

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

---

2003

## Metaphor as Apt for Conversation: The Inherently Conversational Character of Theological Discourse

Robert Masson

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

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Masson, Robert, "Metaphor as Apt for Conversation: The Inherently Conversational Character of Theological Discourse" (2003). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 233.

[https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo\\_fac/233](https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/233)

## METAPHOR AS APT FOR CONVERSATION

### THE INHERENTLY CONVERSATIONAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

It has been suggested in a number of the papers at this conference that conversation, connectedness, encounter and relation are apt metaphors for the theological task in the twenty-first century – particularly apt for addressing pressing problems, which, if not unique to our day, at least have a new post-modern twist. Jacques Haers has proposed these as the root metaphors for a collaborative research program. Papers have investigated the aptness of the metaphors and made compelling cases for them as key paradigms for theological thinking. I suggest to the contrary that we reverse the formulation of the theme. Rather than focus attention on how conversation and encounter are apt metaphors for the theological project, we should consider how apt metaphor is for conversation. In fact, some conversations and related encounters, among which the religious and theological are included, could not take place without a metaphoric process. Properly speaking, talk of God is always rooted in and essentially related to a metaphoric process. That is my first claim.

My aim in this initial reversal, however, is not to undercut the conference theme. The metaphoric process reveals itself to be intrinsically conversational. The metaphoric act presupposes dynamic shifts in shared fields of meanings that can only be undertaken and grasped through ongoing interaction in language and in connectedness with others. Moreover encounter (in the most proper sense of the term) with God and with the neighbour is mediated by a metaphoric process. The research program envisioned in Professor Haers's paper and many of the others is more radical than the investigation of apt metaphors – even if we conceive them as root metaphors. To opt for such root metaphors is to call for *teshuva*<sup>1</sup>: a metaphoric turning or conversion in thinking and living. My second objective is to elaborate a bit on these contentions.

1. For a discussion of the Buber's use of the term and an argument that God-talk involves such a "turning" (although described as grammatical, not metaphorical) see N. LASH, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, pp. 193 ff.

Inattention to this essentially conversational dynamic of our metaphoric discourse about God is at the root of significant confusions in religious and theological thinking. This occasion does not offer the opportunity to discuss specific cases at length, but I will cite instances, one of which I have analysed more fully in a recent issue of *Theological Studies*<sup>2</sup>. Developing these points, hopefully, will give some justification for concluding that conversation and encounter are not merely apt metaphors for theological thinking. Theological thinking as inherently metaphoric is, when successful, intrinsically conversational and fundamentally directed toward encounter with God and neighbour as other and mystery. Attention to the logic of this essentially conversational dynamic is crucial to understanding how we think and talk about God and how we relate to neighbour – especially in our pluralistic world with its many intersecting but also disparate conversations.

My remarks here are part of a larger project to analyse the metaphoric turn in God-talk as a way to rethink the doctrine of analogy. In light of that broader argument, I will take the liberty of making presuppositions that a fuller treatment of the issues would need to justify. A brief acknowledgment of these assumptions must suffice to situate the context and basis for the case I am making.

In Catholic theology, the appeal to analogy has played a pivotal role in explaining how understanding and language can meaningfully refer to God whose reality transcends human grasp. The “received” tradition traces the Catholic position to Thomas Aquinas’s theory of analogy. However, convincing arguments have been made that Aquinas never proposed an explicit theory or even appealed to analogous uses of language in a consistent way over the course of his career<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps more importantly, the use and understanding of analogy in Catholic theology has gradually moved away from the scholastic conceptual framework of the received tradition. This shift in understanding, however, has not been adequately articulated or explained. Often it is not even acknowledged<sup>4</sup>. This became

2. R. MASSON, *Analogy and the Metaphoric Process*, in *TS* 62 (2001) 571–596.

3. For a treatment of this issue see D. BURRELL, *Aquinas: God and Action*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979, p. 55.

4. For example, the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed., 1997) does not note this shift or its import. George Klubertanz’s article in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1981) details the historical development of the notion of analogy in Thomistic thought without acknowledging the difference between such accounts and the way appeals to analogy actually work in contemporary theological figures like Karl Rahner or the influential philosopher of the doctrine, Erich Przywara. Contemporary theologians, like Elizabeth Johnson, who self-consciously have appropriated this transition in understanding continue, nevertheless, to explain analogy in traditional conceptual language which conceals both the shift itself and its significance.

evident to me in my own investigations of Karl Rahner's theology. His use of analogous language is far more subtle, innovative and effective than his explanation of analogy. Inattention to such unarticulated but fundamental moves in his thought is the source of significant misunderstanding among some commentators and critics<sup>5</sup>. I believe that this is not a peculiarity of Rahner or others indebted to Thomistic tradition but is true in general of theological and philosophical reflection on analogy. By and large, explanation has not matched the exercise of the analogical imagination. Nor has the connection between the analogical imagination and metaphoric imagination, or their relationship with the dialectical imagination, been explained satisfactorily.

In this context, the theory of metaphoric process and understanding of analogy advanced in the interdisciplinary reflections of the theologian and literary theorist, Mary Gerhart, and the physicist, Allan Russell, stand out as a unique contribution<sup>6</sup>. Their conception offers an innovative, perspicuous, coherent and persuasive explanation of what happens when believers and theologians stretch language, and are stretched by language, to speak and think of God. Perhaps familiarity with their position cannot be taken for granted. It is not clear that their position is known widely outside American theological circles<sup>7</sup>. More significantly, it is not clear how many, even in American circles, appreciate the significant potential of Gerhart and Russell's contribution beyond its immediate pertinence to the dialogue between science and religion. Their publications have, for the most part focused on that issue and related methodological concerns<sup>8</sup>. The theological illustrations they offer, while suggestive, are limited to brief sketches. Their studies do not directly address the conceptual confusion surrounding theological appeals to analogy and do not test in any

5. The case for this claim will have to be made in other places but I believe an examination of the writings of what might be called a "Yale school" interpretation of Rahner in the 1970's and 1980's, Thomas Sheehan's influential analysis of Rahner's philosophical roots, and Roger Haight's appropriation of Rahner's theology of symbol would show that all miss the metaphoric shift intrinsic to Rahner's argumentation.

6. See M. GERHART – A. RUSSELL, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding*, Fort Worth, TX, Texas Christian University, 1984; and their further elaborations of the theory in *The Cognitive Effect of Metaphor*, in *Listening* 25 (1990) 114-126, and *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion*, New York, Continuum, 2001.

7. For example, their work is not cited in any of the essays in recent collection edited by Leuven's professors, L. BOEVE – K. FEYAERTS (eds.), *Metaphor and God-talk*, New York, Peter Lang, 1999.

8. The one instance of extended analysis of which I am aware is the fourth chapter of *New Maps for Old* [originally published with Joseph P. Healey in *Semina* 61 (1993) 167-182] analysing the metaphoric process implicit in the Mosaic identification of Yahweh and El.

detail the theory's ability to explain the conceptual moves of specific theologians and do not explore the theory's potential to resolve particular theological controversies. So my larger project entails, in part, establishing how and why I think their theory can be helpful in addressing such issues. Moreover, although the case I will make here for the inherently metaphoric and conversational character of theological discourse presupposes their theory, it also seeks to illustrate its explanatory power and in that way to argue for it. Whether the specific details of their theory merit this close attention will hinge in the end on the theory's ability to clarify such issues. The *Theological Studies* article I mentioned was one foray in that direction. What follows is another limited engagement.

# I. THE METAPHORIC PROCESS ACCORDING TO GERHART AND RUSSELL

Gerhart and Russell's proposal summarizes and builds on an extensive body of research in philosophy and literature on metaphor. The focus of concern, as they have been at pains to emphasize, however, is not on metaphor or analogy as such, but on the fundamental epistemological process underlying the creation of new understanding in science and in religion. Metaphors have a part in their understanding in so far as they are manifestations of that epistemic process. But the decisive step in their theory is the role which the underlying process plays in changing the fields of meanings in an inquiry. Rather than merely augmenting what is already known, the metaphoric process creates the possibility for new meanings and understanding. Paul Ricœur comments that this is the "most remarkable contribution" of their proposal<sup>9</sup>.

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 composed of networks of interrelated concepts. Physics, theology, a religion, or 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

9. GERHART - RUSSELL, *Metaphoric Process* (n. 6), p. xii.

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>10</sup>. 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 veranda), 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>11</sup>.

In the view of Gerhart and Russell, a world of meanings is made up of collections of such fields of meanings and it "comprises the basis for an individual's idea of the way things are"<sup>12</sup>. The theory regards the individual's or community's construal, when it is successful, as corresponding in a genuine but complex way to reality. On the other hand, the theory also holds that "worlds of meaning are culture-bound. Within a particular culture, persons have worlds of meanings that have the same general topography despite the fact that a particular field of meanings possessed by one person may be completely absent in another"<sup>13</sup>. These construals take place in conversation – in ongoing interaction in language and in community with others.

What interests Gerhart and Russell is how new understandings and meanings develop among people who share such a world of meanings. They distinguish the discovery of new meanings from the acquisition of new knowledge that involves merely an addition of data that does not

10. *Ibid.*, *The Cognitive Effect of Metaphor* (n. 6), p. 119.

11. To what extent such alterations in meaning were effected, whether by Jesus or later interpreters, with what justification and with what success are of course the fault lines of disagreement from which Christianity developed as a new religion and that continue to divide traditions of beliefs and schools of scholarship. That different historical and theological answers to such questions are possible, does not alter the fact that a metaphoric identification underlies the possibility of such new meanings and understandings.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

13. *Ibid.*

change the notions or fields of meanings themselves. For example, we can learn of new cities or new planets and so gain additional information for ourselves or the field of astronomy. In doing this, however, we usually do not change the notions of "city", "planet", or "solar system". In contrast, Copernicus's insistence that the sun is the centre of the universe or Newton's insistence that the mechanical laws of the heavens are identical with the mechanical laws of the earth, created new understandings that changed fundamental notions within physics and indeed changed how ordinary people understood things. Much of the routine work of scientists and theologians is devoted to the former sort of acquisition aimed at expanding the current knowledge base. Insights of the latter sort are occurrences of genius and discovery typically associated with more extraordinary and consequential developments in a discipline.

Analogy, broadly conceived, plays a key role in both processes. A crucial element of Gerhart and Russell's proposal is the suggestion that we distinguish between three different though related ways of making an "analogy" that we can designate as "analogy", "simile", and "metaphor".

In Gerhart and Russell's scheme "analogy" and "simile" are conceptual tools that often play a key role in the former task, the acquisition of additional information. Analogy in this definition involves the use of some feature common to two known realities to extend or expand our knowledge of either one of them, or, in some cases, both of them. Successful analogies between the operations of the human mind and computers, for example, could lead either to a better grasp of how the mind works, to the development of more sophisticated software, or to an enriched understanding of both minds and computers.

Sometimes, only one of the analogues in question will be known. In that case, a known feature of one reality tells us something about another reality that is unknown. This is what Gerhart and Russell understand to be the defining characteristic of simile. "So when Max Black wrote, 'The chairman plowed through the discussion', he created a text that instructs the reader who does not know how the discussion proceeded, and who now, on the comparative basis of the simile, does know"<sup>14</sup>. It is important for our exploration of the conversational character of such conceptual and linguistic moves to observe that whether Black's proposition functions as an analogy or simile depends on the state of knowledge of the persons involved. A person who was present at the chairman's discussion would be in a position to agree with Black's analogy or, as we say, to "get"

14. *Ibid.*, p. 116 quoting M. BLACK, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1962, p. 13.



the analogy and acquire a deeper insight into the event. That person, however, would not be acquiring new information about something unknown. Therefore, in Gerhart and Russell's account, for that person the proposition would be an analogy, not a simile.

Gerhart and Russell note that with these definitions a great many of the comparisons we ordinarily think of as metaphors are, in their theory, either analogies or similes. As I mentioned previously, they are not proposing that literary concepts of metaphor need to be changed or abandoned. Their description of the "metaphoric process" is not intended as a comprehensive theory of metaphor or metaphorical usage. Rather, the goal is to direct our attention to an epistemological process that involves a third kind of analogy where, given the normal understanding of the notions within or between fields of meanings, there is no acknowledged similarity between a known "x" and "y". When such a situation obtains, saying that "x is y" forces an analogy between the two knowns that is uncalled for "thereby *creating* a similarity or analogy where none existed"<sup>15</sup>. The distinguishing character of what Gerhart and Russell label the metaphoric process is that it distorts the given world of meanings. Once one gets the point of the metaphor – gets the point of affirming that "x is y" then "x", "y", and the coordinates (or field of meanings) in terms of which we had formerly understood them, are comprehended in a new way which makes it possible to conceive notions, understand relations, and envision as logical what could not have been so grasped before the metaphoric act. Gerhart and Russell stress "it is of particular importance to see that it is the theoretical structure of the meanings involved in metaphor that makes new knowledge possible. The distortion of the fields of meanings by means of the metaphoric process is a structural change that demands that other meanings and understandings have to be changed in the wake of the metaphor"<sup>16</sup>. They contend, "This is what is so different about the metaphoric process. The analogical process, on the other hand, is an extension of meaning (as distinct from the creation of new meaning). The increased knowledge from analogy is primarily in terms of the original understandings"<sup>17</sup>.

Take the example of the early Christians' affirmation that "Jesus is the Messiah". 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

15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

16. *Id.*, *Metaphoric Process* (n. 6), p. 119.

17. *Ibid.*



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. Forcing the analogy requires us to understand differently both Jesus and that hope itself. 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. Given that shift in meaning, it is appropriate to say that Jesus literally and properly is the Messiah.

According to Gerhart and Russell, Copernicus brought about a similar shift in scientific understanding.

The sun (not the earth) is the center of the solar system." This is not a simile, nor is it an analogy. Furthermore, there is nothing unknown or ambiguous about "the sun", nor about "center of the solar system." To insist, on the basis of no observational evidence, that one of the concepts is the other, conforms to our description of the linguistic expression of a metaphoric act. The identity between two hitherto different but known concepts changed a host of relations in fields of meanings and reformed the topography of the world of meanings. Testimony to the outrageous act is amply given in history's descriptions of the reaction of religious authorities<sup>18</sup>.

They argue that Newton's equation of the mechanical laws of the heavens with the mechanical laws of the earth "had perhaps an even more profound effect on our lives"<sup>19</sup> and that it was in similar ways metaphoric.

To summarize, in Gerhart and Russell's theory a distinction must be made between two different epistemological processes that use analogies. What they refer to as the "analogical act" involves recognition of similarities within or between given fields of meanings. These are what we ordinarily regard as analogies, similes and, in many instances, metaphors. When successful, the analogical act expands meanings within those fields without distorting the fields themselves. The "metaphoric act" also involves the recognition of similarities, but these similarities are the result of a "disruptive cognitive act" that forces an uncalled-for analogy within or between the fields of meanings – a distortion of one or both of these fields in order to achieve the required analogy. When this distortion is

18. *Id.*, *The Cognitive Effect of Metaphor* (n. 6), p. 124.

19. *Ibid.*

productive it creates new understandings and meanings. For example, a new world of meanings, in fact a new religion, is created if one takes as true the affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah.

## II. THE METAPHORIC AND ANALOGICAL ACTS AS INHERENTLY CONVERSATIONAL

These distinctions between the analogical act and the metaphoric act cannot be determined apart from the knowing processes of the persons entertaining them. Metaphoric and analogical construals take place in ongoing interaction in an already-given world of meanings and in community with others. These are inherently conversational processes. For example, as a successful metaphoric act gains acceptance and begins to effect permanent transformations in a field of meanings, the uncalled-for analogy becomes more and more obvious. After a while, it is taken for granted. It becomes a "given" in the new but now stabilized field of meanings. The metaphor dies or perhaps more accurately is transformed into an analogy, simile, or univocal concept. It was a metaphoric act for Copernicus, and those who accepted his affirmation, to insist the sun is the centre of the solar system, or for Newton, and Newtonians, to insist on the identity of heavenly and earthly mechanics. Such insistence would not constitute a metaphoric act today.

That the propositions could be metaphoric for Copernicus and Newton but univocal for us demonstrates that whether the act terminates in metaphor, analogy, simile, a univocal concept or an equivocation is determined in part by the knowledge state of the person entertaining it. As we saw with Black's example of the chairman ploughing through a discussion, an analogy becomes a simile if the people entertaining the proposition were not at the discussion. Likewise, the persons must know both sets of relations for a metaphoric proposition to create a distortion in their fields of meanings. If they know only one of the two metaphoric elements, the proposition "functions as an analogy, since the unknown element is free to move within the field. Such freedom removes the possibility of tension or distortion of the field of meanings"<sup>20</sup>. Alternately, if the persons involved have different linguistic sensitivities or only appear to share fields of meanings, and because of different backgrounds or pre-suppositions understand one or the other of the terms differently, then

20. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

what for one person is a metaphor, for a second could be merely an analogy, while a third might take the proposition as univocal.

Let me illustrate with the example I mentioned of the Christian's insistence that crucified Jesus is the Messiah. There are a number of ways of reading this affirmation. The reading I recommended above would construe the affirmation as metaphoric. The metaphoric reading challenges us to reconfigure fundamentally the fields of meanings involved in understanding Jesus, God's love, and humanity's relation to both. When Saint Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, acknowledged that this insistence is "illogical to those who are not on the way to salvation" (1 Cor 1,18)<sup>21</sup>, he recognized the necessity for fundamental changes in the fields of meanings associated with these concepts – indeed, the rhetoric of his argument presupposes and plays on the this conceptual reconfiguration.

But, as Paul's admission allows, this is not the only logical reading possible. The proposition could also be conceived in Gerhart and Russell's terminology as analogical. On the analogical reading, there are some ways in which Jesus' activities and his impact were similar to the activities and impact associated with a New David, a Son of Man descending from the clouds of heaven, or the promised Messiah. But there are also obvious ways in which the analogy does not apply. So he is not literally the Messiah. Understood in this way, the analogy proposes to communicate a deeper insight into the events, similar to what we saw with Black's proposition about a chairman ploughing through a meeting. Read as an analogical metaphor, the insistence that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah, however, does not require any realignment of our fields of meanings. It may add to knowledge but it does not create new meanings. It is similar to information acquired from learning about the existence of new cities; it is different from the creation of new understanding in the Copernican assertion that the Sun *is* the centre of the universe.

It is possible to imagine several people disagreeing about whether and how such an analogical reading of Jesus as Messiah applies. The first might believe the analogy is warranted. Perhaps this person would be intent on showing how Jesus fulfilled what is essential about the scriptural prophecies, even if Jesus did not literally descend from the heavens. For such a person, the identification of Jesus and the Messianic expectations is not simply univocal, but it is not merely a metaphorical trope either. That person's problem is to explain how this middle point is not an equivocation. It is possible to imagine a second more liberal believer

21. The Jerusalem Bible.

who holds that Jesus is the Messiah but who sees this affirmation as more metaphorical and figurative. That person faces the charge of relativizing the Christian faith's claim. There is the third possibility of a secular historian who does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah but who judges that the affirmation is warranted, or at least makes sense, but only figuratively. A fourth possibility is a more sceptical counterpart who holds that the identification of Jesus with such Messianic concepts is historically implausible, and that using the term figuratively is thus misleading and unjustified. Finally, there is the possibility of non-believers (for example, Jews or Muslims) who regard the analogy as untrue, even though such persons might have great respect for Jesus as a person and religious figure. Despite the real differences between each of these positions, all understand the affirmation, Jesus is the Messiah, as analogical in Gerhart and Russell's sense. What is in dispute between them is quite different than what is at issue on the first reading as a metaphoric analogy. This is true even though the believers who read the affirmation as an analogical metaphor might also cite Paul's text from 1 Corinthians for support.

There are still other possibilities. We can envision a person whose understanding of Messianic hope and images is learned from a very limited reading of the New Testament. Or we can consider someone raised in the Jewish faith who learned about Jesus or the significance Christians attribute to Jesus by associating the concepts of Davidic promise and Messianic expectation with him. In these cases, we would have instances of what Gerhart and Russell call *similes*. The one analogue provides information about the other. There is an expansion of information but not a creation of new understanding or fields of meanings.

Finally, there is the possibility of persons who interpret confession of Jesus' lordship as asserting a univocal identification of Jesus and the concept of Messiah without a sense of the complexity involved in the affirmation. There are both believers and sceptics who assume that this sort of univocal identification is the decisive question. And what is at issue for them is distinct from what is at issue in either an analogical reading or a metaphoric reading.

The point of laying out all these possibilities is to illustrate that the same affirmation can be understood as an instance of metaphoric understanding for one person, analogical understanding for a second, and univocal understanding for third. On each of these readings what counts for the truth of the affirmation and what constitutes equivocation varies significantly. Hence "reception" has to be taken into account to understand what is being signified. Reception is but one side of the give and take of conversation. Getting the meaning of a metaphoric act, or generating it

in the first place, presupposes dynamic and fundamental shifts in shared fields of meanings that are grasped in ongoing dialogue. So the generation and sustaining of metaphoric meaning requires a give and take between conversation partners, between their fields of meanings, and between their worlds and those networks of meanings. Moreover, where there is conversation, shared fields of meanings, and ongoing fundamental shifts in some of these meanings, there is also the possibility that one party might get the other's analogy differently, get it wrongly or might not get it at all because a metaphoric shift is not recognized, not accepted or confused with an analogical shift. The point at issue between these positions has as much to do with how something is said – and heard – (as metaphoric, analogical or univocal) as it does with what is said. Fundamental disagreement about the former is likely to preclude or at least confuse meaningful resolution of the latter.

The research program Haers proposes requires attention to this connection between the metaphoric process and conversation. This connection has positive and negative aspects. Both underline the intrinsic and mutual connection between metaphoric process and conversation. Positively, the metaphoric invitation to force an uncalled for analogy and the consequent shifts in shared fields of meanings is key to the generation of new knowledge among conversation partners. It enables conversation partners to recognize, say, and explain something new which they could not have understood or said before. The conversation could not advance in this new direction without the metaphoric act. For example, the generation of Christian faith and community presupposes and is effected in the metaphoric proclamation of Jesus as Lord. And likewise, the metaphoric act could not take place without a community in conversation, just as the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, presupposes a community whose field of meanings and whose experience of Jesus allow for the possibility of recognizing the affirmation's force. Moreover, if the metaphoric act is to continue to carry its force, and so its meaning, the community's conversation must have resources to sustain the new meaning and communicate it. The liturgical retelling of the Gospels and development of doctrine thus work to revivify the revelatory and extraordinary character of the Christian community's confession.

Negatively, the possibility for missing or mistaking metaphoric shifts in fields of meanings provides the potential for misunderstandings that can confuse or preclude genuine conversation. The force of a metaphoric shift in meanings is an invitation and conceptual move that can be missed, refused or confused (taken as mere analogy or simile). The point, here, would be missed if we simply thought it a matter of misunderstanding

caused by people having different presuppositions. Difference in presuppositions could be taken merely to mean either knowing different things within a shared field of meanings or having different fields of meanings. The creation of new knowledge in the metaphoric act is different than what is at issue in those two instances. In the first, the matter has to do with expanding knowledge within a given field of meanings. (Learning more facts about Jesus.) In the second, the matter could concern simply an expansion of one's fields of meanings. (A Christian learns how Jews and Muslims understand holiness.) Although there is an expansion of meaning in both cases, neither requires a reformulation or shifts in fields of meanings, and so neither would be metaphoric. (One can learn what it means, at one level at least, for Christians to say "I believe Jesus is Lord", without getting the metaphoric force of the affirmation.)

### III. THE METAPHORIC AND CONVERSATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF GOD TALK

Had we the time, I would want at this point to demonstrate how theological discussion gets into trouble when we are inattentive to the metaphoric character of God-talk and its intrinsically conversational dimensions. The article in *Theological Studies*, to which I referred previously, examines one illustration: Joseph Bracken's "Process" response to Elizabeth Johnson's revised "Thomist" account of divine providence. Bracken's critique misses altogether her argument's metaphoric thrust. The issue for him is whether "process" or "substance" provides the more apt metaphor for God. Johnson's position presupposes a more fundamental shift in understanding how we talk about God in the first place. Her revision of Thomism presupposes that Aquinas himself stretched language, and that we must stretch language today, not to identify *esse* or substance as the best analogy for God, or to identify any analogy for God as best, but to identify God as unlike any other being or substance. On this point, at least, my interpretation of her argument is in agreement with Denys Turner's interpretation in this volume of classical, late antique and medieval apophaticism. I think I could also enlist support from Turner's paper for emphasizing, in response to Bracken, that stretching language this way, though a rejection of the kind of ontotheology advance in Process Theology, is not an abandonment of rigorous philosophical argumentation about God's existence and identity. Turner's argument supports, further, my contention that we speak properly of God only when we are brought by such argumentation to the recognition, that God is beyond the grasp of our conceptions.



Turner shows that the point of Pseudo-Denys "is to demonstrate that our language leads us to the reality of God when, by a process simultaneously of affirming and denying all things of God, by, as it were in one breath, both affirming what God is and denying, as he puts it, "that there is any kind of thing that God is"<sup>22</sup>, we step off the very boundary of language itself, beyond every assertion and every denial, into the "negation of the negation" and the "brilliant darkness"<sup>23</sup> of God"<sup>24</sup>. Turner offers a similar reading of Aquinas: "So what the five ways prove is *simultaneously* the existence of, and the unknowability of, God: God is shown to exist, but what is also shown is that, in *that* case, we have almost lost our grip on the meaning of "...exists" as predicated of God"<sup>25</sup>.

I do not know whether Professor Turner would find helpful my further description of such language as metaphoric, but the case he makes certainly fits the paradigm. He does not hesitate to affirm that for Pseudo-Denys and Aquinas the principle of apophaticism is necessarily at the same time the general principle of cataphaticism. He shows how the logic of this argumentation entails a "paradoxical conjunction of opposites". He insists that for Aquinas "God must be thought of as off *every* scale of sameness and difference and thus beyond 'every assertion ... beyond every denial'"<sup>26</sup>. Turner insists (and I would concur) that such claims are neither leaps of "atheistical deconstruction" nor exercises in a "foundationless, anti-metaphysical" apophaticism. Nevertheless, in the end, the conceptual moves are intended to get us to the realization that when we speak of God, we are talking about one who is not like any other and we are using our ordinary language in a way that is significantly different from other ways of signifying. The force of this argument requires that the logic of description in God's case is not what it is in every other case. Inattentiveness to this metaphoric move and its necessary relation to its roots in the soil of medieval metaphysics and vocabulary (fields of meanings) is precisely what Turner faults in both the apophaticism of Derrida and some contemporary spiritualities. The issue here, as in the Bracken-Johnson discussion, is not just that parties in dispute apparently have different concepts of being or of apophaticism. One discussion partner does

22. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *The Complete Works*, trans. C. LUIBHEID, New York, Paulist, 1987, p. 98.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Compare the contribution by Denys Turner on *Atheism, Apophaticism and "Différance"* in this volume pp. 689-708, esp. 691.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 701.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 702.

not recognize the metaphoric moves operative in the other's fields of meanings and so misses the force and logic of the other's arguments.

In the article mentioned earlier, I show how David Burrell and Karl Rahner's readings of Aquinas led them to conclude as well that, properly speaking, talk of God always entails this logical difference from talk about every other reality. That is what Rahner meant when he insisted that affirmations properly apply to God only as mystery. I take this to be the ultimate meaning of his claim, shared by many other Catholic theologians, that talk of God is necessarily analogical. The reason for describing this talk further as metaphoric, besides distinguishing it from misguided attempts to find a "most apt analogy", is to indicate that the positive insight and knowledge is achieved through the distortion in accustomed fields of meanings. The new understanding is brought about by the stretching of language itself and not with some new concept or analogy for grasping God<sup>27</sup>. It is the forcing of the analogies that open up the possibility for new meaning – for using everyday language to speak towards what is beyond its ken. This is why properly speaking, at least in the Christian conception, talk about God is inherently rooted in and essentially related to a metaphoric process and why I suggest that inattentiveness to this process and its essential conversational character is a source of theological confusion.

I do not suppose for a moment that recognition of this metaphoric dimension in itself is all that we need to clarify our theological muddles. Turner wondered at the conclusion of his paper what Christoff Schwoebel could possibly mean when he said "that it was a mark of our philosophical sinfulness that we make the pattern of our existence to be the pattern of the divine – as if there were some, even notional, alternative state of affairs, some other, *pre-lapsarian* possibilities of language about God from which we have fallen away"<sup>28</sup>. One might address a similar question to Anne Hunt who concluded that the Paschal Mystery "explodes the very notion of conversation as we know it"<sup>29</sup>. Schwoebel's recommendation

27. The limitation of Wim A. de Pater's analysis of the analogy of attribution, from this perspective, is that it does not draw attention to this shift in fields of meanings although I believe it, like Burrell's position, presupposes such a shift. My aim is not to take exception to such interpretations but rather to point to this further aspect and its importance for clarifying what is going on in God-talk. See W. DE PATER, *Analogy and Disclosures: On Religious Language*, in *Metaphor and God-talk* (n. 7), pp. 33-44.

28. Compare the question by D. Turner on p. 706 of this volume, referring to C. SCHWÖBEL, *God as Conversation. Reflections on a Theological Ontology of Communicative Relations*, pp. 53-55 (IV. *Disrupting the Conversation: Sin*).

29. Compare the article by Anne Hunt on *Trinity and Paschal Mystery: Divine Communion and Human Conversation*, in this volume, p. 96.

looks to me a classic Lutheran metaphoric turn and Professor Hunt proposes a variation on a turn of thought recommended by von Balthasar. Whether and how others of us might accept such recommendations will not be resolved simply by noting their metaphoric character. To show that their affirmations are metaphoric does not prove them true. On the other hand, if I am correct about the metaphoric character of their positions, genuine engagement with their claims presupposes recognition of this metaphoric thrust.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

If talk of God is intrinsically metaphoric in this way and, as Karl Rahner persuasively argued, the human person is defined intrinsically by openness to God, there is a sense too in which the identity of the other, our neighbour, is also beyond any adequate grasp of our conceptualizations. But as Professor Haers indicated so clearly in his paper, for me even to state the issue this way suggests that encounter with neighbour begins with myself and entails merely my finding things in common with the other. This makes it sound as if I am in a position to get an adequate grasp of my connectedness to God and neighbour; the task is merely to find the right analogies for comprehending them. But as long as I begin with myself as privileged centre for encounter and presume that the God or neighbour can come within my grip, there is no space for the claim of our prior connectedness and for genuine encounter with them as irreducible other to emerge. There is a metaphoric thrust to the Christian claim that in Christ we are all sisters and brothers, or to the confession (shared with Jews and Muslims) that we are all children of God. To get the point entailed in these affirmations requires a fundamental shift in our field of meanings. For the point is not that we are "like" sisters and brothers, but that we "are". Although I agree with Professor Haers that it would be misleading to describe this fundamental conviction as a paradigm change, since it is central to the core of Christian faith and not something new, the notion is also more than a mere metaphor, albeit a root one. Hence I think it important to add, what I hope is not an imposition on Professor Haers's argument but a kind of "midrash", that to opt for such an affirmation as a root metaphor is to call with the prophets for *teshuva*: a turn or conversion in thinking and living. It requires such a turn because a thinking and living which seeks to centre itself in the "other", rather than the in the "I", requires an openness to the gift of the other and the givenness of our prior connectedness. It is not something

that the "I" can establish for itself. The "turning" is never complete because no conversion can ever capture the neighbour or God. The turning is metaphoric because it requires a radical shift in our fields of meanings about self, God and neighbour.

This then is the brief for my suggestions at the beginning of the talk. Properly speaking, talk of God is always rooted in and essentially related to a metaphoric process. Conversation and encounter, consequently, are not merely apt metaphors for theological thinking. Theological thinking as inherently metaphoric, when successful, is intrinsically conversational and fundamentally directed toward encounter with God and neighbour, as other and mystery. Attention to the logic of this essentially conversational dynamic is crucial to understanding our thinking and talk about our encounter with God and neighbour – especially in our pluralistic world with its many intersecting but also disparate conversations.

Department of Theology  
Marquette University  
100 Coughlin Hall  
P.O. Box 1881  
Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881  
U.S.A.

Robert MASSON