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Robert Masson

Marquette University, [robert.masson@marquette.edu](mailto:robert.masson@marquette.edu)

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## The Clash of Christological Symbols: A Case for Metaphoric Realism

*Robert Masson*

In musical composition, a clash of cymbals signifies a dramatic moment in a passage. But its significance can vary. The force of brass plates can simply call attention to a phrase, voice, anthem, or transition in the arrangement. It can emphasize a thematic development, a musical notation anticipating a later twist or crescendo—or indicate that climax itself. It can signal a harmonious resolution of previous chords, or a rhapsody of dissonant voices. There are the occasions when a clash of cymbals heralds an extraordinary expression of musical creativity and genius: an adventitious musical gesture that brings together quite different voices in a way that enables the composition to express itself in a new idiom. At such moments cymbals announce a new musical vocabulary, a new form of expression. It is not just that something unexpected is said. The juxtaposition of the disparate voices creates a way to say something that could not have been said before. What it expresses is made possible only through the arrangement's invention of new possibilities of meaning created by its forcing a combination of musical phrases that until this composition had not been envisioned. The audience hears something it has never heard before—and could not have been expected to hear until this musical passage itself created the space for the hearing.

Such compositions can be extremely demanding for the audience. Understanding these pieces requires a stretch of sensibilities, a flexibility of affection, and suppleness of comprehension—even a reformation of one's register of meanings. Some in the gallery might not get the point. Others might not appreciate it. But for those who do, the clash of cymbals signals the advent of new meaning. The disparate voices are not reduced to one or the other—not harmonized in a famil-

iar resolution. The uncalled-for juxtaposition is much more than a cacophonous celebration of dissonance. The composition is inspired, a revelation. That is what happens, for example, in great symphonies and great jazz. Indeed, symphony and jazz as distinct genres are themselves inventions of such musical genius.

The clash of christological symbols signals comparable dynamics in the movements of Christian thinking and discourse. The New Testament attests to a variety of images and potential trajectories for comprehending the significance of Jesus. Clashes among them preoccupied theological concerns for the first four centuries. The "official libretto and score" views the resolution of the christological and related trinitarian debates as a thematic progression—in Catholic parlance, as a development of doctrine. The earlier clashes call attention to distinct voices whose disparate and incomplete insights are harmonized at Nicaea and Chalcedon. The councils' determinations of phrasing provide the foundational chords and so are normative for subsequent advances. Still, progression is possible, even necessary, because of the inherent tension between the chordal elements. The councils resolved that the human and divine notes must be played together, but in the definition of Chalcedon, "unmixed and unchanged, undivided and unseparated."<sup>1</sup> The terms are inescapably contrapuntal and analogous. Hence, as Rahner famously emphasized, Chalcedon is a beginning rather than an end for further theological meditation and development.<sup>2</sup>

Roger Haight's *Jesus Symbol of God* argues for an emended libretto and score.<sup>3</sup> As he sees it, the official rendition glosses the plurality of discordant voices in the New Testament. The scenario is not attentive to the genesis of the phrases intoned at Nicaea and Chalcedon, and so mistakes the movement's finale for the originating notes that it was meant to express. Haight contends that attention to the history of the controversies establishes that the original meaning that generated the christological formulas of the councils was not—and is not—identical to the formulations themselves, and indeed should be distinguished from them. Moreover, the official story line takes the movement toward that particular paradigm, the incarnation of the divine *Logos* in the human as *sarx* or *anthropos*, as a necessary and normative development. So doing precludes as orthodox any interpretations of Jesus' significance that appeal for inspiration and resources to voices in the New Testament that do not fit this pattern.

Haight challenges the notion that these developments were inevi-

table. This scenario is especially problematic, he alleges, because it does not render an account that can speak credibly to the historical sensibilities of postmodern consciousness. He insists that the problem is not with what Chalcedon intended and affirmed (the divinity and salvific significance of Jesus) but with the theoretical tools the council had at its disposal to express its intention. While the council played the divine and human notes as contrapuntal, Haight claims that the incarnate Logos paradigm did not provide the means to insure that the counterpoint would be clearly heard in subsequent generations and theologies. Indeed, the attempted counterpoint appears inevitably to resolve to a diminished humanity. Hence, if one is to take seriously Jesus' humanity and contemporary conceptions of what full humanity entails, the official score poses impossible conceptual dilemmas.

Haight's revisionist libretto and score put forward a detailed, multifaceted, and provocative strategy for defending in our present context the affirmation that Jesus is divine and savior. I propose a third libretto and score as a clarification of the official analogical reading and as an alternative to Haight's dialectical and symbolic reading. The third possibility is a metaphoric reading. Metaphoric, as distinct from metaphorical, refers to an epistemological process that creates the possibility for new meanings, illustrated, for example, by the previous description of the creation of a new musical idiom.

The role of the metaphoric process in generating such new understandings in science and theology has been analyzed in some depth by Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell.<sup>4</sup> Metaphoric process, in the specific sense in which they define it, offers a more effective way to explain the Christian affirmation of identity between Jesus and God—more effective because it suggests how to maintain credibly the realism of both the identity claim and the affirmation of Jesus' full humanity, while also accounting for the ways in which these affirmations stretch language to new uses and stretch believers to new horizons of understanding and action.

While I acknowledge, then, the considerable merit in Haight's contention that the issue of how language, concepts, and realities signify God is a decisive one for contemporary christologies, my considerations vie for a different libretto on that same issue. Haight's extended, systematic analysis confronts a number of issues that are problematic today for many thoughtful people and that are not convincingly explained by academic theology or adequately addressed by church pro-

nouncements. But my aim is not an appraisal of these broader issues in Haight's proposals, or of his christology as such or as a whole. Reservations about key aspects in only one of the many lines of argumentation he advances prompt my suggestions and provide the context for developing them. My purpose is narrow: to sketch an outline of a constructive alternative for understanding the logic of Christian talk about Jesus' significance.

For our purposes, three moves are crucial in Haight's efforts to retrieve the authentic meaning behind Nicaea and Chalcedon, and to articulate an alternative orthodox christology. First, he argues that symbolic mediation provides the key for interpreting religious language and for explaining Jesus' significance. Second, he assumes that the coherence between Paul Tillich's and Karl Rahner's theologies of the symbol is sufficient to warrant a relatively undifferentiated appropriation of their positions in support of the first thesis. Third, he argues that a genetic interpretation of scriptural and patristic christological formulations precludes unwarranted extensions of their senses beyond the meanings that generated them.

There is something of a circularity to Haight's argument—legitimately so—and he acknowledges it. That applies to the three conceptual moves at issue here. His appropriation of Tillich and Rahner determines his understanding of symbol, which in turn shapes his genetic interpretation of christology, his critique and revision of Rahner's christology, and his constructive argument for a Spirit christology. To this I add that Tillich's and Rahner's theologies of symbol are both instances of what Gerhart and Russell have described as metaphoric process. This addition enlarges the interpretive circle and complicates further the question about the most appropriate point of entry into the discussion. Haight's conflation of Tillich's and Rahner's theologies of symbol suggests itself as an opportune ingress. It is not the most important of these issues, nor is it illegitimate to appropriate compatible insights from otherwise contrary arguments. But the conflation does offer a direct path to the divergence between my metaphoric and Haight's symbolic librettos.

### **Conflation of Tillich's and Rahner's Theologies of Symbol**

Although Haight's theory of the symbolic draws on numerous sources, it appeals particularly to Tillich and Rahner. There is no ques-

tion that there are striking parallels in their phenomenological characterizations of symbol and the symbolic. The issue that demands attention is the fundamental difference between their approaches. In *Dynamics of Theology*, Haight admits that he brings "together in what may appear to be a too smooth and easy way elements" from their theologies of symbol.<sup>5</sup> He adds, though, that "despite these differences, I see no fundamental antithesis between these two theologies of symbol. Rather I see Rahner much more willing to emphasize the 'is' side of the dialectic between symbol and symbolized, especially in the case of the concrete symbol Jesus."<sup>6</sup> The important point, he insists, is that "the dialectical structure is still present in Rahner's christology, despite his tendency to emphasize Jesus' being the actuality of God in the world. Moreover, this must be the case for his christology to be judged consistent with Chalcedon which . . . is a strictly dialectical confession."<sup>7</sup>

But there is more to this difference than a question of emphasis. There is a fundamental antithesis between these theologies of symbol. Haight's comment begs the real issue of how to understand the dialectic between symbol and symbolized, between, as he puts it, the "is" and the "is not." Both theologies of symbol were developed to address that very issue. The difficulty is that Tillich's notion of symbol, and Haight's appropriation of it, rules out—and is intended to rule out—a priori the very conception of symbol and symbolic that Rahner's theory seeks to legitimate.

For theological, ontological, and christological reasons, Tillich maintains, and Haight with him, that the symbolized points beyond itself *to something else*. This precludes any sort of proper identity between symbol and symbolized. There can be no direct or literal sense in which one could say that the symbol "is" the symbolized. The "is not" always trumps the "is." Properly speaking, Jesus is a man not God. For Tillich, both the Protestant principle's stricture against idolatry and the infinite qualitative difference between finite beings and the ground of being require this. "That which is the true ultimate," Tillich emphasizes, "transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly."<sup>8</sup> Both Haight and Tillich insist that the integrity of Jesus' historical existence requires an uncompromising affirmation of his humanity. To say that christology is dialectical means for them that the identity between Jesus and God can be no more than the sort of transparency by which any

finite reality, in principle, can point beyond itself to the ground of being.

Neither Haight, nor Tillich, intends by this restriction to deny the appropriateness of affirming that Jesus is truly symbol of God. Haight takes pains to stress that it is indeed God who is encountered in Jesus; that God is uniquely—even though not exclusively—encountered in him; and that the point of explaining how Jesus, as symbol, mediates God is to facilitate the worship of God in him, not to undermine it. Nevertheless, it is only in pointing beyond himself and his humanity that Jesus mediates God. It is only in that qualified sense that he can be called divine or worshiped. Haight is emphatic: "One must recognize immediately that as a human being Jesus is Jesus, is not God, but points away from himself to God. Only then can the human mind begin to recognize certain contours of God within the reality of Jesus."<sup>9</sup> Hence, Haight, following Tillich, uses "symbol," "symbolic," and "dialectical" restrictively. The terms designate "mediation" of the divine but always with the qualification, in Tillich's language, of the "absolute break" and "infinite jump" between symbol and what it symbolizes.<sup>10</sup>

One can find wording in Rahner that might appear equivalent to Haight's definition of a symbol "as something that mediates something other than itself."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Rahner's language might also seem to suggest that "a symbol makes present something else."<sup>12</sup> Rahner's conception of the symbol, however, is not derived from a phenomenological account of the relation between symbol and symbolized. Penetrating the point of Rahner's notion is clearly a situation where Haight's principle of genetic hermeneutics should apply. A genetic approach interprets a concept's sense by tracing the development of the meanings that generated it. Explanations that contradict the intentionality of the originating logic are deemed unwarranted.

So what explains the genesis of Rahner's notion? "What is going on in this development? Why is this move being made rather than another? What is at stake in this theological decision?"<sup>13</sup> Rahner was quite explicit about this in his seminal essay on "The Theology of Symbol."<sup>14</sup> He was looking for a more original explanation of the relation between symbol and symbolized than the phenomenological traces of its mediation that Haight and Tillich chart. He believed he found such an explanation in the insight that beings themselves are—and even being itself is—symbolic.

Every being, he argued, consists of a plurality in unity. The plural elements can be distinguished from the underlying unity that they express, and in that sense the plurality can be considered a kind of "other" or "otherness." But it is an "otherness" intrinsic to the unity and expressive of it—the way embodiment (the body itself and bodily gestures) expresses a person. On the one hand, the only access to persons is in their embodiment. We are our bodies. On the other hand, there is something fundamentally dialectical about personal embodiment. We are not simply our bodies. One can—and indeed must—distinguish between persons and their embodiments. In extreme situations (for example, such as deception, mental illness, the influence of pain, drugs, or stress, or in death) bodily expressions are in varying degrees no longer properly speaking a person's self-expression or embodiment. Hence there are genuine and proper senses in which what confronts us in the body and embodiment both "is" and "is not" the person himself or herself. Rahner contends that something like this is true of the relation between plurality and unity in all beings.<sup>15</sup>

For Haight and Tillich, symbol mediates something other than itself. For Rahner, symbol, in the most original and basic sense, is the otherness of a being itself through which the being is expressed. The "otherness" is not, as Haight says undialectically, "something else." This most basic "otherness"—what Rahner calls *Realsymbol* to distinguish it from more derivative instances of the symbolic—both "is" and "is not" identical with the symbolized. Ironically, Rahner's position is more complex, more dialectical than Haight's and Tillich's. His aim is to explain how the identity both "is" and "is not" at the same time. He argues against expectations that for such *Realsymbols* unity and diversity correlate in like, not inverse, proportion.<sup>16</sup> Hence his point is to legitimate a kind of identity between symbol and symbolized, which Haight and Tillich bar on principle.

Rahner argues further, appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity, that divine being itself is symbolic in this sense. This is clearly the antithesis of Tillich's theological and philosophical convictions. God is not symbolic for him. Being itself is beyond the polarities of finite beings that enable one thing to symbolize another, and that enable all things, in so far as they point beyond themselves to their ground, to symbolize the ground itself. Rahner, too, stresses that God is not another being in the world, alongside it, or even beyond it. But Rahner does not conclude that the qualitative difference between God and creature re-



stricts the logic of symbol in the same way. Hence, he does not endorse at all the kind of "symbolic realism" advocated by Haight. Rather, the point of Rahner's theology of symbol is to provide a philosophical rationale for conceptions of "dialectic," "symbolic," and "symbolic realism," which clearly differs from and stands opposed to what Haight intends by these notions. Rahner's point is not simply to emphasize the "is" at the expense of the "is not." His point is to argue that a very different logic (or dialectic) applies in this situation—one in which symbolized and symbol, unity and distinction, divine and human, contrary to expectations, are not reduced to one or the other, not harmonized in an artificial resolution, and not played in opposition to one another as properly "other" and different.

Given the genesis and contrary thrust of Rahner's theology of symbol, I conclude that although Haight uses language that often is similar to Rahner's, Haight cannot legitimately appeal, at least without further and substantial clarification, to Rahner's position, or the many theologies inspired by it, to warrant his position. This also raises more fundamental questions about Haight's critique and reinterpretation of Rahner's christology than Haight acknowledges in his publications. Likewise, it requires much clearer distinctions between the various senses of "symbol," "symbolic," "symbolic realism," and "dialectical" in our ongoing discussions of the logic of Christian talk about Jesus' significance. Otherwise our theological discussions will result in an obfuscation of what Christians are about in such discourse rather than lead to the sort of clarification for which Haight rightly calls.

### **Symbolic and Metaphoric Readings**

Although such qualifications bring us to the nub of contention between Tillich's and Rahner's theologies of symbol, this does not yet elucidate the difference between Haight's symbolic libretto for christology and the case for a metaphoric reading. Nor does it clarify the most basic difference between Tillich's and Rahner's understandings of the logic of theological predication. The terms Rahner typically uses to describe such discourse are "analogical," "transcendental," and "mystagogical," not "symbolic." These preferences signify further divergences that need explanation. As Haight remarks, symbolic knowledge can be defined and distinguished from metaphor and other forms of speech in a variety of ways. There is no

standard usage.<sup>17</sup> A more differentiated account is required.

When Christians seek to articulate the significance of Jesus, they are forced inevitably to stretch the available language and conceptual frameworks. That happens already in the scriptures. Followers of Jesus have an arsenal of linguistic tools at their disposal for this: not only symbol and literal speech but metaphor, parable, allegory, analogy, personification, paradox, myth, poetry, narratives of various kinds, and so on. The later christological controversies can be viewed in part as efforts at dealing with this diversity. They attempt to distinguish when language is stretched too far and when not far enough; to discern when the stretching is revealing and when obfuscating; and to decide what stretching of language, generated in particular communities and circumstances, is acceptable to broader communities of belief in different contexts, and what is not tolerable. It should be admitted that any attempt to account for this exceedingly rich play of language and arduous communal discernment under a single rubric, whether "symbolic" or "metaphoric," risks oversimplification and distortion. Such theories must be advanced with reservations and modesty. But still an accounting of how language and thinking can be legitimately stretched is necessary, and unavoidable. We must have such an account if we are to make judgments about the logical limits of such linguistic and conceptual moves, or to settle interpretative questions about the "point" of particular terms and formulations, or to develop a hermeneutics to help adjudicate between alternative ways of speaking and thinking about God and Jesus.

### *Gerhart and Russell*

The advantage of the theory of metaphoric process advanced by Gerhart and Russell is that it focuses particularly on the epistemological moves in religion and science in which genuinely new possibilities for understanding and meaning emerge. Put very simply, their theory envisions situations in which a novel analogy is forced between two notions in our available world of meanings.

Their argument presupposes that our inquiries about the world and ourselves take place in what can be imagined as cognitive spaces or worlds of meanings. These worlds of meanings are made up of networks of interrelated concepts. Physics, theology, a religion, and common sense as defined by a particular time and culture are examples of

such fields of meanings. The concepts within these fields do not stand directly for things in themselves, but for our notions of these things. These notions are defined by their interrelation with other notions. For example, to get some conception of "house," one must have other notions available (lumber, bricks, wall, window, roof, and so forth). These other notions are variable, as well as the relations between them, so meaning "arises out of the interaction of concepts and relations, and is expressed in the topography of the field. Necessary concept changes, such as those which might arise from a new experience, alter relations; and changes in relations, such as occur when one attempts to understand an experience in a new way, relocate old concepts." <sup>18</sup>

Gerhart and Russell speak of an analogy as "forced" when it involves an affirmation of an identity between two "knowns" that, given current understandings, is unwarranted. In the world of Copernicus, for example, the affirmation that the sun and not the earth is the center was uncalled for. In Newton's world, to affirm that the laws of heaven and the laws of earth are the same was unreasonable. In the world of meanings available to Palestinian Jews at the time of Jesus' death, the warrants for identifying him as the Messiah were questionable at best.

The first thing that distinguishes these particular analogies is that, despite their apparent unreasonableness, forcing them does not result in nonsense. Quite to the contrary, twisting accustomed meanings in these situations opens up possibilities for understanding that had not been available before, just as stretching the elements of musical composition can create a new idiom such as jazz.

The second thing that distinguishes such uncalled-for analogies is the disruptive effect on the fields of meanings associated with them. Copernicus's insistence that the sun is the center, or Newton's insistence that the laws of terrestrial motion are identical with the laws of planetary motion, changed related notions within physics in most fundamental ways. <sup>19</sup> So the force of the analogies did not simply add new information to the world of physics, expanding it the way the discovery of a new planet or a new mechanical law might have. Nor did it clarify the given world of meanings, the way an apt analogy between something known and something unknown might have. By Newton's time both Galileo's and Kepler's laws already were known. The uncalled-for analogies had a more "tectonic" or "metaphoric" effect because they forced a reconfiguration in the until-then accepted fields of

meanings. The result was newly shaped fields of meanings that constitute a better understanding of what we know of reality.<sup>20</sup>

This effect—the creation of significant changes in fields of meanings—I take to be the fundamental characteristic of the metaphoric analogy. That is what distinguishes it from rhetorical moves we more commonly label “metaphor” or “metaphorical” in which forcing a new analogy extends the meaning of terms within a field of meanings but does not reshape the field of meanings itself. (In Gerhart and Russell’s theory “metaphoric” and “metaphorical” are not equivalent. And on their accounting many metaphors are not genuinely metaphoric because they do not create the possibility for new meaning by creating fundamental shifts in our fields of meanings.)

For example, the affirmation that “Jesus is the Messiah” effects such a change in fields of meanings. Given the images current in the eschatology of the day, affirming that God was victorious in the crucified son of a carpenter from Nazareth was uncalled for. In fact most of the key eschatological images by which Jesus is identified in the gospels have something of this metaphoric dimension. By ordinary logic he was not a victorious King of Israel; he was not a Son of Man who descended gloriously from the heavens; he was not acknowledged by his people nor did he vanquish their enemies. To affirm that Jesus is the Messiah is to force an analogy between him and Israel’s expressions of hope and trust in God. This in turn requires a different understanding of God, Israel’s hope, and Jesus. Affirming that Jesus is the Messiah, if taken seriously, forces a thoroughgoing revision of the field of meanings operative in Palestinian Judaism, or at least those operative in the narrative worlds of the New Testament.

This leads us to the third factor that distinguishes the metaphoric process. The shifts of meaning entailed in it typically make a new logic available. Conceptual moves are possible in Einstein’s world that were inconceivable in Newton’s, and moves in Newton’s world would not have made sense in Galileo’s. Likewise, the affirmation that Jesus is Messiah reconfigures the meaning of “Messiah,” the identity of Jesus, and the field of meanings associated with messianic hope. This makes possible a logical move otherwise unavailable and lays the groundwork for later moves otherwise unthinkable.

Several entailments of this conceptual step are noteworthy. First, there is no hedging of the “is” in the claim “Jesus is Messiah.” The logic of this move loses its force if Jesus is not in some sense properly

and literally the Messiah. I use "literal" here purposefully but advisedly. The conception of metaphoric process destabilizes the meaning of "literal" itself and warrants this qualified use. Although reference to the literal meaning often presupposes that exact and primary meanings are univocal and constant, and that fields of meanings are stable, the metaphoric process demonstrates that this is not always the case. In a metaphoric affirmation words come to have new exact and primary meanings. Moreover, these meanings can be semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case—three further important denotations of "literal." After Thompson and Joule, heat *is* motion. After Einstein, it is literally true that the speed of light is the same for all observers. For those whose world of meanings has been transformed by the gospel, Jesus *is* the Messiah.

Second, this is possible only if one allows for the fundamental shifts in fields of meanings. For those who got the point of the surprising affirmation, Jesus redefines what it is to be Messiah, just as the concept Messiah redefines Jesus' identity. Moreover, the fields of meanings associated with messianic expectation, Jesus, and God's relation to humanity are transformed. Hence, reception is always a crucial dimension in the metaphoric process. The point of the affirmation will be missed if the hearer is unable or unwilling to recognize the intrinsic changes in these fields of meanings.

This would be the case, for example, if a secular historian understood the predication univocally and so concluded that it is an analogy that in some ways is justified, in other ways not. This would also be the case if the affirmation is taken, whether by an historically naive believer or skeptic, as asserting a univocal, non-metaphoric identification of Jesus and the Messiah. Both people would miss the affirmation's logical significance. A univocal and literal reading in that sense—a reading that does not negotiate the entailed shifts in fields of meanings—will mistake the logic of the predication. Therefore, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah requires what the prophets had called *teshuva*, a fundamental "turning" or conversion in thinking and in identity.<sup>21</sup>

It was a shift in conception and identity that many at the time could not see or accept, a shift that many of Jesus' followers apparently found difficult, and a shift whose far-reaching implications plainly were not at all clear, at first, even to those who affirmed it. The logic was not patently explicit, conscious, or transparent. Nevertheless, the

metaphoric point of this predication is neither to deny the identity nor restrict its significance but to open up a logical space that enables us to say more than would be possible if the predication were interpreted as either merely univocal (is) or merely dialectical (is not).

### *The Metaphoric Character of Rahner's Thought*

Gerhart and Russell's conception of the metaphoric process provides an illuminating explanation of the logic entailed in Rahner's appeal to the "analogical" and "transcendental" character of God-talk. His performance is more subtle, innovative, and effective than his own explanations. Inattention to such unarticulated but fundamental moves in his thought is the source of significant misunderstanding among some commentators and critics. For one thing, Rahner holds that "analogy" and "transcendental" are themselves analogous and transcendental conceptions. Pinning down their precise meaning and demonstrating that it is metaphoric requires attentive and extended analysis. For the present purposes a brief overview of this claim and its justification must suffice.<sup>22</sup>

If one steps back from what Rahner says about analogous and transcendental statements and then examines how he actually uses such language, it becomes clear that he is forcing an analogy. The effect is to open up new fields of meanings and so a new logical and grammatical space in which it is possible to speak meaningfully of God, though in a qualified, indirect, and somewhat apophatic way. Rahner insists that this does not entail any grasping of God in concepts. His move is a metaphoric act grounded in a very different understanding of how we think and signify God in the first place. This does not entail affirming that God is in some ways like and in some ways different from some putative analogue. Like Tillich and Haight, he resists the claim that concepts can grasp God in that way at all. But unlike Tillich's and Haight's restrictive views of the range of predication, Rahner's argumentation reveals that he thinks we can force language as we normally use it to different purposes, shifting our fields of meanings as they apply to God, so that conceptual room can be open for saying *something meaningful and substantive that grasps at God without grasping God*.

More specifically (although Rahner does not put it this way himself) the transcendental argument in its most basic conceptual move

forces an analogy between two known elements that require a shift in our fields of meanings. This opens up possibilities for predication otherwise unavailable and unthinkable. The first known is what Rahner calls "transcendental" intentionality—the reflexive, indirect, and dynamic presence-to-self and anticipation (*Vorgriff*) of the horizon of knowing, love, and freedom. The second known is the more direct grasp of specific objects as known, loved, and affirmed in freedom, what he calls "categorical" intentionality.

Rahner forces an analogy by insisting that the model for knowing and speaking of God is transcendental intentionality rather than categorical intentionality, and by insisting that the former is not a derivative, secondary, or inferior activity, but the primary and grounding manifestation of the human spirit. Forcing this analogy—that is to say, speaking of God as "transcendental reality"—creates a logical space for talking about God, while insisting that God is the goal and presupposition of human intentionality and never its object, and underlines that God is always beyond our grasp. The logic of God-talk, for Rahner, is governed by the intrinsic reflexivity and indirectness of this metaphoric signification. If this is forgotten, one falls into the mistaken notion that transcendental reality is a transcendental "object" that can be known, spoken of, or described in the way we know and speak about categorical objects.

Rahner is able to show that a similar logic applies to other transcendental "realities," such as the self or freedom, that are real and that can be the grammatical objects of our predications even though they are not entities perceptible by the senses. People do indeed speak of such "things" as if they were objects in that sense. Moreover, people take them as "real." But even though people might not be able to explain why, most would recognize the inappropriateness of questions about the physical location of the self, its size, weight, color, taste, or smell. There is something metaphoric going on in much of our everyday talk about realities such as the "self," even though we do not normally call attention to this "stretching" of language and are not discomforted by its peculiar logic.

Rahner's use of "Holy Mystery," "nameless whither," "horizon," and "asymptotic goal" as terms for God is meant to call attention to such a metaphoric shift in signification and logic. Moreover, characteristic of metaphoric signification, the act of affirming that God is transcendental reality effects fundamental and global changes in the



available theological and philosophical fields of meanings. Rahner seeks to exploit these meanings in his various theological investigations. We have already seen him do this in his theology of symbol. His affirmation that beings, and indeed being itself, are symbolic is itself a metaphoric proposal. Accepting his suggestion forces a reconfiguration of what symbol is, of how beings and being itself are, and of the fields of meanings associated with each of these notions. Moreover, this reconfiguration of fields of meanings makes available a logic in which, contrary to expectations, symbol and symbolized are not opposed, indeed in which unity and diversity correlate in like, rather than inverse, proportion.

It is true that Rahner explains and achieves this metaphoric move within the context of his rather cerebral transcendental metaphysics. He was inspired by Aquinas, who achieved a similar innovation in an earlier philosophical context, quite different from our so-called post-modern world of meanings. Aquinas also required a significant reconfiguration of the intellectual idioms of his day. Following Gerhart and Russell, however, it can be argued that the metaphoric process that their theologies exemplify is a more general epistemological activity entailed in the expansion of religious and theological understanding as well as other forms of scientific and artistic understanding.

Such moves are not *a priori* inimical to the sort of "intelligibility in today's world" that Haight argues must be a crucial criterion for christology. Contemporary belief structures, particularly those that have created the possibility for new horizons of human understanding, are built on such cognitive shifts in our fields of meaning. This argues for a significant qualification of Haight's insistence that "one cannot logically affirm a belief that stands in contradiction with what one knows to be true in a wider context" and that "the principle of non-contradiction rules out a compartmentalization of christological beliefs held in a private sphere that do not correlate with what we positively know to be the case from other spheres of life."<sup>23</sup> This norm can be granted, but only so long as one takes into consideration those significant metaphoric acts in other spheres of life that reveal knowing as a process in which our fields of meanings can be meaningfully stretched to unexpected uses, and our logic twisted in uncalled-for but warrantably productive ways. This qualification must be part of the equation, as well, in the application of Haight's positive articulation of the criterion: that



"one's christological faith should find expression in belief structures or ways of understanding that fit or correspond with the way reality is understood generally in a given culture."<sup>24</sup> A restrictive theory of the symbolic that *a priori* rules out the metaphoric in theology and religion, or that relegates it to the non-cognitive and poetic, ignores the significance of the metaphoric as a legitimate cognitive process in the sciences and arts.

As I read them, Tillich and Haight also seek to force an analogy when they claim that all talk of God is symbolic. Establishing this reading is not necessary for the further development of the case I am making for a metaphoric reading of christological symbols, but it does provide an occasion to stress that making a metaphoric move does not require an awareness that one is doing so or a commitment to a theory such as Gerhart and Russell's. It also calls attention to the difference between recognizing a move as metaphoric and judging it true or as the most helpful conceptual move. Clarifying precisely how christological predications logically function, whether as metaphoric or symbolic in the various senses we have examined, is a crucial step toward interpreting their meaning, but it is still preliminary to determining their truth. Our concern is with the question "What kind of truth?" and so bears more indirectly on the question "Is it true?"

### **Hermeneutical Implications of a Metaphoric Reading**

If the logic of christological predication is metaphoric in the sense I have argued, rather than restrictively symbolic, Haight's genetic hermeneutics loses much of its force. He acknowledges that his interpretation presupposes his theory of symbol as the only viable alternative either to literal readings, which he contends are today historically implausible, or to highly speculative metaphysical readings, which he maintains are at best problematic for postmodern consciousness. But a metaphoric libretto such as I have proposed here makes possible yet another construal. The scope of this essay permits little more than this bare suggestion itself and some of its hermeneutical implications. The significant historical issues related to this claim or to Haight's christological interpretations must be left to other occasions and to those with appropriate expertise.

The focal point of contention follows directly from what has been argued. If metaphoric acts in religion, theology, or other sciences can

sometimes adventitiously create the possibility for affirming an identity claim (a metaphoric analogy) that otherwise would have been unavailable and unthinkable, it has to be asked if similar conceptual moves could not have been entailed in scripture and in the early reflections of the church that prepared the grounds for the formulations of Chalcedon and Nicaea.

This contrasts with Haight's interpretation of Jesus as the "Wisdom of God" and "Logos of God." The wisdom christology, he observes "is often considered a bridge to a fully three-stage, incarnational understanding of a pre-existent Jesus Christ."<sup>25</sup> The logos christology "both resembles the other wisdom christologies and transcends them in the direction of an explicit statement of the incarnation of an hypostatized being."<sup>26</sup> He maintains that "what is happening in the development of the earlier wisdom christology is evident: 'What Judaism said of Sophia, Christian hymn-makers and epistle writers now come to say of Jesus.'"<sup>27</sup> This conceptual move paved the way for later assertions of Jesus' pre-existence, but in Haight's scenario those later moves were not justified by the intentionality of the scriptural texts that generated them. The originating meaning was very different and contradicts the later, since the referent of these affirmations was the historical Jesus of Nazareth seen symbolically as a personification and revelation of God. The referent was not a pre-existent being in identity with God.

And what do these assertions mean? . . . James Dunn, for example, recognizes that in his wisdom christology Paul wanted to show that Jesus is the new and exhaustive embodiment of divine wisdom. He admits that Matthew transcends his source Q, where Jesus is a messenger of wisdom, and identifies Jesus with wisdom. It is clear that Jesus is being equated with the personification of God's wisdom in the hymns like that of Colossians. Moreover, this metaphorical language of personification finally led to a christology in which Jesus is different in kind from other mediations of God, and enjoys a metaphysically divine status of personal pre-existence. But Dunn fails to find in the Jewish tradition prior to Jesus any consideration of wisdom as a hypostasis or divine being; this would not fit with Jewish monotheism. Wisdom language remains figurative personification. It is thus at least ambiguous that pre-existence represents the intention of

these wisdom christologies, because one cannot really show that this is more than the figurative language of metaphor and personification. Is there a way out of this impasse?<sup>28</sup>

Haight responds "yes" and proposes that the issue can be sorted out hermeneutically. His first move is to argue that the historical Jesus of Nazareth is the primary referent of such affirmations. He next notes that in such wisdom sayings the central theme is Jesus' role as one who "reveals both the true nature of human existence and also the nature of God."<sup>29</sup> Haight reasons that the personification borrowed from wisdom language should be interpreted in this light. "These texts are not providing unknowable information about transcendent realities from some secret source of knowledge. The epistemology of these christologies begins from below, with Jesus, and their content is based on the encounter of God in and through Jesus."<sup>30</sup> So, he concludes, the affirmations are symbolic: Jesus points to God but is not literally identified with God and does not pre-exist in identity with God. The affirmations are symbolic in this restrictive sense for two reasons: first, because it is language about transcendental reality and, second, because "this is consciously developed language of personification."<sup>31</sup>

On more careful analysis, the second reason is little more than a variation on the first. Throughout Haight's work, it is clear that he understands metaphor and personification in terms of his theory of the symbolic. He notes early in the book that "descriptions of how metaphor functions resemble the dynamics of symbols."<sup>32</sup> In his understanding, the logic of metaphor and personification presuppose the fundamental non-identity between the realities compared. They are analogies in the common sense—not metaphoric. One term (or perhaps both terms) communicates information about the other. In so doing, the analogies may introduce paradox, tension, and ambiguity into the meanings of the terms themselves, but the analogies do not create fundamental changes in the fields of meanings or create the possibility for new logical relations between them. They do not force a new identity. So Haight tells us:

I indicated earlier how in a metaphor one thing is identified with something different, as in "My husband is a bear." What immediately strikes the listener or reader is the non-identity between the implicitly pared items. The creative imagination is thus set in

motion to formulate the similarity or point of identity: is he a teddy or a grizzly? So too, analogously, to say that Jesus is a parable of God introduces paradox, tension, and ambiguity in Jesus' mediation of God. One must recognize immediately that as a human being Jesus is Jesus, is not God, but points away from himself to God.<sup>33</sup>

A similar logic applies in his interpretation of personification in the Hebrew scriptures:

In some instances these metaphorical symbols in the Hebrew scriptures are personified, and this personification became a very significant factor in the development of christological and trinitarian doctrine. Personification is a figure of speech: the literal meaning of a personification, that is, the meaning intended by the author of the personification, is not that the "hands of God" refer to two actual hands, or that the Word of God is something really distinct from God. When the metaphorical character of personification is not respected, when it becomes hypostatized, that is, conceived as objective and individual, in the same measure the power of the symbol tends to be undermined. The symbol can then be made to point to something distinct from God, which in its turn acts as an intermediary between God and the world. God's transcendence and immanence in the world become separated and competitive; God, as holy and transcendent, cannot be mixed up in this world but needs a messenger, an angel, a Word. This goes against the primitive intention of the symbol as referring in its first instance simply to God experienced in the world.<sup>34</sup>

But do such metaphors always refer simply to God as experienced in the world in that restrictive way? I suggested earlier that identifying Jesus as Messiah is not a metaphor in the manner Haight defines, but metaphoric in Gerhart and Russell's sense. It opens up and requires a new way of conceiving Jesus, messianic hope, and God's relation to humanity. With this shift in fields of meanings, a new logic applies; one can say properly and literally that Jesus is Messiah. Christians proclaim nothing less. They do not proclaim him as a "sort of" Messiah.

It is reasonable to suppose that a similar logical move is involved in Philippians, Colossians, and the prologue to the Gospel of John—their authors were forcing new analogies stretching the available fields of meanings and logical relations between them. If they were doing something of the sort, it would not require that Jewish tradition prior to Jesus had available this sense of wisdom as a pre-existent hypostasis or divine being; nor would it require that the authors intended to appeal to such meanings. The point of a metaphoric analogy is to create conceptual room to say what could not have otherwise been said by forcing language and logic to a new use. There is as much evidence for the claim that the disciples' reflection on a deeper level of their experience of Jesus forced such a metaphoric expansion of the available language and logic, as there is for Haight's assumption that what followers of Jesus could have intended to say was restricted to the fields of meanings available before such a metaphoric act or limited to what would have been conceivable to those whose experience did not force and warrant such a metaphoric process.

The tension between the historical Jesus and what is affirmed of him in worship and scripture—and eventually in creed—supports the metaphoric reading just as much as it supports Haight's restrictive symbolic reading; it explains better the realism of the claims that Jesus is Lord, the Word made flesh, and the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. A metaphoric realism, like Haight's symbolic reading, would insist that the logic of christology begins from below with Jesus and with the historical encounter of Jesus. By invoking such realism, we would concur with Haight:

It is mistaken to read this wisdom language as though it were straightforward descriptive language that told the story of a divine being that descended to become Jesus. To understand this language as descriptive language about a being who is "on the side of the creator in the creator-creature distinction" is to misinterpret the kind of language that is being used and its epistemological provenance. These texts are not providing unknowable information about transcendent realities from some secret source of knowledge. The epistemology of these christologies begins from below, with Jesus, and their content is based on the encounter of God in and through Jesus. Their revelatory character in epistemological terms is ascending. To

the question about God and what God is like, these texts testify that Jesus mediates an answer. God is encountered in Jesus; God is revealed in Jesus; God is like Jesus; the wisdom of God is made manifest in Jesus; Jesus is the wisdom of God. Jesus himself responds to the questions, what is God's wisdom and where is it found?<sup>35</sup>

But a metaphoric reading would not concur with the conclusion that talk of Jesus as God's word incarnate is thereby illegitimate. Nor would a metaphoric reading require us to conclude that subsequently drawing implications for our understanding of God as triune is unwarranted. If such claims are metaphoric and if this metaphoric act is justified, then within that context there is a warrant for the proper use of such language and justification for predication that involve more than the symbolic meanings envisioned by Haight. While Haight's symbolic reading enables a vigorous affirmation of Jesus' historical reality, that reading severely restricts the divine. God and God's relation to creation seem bound by the logic that constrains beings and the relations between beings. This appears to be at the root of his objection that Rahner's Logos christology undermines the affirmation of Jesus' full humanity:

But despite his intentions and his strong affirmations of Jesus' real humanity, the suspicions arise at several points. Jesus is not like us insofar as God is present to Jesus as Logos and God is present to us as Spirit. In other words, God's presence as Logos to Jesus is a qualitatively different mode of presence than God's union with human beings generally. It seems metaphysically inconceivable that this different presence to Jesus would not make a substantial, ontological difference in him relative to God's presence to us. It would be an odd metaphysics that could imagine God assuming a human nature without ontologically transforming that human nature.<sup>36</sup>

It is an odd metaphysics only if one assumes that the same logic applies between God and beings as between beings themselves, only if one assumes that God is a competing part of nature or of the world, and only if one assumes that God's agency in the world is like other kinds of agency. Despite Haight's and Tillich's strong affirmations to

the contrary, their symbolic reading of incarnation has the similarly odd character of treating the distinction between God and creatures as if it were like other distinctions. They insist that in the case of God, as in other cases, the "is" and "is not" must be either harmonized or different.

But are those the only two choices? A metaphoric reading would say no, and question whether Haight's symbolic realism takes seriously enough the uniqueness of the distinction between God and what is not God. The metaphoric libretto would argue along with Robert Sokolowski that the Christian sense of God entails a unique distinction between the divine and non-divine and that "once this new context is reached, new 'kinds' of differences become available" that were not available within philosophical and religious conceptual frameworks prior to Christianity.<sup>37</sup> It is precisely this distinction in the notion of divinity and this new conceptual framework, and not just the status of Jesus, that Sokolowski argues was at stake in the christological controversies. The councils required a new understanding of the logic of Christian talk about God and Jesus:

. . . They tell us that we must think of God as the one who can let natural necessity be maintained and let reason be left intact: that is, God is not himself a competing part of nature or a part of the world. If the incarnation could not take place without a truncation of human nature, it would mean that God was one of the natures in the world that somehow was defined by not being the other natures; it would mean that his presence in one of these other natures, human nature, would involve a conflict and a need to exclude some part of what he is united with. . . . But the Christian God is not a part of the world and is not a "kind" of being at all. Therefore the incarnation is not meaningless or impossible or destructive.<sup>38</sup>

Does Haight worry about God's transcendence and immanence in the world becoming separated and competitive in hypostatized symbols because he has missed, and indeed precluded as possible, the distinction (the metaphoric shift) that Sokolowski discerns as a key insight emerging from the classical christological controversies? Is it not reasonable to view the innovations of wisdom and logos christology in the first centuries as forcing an analogy and warranting a logic that

open up the possibility for affirming both the identity between Jesus and God, and the integrity of Jesus' humanity?—both the “is” and the “is not” at once?

This short paper cannot settle the question. It has barely sketched the outline of a constructive alternative for explaining the logic of Christian talk about Jesus' significance. An adequate critique of Haight's response to the question would require more substantial analysis, as would a defense of a metaphoric realism. I can only hope that I have played out enough of the overture to suggest the crucial themes in the proposed metaphoric libretto and score.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“... inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter,” #302, Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schonmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (Barcinone: Herder, 1966), 108.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Rahner, S.J., “Current Problems in Christology,” in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 149-200, first published in 1954 with the title, “*Chalkedon—Ende oder Anfang?*”

<sup>3</sup>Roger Haight, S.J., *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999). Hereafter cited as *Symbol*.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984); and *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Roger Haight, S.J., *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 280, n.17.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 44. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 237, Tillich emphasized that “Being itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. There is an absolute break, an infinite ‘jump.’” Tillich explained the implications for christology in his essay “Theology and Symbolism,” in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 114: “The second level of religious symbols is the sacramental level, namely, the appearance of the holy in time and space, in everyday realities. Realities in nature and history are the bearers of the holy on this level. Events, things, persons can have symbolic power. *The danger in sacramental holiness is that the holy is identified with that which is the bearer of the holy.* Where this happens religion relapses into magic. I believe that the vigorous opposition of the Reformers to the transubstantiation theory was the belief that it was a regression into the magical identification of the Divine with



the bearer of the Divine. *When we speak of Jesus we have the same problem. He is the bearer of what in symbolic terms is called the Christ.* The same is true of the Church. The Church is a sacramental reality. It is sociological, historical as is every group, and at the same time, it is the 'Body of Christ.' *In all these cases, the confusion of the holy itself with the bearer of the holy is the beginning of the distortion of religion*" (emphasis added). This understanding is at the root of Tillich's problems with the doctrine of the incarnation, formulated baldly in an early essay, "A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Church Quarterly Review*, 147 (January-March, 1949): 133-48, and articulated in a more nuanced way in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, 92-96, 138-50.

<sup>9</sup>*Symbol*, 112.

<sup>10</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I, 237.

<sup>11</sup>*Symbol*, 197.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Symbol*, 480, where Haight is speaking about how one penetrates to the point of trinitarian doctrine.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Rahner, S.J., "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations* 4 (New York: Seabury, 1966), 221-52 (*Schriften zur Theologie* 4 [Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954] 275-311). Hereafter I cite first the English translation followed by the pagination of the German text in square brackets.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 228 [283] (*wobei die Einheit und Verschiedenheit korrelierte, im selben Maß wachsende, nicht sich gegenseitig bis zur widersprüchlichen Ausschließlichkeit herabmindernde Größen sind*).

<sup>17</sup>*Symbol*, 11.

<sup>18</sup>"The Cognitive Effect of Metaphor," *Listening* 25 (1990): 114-26, at 119. Consider the difference in the concept that "bungalow" would call to mind by the interaction of such notions: in India (a thatched or tiled one-story dwelling surrounded by a wide verandah), in Aberdeen, Scotland (a small granite cottage huddled between similar structures), or in New England (a single-story wood-framed home). Even among those who share a world of meanings, the understandings of such notions can vary somewhat from person to person, depending on factors such as background, education, and linguistic sophistication. Moreover, meanings can change over time if new associations are made between existing notions, or if a new notion is added to a field of meanings. In the gospels, when Jesus identifies the notion of Messiah with that of the Suffering Servant, the association significantly alters not only these notions but, as well, a host of other notions related to the idea of eschatological expectation (a field of meanings), if not the very fabric of Jewish faith (a still broader field of meanings).

<sup>19</sup>See *New Maps for Old*, 53-60, for a number of examples.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>21</sup>For a discussion of Martin Buber's use of the term and an argument that God-talk involves such a "turning" (although described as grammatical, not metaphorical) see Nicholas Lash's *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (South Bend, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), 193 ff.

<sup>22</sup>See my articles "Analogy and the Metaphoric Process," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 571-96, and "Metaphor as Apt for Conversation: The Inherently Conversational Character of Theological Discourse," in *Relational Theology*, Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology, III (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Uitgeverij Peeters [forthcoming]).

<sup>23</sup>*Symbol*, 49.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, quoting Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985): 261-94, at 261.

<sup>28</sup>*Symbol*, 171, citing James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 170 and 205-12.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, citing Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 216.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 437-38.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 432-33.

<sup>37</sup>*The God of Faith & Reason: Foundation of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1982, 1995), 48.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.