

## Metaphor and Symbolism: possibility of iconic theology

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### Abstract:

In language and literature, metaphors and symbolism are both used to communicate complex ideas and emotions that are more than what is seen on the surface. Metaphors create connections between seemingly unrelated concepts, while symbolism uses symbols to represent abstract ideas and themes. This paper will explore both metaphors and symbolism, as well as how they can be used to analyse theological contexts and apply them to society. The term “metaphor” comes from the ancient Greek word *metapherein*, where *meta* means “beyond,” and *pherein* means “to transfer” or “to carry over.” Essentially, a metaphor is a linguistic process by which one thing is “transferred” or “carried over” to another thing. This means that one thing is described as another to reveal certain characteristics of the first thing. Aristotle explicitly defined it in *Poetics* as “using a word that signifies one thing to refer to another; this word then becomes a metaphorical word.” Metaphor is not just a linguistic process but also a fundamental way of thinking about and understanding things.

**Keywords:** Metaphor; Symbolism; Communication; Theological contexts.

### 1. Introduction

Metaphor is a form of parabolic storytelling that operates on two levels: the narrative level and the logical level. “A metaphor is an extended analogy used to persuade and convince.” The logic of Jesus’s parables is a form of proportional analogy. Metaphors can be classified into four types: similes, narratives, exemplary stories, and fables. Kierkegaard viewed metaphor as an indirect means of communication. Therefore, most of Jesus’s parables function as dual forms of indirect communication. There are procedural metaphors and situational metaphors. Exemplary stories use a form of synecdoche, where a part represents the whole. Fables are an extension of metaphor over the entire story [1]. Metaphors can be categorised into seven types: direct metaphor, implied direct metaphor, metaphorical questions, double indirect narrative metaphor, judgement metaphor, single indirect narrative metaphor, and let alone metaphor.

The distinction between metaphor and allegory: Kierkegaard viewed metaphor as indirect communication, “Metaphor is an extended analogy used to persuade and convince.” “Metaphor refers to an extended analogy. “The distinction between semantics and rhetoric, and between semantics and semiotics: Nietzsche considered metaphor to be the “most fundamental principle” of language. Pascal saw metaphor as a code with two meanings: literal and figurative. There is a tension between decodable and non

decodable metaphors. Metaphors are seen as cognitive tools or aesthetic tools. Metaphor is a compressed model, and also miniature poetry. Aristotle believed that the core of metaphor is transferred meaning. Metaphors can be classified into simile (where one thing is compared to another), analogy, metonymy (where something associated with a person or object is used to represent that person or object), and synecdoche (where a part is used to represent the whole). Vico proposed the logic of imagination, and metaphor is one of that [2].

There are three kinds of analogies, Plato and Aristotle’s proportional analogies, Aristotle’s predicative analogies, and Aquinas’s double analogies. Fables represent a large and continuous use of concrete metaphors and analogies. Vico believed that metaphors are a means of experiencing facts. Modern views suggest that metaphors alter perception, thereby shaping experience. In his book *Metaphor*, Cooper presents four classifications: formism (where the root metaphor is similarity), mechanism (where the root metaphor is machinery), organism (where the root metaphor is biological processes), and contextualism (where the root metaphor is historical events). Todd refers to Jesus’s parables as an extended version of metaphor. Derrida argues that writing has two characteristics: metaphor and intertextuality. The foundation of metaphysics may be metaphorical. In economics, the analogy of mechanics has given way to the analogy of mathematics. Conceptual metaphor theory includes directional meta-

phors, ontological metaphors, and structural metaphors. True rhetoric is dialectics itself, which is pure philosophy. Dialectics aims to uncover the true syllogism and the apparent syllogism. Metaphors serve two functions: rhetorical and poetic. Metaphor is grounded in analogy. From Plato and Aristotle's proportional analogies to Aristotle's predicative analogies, to Aquinas's double analogies, and Aquinas's attribution analogies. The purpose of poetry is imitation. Analogy, intrinsic order, and critical realism. Metaphor is both an art and a weapon. Metaphor is an extension of analogy. The significance of metaphorical meaning. Critical realism and its relationship with Searle's speech act theory. Reason is a unique attribute of humanity. The soul possesses the ability to reflect, critique, and comprehensively examine the world. The soul is indivisible. The relationship between mountains, dragons, and clouds. The City of God is transformed into the vision of the Holy Mountain; the Trinity is a treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity. The successful integration of the doctrine of the Trinity with balance. The discussion of God: positive, negative, and causal arguments. The basis of the analogy method: the commonality of relationships. The intersection of personae [3].

## 2. Iconic Theology

Metaphor is a form of parabolic storytelling that operates on two levels: the narrative level and the logical level. "A metaphor is an extended analogy used to persuade and convince." The logic of Jesus's parables is a form of proportional analogy. Metaphors can be classified into four types: similes, narratives, exemplars, and fables. Kierkegaard considered metaphor to be an indirect means of communication, with Jesus's parables often functioning as dual forms of indirect communication. Metaphors can be categorized into procedural metaphors and situational metaphors. Exemplar stories use a type of synecdoche, where a part represents the whole. Fables are an extension of metaphor over the entire story. The Bible refers to various attributes and aspects of God using human body parts and emotions, including God's face, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, lips, tongue, neck, arms, hands, right hand, fingers, heart, bowels, chest, and feet. Human emotions such as joy, sorrow, grief, fear, zeal, jealousy, regret, hatred, anger, and vengeance are also included. The Bible describes God's actions using human behaviors such as: observing, forgetting, remembering, rebuking, resting, working, sitting, rising, walking, visiting, writing, killing, bringing disaster, judging, cursing, engraving, cleansing, anointing, adorning, dressing, and wearing a crown [4].

Additionally, the Bible often describes God through various roles, occupations, titles, and relationships, such as

the bridegroom, father, judge, king, legislator, warrior, builder, gardener, shepherd, and physician, among others. Related to these occupational descriptions, the Bible mentions God's throne, seat, footstool, staff, scepter, weapons, bow, arrows, shield, chariot, banner, scroll, seal, treasures, inheritance, and so forth. Finally, the Bible also uses organic or inorganic created things to describe God's relationship with His people, likening God to a lion, lamb, hen, sun, morning star, light, lamp, fire, spring, food, bread, drinking water, oil, rock, refuge, fortress, high tower, shade, shield, way, and sanctuary, among others [5].

Christians are the descendants of Abraham, the bride of Christ, the vineyard or cultivated field, a part of the olive tree, God's chosen sisters, and a kingdom of priests. Descendants of Abraham and the Logic of Sacred Places in the Bible: The journey from northeast to southwest symbolizes the transition from the gate of life to the gate of death. The Ark floating on the water, with its uncertain direction, reflects a similar logic to the post-COVID era. Steering the ship of destiny requires faith, learning from Abraham's example of selfless and regretless sacrifice. Christians as a Vineyard or Cultivated Field: The concept of planting churches, with each person involved in planting or watering contributing to growth. The power of growth is crucial; the vitality of individuals, families, and churches is the essence of revival theology. The vineyard encompasses earth, water, fire, and wind. Growth requires seeds, and good teachers, leaders, and parents must sow seeds, initially in the soil. Watering is the work of water, and growth involves both fire and wind. Spiritual events in the church test the breadth and depth of spiritual maturity.

### *1 Corinthians 3:5-8:*

*"What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor."*

Parents must set an example in sowing, establishing spiritual, lifestyle, and work habits. Revival is the work of the Holy Spirit, involving internal growth and fundamental life transformation.

*Christians as a Kingdom of Priests:*

*Prophets, priests, and kings. Prophets proclaim God's word, priests offer sacrifices and intercede, and kings rule and protect.*

The altar and offerings. The family as a living sacrifice on the altar. The Chinese church must rise up with a group

of elite soldiers who are committed to sacrifice and intercession, experiencing the Holy Spirit's elements of water, fire, and wind. There are four types of fire: the fire of burning, the fire of holiness, the fire of light, and the fire of love. As descendants of Abraham, Christians are linked to the Biblical logic of sacred geography, which stretches from the northeast to the southwest, from the gate of life to the gate of death. The ark floated on the water, with its direction uncertain, mirroring the logic of the post-COVID era. Navigating the ship of destiny requires faith, learning from Abraham's example of uncomplaining and selfless sacrifice. These four living creatures each have six wings and are full of eyes (Revelation 4:6-8). They continuously praise and worship God (Revelation 4:8; 5:8-14; 7:11-12; 19:4). They also have specific functions and duties to fulfill, including revealing God's anger and majesty (Revelation 6:17). One of them even holds a golden bowl filled with God's wrath (Revelation 15:7). These four living creatures symbolize everything that is "essentially supreme, strong, intelligent, and agile," with each creature representing a unique and superior domain: the "lion" is the king of beasts; the "ox" is particularly brave and strong among cattle; the "eagle" is the swiftest of birds; and the "man" is the most intelligent of all creatures. Thus, they represent the greatness, power, and beauty of nature.

### **3. Interpreting Scripture through Symbolic Exegesis, Comprehensive Allegorical Interpretation, and Literal Interpretation**

Exodus from Egypt represents moving from the southwest, a land of death. Going out of Egypt signifies a transition from death to life, moving towards the northeast, a land of life.

*Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture involves four levels: literal, allegorical, moral, and spiritual.*

*Literal: The plain meaning of the text.*

*Allegorical: Symbolic or faith-based interpretation.*

*Moral: Interpretation focusing on ethical or love-based teachings.*

*Analogical: Interpretation related to hope and eschatology (the end times).*

The true meaning of allegory is an expanded metaphor. Mackintosh proposes a theological hermeneutics method for studying mystical theology, suggesting that spiritual writings should be considered as containing "superabundance of meaning" or "apophatic momentum"—which cannot be simply abstracted or interpreted. Mackintosh believes that spiritual texts are "ultimately not descriptions of objects but invitations to participate in a certain way of

life." Therefore, the theological meaning of such texts is not found in "a 'finished' work composed of definitions or formulas," but in "continuously positioning believers within God's 'unfinished' activity." Mackintosh thus recommends that to gain the "maximum value" from these texts, we need to pay attention to their "imagery, structure, and linguistic particularities," and be prepared to allow our own frameworks of understanding to be changed or transformed. He argues that "entering into the meaning of a mystical text involves allowing our understanding and experience of reality to be abandoned—perhaps broken—and undoubtedly transformed by the otherness that always transcends human self."

### **4. Zhuangzi's Fables, Repetitions and Parables**

The essence of Iconic Theology. Wang Bi argues, "Words are used to clarify symbols; once the symbol is grasped, words are forgotten. Symbols are used to preserve meaning; once the meaning is grasped, symbols are forgotten." "Thus, those who preserve words do not grasp symbols, and those who preserve symbols do not grasp meaning [6-7]. "Wang Bi proposed an interpretation method for the I Ching that involves seeking words to understand symbols, seeking symbols to understand meaning, grasping symbols and forgetting words, and grasping meaning and forgetting symbols. Wang Bi believed, "Symbols are expressions of meaning; words are clarifications of symbols. No form can fully convey meaning like symbols, and no symbols can fully convey form like words. Words arise from symbols, so one can seek words to understand symbols; symbols arise from meaning, so one can seek symbols to understand meaning. Meaning is fully expressed through symbols, and symbols are fully detailed through words. Thus, words clarify symbols, grasping symbols and forgetting words; symbols preserve meaning, grasping meaning and forgetting symbols. It is like the hoof used for finding a rabbit—once the rabbit is found, the hoof is forgotten; or the trap used for catching a fish—once the fish is caught, the trap is forgotten."

### **5. Interpreting Genesis through Heaven, Earth, Water and Fire**

The concepts of the holy mountain, living water, love, light, the new heaven and new earth, and the sources of wisdom such as springs, streams, rivers, and the sea can be explained through the symbols of the I Ching. However, the symbols of thunder and wind, as well as the explanations of yin and yang, and the concept of three (trinity), are insufficient. Phenomenology can aid Chinese theology by exploring the relationship between the Dao

and existence [8-10]. “When the will is unified, the spirit is mobilized; when the spirit is unified, the will is mobilized. The will is the leader of the spirit, and the spirit is the substance of the body. “Holy Mountain and Marshes: The interplay between the ocean and the marshes. The great sea represents God’s wisdom, the living water of the Holy Spirit, and humble service to others. This reflects the wisdom hidden in the middle path of the holy mountain. The natural laws of mountains and waters. The incomplete journey of the vision of the holy mountain, including highland theology and wilderness theology. Voegelin’s concepts of symbolization, mythologization, and conceptualization. Structures can be creatively mimicked, but plots and events cannot. The Dao concerns three dimensions: divine will, heavenly mandate, and the human heart.

### 6. Conclusion

The human personality is the form, which means that the symbol becomes the intermediary, allowing a distinction yet not separation between humans and God. To emulate Christ means that humans are in Christ; unity with Christ means that Christ is in humans, resulting in success in all endeavors and victory in all battles. The Sword of the Holy Spirit is the Word of God. In essence, there is unity; in personhood, there is distinction. Heaven manifests symbols, indicating good or bad fortune, and the sage interprets these symbols. The theoretical framework of the Yi Jing includes calligraphy theory, poetry theory, literary theory, and historical theory. There is a relationship between force theory and calligraphy. The unity of operation indicates that the essence is the same. Essence and function are not separate. The symbol is the key to transformation, and Iconic Theology pertains to the Christian personality. It is seemingly non-conforming yet true: humans are distinct from but not separate from God, and the human personality represents Christ, yet is not Christ itself. Being in Christ is to resemble Christ; Christ in me, after purification and unity, allows for the potential for

union between God and humans. Using the metaphor of the holy mountain as the core, transforming the symbols of heaven and earth, water and fire, mountains and marshes, and thunder and wind from Chinese culture. The contribution of Christian theology to Chinese democratic constitutionalism includes concepts such as original sin, covenant, and the integration of love and justice. Procedural rationality needs to incorporate these concepts.

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