extension, showing a stronger preservation of their traditional religious meanings. The rarity of secular modifiers paired with these terms suggests cultural sensitivities and distinct social boundaries that limit their metaphorization.

The study also reveals that metaphorical extensions concentrate within certain conceptual domains, here notably SOCIETY, CULTURE, and LIFESTYLE. These domains represent arenas where secular engagement is distinctly characterized by communal, voluntarily habitual, even ritualistic processes, recalling to some extent religious engagement and religious processes themselves, and perhaps also indicating that, overall, the linguistic secularization process is manifestly gradual. Admittedly, the domains of SPORT, MILITARY, and perhaps TECHNOLOGY today, conceivably share one or more of these characteristics, but yielded few phrasal attestations. This is likely the result of comparative developmental stage and associated productivity level. These domains most probably have not been eligible for long enough to generate plentiful evidence. Ancillary analysis with greater time depth, and perhaps also with data from related corpora, would likely confirm or dispel this supposition.

If in fact American society is undergoing measurable secularization, a decline in the significance of not just Christianity but religiosity generally (de Graaf 2013), and if the presupposed interrelations between language, cognition, and culture are in fact actual (Sharifian 2017), the secularization of religious lexis can be considered to mirror secularization in contemporary American society. The pervasive use of *temple* and *church* in non-religious contexts can be seen to confirm as much, and, indeed, that use underscores the fluid boundaries between sacred and secular spheres, reflecting shifts in collective identity and cultural priorities. Moreover, this greater cognitive phenomenon highlights the adaptive capacity of language to encapsulate societal transformation, reinforcing the notion that metaphorical extension is not merely a linguistic process but a reflection of changing value systems. By tracing these patterns, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in cultural linguistics and cognitive semantics, providing insight into how language evolves alongside cultural paradigms.

Certainly, it remains to investigate additional religious terms of English from a similar perspective, and even to expand the investigation to take in evidence from other languages; both, in an effort to confirm or refute the findings here, and, ultimately, to discover broader, cross-language patterns of metaphorization.

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