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Religious Metaphor in Malaysian Political Speeches After the *1997-1999 Financial Crisis*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of religious metaphor in Malaysian political speeches delivered in response to the unprecedented 1997-1999 financial Asian crisis, which originated in Thailand and spread to other Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia. It focuses on how religious metaphors were used to criticise the dogmatic commitment of free market proponents who promoted market liberalism as the sole solution to the crisis, thereby advancing the view that market forces should be balanced by social protection. The data was drawn from thirty-nine political speeches delivered in 2000 by Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia. The study aims to identify the types of religious metaphors selected for inclusion in his speeches and examine how they were used to represent fanaticism among those supporting free-market ideology, taking into account the socio-political context of the speeches and Mahathir's religious beliefs. The analysis draws on Charteris-Black's approach to political rhetoric and Fairclough's (2003) textually oriented discourse analysis. Five speeches were selected for close analysis to illustrate how religious metaphors were used to represent the doctrine of the free market as a "quasi-religion", characterised by dogmatism and resistance to alternative perspectives. The findings show that religious metaphors enabled Mahathir to present a vision of economic independence for Malaysia, while framing his opposition to free-market capitalism within a morally resonant narrative. The study demonstrates how religious metaphor functions as a powerful rhetorical and ideological resource in political discourse, particularly in times of crisis, contributing to critical debates on metaphor, ideology and resistance in political communication.

Keywords: Capitalism, economic marginalisation, financial crisis, free market, north-south divide, political speeches, religious metaphor

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the use of religious metaphors in the political speeches of Mahathir Mohamad after the 1997-1999 financial Asian crisis, a period that exposed economic vulnerabilities across Southeast Asian economies (Berg, 1999). The crisis, which began in East Asia, was global but the impact was local. Southeast Asian countries faced major challenges and turned to the West for solutions; some took loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Their decisions had an unfortunate impact on the economy and their political lives (Makaruddin, 2002). The impact of the crisis on Malaysia was particularly severe, leading to a sharp contraction in economic growth, a decline in real GDP to 6.7%, a depreciation of the Malaysian ringgit by nearly 50%, and an estimated 60% collapse in the stock market (Ariff & Abu Bakar, 1999). This was Mahathir's most impactful period, and when he showed his true calibre. Following his own path to recovery, Mahathir pulled Malaysia out of the 'global economy', took the Malaysian currency off the world market, "imposing controls on the export of capital and imposing tariffs." (Fairclough, 2006, p. 53). Fairclough (2006) argued that the unexpected success of Mahathir's unprecedented steps and bold policy decisions took many neoliberal experts by surprise.

In his post-crisis speeches, Mahathir articulated a sustained critique of global economic inequality and exploitation, which he identified as underlying causes of structural imbalances within the international economic system. He was especially critical of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for imposing an unfair Western-controlled financial system on poorer countries in the Global South in exchange for financial assistance, measures that, he argued, intensified poverty and exacerbated the exploitation of vulnerable populations (Rethel, 2020). Mahathir consistently called for a more equitable global economic order that would allow developing nations to grow and prosper without being subjected to unfair trade practices and systemic disadvantage (Kaplinsky & Kraemer-Mbula, 2022). Against this backdrop of profound economic disruption, this study investigates how religious metaphor functions as a rhetorical resource through which Mahathir communicated his interpretation of the crisis and framed its moral and ideological significance, particularly following the government's success in mitigating its effects on the national economy. In this study, religious metaphor is understood as the metaphorical use of language drawn from religious discourse to construct meaning in non-religious contexts, enabling abstract socio-economic phenomena to be interpreted through shared religious beliefs and moral evaluations.

Mahathir Mohamad was the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003) and returned in 2018 as the seventh. The significance of Mahathir's speeches derives not only from his institutional authority as head of state, but also from his leadership during the economic crisis of the late 1990s. His speeches delivered in the year 2000

discursively position neoliberalism not as a neutral economic paradigm, but as an ideological project that privileges market liberalisation, minimal state intervention and regulation, and global financial integration. Mahathir articulated a counter-hegemonic discourse in response to the Asian financial crisis, and by rejecting dominant neoliberal prescriptions of liberalising financial markets and the withdrawal of regulatory oversight, he legitimised an alternative model centred on state intervention, capital controls and economic sovereignty. This discursive challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy provoked considerable controversy, while simultaneously positioning Malaysia as a site of resistance to globally dominant economic ideologies. According to Peck et al. (2010), the dominant thinking that neoliberalism is "a sort of theological free-market ideology" (p. 99) explains its resilience and growing capacity to shape the economy and the market, reflected in the way it dominated the thirty years before the 2008 financial crisis. In this regard, we concur with Charteris-Black (2004) that metaphor is "a gateway through which persuasive and emotive ways of thinking about the world mould the language that we use, and through which our thoughts about the world are moulded by language use" (p. 2).

Drawing on Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004; henceforth CMA) and Fairclough's (2003) textually oriented discourse analysis, this article examines the use of religious metaphors in Mahathir's speeches in response to what he perceived as fanaticism in the free-market economic model promoted by major Western economies. Mahathir's position as Prime Minister of a predominantly Muslim nation, his self-identification as a Muslim and close political and economic ties with ASEAN significantly shaped his political rhetoric. Consequently, his religious beliefs informed his worldview and were discursively realised through the strategic deployment of religious metaphors in his speeches, which functioned to construct and legitimise a particular representation of social and economic reality.

RELIGIOUS METAPHORS IN POLITICAL SPEECHES

Interest in metaphor as an area of academic research increased markedly following Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By,* which conceptualised metaphor as a fundamental cognitive phenomenon, rather than a purely rhetorical device. They argue that human communication is grounded in an ordinary conceptual system used "in thinking and acting" which is inherently "metaphorical in nature" (p. 1), and that "metaphors play a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (p. 159). In political speeches, communication is intrinsically persuasive, and is realised through linguistic resources, including metaphor to produce effects of authority, legitimacy, and consensus that are central to political practice (Chilton, 2025). Research further demonstrates that metaphor "can guide thought and influence our reasoning about social reality" (Liu &

Chen, 2023, p. 1), functioning as a cognitive tool that can be drawn on to understand a target domain in terms of a seemingly unrelated concept" (p. 2). By structuring one domain of experience (e.g., finance) metaphorically in terms of another (e.g., religion), metaphor constructs reality in particular ways, foregrounding specific interpretations while obscuring others. In this regard, metaphors prompt audiences to use their knowledge of the concrete source concept to make sense of the more abstract target issue (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cox (2012) argues that political discourse makes strategic use of metaphor to serve the following purposes: first, to simplify abstract political concepts that may not be readily accessible to the general public; second, to influence the mind of the audience by framing issues in ways that suggest a particular course of action; and third, to persuade the audience in support of arguments that serve the interests of the speaker or writer. Empirical support for the first purpose is provided by Imani et al.'s (2021) study, which analyses Mahathir's political speeches, and demonstrates how metaphorical language renders complex economic concepts more accessible and meaningful to his audience. Similarly, Yu et al. (2025) emphasise the centrality of metaphor in political discourse, foregrounding its capacity to convey evaluative ideologies and influence public perception. In line with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive view of metaphor, Kövecses (2020) further underscores its power as a rhetorical resource for constructing reality, particularly in political contexts where persuasion is paramount (see also Alharbi, 2023).

Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has led to the critical study of metaphor. For example, Charteris-Black's (2017) study on metaphors in different genres has revived interest in how those in power use metaphor as a rhetorical tool *par excellence* in political, media and religious texts. He uses corpus methodology and draws on CMA and Fairclough's (1995) CDA to identify, quantify and discuss metaphors in presidential speeches and political manifestos. The findings show that research on metaphor provides a strong basis for the critical analysis of texts produced by those in power to create meaning to account for their actions. Because of its persuasive nature, metaphor is frequently used by politicians to evoke feelings to influence people's thinking (Arcimavičienė, 2023; Musolff, 2021). When metaphors influence the way we understand and think about things, they may become the commonsensical way of understanding certain aspects of the world, which explains why politicians tend to use metaphors to highlight some aspects of reality while concealing others for ideological purposes (Machin & Mayr, 2013). Metaphor thus provides rich insights into people's ideas, attitudes, and values (Cameron et al., 2009; see, e.g., Patterson, 2022), making it a suitable research object to understand why those in positions of authority act in a particular way affecting the lives of others.

One of the most rhetorically powerful metaphor domains in political speeches

(Charteris-Black, 2004) is arguably the comparatively under-researched 'Religious' domain. Dorst (2021) argues that metaphor and religion are closely intertwined, as religious and spiritual experiences are often highly personal, emotional, and abstract. Drawing on CMA, Polova (2020) investigated the use of religious metaphors in the speeches of Turkish politicians to identify their functions and explain how these metaphors reflected Turkish cultural values and shaped public perceptions of reality. In contrast to more established metaphor domains such as 'Journey, Building, and War', 'Religious' metaphors tended to be more selectively deployed, often associated with political actors and specific genres. For example, studies have shown that the speeches of US presidents are noticeably richer in religious metaphors than those found in British political speeches (Hughes, 2019; Ivanovic, 2017). Similarly, an analysis of David Cameron's campaign speeches demonstrates how religious language was strategically used to appeal to Christian voters in England, highlighting the persuasive power of religious metaphor in electoral contexts (Williams, 2018).

In American political speeches, 'religious' metaphors were associated with different ideological perspectives. George W. Bush, for example, used 'Religious' metaphors as a strategy to validate and legitimate war against Iraq (Biria & Mohammadi, 2012). Daughton (1993) asserted that the 'Holy War' metaphor in Roosevelt's inaugural speech was an effective strategy to 'unify the audience' and 'rehearse shared values'. What is socially significant about 'Holy War' was the combination of qualities of 'Religious' and 'War' metaphor domains calling for 'unquestioning obedience' and "inspired, committed actions for a morally satisfying victory over evil" which ultimately brings about peace (p. 436). Bush referred to Iran using the metaphor 'Axis of Evil', and Reagan used 'Evil Empire' for the Soviet Union. Likewise, the Iranian government framed the policies of the US government using the 'Great Satan' metaphor, and Osama Bin Laden used the 'Us/Them image-making' strategies to represent the USA as 'the Evil' (Bhatia, 2007). From a religious point of view, as an ontological force, Evil is not to be negotiated with and must be destroyed as a last resort (Biria & Mohammadi, 2012). Van Dijk (2006) refers to this image-building function as 'ideological square' defined as 'emphasising our good things, emphasising their bad things, de-emphasising our bad things, and de-emphasising their good things' which ranges from persuading alliance with Us (Daughton, 1993) to legitimating war against our enemies (Bhatia, 2007).

'Religious' metaphors tend to be strongly polarised ('Us/Them') to justify, for example, the complete eradication of 'them' by waging war against 'them'. This is a common function of 'Religious' metaphors, usually conveyed by Good vs. Evil image-making (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007) to restructure the political world and unify 'us' against 'them'. Bhatia (2007) reported the use of contrasting metaphors such as

'Evil, Light and Darkness, and Heaven and Hell' as an image-making strategy by George Bush and Osama bin Laden to create a positive self-image versus a negative-other image. This evangelical dualistic perspective of life seems to have no middle ground: you are either with 'us' (the forces of Good) or with 'them' (the forces of Evil). The 'Evil-other' image portrayed by 'Religious' metaphors in the speeches of US presidents appears to be quite forceful and intense, and attributing to their enemies or rivals negative attributes to legitimate war against them (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The dataset comprises five political speech transcripts (Table 1) selected from a larger corpus of thirty-nine speeches (see Appendix) delivered by Mahathir at international summits and conferences in 2000. The transcripts were sourced from the Prime Minister's Official Website and the Collection of Mahathir's Speeches (January - December 2000) compiled by Kidam and Hamim (2001). In general, the primary audiences for the five speeches were heads of states from different countries, political leaders, government officials and business leaders.

The selection of the year 2000 as the historical context was significant. It marked a critical turning point in Malaysia's economic and political trajectory, thereby rendering Mahathir's speeches relevant for contemporary audiences despite having been delivered more than two decades earlier.

Table 1
Details of the five speeches

Speech No.	Date of Delivery	Title of Speech/Conference	Source of Speech	Length of Speech in Words	Location of Delivery
1	11/04/2000	ASEAN Business Summit 2000/Asia 2000: Moving Forward	Collection of Mahathir's Speeches (Kidam & Hamim, 2001)	2724	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2	12/04/2000	The South Summit	Prime Minister's Website	1460	Havana, Cuba
3	09/06/2000	The 6th Nikkei Shimbun International Conference on 'the Future of Asia'	Prime Minister's Website	3145	Tokyo, Japan
4	20/06/2000	Malaysia's Strategies to Deal with the Financial Crisis as Related to the Impact of Globalisation on Developing Countries	Prime Minister's Website	3088	Cairo, Egypt
5	11/11/2000	The Meeting with Muslim Intellectuals and Businessmen	Prime Minister's Website	2384	Doha, Qatar

Malaysia had (1) successfully emerged from the late 1990s economic crisis; (2) begun to orient its foreign policy priorities, shifting from Buy British Last towards the Look East policy; (3) initiated new economic development programmes; and (4) sought to strengthen economic ties with ASEAN and African countries (Jomo, 2003).

The speeches reflect Mahathir's unorthodox approach to managing economic crises. The introduction of regulatory measures, most notably capital controls and foreign investment regulation, was aligned with national priorities and domestic needs. The relative success of these measures renders his speeches particularly significant, as they offer an alternative paradigm that challenges the orthodox neoliberal response to economic instability. In an era marked by recurrent global financial crises, Mahathir's decisive action highlights the enduring relevance of political leadership that prioritises national resilience over an uncritical reliance on free-market forces. His development policies, informed by Islam and a critical stance towards Western economic dominance, further contribute to ongoing debates about sovereignty, economic justice, and governance shaped by local values and priorities.

The use of metaphor was examined in selected extracts from Mahathir's political speeches in which he directly challenged "a particular neoliberal version of free market capitalism" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 11), arguing instead for the need to balance market forces with social protection. The unit of analysis is the lexical item, operationalised either as a single word or a multi-word phrase, and analysed as situated instances of metaphorical language through which Mahathir's ideological positions and critiques of free-market capitalism are discursively constructed. Other linguistic resources and larger units are also examined to show how the speeches were textured by setting up relations between their elements. This is particularly relevant at the level of textual interpretation because "metaphors may extend over longer stretches of text, creating powerful cohesion." (Mautner, 2008, p. 43).

This study adopts the three-stage analytical procedure of Critical Metaphor Analysis: Identification, Interpretation, and Explanation (Charteris-Black, 2004). Metaphor identification involves close reading to identify words or phrases used metaphorically in context. Metaphor interpretation examines the cognitive and pragmatic factors shaping metaphor use and the extent to which metaphor choices construct socially salient representations. Metaphor explanation examines the discourse functions of metaphor, enabling the identification of their ideological and rhetorical motivations.

To minimise subjectivity in metaphor identification, this study adopted the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) to systematically identify religious metaphors framing the free market as "the religion of free trade". The procedure involved initial familiarisation with the speeches, followed by close analysis to identify candidate expressions,

which were then examined in context to determine metaphorical use before coding. Reliability was enhanced through independent identification by two raters, a PhD candidate in TESL and a researcher in language studies, followed by a final review by an ESL teacher from England pursuing a master's degree in education.

Although Charteris-Black draws on corpus linguistics tools, his approach to metaphor analysis is theoretically independent, and is applied here to selected examples extracted from a corpus. The analysis is grounded in Fairclough's (2003) approach to textual analysis, which examines linguistic features in relation to their socio-cultural contexts to reveal the relationship between language and social change under new capitalism. Rather than examining large datasets, handpicked extracts were analysed to enable close examination of how textual elements construct meaning, specifically in representing a dogmatic form of capitalism, described by Mahathir as "the current financial orthodoxy" which foreclosed alternative views. In this neoliberal discourse, the unquestioning acceptance of the free market as the sole solution to economic problems is framed as a form of religion using religious metaphors, with dissenting voices positioned as "heretics" and "non-believers". This finding aligns with Mavelli's (2020) argument that neoliberalism derives discursive power by invoking religious meanings and signification, thereby creating "an aura of sacredness" while concealing itself behind the appearance of objective, secular rationality.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Mahathir's most impactful period was in the late 1990s when Malaysia was faced with the 1997-1999 Financial Crisis. His world view and Eastern rhetoric were shaped by Malaysia's post-colonial experience, marked by economic dependency, cultural domination and the lingering influence of Western powers in the region (Hilley, 2001). The Western-controlled financial system was viewed as a continuation of colonial exploitation, keeping former colonies economically dependent.

Identification Stage

Mahathir's religious metaphors emphasised themes of justice, morality, and collective responsibility grounded in Islamic and "Asian values". He positioned himself as the spokesman for the Third World during the 1997 financial crisis (Soh, 2000), and the leader of the Islamic World in responding to the economic challenges faced by Muslim nations (Ahmedullah, 2004). These metaphors lent moral authority to his critiques of neoliberal policies, which he argued undermined the sovereignty and development of Eastern nations. By framing economic injustice in religious terms, Mahathir challenged Western-centric narratives of globalisation and governance, presenting an ethical alternative to what he perceived as the greed and moral deficit of Western economic practices. This context underscores the significance of religious metaphors in shaping his political discourse during the post-crisis period.

The first level of analysis involved the close reading of 39 speeches, of which five were selected for detailed examination of metaphorical language and Mahathir's use of metaphor to represent his views on trade liberalisation and free-market solutions to the financial crisis. These speeches were selected because they were delivered at international events in African and Asian countries adversely impacted by the crisis and sharing key affinities with Malaysia, including religious (Muslim-majority), regional or cultural and historical contexts. In addition, the speeches addressed comparable themes, including Malaysia's experience of the economic challenges, strategies for survival, and calls for unity and independence from Western influence. Across the five speeches, 54 religiously based metaphorical expressions were identified and grouped by key lexical items, frequency and patterns of metaphorical use. Table 2 shows the religious keywords and frequency of occurrence.

Table 2
Religious keywords and frequency of occurrence

No.	Keywords	Total Occurrences	Metaphorical Occurrences
1	Religion, Religious, Religiously	16	7
2	Fanatic	8	7
3	Faith	8	6
4	Sacred	6	6
5	Heretic, Heresy	7	7
6	Theology, Theological, Theologian	1	1
7	Preach	3	3
8	Christian	4	1
9	Bible	2	2
10	Paradise	2	2
11	The Good Book	2	2
12	God	2	1
13	Believers	1	1
14	Infidels	1	1
15	Divine	1	1
16	Missionary	1	1
17	Evil	1	1
18	Guru	1	1
19	Priest	1	1
-	-	69	52

Mahathir's use of religious words is marked by selectivity and strategic intent rather than accidental or merely a discourse habit. Although they occur infrequently across the corpus, they are used metaphorically at a notably high rate in a small number of speeches. For example, of the eight occurrences of *fanatic*, seven (87.5%) are metaphorical, while six of the eight instances of *faith* (75%) are used metaphorically. The concentration of these metaphors in specific speeches, rather than their distribution across the corpus, indicates deliberate selection in relation to the audience and topic.

Interpretation and Explanation

The most mentioned market ideologies were *globalisation* and *liberalisation*, occurring 165 and 71 times respectively. At the Doha meeting with heads of state, political leaders, and business leaders, Mahathir strongly criticised the form of globalisation promoted by the "North Atlantic countries" which advocated barrier-free trade "to enrich them further and enhance their domination". He argued that despite causing "unprecedented misery", the free market "is still being touted as the solution to the economic problems of the poor". Opposing full liberalisation, Mahathir maintained that market forces must be balanced by social protection policies for the collective good so that developing nations can compete fairly and have equal chance of succeeding (Kamaruddin & Rogers, 2020). His core religious beliefs shaped this perspective, informing his use of religious metaphors to depict a divided global order between wealthy Western countries supporting free-market capitalism and poor Eastern countries adversely affected by it.

Mahathir used religious metaphors to challenge the 'unquestionable' status of the free market and criticise those who condemned his rejection of free-trade orthodoxy, framing market ideology in religious rather than secular terms. By casting his opposition to Western economic systems as a moral and ethical struggle rather than merely a political or economic one, he strengthened the legitimacy of his radical stance both domestically and internationally. These metaphors represented free-market proponents negatively, attributing to them unquestioning devotion akin to religious fanaticism, as reflected in expressions such as 'the god that can do no wrong', 'a religion that tolerates no heresy' and 'a religion that everyone must accept'.

Excerpts 1-4 show the patterns in Mahathir's choice of religious metaphors which have a distinctive negative semantic load. Table 3 shows the religious metaphors of market fanaticism.

These four excerpts illustrate how the argument is structured by stating upfront the central claim: "the market, the god that can do no wrong". The assertion presented in the negative form is a highly contentious assumption, and directly challenges free market capitalism based on neoliberalism. Sentences 2 to 4 that follow illustrate this further. Religious metaphors are used evaluatively to criticise the globalist discourse of globalisation and

Table 3
Text 1: The religious metaphors of market fanaticism

No.	Excerpts 1 to 4
1	…It is simply the market. It is that wonderful abstraction, **'the market'**, the **god that can do no wrong**, that can be expected to perform better and to produce better results than anything that individual human beings either in business or public life can do. (11/04/2000, ASEAN Business Summit 2000/Asia 2000, Malaysia)
2	…Globalisation has already shown signs of becoming a **religion that tolerates no heresy**. (12/04/2000, The South Summit, Cuba)
3	… The propaganda machine of the West is good at making everyone feel guilty if he does not accept the new ideas and ideologies created by the rich to give them ever more advantage over the poor. Democracy, the free market, a world without borders, liberalism … have all been cooked up in the rich countries and then forced on the poor. They all sound great but somehow their acceptance by the poor invariably destabilise them and put them at the mercy of the rich. Yet today people talk of the free market as if it is a **religion** that everyone must accept. To question its role in shaping the economic development of the world is to **commit heresy**. (20/06/2000, Malaysia's Strategies to Deal with the Financial Crisis, Egypt)
4	…No longer worried about the socialists, they propounded the **religion of free trade**. Free trade is everything. It is going to enrich the whole world. It is going to lead to a worldly **paradise**… Insidiously free trade became **sacrosanct** through the GATT and the WTO. The World Bank, the IMF and the Western-controlled international media **preached** it. Anyone who dared to oppose free trade became **heretics, infidels, non-believers** who were trying to impoverish the poor. (11/11/2000, The Meeting with Muslim Intellectuals and Businessmen, Qatar)

the fanatic belief of its proponents in market liberalisation free of restraints to enable companies to act without control.

Sentence (1) is a condemnation of the view that the market is infallible. The use of religious metaphor, "the god that can do no wrong", reinforces this representation of infallibility and sets the scene to foreground the free market economy in negative terms. The word "abstraction" in the phrase "that wonderful abstraction" is used to implicitly criticise the way the term 'market' is reduced to an aspect of the market - its infallible nature - for a particular purpose. The market is claimed to tackle problems in business and public life better than "individual human beings". Another aspect of fanaticism in free market is foregrounded in Extract 2, globalisation as the driving force behind the unrestrained market being described as becoming a 'religion' which 'tolerates no heresy', suggesting intolerance towards different views.

In Excerpt 3, Mahathir highlights the hegemonic nature of free market ideology, describing how people talk about it as if it were a religion. Metaphors are used to create knowledge frames linked to a belief system that free market is "a religion that everyone must accept", and a critical stance is taken against it. Questioning the role of free market in shaping global economic development is comparable to "committing heresy". If some of Mahathir's religious metaphors seem extreme (e.g., "burn the heretics at the stakes", "heretics, infidels and

non-believers"), the context in which they were produced may provide the explanation.

In Excerpt 4, it is asserted that free market proponents (GATT, WTO, World Bank and IMF) "propounded free trade" as "the religion" to reflect their rigidly dogmatic views, namely strongly believing that they are right and refusing to consider contrary opinions. By attributing to them the belief that "Free trade is everything", Mahathir implicitly represents them as dogmatically sticking to a set of beliefs. Notice the use of a religious metaphor in "a worldly paradise" to represent the predicted outcome of free trade ("It is going to lead to a worldly paradise"), which reflects their delusional belief, completely divorced from reality. The free market is further described as sacrosanct, so that it could not be interfered with, and those opposing are labelled "heretics, infidels, non-believers" using words which are specifically part of the vocabulary of religion. In sum, the primary implication of the religious metaphors used in Extracts 1-4 is intolerance of non-adherence and dissent from the western free market.

Excerpts 1-5 in Text 2 contains a response to the "so-called solutions to the problems of human society" accepted by the supporters without question to the extent that any opposition was not allowed, even though the solutions actually caused more harm than good. Given the context and the year, it is possible to infer that Mahathir was indirectly referring to the solutions supported by rich Western nations to deal with the 1997-99 financial crisis, namely trade liberalisation and free-market orientation, to which he was strongly opposed. There is a repeated use of religious metaphors relating to dogmatism and fanaticism (e.g., "burn the fanatics at the stakes"; "ideas … practiced as articles of faith"; "questioning or condemning them would make one a heretic"). The conceptualisation of dogmatism and fanaticism is linked by correlating elements in source (religion) and target domain (free market ideology). The selected religious metaphors are not arbitrary but intended to develop an ideological force in Mahathir's argument against this fanaticism.

It is argued that ideas offered as solutions to problems in society contribute to achieving and sustaining the dominance of practices and so inhibit alternative ideas and ignore the need for realistic evaluation of their results, considering current circumstances. Mahathir's evaluative stancetaking is realised at the lexical microlevel using religious metaphors and extends over longer stretches of text creating "powerful cohesion, which is a textual and not merely lexical phenomenon" and contributing to overall meaning and perspective (Mautner, 2008, p. 43). The metaphors are drawn from religion to construct versions of reality highlighting dogmatism and fanaticism in the adoption and practice of "so-called solutions". They are used to support his ideological positioning, which claims that the economies of poorer countries in the East could be destroyed by the kind of unrestrained market liberalisation offered as a solution to these financial crises.

Mahathir denounces the fanaticism of those who advocate unrestrained market liberalisation as the solution, characterised pejoratively by their uncritical and unquestioning devotion which is taken too far as implied in "practiced as articles of faith". The fanatical views are represented as a religion, positioning those who question them as heretics, thus encouraging their association with dogmatism. There are for example seven words related to "heretic" and "heresy", all used metaphorically. The text begins with a claim that people are fanatical about solutions to problems to "create a better society", which when accepted give no allowance for questions or alternative views (Excerpt 1). The argument ends with weaknesses in the systems created by 'Man' and a reason to explain the need to avoid fanaticism, especially in the information age (Excerpt 5). We now examine these five excerpts (table 4).

Sentence (1) presents Mahathir's central claim about the fanatical nature of the "so-called solutions to the problems of human society", which when accepted give no allowance for questioning or alternative views. An element of evaluation is added with "so-called" in collocation with "solutions" in the phrase "so-called solutions" which suggests that Mahathir did not regard them as genuine solutions.

Table 4
Text 2: Religious metaphors in Mahathir's argument against fanaticism

No.	Excerpts 1 to 5
1	Human history is full of so-called solutions to the problems of human society. Each time a solution was found, the efficacy and infallibility of the solution was accepted as being beyond doubt. Those who espouse the solution will permit no criticism or opposition. They become so **fanatical that they would figuratively and sometimes literally burn the heretics at the stakes**…
2	…The Feudal system, Republicanism, Capitalism, Socialism and Communism are among the ideas invented by men to deal with the inequities and injustices in his society. When first introduced each was regarded as perfect by those who espouse them. They were all **practiced as articles of faith** and anything done in their name were accepted unquestioningly…
3	**…**The same thing will happen to all human ideas, concepts and ideals. Over time they will all become **quasi-religious, fanatically** believed in until they bring about new problems which are often worse than the problems they were supposed to solve…
4	**…**But believe me**,** we have turned around and we are much better off than those who **religiously** believe in the floating rate as the only way to ensure sound finances for a country… Malaysia is interested in results not systems. No matter how good a system is, if it delivers a bad result, we are not going to stick to it. Call us **heretics** if you like…
5	**…**all the systems devised by Man in order to create a better society are imperfect. And they become more imperfect because clever people keep on tempering with them, embellishing them and making them **sacred** so that you may not question them even when they fail to deliver. We must learn not to be too **fanatical about economic theories as much as we should not be fanatical about interpretations of religion**… We must learn not to be **fanatical** especially now, now that the Information Age has descended on us.

He views as fanatics those who "espoused the solution", accepting it as infallible, and depicts them as dangerous extremists metaphorically burning at the stake as heretics those who oppose them (bold and underlined in the extract) to highlight the intolerance and inflexibility of its proponents. By metaphorically framing his views, meaning from one domain of experience, namely religion, is transferred across to another target domain as the adopted solution.

In (2) Mahathir supports his claim with examples of inflexible practice in the past, derived from ideas created to address problems in society and executed as "articles of faith". Capitalism, Socialism, and Communism are represented as solutions "to deal with inequities and injustices in society" and "regarded as perfect by those who espouse them". Notice how the voice of those who embrace these ideologies (underlined) is incorporated to illustrate their fanatical belief. Mahathir then comments on how they are practised "as articles of faith and […] accepted unquestioningly". This way of metaphorical framing gives rise to an unfavourable interpretation which implies that "those who espouse them" take their devotion too far. The selective mapping which involves foregrounding some aspects of the source domain and backgrounding others evoke notions of intolerance and dogmatism.

The argument in (3) is organised by creating semantic relations with Excerpt (2) using the latter as the basis for his categorical prediction of future happening - "The same thing will happen to all human ideas […]. Over time they will become quasi-religious". He cites experience concerning bigoted beliefs (asserted in (2) - "They were all practiced as articles of faith and […] were accepted unquestioningly") to make assertions about possible outcomes (predicted in (3) - "The same thing will happen to all human ideas"). Notice the change from prediction of future happening "they will become quasi-religious" to a statement of fact "… until they bring about new problems … often worse than the problems they were supposed to solve." Ascribing "all human ideas, concepts, and ideals" the propensity to become "quasi-religious" over time may serve Mahathir's ideological agenda, which makes it possible for him to represent an aspect of experience from his own perspective. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that creating social realities through metaphor may become significant when those in power get to impose their metaphors.

In (4) Mahathir talks about those, including himself, who oppose the free market, using the us-them dyad to separate "us" the opponents from "them" the supporters of this ideology. The metaphor "religiously" is used to depict the Other's unrelenting dogmatism. Mahathir challenges those who criticise "us" for going against the generally accepted practice to call "us heretics if you like". The use of the religious word "heretics" reflects the fanaticism of the free market ideology supporters, but those who opposed it are not bothered by this name-calling because if the system leads to

"a bad result" "we are not going to stick to it". Religious metaphors provide Mahathir with an effective discursive device to portray a *positive*-Self versus *negative*-Other image that is conceptualised as the forces of 'good' versus 'evil'. Notice the way argument is framed against adherence to neoliberal orthodoxy: "we have turned around and we [the positive-self] are much better off" than "those [the negative-Other] who religiously believe in the floating rate as the only way to ensure sound finances for a country". In this context, the function of this +Self and -Other is simply to encourage 'independence from the West' rather than the more 'common' and 'alienating' function of encouraging the extreme measure of 'war' against the enemy (Bhatia, 2007).

Sentence (5) is structured as a move from critical assertions to expressing commitment to obligation/necessity, making authoritative claims about what is the case and speaking with authority on what must be done on behalf of "We". Mahathir begins the argument by making a strong commitment to the truth of the proposition that "all systems devised by Man […] are imperfect" using the simple present 'are' to signal factuality presenting it as a statement of fact. The gist of his critical evaluation is that despite the flaw in the systems "devised by Man" to improve society, they are made "sacred" to prevent any opposition. The systems are framed as "sacred" being assigned an attribute associated with religion, thus deserving unquestionable devotion "so that you may not question them even that when they fail to deliver".

The second part of the argument imposes obligations upon "We", used inclusively here to represent the global community: "We must learn not to be too fanatical". The obligation to avoid fanaticism is legitimated by the claims that "all the systems devised by Man […] are imperfect". Mahathir makes a connection between claiming what is the case e.g., 'All systems […] are imperfect' and places obligations on what we 'must not/should not do': "We must learn not to be too fanatical about economic theories as much as we should not be fanatical about interpretations of religion"; "We must learn not to be fanatical especially now". "Must not" and "should not" are used in this context to talk about things to avoid. Injunctions about what people must or should not do are legitimised in terms of the failure of the imperfect systems created by Man despite the attempts made to improve them (e.g., *all the systems devised by Man in order to create a better society are imperfect. And they become more imperfect because clever people keep on tampering with them, embellishing them and making them sacred so that you may not question them even when they fail to deliver*).

The representation of "We" as being "too fanatical" incorporates a metaphor for religion itself as a dogmatic force, reflected in irrational devotion to the systems designed by Man to create a better society with no tolerance for the views of others despite evidence to the contrary. Such fanaticism about economic theories provokes Mahathir to respond with strong advice: We must learn not to be too fanatical about economic

theories as much as we should not be fanatical about interpretations of religion. Notice the use of the adverb "too" and how the religious metaphor "fanatical" is linked to 'economic theories' in the main clause and to 'interpretations of religion' in the subordinate clause. Notice also the shift from 'must not' a strong obligation to refrain from being "too fanatical" about "economic theories" to 'should not' a relatively less strong obligation to refrain from being "fanatical' about "religious interpretations". He then repeats "We must learn not to be fanatical especially now". At the higher level of text, Mahathir's key argumentative strategy here is to denounce fanaticism in systems by linking them to failure and bring into focus the need not to be "too fanatical about economic theories. He uses the inclusive 'we' to reduce the force of the imposition imposed by these potentially face threatening actions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigates the use of religious metaphors in political speeches delivered by Mahathir following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. His speeches attracted global attention not only because of their context, but also because of Mahathir's radical stance and incisive critique of what he perceived as new capitalism - a market system that promoted liberalisation and exposed national economies to unrestrained market forces (see e.g., Shukri, 2024). They were presented in English for international consumption as a form of resistance against the detrimental effects of the globalist view of globalisation. Mahathir discredited the claims that "markets are self-regulating" and "market forces drive the economy to efficient outcomes", and instead debunked the belief that external regulation in the form of state interference "is economically counter-productive and damaging" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 40). This moral critique of Western capitalism enabled him to advance an ethical alternative grounded in religious values, positioning it in opposition to what he perceived as the greed, and moral failings underpinning Western economic practices.

Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) was used to examine Mahathir's political rhetoric through a three-stage process of metaphor identification, interpretation and explanation. Selected extracts were subjected to close analysis in accordance with Fairclough's textually oriented discourse-analytic approach. Religious metaphors were identified using the metaphor identification procedure proposed by the Pragglejaz Group, which involved careful reading of the entire texts using the context to ascertain the meaning of the words. Five speeches were analysed to illustrate how Mahathir used religious metaphors to construct representations of reality, especially in relation to the hegemonic nature of free market ideology accepted by its "fanatical" proponents as a "religious faith".

Religious metaphors enabled Mahathir to articulate a vision of economic independence for Malaysia and the broader Eastern world and frame his opposition to Western systems within a morally resonant

narrative. By invoking Islamic principles through religious metaphors, Mahathir provides a framework for resistance against neo-colonial economic practices, particularly the dominance of Western financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank imposing developing countries unfair conditions in exchange for financial assistance (Mumtaz et al., 2023). The combination of Islamic principles with the broader concept of Asian values not only strengthened Mahathir's domestic political legitimacy but also positioned Malaysia as a leading voice for an alternative, Eastern vision of global governance and development.

Future research could extend this study by examining larger datasets using corpus linguistics tools to identify broader patterns of metaphorical use and trends across genres, and audiences. Combining CMA with corpus-based techniques would enable more systematic generalisation while retaining critical interpretive depth. More broadly the findings of this study may contribute to debates on political rhetoric, ideology and moral framing, foregrounding the role of metaphor in legitimising critique and shaping public perceptions of economic systems.

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APPENDIX

No.	Speeches
1	The Plenary Session of the Tenth United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 12-02-2000, Bangkok, Thailand
2	The Opening of Air Freight Asia 2000 Conference, 17-02-2000, Kuala Lumpur
3	The Official Opening of Ericsson Mobile Phone Plant, 21-02-2000, Shah Alam
4	The Second World Knowledge Conference, 08-03-2000, Kuala Lumpur
5	The Official Opening of POLMET 2000, 20-03-2000, Kuala Lumpur
6	Malam Asia Pacific MSC IT&T Awards (APMITTA), 31-03-2000, Kuala Lumpur
7	ASEAN Business Summit 2000/Asia 2000: Moving Forward, 11/04/2000 Kuala Lumpur
8	The South Summit, 12-04-2000, Havana, Cuba
9	The Official Opening of the Third Asia Africa Forum (AAF III), 23-05-2000, Kuala Lumpur
10	The Asia Oil & Gas Conference 2000, 29-05-2000, Kuala Lumpur
11	The Europe-Asia Business Summit 2000, 30-05-2000, Kuala Lumpur
12	The 6th Nikkei Shimbun International Conference on The Future of Asia, 09-06-2000, Tokyo, Japan
13	The Millennium Leaders' Summit, 16-06-2000, Kuala Lumpur
14	The Meeting with Members of The Industrial and Power Committee of The Egyptian Senate, 18-06-2000, Cairo, Egypt
15	Malaysia's Strategies to Deal with The Financial Crisis as Related to The Impact of Globalisation on Developing Countries, 20-06-2000, Cairo, Egypt
16	The Opening Ceremony of the 27th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM), 27-06-2000, Kuala Lumpur
17	The International Seminar and Dialogue on Enhancing the Understanding of Islam for the Media, 30-06-2000, Kuala Lumpur
18	The Official Opening of The Malaysian Structural Steel Association Convention 2000, 11-07-2000, Kuala Lumpur
19	The Opening of The International Association of Historians of Asia, 27-07-2000, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah
20	At The Official Dinner in Honour of The Honourable Sheikh Hasina Prime Minister of The People's Republic of Bangladesh, 31-07-2000, Putrajaya
21	At The Official Dinner in Conjunction with The Meeting on Global 2000 International Smart Partnership, 21-08-2000, Maputo, Mozambique
22	At The 21st Century Conference to Commemorate the Establishment of The Tun Ismail Ali Chair in Monetary and Financial Economics, 29-08-2000, Kuala Lumpur

No.	Speeches
23	At The Lariba Lifetime Achievement Award Ceremony, 01-09-2000, Chicago, USA
24	The Official Launch Of E-Village, 08-09-2000, Dengkil, Selangor
25	The Launch of The International Convention on Role of The Media in Non-Aligned Countries, 21-09-2000, Shah Alam
26	The Opening Ceremony of The Second Meeting of The Regional Steering Committee on The Advancement of Rural and Island Women-Asia Pacific Region 26-09-2000, Kuala Lumpur
27	At Red Ribbon Gala 2000, 30-09-2000, Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur
28	At The Launch of The International Haji Conference, 30-09-2000, Kuala Lumpur
29	The Meeting with Muslim Intellectuals and Professionals, 03-10-2000, London, United Kingdom
30	The Third Meeting of The Malaysian-British Business Council & Conference on Malaysia-British Partnership for the 21st Century, 05-10-2000, United Kingdom
31	The Conference Organised by Cambridge University Malaysia Society (CUMAS), 07-10-2000, United Kingdom
32	The Opening Ceremony of The International Meeting of The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), 13-10-2000, RCS, Kuala Lumpur
33	The Official Opening Of K-Economy Conference, 17-10-2000, Petaling Jaya
34	The International Seminar on Islamic Law in The Contemporary World, 24-10-2000, Kuala Lumpur
35	The Asia Society Gala Forum, 28-10-2000, Hong Kong
36	The Opening of the 40th Meeting of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Council, 06-11-2000, Kuala Lumpur
37	The Meeting with Muslim Intellectuals and Businessmen, 11-11-2000, Doha, Qatar
38	The Ninth Islamic Summit Conference, 12-11-2000, Doha, Qatar
39	The Langkawi International Dialogue, 19-11-2000, Langkawi, Kedah