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Clusters, roots and hierarchies of (religious) metaphors in the disciplines

“Our language habits are at the core of how we imagine the world. Metaphor provides access to a disciplines assumptions about the way the world is structured’.

(Postman, *The End of Education, Redefining the value of school.* (Vintage. Random House, 1996, . 176).

Theoretical language harbours and mediates the underlying assumptions about the nature of the world. Metaphors provide access to a disciplines assumptions about the way the world is structured. To what extent Biblical metaphors shape theoretical language and constrain the parameters of textual meaning within which terms and concepts function is the question addressed in this paper. In many disciplines the significance and relevance of a well-developed theory of metaphor, metaphorical models and a clear understanding of the nature of metaphorical language are being acknowledged as a central issue in the scholarly enterprise. These emphases were partially the result of the linguistic turn in philosophy, developments in philosophy of language and philosophy of science in which the basic tenets of Modernity, the Cartesian subject-object divide and positivist rendering of objective and value-free theoretical knowledge was being questioned and replaced by stronger emphasis on the theory ladenness of all scientific observation, the relativity of all knowledge and the

plurality of possible perspectives on the world. A mirror image of these developments are reflected in religion, theology and Biblical scholarship. Here evidence abounds that metaphor is being recognized as constitutive of world views, philosophical systems, myths and theological theories of different kinds. The initial impact of this recognition was fueled by the radical rejection of the notion of objectivity - a notion deeply rooted in the positivist understanding of both theories and language.

In Post - modernism metaphor was thrust in the centre of discussions and opened up the recognition of the plurality of perspectives, theory pluralism, pluralism of language games and interpretation, multivocity of meaning and inter-textual reference, accompanied by the specter of relativism. In this respect Van Hoozer¹ speaks about '... the loss of the 'transcendent signifier' or Logos which results in a textual Gnosticism '... that refuses to locate determinate meaning in literal sense. Every truth claim is dissolved in a sea of indeterminacy'. In spite of the recent foregrounding of metaphor, views that claim that "all language is metaphorical"² and that metaphors have cognitive status or actually refer to and depict real states of affairs still seem to be controversial claims. In many disciplines including religion and theology, the parameters of the *double language thesis* (the literal-metaphorical distinction with its

¹ 'The Spirit of Understanding. Special revelation and General Hermeneutics'. In: Lundin, Roger (ed.) *Disciplining Hermeneutics. Interpretation in Christian perspective*. Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997, 136.

² This thesis was developed by Mary B. Hesse and others who argue against '...the standard analytical philosophical view of language which universally presupposes that normal, descriptive terminology is literal, stable and univocal' Hesse, M.B. 'The cognitive claims of metaphor'. In: Van Noppen, J.P. (ed). *Metaphor and religion*, Theolinguistics. Brussels, 1983, 27. This thesis as defended by Hesse argues for a position that '...sees metaphoric meaning as normal, not pathological and (that) some of the mechanism of metaphor is essential to the meaning of any descriptive language at all'(Hesse, Cognitive claims, 29). The whole discussion concerning Pan-metaphoricism is relevant here, but can not be dealt with explicitly. Cf. Alston, William P. *Divine nature and Human Language. Essays in Philosophical Theology*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) and Van Woudenberg, Renee. Pan-metaphoricism examined. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 31, no.4, 231 - 247, 1998.

emphasis on the primacy of the literal), still continue the Aristotelean legacy in which metaphorical language is seen as somehow deviant, primarily decorative and ornamental and certainly not intended as conveyor of cognitive meaning.

The groundbreaking work of Max Black, Mary B. Hesse and T.S. Kuhn emphasizing the role of metaphors, analogies and models in scientific paradigms, paved the way for the understanding that metaphorical language is not ornamental and therefore redundant but constitutive of many scientific models and moreover able to claim cognitive import. These developments have only recently (Van Huysteen, McGrath, McFague et al) resonated in Theology and Religious and Biblical Studies and paved the way for an openness to accommodate concomitant issues such as critical realism and pluralism. Christian scholars in most disciplines defend claims that a scholar's world view (way-of-looking-at-the-world mediated by metaphorical 'seeing-as' or '...as if..' language) i.e. a *theoretical* view of reality, mediates and harbours the (religious) assumptions underlying theoretical work. Not only are metaphors constitutive of the world views "made" ³by groups and cultures, they are also constitutive of the "scientific world views made" by academics and theorists of different hues. They form part of the triad of elements with which human language habits imagine and construct a world view and which also includes definitions and questions.⁴ To what extent such theoretical *world* views in the disciplines are informed by, depend upon or are conditioned by *Biblical insights* is a critical issue for Christian scholars. They are as dependent on answers to questions concerning the role, place and meaning of metaphor in Biblical and religious language as their counterparts in Biblical scholarship are.

It is common knowledge that religious utterances which are replete with metaphorical language, have a unique character, which distinguishes it from other language use and more specifically other uses of metaphorical language. It is the

³ This refers to Postman's use of "World makers," *The End of Education*, 172.

⁴ Postman, *The End of Education*, 175, 6.

relationship of this unique and typical character of *metaphorical language* and its relevance to world views and scholarship that is the focus of this paper. It is the differentiation between metaphor in religion (e.g. redemption) or in religious language (God's Providence), religious metaphors (God's Kingdom) and metaphors which function analogically in a "religious" manner in a variety of other contexts (e.g. Logical positivist prescriptions about the nature of truth) ⁵and their relevance for scholarship in general which are of interest in this paper.

Root metaphors in Scripture and the disciplines

The metaphorical nature of the language of the Bible is indisputable. In this respect it does not differ from the nature of ordinary language or from the language used in science and theology. In these contexts too, metaphorical language plays a central role. Scripture is replete with well known metaphors about God, His revelation in Scripture and about believers: God is portrayed as Creator, Father, King, Judge, Shepherd, Redeemer etc. Scripture is depicted as the 'Word' of God' and a 'light' by which the light is actually seen (Ps. 36). Christians are described as the 'body of Christ', a 'temple', the 'children' of God, 'friends' of God, 'slaves', 'ambassadors', 'light', 'salt', 'fishers', 'letters', etc. These and many other entity-like metaphors and metaphorical utterances are to be found *in* Scripture. Scripture also utilizes a different type of metaphorical language, that which relates to aspects or facets of reality and God's existence: God is love, He is justice, He is righteousness, etc. These types of relationships refer to a different kind of analogical relationship, one that relates to dimensions, aspects or 'modalities' of reality or God. Both types of metaphorical relationships are woven into the warp and woof of God's revelation to humankind. Because Scripture is a book of revelation for humankind it obviously utilizes both kinds of anthropomorphic images to portray and represent God and human experiences of the relationship to God.

⁵ Neurath, O. *Empiricism and Sociology*. (Boston: Reidel Publishing Co, 1973).

To the extent that disciplines have some theoretical sophistication their disciplinary and theoretical approaches express perspectival overviews of reality or are implicitly embedded in overviews of this kind. In these approaches a root-metaphor⁶ can often be discerned which is developed on the basis of a selection of one or more aspects of reality in terms of which reality is portrayed⁷. Systems theory is a well known and prevalent example of a theory and philosophy developed on the basis of a metaphor. The systems metaphor functions as a screen or a filter in terms of which the reality under scrutiny (the explanandum) is to be explained. It focusses, selects, organizes the perceptions and observations, guides the process of theory formulation and in this process provides the theoretical vocabulary (metaphors and analogies) on the basis of which explanatory hypotheses are developed and pursued. Organic, mechanistic or cybernetic emphases in Systems theory point to different analogies of the system metaphor that are explored. The systems root metaphor sets the parameters of interpretation of reality. But in the case of each one of these articulations (organic, mechanical or the information model) a different “shoot” of the root functions as controlling belief set. Most taxonomies of philosophical frameworks of theories in the Social Sciences do their analysis on the basis of the identification of such key notions.⁸ the . When a choice is made for one or the other such a root-metaphor it provides the basis for the understanding of deep religious truth or a Scriptural perspective on the

⁶ Pepper, S. *World Hypotheses. A Study in Evidence*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1942. Republished in 1970.

⁷ Pepper initially distinguished four such dominant root metaphors and later revised this insight.

⁸ Cf. Altman, I & Rogoff, Barbara 1987. World views in Psychology, Trait, interactional, organism, and transactional perspectives. In: Stokols, D. & Altman, I. 1987. *Handbook of Environmental Psychology*. New York:Wiley, 7 - 40. Brown, Richard H. 1977. *A Poetic for Sociology.toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Stein, Maurice, 1963. *The Poetic Metaphors of Sociology*. In: Stein, Maurice and Vidich, A. (eds.) *Sociology on Trial*. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1963.

world. The question is whether similar root-metaphors with their subsidiary foci are to be found in Scripture and how these relate to scholarship.

It is the purported relationship between these two kinds of root-metaphors (those found in Scripture and chosen as hermeneutical keys to interpret Scripture and those developed in the disciplines to gain access to the nature, structure and functioning of some dimension of reality) that is of interest to the scholar who wants to practice Christian scholarship.⁹

It seems possible to develop solid arguments for a number of possible 'points of entry' to God's revelation in Scripture, as it is possible to access creation from a diversity of points of entry. The critical question (in the context of this paper) is how the confessional thrust of Scripture conditions or qualifies the Christian's quest in scholarship and how choices for hermeneutical keys to Scripture relate to metaphorical keys chosen as access to reality.

Scriptural root metaphors condition and guide one's view of the world and sets limits to the permissible ways the world can be seen. This is apparent in the pervasive worldviews that permeate the perspectives of theories. Roy Clouser's¹⁰ formulates this as follows:

"Finally, recognizing the distinctiveness of perspectival theories is important because it allows us to notice how theories of reality pervade the concepts and theories of the sciences devoted to a particular aspect and are not confined only to philosophy. In fact ... It is through theories of reality that the influence of religious belief is conveyed to scientific theories: scientific theories necessarily presuppose an overview of reality, while overviews of reality necessarily presuppose some religious belief. Religious belief Regulates overviews of reality directly, and through the mediation of such overviews regulates scientific theories indirectly'.

On *the level of meta-discourse* about the discursive practices in Scripture the question arises whether it is possible to discern one or more central, traditional, privileged or

⁹ The reader is referred to a number of my publications in the Bibliography that have already attempted to deal with different aspects of these issues.

classic (root) metaphors that regulate both the pre-understanding of Scripture in the life of the church and the theologies that are imaginatively generated to give account of this. Van Leeuwen,¹¹ speaks of the "nucleus symbol" of specific sections or books in Scripture that would by nature of their status capture that which is essentially the intent and purpose of God's revelation concerning Himself, His plan of redemption or the nature of His reign. Such (root) metaphors, being central themes of Scripture, would dictate the manner in which Scripture ought to be read or understood. They express those insights which have been regarded as permanent and essential components¹² of the truths of the Christian tradition. This raises a number of issues one of which is the question whether Scripture harbours a hierarchy of metaphors or metaphor clusters which could be interpreted as either the central thrust, central motive or theme of Scripture that claims primacy in providing access to the central message of Scripture and regulates and conditions the interpretation of the rest of Scripture. Positions on this matter have far reaching consequences for the meta-discursive issue concerning *the regulating function of such metaphors*, an issue which functions in both non-theoretical and theoretical (theological) interpretation of Scripture.

Which Biblical metaphors are candidates for the most likely and most Biblically responsible root construals of the central reality of Christianity. Obviously not all these issues can be addressed but there is one specific issue which can not be avoided. Whatever the answer may be to the questions posed above, the Christian scholar still needs to reflect on how such choices impact his or her own theorizing. Here the relationship between Biblical insights and the decisive, regulating and controlling function of beliefs at work in theory constitutive metaphors and metaphorically

¹⁰ Roy Clouser, *Myth*, 66.

¹¹ 'Liminality and Worldview, in Proverbs 1 - 9' *Semeia*, 50 ,990.112

¹² McGrath, Alister E. *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1988), 185.

constituted theory terms ¹³require reflection. It still remains to be seen to what extent Biblical metaphors actually elucidate and inform the content, scope and meaning of such theoretical constructs

What has traditionally been regarded as the classic or traditional Biblical metaphors have also been challenged from a different angle. Sallie McFague ¹⁴ for example, argues that theology needs to reject outmoded and oppressive metaphors and models and is in need of poetic and philosophical constructs that will reflect the current experiences of reality of humankind. She argues that the basic metaphors and images used to interpret faith for our times have remained relatively constant: 'triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal'. These are outmoded and oppressive metaphors and models, she claims, and ought to be replaced by a 'remythologizing' of the relationship between God and the world. She then experiments with the models of God as mother, lover and friend of the world and with image of the world as God's body. She ¹⁵ says:

'Language that supports hierarchical, dualistic, unchanging, atomistic, anthropocentric, and deterministic ways of understanding these relationships (between ourselves and our earth) is not appropriate for our time, whatever its appropriateness might have been for other times. It would appear that the appropriate language for our time, in the sense of being true to the paradigm of reality in which we actually live, would support ways of understanding the God-world and human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative'.

Here the source of the metaphors is not Scripture, but contemporary human experiences. These positions raise significant questions concerning the nature, scope and meaning of metaphorical language.

A choice for example for the so called Scriptural groundmotive of creation - fall -

¹³ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*.

¹⁴ *Models*, 29 cf.

¹⁵ *Models*, xi, 13.

redemption and consummation¹⁶ requires the reader to follow a redemptive-historical reading of Scripture. The governing metaphors which regulate Dooyeweerd's philosophy are derived from his understanding of the ground motive (or root metaphor?) of Scripture: Creation - Fall and Redemption with its central emphasis on the *law* of God for His creation. The transcendental ground idea of philosophy is a 'cosmonomic idea', a term formed by Dooyeweerd when he was struck by the fact that different systems of philosophy were expressly oriented towards an idea of a divine world-order of some or other kind. Choosing the centrality of the notion or metaphor of 'redemption in Christ'¹⁷, 'covenant and kingdom', 'law'¹⁸ in Scripture leads to a different emphasis, as would a choice for the primacy of the notion of 'creation'¹⁹ or the 'Word'²⁰. Obviously these 'choices' beg the question of whether the nature of Scripture is such that one can actually 'choose' these metaphors or whether one has no choice but to accept those metaphors that are 'given'²¹.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's²² attempts at answering these questions have elaborated central themes of the Gospel and situated them in the midst of contemporary societal issues. Others propose to resurrect the notion of *care* (Goudzwaard and De Lange) and an *ethos of compassion* (Hart) in social relations or to seek *justice and peace* (Wolterstorff). In the epistemological stalemates posed by naive

¹⁶ Dooyeweerd, H. *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*; Vol 1 Amsterdam: Paris.1953; Wolters, Albert M. *Creation Regained. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.*

¹⁷ Van Huyssteen, *Essays*, 144.

¹⁸ Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, Vol. I. The original title of the Dutch version of his philosophy was *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic or 'Law' idea).

¹⁹ Stoker; H.G. 'Wysbegeerte van die Skeppingsidee' In: Stoker, H.G. *Oorsprong en Rigting*, I; Wolters, *Creation Regained*.

²⁰ Olthuis, *The Word of God and Biblical Authority*. Instituut vir die Bevordering van Calvinisme. Studiestuk nr. 101, Potchefstroom: PU vir CHO, 1976, 88.

²¹ McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue*, 185.

²² Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Reason within the bounds of religion*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984; *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. Kampen, Kok, 1983 both deal with epistemological and social articulations of this central question.

realism and radical constructivism some have proposed the consideration of an epistemology of *stewardship which emphasizes gift and call* i.e. a relational epistemology "...committed to respecting the other, attending to how the other discloses itself to us".²³ or to replace the idea of knowledge as power and knowledge as control with the understanding of knowledge as "*intimacy*"²⁴ for us to come to know and love others. *Knowledge with love* he says will mean the transformation of the current symmetries of production, reproduction, and arrangement of knowledge.

These worthy proposals have one refrain in common, a return to the very concrete claims of Scripture on the way society is structured and also on the way we form knowledge and theories of social reality. Why choose for the one dimension and not for the other? Why emphasize love, or compassion, or community or intimacy or care or justice or peace? Do they not all have to come into the full orb'd image of our daily lives in obedience to the Lord? Why privilege the one Biblical emphasis over the other? Moreover do all these Biblical emphases not also require philosophical articulation in order to become fruitful in the enterprise of the academy? One needs to recognize the multi valency of God's law both in Scripture and in creation and honour the multi dimensionality of its validity Perhaps this is an element of truth in postmodern insights into the pluriformity of the nature of the world we live in and the wide spectrum of possible ways of coming to grips with it of which human language is only one possible way. But all signification has as prerequisite the existence of a stable, constant and reliable order which makes it possible and conditions the broader process of knowing -(i.e. "being gripped by...") God's law. This structure is that to which the

²³ Walsh and Middleton, 1995, 167 - 171. This reminds of the South African philosopher H.G. Stoker's notion of "fanerosis". He advocates an epistemology which recognizes the intrinsic revelational (fanerotoc) character of reality.

²⁴ Jennings, Willie James. 'Baptizing a Social Reading: Theology, Hermeneutics and Postmodernity', In" Lundin, Roger (ed.), *Disciplining Hermeneutics. Interpretation in Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997, 124

metaphorical models and language refer and although articulated by the theoretician, it conditions the intentions of the author or actor and the bias of the interpreter

There is obviously a correlation between central notions like justice righteousness, care, frugality, stewardship, discernment and compassion in the full Biblical sense and the concrete and particular expressions of (love) notions as they present themselves in a diversity of aspects of human experience. These Biblical themes do not exhibit an enclosed and restricted meaning, but have a multivocality of meanings and also simultaneously exhibit depth dimensional religious meaning. One such notion is the Biblical notion of God's Word, law or creational decrees and ordinances - a central root metaphor of Scripture expressing succinctly God's covenantal and providential creation and care for His creation in and through His Word.²⁵ The notion of God as creator and sustainer or the metaphor of 'creation' in the sapiential traditions is a metaphor which governs the sages' understanding of God's involvement in the world. Perdue²⁶ writes:

'The metaphors for construing the acts of creation and providence in the wisdom tradition include fertility, artistry, word and battle. These infer, then, that God as creator and sustainer is king, judge, artist, warrior, parent, lover, husband and sage. Metaphors for human beings include children of God, lovers of wisdom, objects of art, kings, and slaves, while the world humans inhabit is most often depicted as a fertile field or garden, kingdom, city, household, or building.

Creation and providence as governing metaphors, Perdue²⁷ says, are not restricted to only the sapiential texts, but also play a significant role in the non-sapiential texts. The interpretation and understanding of creation Gammie and Perdue²⁸ argue is brought about by two major social paradigms: the paradigm of order and the paradigm of conflict. Similar attempts have been made to characterize the essential message of

²⁵ *Spykman, Gordon J. Reformational Theology, 178 - 182.*

²⁶ *Perdue, Leo G. Wisdom and Creation. The Theology of Wisdom Literature.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 29,330.

²⁷ *Wisdom and Creation, 341.*

the text of Scripture as a whole. I am thinking here of "The Story-line of the Bible" found in the Introduction of the Bible Society version of the Bible '*Into the Light*' and Al Wolters' *Creation regained*.

Others²⁹ differ on the choice of a specific central or primary theme in Scripture. Some argue that covenant and kingdom are the main themes of Scripture and that both are rooted in the creation covenant. Bartholomew³⁰ says if one sees the Bible as an edifice with many entrances, then covenant is one of the main entrances that gives us a 'unified and overall picture'. Similar insights informed the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy which was developed on the basis of seminal insights formulated by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper..

I do not believe that the emphasis on or recognition of law, order or structure is in any way an arbitrary choice of a Biblical theme or metaphor. Nor do I believe that singling out this notion amongst other Biblical notions is contrary to Biblical calls to justice, shalom, care, stewardship, intimacy, love or community. It is also not merely one possible alternative choice from an array of possible Biblical emphases. Whether we choose a central metaphor as point of entry to understand the 'holistic grammar' of the whole text of Scripture or whether we come to discern the governing metaphors of specific texts within Scripture or just identify an inventory of common metaphors to be found in Scripture, Scriptural metaphors have one thing in common: They are certitudinally or confessionally qualified. This is what Olthius³¹ calls '...the overriding focus of Scripture'.

In a recent publication³² by David Smith and Barbara Carvill on the Biblical basics for the teaching of foreign languages a different approach is followed. They do

²⁸ Gammie, John G. and Perdue, Leo G. *The Sage in Israel and The Ancient Near East*. (Eisenbrauns; Winona Lake, 1990), 457.

²⁹ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*. So does Bartholomew, 'Covenant and Creation', 11, 32.

³⁰ Covenant, 32.

³¹ *A Hermeneutics of Ultimacy*, 86.

not reject the role of the over arching narrative or root metaphor of Scripture, but claim that there are also limited metaphors that are relative to the pursuits of scholars. They argue that Scripture gives a significant position to the “stranger” in our midst and requires hospitality to be part of the life of the Christian community. This Biblical image or metaphor should form the basis of the teaching of foreign language, they argue. This type of approach is certainly a more sophisticated hermeneutical approach than fundamentalist or Biblicistic proof texting and yet it raises some questions. Is this the way that religious beliefs or convictions enter the intrinsic structure of theorizing? Does this not divorce the limited Biblical injunctions from the overall thrust of the Biblical message? To illustrate the point: Could an appeal to the Biblical injunction of “hospitality to the stranger” not also justify other theoretical positions such as e.g. sanctioning an open immigration policy at the expense of the citizens of a country? The point is that a Biblical metaphor often allows a wide diversity of possible theoretical positions, but is characterized by the fact that it rules out, prevents or prohibits certain positions or assumptions. The Biblical injunction or metaphor is a pointer, a compass not a road map. It sets direction, delimits parameters but does not dictate the exact way to go. Moreover the direction it dictates acquires its calibration from the central thrust of Scripture - a thrust which can be expressed in a central or root metaphor. Theoretical work requires far more detailed and elucidated theoretical approaches than can be provided by or gleaned from these (theoretically) ‘limited’ metaphorical Biblical insights. It requires an approach to scholarship conditioned by what can be regarded as the root - metaphor of Scripture.

Scholars often derive their ideas from religion or theology or are often stimulated or influenced by theological or religious notions in the process of theory formation. A much cited example of such an approach from the history of science is James Clerk Maxwell, the nineteenth century physicist in whose scholarly work the notion of the Trinity is claimed to have played a pivotal role. This approach argues that if a scientist

³² Smith, David and Carvill, Barbara. *The Gift of the Stranger*

is guided by or influenced by ideas³³ which have their **origin** in Scripture, faith or theology, then this would be proof of the "influence" of faith in theorizing. Here faith, the Bible or theology are seen and used as the **source** of the theory formation. Although the history of science abounds with examples of this kind, careful analysis soon shows that such sources or origins or themata do not necessarily make the theories developed Christian or 'religious'³⁴ Moreover, it is often the case that such so called 'religious' notions are often based on a suspect theology and exegesis clearly influenced by non-Christian philosophical influences. To the extent that theorizing is rooted in the Biblical narrative about God's covenantal love for His world and His gift and call to all His creatures to obey Him, it will produce perspectives that shed light on the path of scholarship and are conducive to growth of insight into the nature of social reality and human relationships. But due to its confessional focus and nature it is always inadequate to prescribe or proscribe the content and substance of theories with which to approach or explain dimensions of reality.

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³³ (Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 1984: 215 -242)

³⁴ The important works of Amos Funkestein, *Theology and the scientific imagination. From the Middle Ages to the 17th century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press and Brooke, 1986. John H. *Science and Religion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 deal extensively with historical examples. Cf. Also Cantor, Geoffrey. *Michael Faraday Sandemanian and scientist*

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