

Religious Metaphors and its Conceptualization

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Annotation:

Religious meaning-making occurs in and through metaphors. Religion depends on them, as it can never articulate its ultimate object, namely the transcendental, literally. The SFB 1475 “Metaphors of Religion: Religious Meaning-Making in Language Use” aims to understand this process with greater theoretical precision and grasp it methodically, in order to empirically and comparatively research the semantic formation of religion. This is how the researchers hope to better understand the formation of religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon and to record central developments within specific religious traditions more precisely.

Keywords: paradoxical propositions, notion of metaphor, symbol, symbolization, metaphorical character, negative metaphorical language.

The famous theologian Paul Tillich once stated that “*everything religion has to say about God has a symbolic character*” (Tillich 1957, 9). Expressions like “*life after death*”, “*immortality*”, “*reincarnation*” or “*heaven*” are not to be taken at face-value but are to be understood symbolically. Thus *heaven* is not an immediate reference to a place but a symbol. *God*, “*Being itself*” and everything religious has, according to Tillich, necessarily a symbolic, i.e., metaphorical character, and religion is to be considered a symbolic reality. Symbols, however, cannot be “*deciphered*”; there is no way to translate religious meaning by no metaphorical notions. Therefore Tillich tried to develop a “*negative metaphorical language*”, a kind of language full of contradictions and paradoxical propositions (Tillich 1964). Although Tillich emphasized the relation between metaphor, symbol, and religion, he used the notion of metaphor in a very broad, unspecific way which may lead to the misunderstanding that metaphor is a specific feature of religious language (Edwards 1968)¹.

¹ Knoblauch, Hubert. Metaphors, transcendence and indirect communication: Alfred Schutz' phenomenology of the life-world and the metaphors of religion. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-7530>

In order to understand the notion of metaphor, we have, therefore, to clarify what we mean by “symbol” and “symbolization”, a clarification which I shall attempt on the basis of the phenomenological theory of symbols developed by the “father” of phenomenological sociology, Alfred Schutz. Schutz’s phenomenological theory of symbols and signs is based on the notion of appresentation. Appresentation is also at the very heart of his theory of transcendences which has been adapted to the sociological theory of religion by Thomas Luckmann. By referring (somehow extensively) to Schutz’s writings (including some unpublished manuscripts), we shall attempt to show that Schutz himself has developed concepts of religion, religious experience and symbolic communication of transcendence which differ at certain points from Luckmann’s adaptation² [9].

A superficial reading of these passages can be paraphrased as follows: religion is nothing but a construct; scholars of religion invent the entire contents of their writings. There is no real world of religion to which scholarship of religion has any meaningful relation. However, such views are based on a false dichotomy: either (a) truth and meaning are rooted in a simple and direct correspondence between theory and object, language and world, or (b) no definable relation between language and world is possible (and, hence, for practical purposes, there is no world). This simplistic reading of the claim that ‘map is not territory’ is untenable. Smith does not hold a simplistic view. His choice of ‘map’ ‘as a substitution for terms such as ‘cosmology’ and ‘world-view’, themselves replacements for Eliade’s ‘ontology’, was meant to emphasize the status of these patterns as ‘constructs’” (Smith, 2004, p.47, n. 59). Smith (2004, p.24, 31) is explicit that the concept of ‘map’ played a greater role in his earlier work, emphasizing the ‘consequences of the juxtaposition inherent in comparison’, but he remains insistent on the importance of the ‘choice of the map over the territory’. He complicates the relation between scholars of religion and their putative objects of study, but he does not negate it: What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. . What we study . is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit. positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation[1.164].

The above analysis has been used as a basis for portraying the Shona God as a male just like the Judeo-Christian God. The argument is that Shona grammar forbids joining syllables with two vowels following each other in certain cases. The rule for morphophonemic change results in a case where we drop “u” from the prefix “mu-” and substitute it with “w-” so that the prefix “mu-” is identified as “mw-” and therefore mu- + ari gives us Mwari. When you refer to the one who claims to be or the one who claims that “I am”, i.e., “ari”, the rule requires that the person be called Mwari. The Shona God is identified as male with the Judeo-Christian *God* who said to Moses: “I am who I am.” This is why most works which refer to the Shona God as Mwari use the gender specific pronoun the above analysis has been used as a basis for portraying the Shona God as a male just like the Judeo-Christian *God*. The argument is that Shona grammar forbids joining syllables with two vowels following each other in certain cases. The rule for morphophonemic change results in a case where we drop “u” from the prefix “mu-” and substitute it with “w-” so that the prefix “mu-” is identified as “mw-” and therefore mu- + ari gives us Mwari. When you refer to the one who claims to be or the one who claims that “*I am*”, i.e., “*ari*”, the rule requires that the person be called Mwari. The Shona God is identified as male with the Judeo-Christian God who said to Moses: “*I am who I am.*” This is why most works which refer to the Shona God as Mwari use the gender specific pronoun *he*. Yet there is a feminine aspect to Mwari as a Shona metaphor for God. Mwari exists in the closest relationship with the female. The use of the word Mwari in the context of female initiation is marked among the eastern and the southern Bantu groups. In this context the

² Spickard (1993) has already suggested that Schutz provides a useful approach to a sociology of religious experience. However, he neither refers to Schutz’ explicit references to religion, nor does he mention the theory of transcendence, but considers only the “intersubjective experience” of time as religious

word Mwari is used to mean a female initiate. Among the Shona and in Mutare in particular the word Mwari and Mhandara (a girl who has reached puberty) may be used interchangeably. Ranger (1974: 8) captures this aptly: He. Yet there is a feminine aspect to Mwari as a Shona metaphor for *God*. Mwari exists in the closest relationship with the female. The use of the word Mwari in the context of female initiation is marked among the eastern and the southern Bantu groups. In this context the word Mwari is used to mean a female initiate. *That is a girl undergoing initiation*. Among the Shona and in Mutare in particular the word Mwari and Mhandara (a girl who has reached puberty) may be used interchangeably[4:234].

In some interpretations *God* as Muvumbapasi The female image of God is also reflected in the Shona metaphor for *God* as *muvumbapasi* (shoulder or fashioner of things). When we discuss this aspect of God in theology we need to be aware that, among the Shona, *kuumba* in the sense of moulding clay pots is traditionally done by women. Women are the ones who mould and fashion clay-pots (*hari*). In Shona Christian theological discourse the female aspect is suppressed by the use of the pronoun “he”: if God is known as *muvumbi* it is still assumed that He is the moulder. Why is it not said that She is the moulder? The reason may be that this was mainly a trade associated with Shona women. If we consider *Muvumbapasi* (founder of the land), we may realize that the world was created through *Kuumba* an activity associated with women. God as *Muhari* Furthermore, the metaphor *Mwari* is sometimes thought to have been derived from *Muhari* (in the clay-pot). *Hari* symbolises the womb and therefore women are associated with *kuumba*. Stillborn children are first put in a *hari* before they are buried. This symbolizes putting them back into the womb and becomes a guarantee for future births. Therefore the metaphor of God as *muumbi* clearly reflects the female image of God among the Shona. God as *Musikavanhu* Another popular metaphor used for God among the Shona is *Musikavanhu*. This metaphor reveals that God is both male and female. Among the Shona *kusika* was associated with kindling a fire using two sticks. One of the sticks has a hole in it, in which grass was put and the other one (*musika*) was twisted in the hole until heat and therefore fire is created. Such fire-making tools symbolise the male and female organs. So, for the Shona, when married people engage in sex they are involved in *kusika* – that is – in creating people. Obviously this involves a male and a female. As the sticks are united, so man and women are united in a process during which new life is created. *Kusika* means to create. This is the origin of the word *musika* and therefore *musikavanhu*.

The relation between the terms of a metaphor is based on a subjective experience. This leads to an ambiguity of the metaphor. It cannot express the inner life of a human, but it can provoke the reader to search the way to similar experiences. These experiences assimilated emphatically by the reader are important in the sense that his *Weltanschauung* is modified and even reconstructed. In the confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the power of the metaphor to re-describe the real world: “I came to say that metaphorical and narrative statements, taken in hand by reading, aim at refiguring reality, in the twofold sense of uncovering the concealed dimensions of human experience and of transforming our vision of the world. ... refiguring seemed to me to constitute an active reorganization of our being-in-the-world, performed by the reader following the invitation of the text[5]”.

The task of the parable is to disclose the tools needed to understand the unconventional world of the sacred: the paradoxical thinking, the view of the individual as part of the general, but also of the general as part of the individual. The endless power of the Biblical truth, which is unlimited and manifolded, is revealed in the biblical narratives. They are exemplary stories that edify us about what unifies our fragments of everyday life and therefore create a permanent "mirror of perfection": “The characters of the stories represent roles to be filled by the reader, and they represent exempla. What is read needs to be studied, repeated, memorized, and applied to one’s personal life constantly, thus becoming an absolute mental space which will be present during everyday life

activities. This is a teaching to be applied to one's life, to be meditated, and to be given life through one's actions, thoughts and words [2].

On the other hand, man has always searched for explanations of the incomprehensible phenomena, since he realized that each thing hides a certain "initiatory secret", and the enigmas, the cryptic, the meanings at the limit of his comprehensiveness have always got to him, challenged him to search. Following this way of the drift of senses – called by Eco unlimited semiosis -, a partial revelation of these secrets will be reached, but at the same time it will become obvious that this revelation will do nothing else but drive to another secret, deepen the mystery more, leading, in a vertigo of signs that one by one demand decryption, towards a great ultimate secret of the "hermetic initiation" – this proving to be in the end the exact death "everything is secret" (Eco, 1996, pp.49-50). The same theory could be found with Mircea Eliade (1959), in whose opinion the ultimate truth cannot be revealed, is not bound for us, is unavailable for the profanes. With Eco as well, the secret hides everything that is more profound and more relevant, that is why there occurs the error that any mysterious thing is essential. Intrinsically scared of remaining surrounded by incomprehensible things, he always tries to decode, to elucidate, but, as he proceeds, the unknown is amplified.

The biblical authors use metaphors to help us better understand the world, God, and ourselves. In today's episode, we reflect on the surprising metaphor of God giving birth.

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