*Article*

# Metaphor and Analogy in Theology: A Choice between Lions and Witches, and Wardrobes?

**Ligita Ryliškytė, SJE**
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

## Abstract

Through a reconsideration of metaphorical language in its relation to analogy, this essay brings into conversation the divergent currents of spirituality and theology. The author advocates a theological approach which values and appropriately employs both analogical and figurative language as the means for integrating the speculative and spiritual dimensions of theological discourse. In particular, by referring to the Christian mystical tradition, metaphor can be deployed as a creative modification of the standard *triplex via* of analogical predication.

## Keywords

If the reader is slightly puzzled by the title of this article, it is alright. Lions and witches? Wardrobes? This is what metaphors do: they suggest some analogies and provoke our imagination even though we cannot know what precisely is meant until they are placed in the context (in this case, the present essay). The allusion to the title of the best-known book in C. S. Lewis's famous series *The Chronicles of Narnia* serves as a springboard to ask a series of questions of great importance for a contemporary inquiry into the relative limits and merits of analogical and metaphorical

**Corresponding author:**
Ligita Ryliškytė, SJE, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA
Email: ryliskyt@bc.edu

language in theology. First and most obvious, Do we really need to choose between the two? Furthermore, does using metaphorical language (e.g. "lion" for God) necessarily imply error (thus, call in the "witches")? Or does it primarily do something else, for instance, convey something about the felt presence of the ultimate gentleness and unlimited power, which Aslan's encounters with the children in the book illustrate? Finally, is analogy a mere categorical container (an ordinary "wardrobe," if you want) or rather, more like a wardrobe which turns out to be a door to Narnia, a different and wondrous world of the Great Lion, Aslan—to allude again to C. S. Lewis's metaphor for God and the plot of his story?

Keeping in mind these and similar questions, let us now leave behind Christian fiction and turn to our reality. One may argue that the contemporary split between theology and spirituality and the subordination of spirituality to theology is reflected in a similar dynamic observed in the relationship between analogical and metaphorical language. However, a reverse dynamic plays out in the contemporary world: spirituality is valued over and independently of religion and, by extension, of theology. Therefore reconsideration of metaphorical language and its relation to analogy is important for bridging the gap between spirituality and theology. Moreover, discerning the relative merits and appropriate uses of analogical and metaphorical language in theology has continuing pastoral relevance in the societies where the triumph of the "secular age" threatens to replace a transcendence-oriented spirituality with a "spirituality" of exclusive humanism.[1] In these contexts, one has to ask in what way each linguistic strategy is compatible with locating us in relation to transcendence. Likewise, the internal debates in theology and the Catholic Church call for further inquiry as to what the Christian tradition has to say about analogical and metaphorical predication.[2]

By revisiting the classical tradition of Thomas Aquinas and its contemporary understanding, and bringing it into dialogue with Christian mysticism, this article aims to

---

1. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), esp. 19–20.
2. For instance, whereas in *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) and other works Sallie McFague argues for the centrality of metaphorical language, two recent texts, though very different in nature, lament over the (indiscriminate?) use of metaphor in theology. Francis J. Caponi declaims against "the hegemony of metaphor" and "panmetaphoricism" in theology in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," *Horizons* 37 (2010): 25–51, esp. at 26–27, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900006836. At the institutional level, a similar instance of lament is the (in)famous letter by the US Bishop's Committee on Doctrine in which Elizabeth Johnson is charged with reducing all talk of God to mere metaphor: "Statement on *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, by Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson" (March 24, 2011), http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/publications/upload/statement-quest-for-the-living-god-2011-03-24.pdf; the dossier of related official documents may be found in Richard R. Gaillardetz, ed., *When the Magisterium Intervenes* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2012), 177–275. As Robert Masson points out, the source of misunderstanding in Johnson's case lies in two different possible uses of the word "literal." See Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology after Cognitive Linguistics* (Walpole, MA: Peeter, 2014), 198.

respond to the need indicated above. It explores the relative strengths and weaknesses of analogical and metaphorical language for a theology that seeks to integrate both speculative and spiritual dimensions. The speculative dimension focuses on attaining truth and clarity, whereas the spiritual dimension attends to the practical goal of discerning and inspiring action and the mystical goal of *theosis*. Though analogical language is a privileged language for achieving the speculative goal,[3] I propose that (1) metaphorical language has advantages for attaining the practical and mystical goals of theology and (2) may provide a similar control of meaning as analogical language. In particular, whereas analogy better serves the speculative goal of faith seeking understanding, and thus, by and large, pertains to *orthodoxy*, metaphor better helps to imagine and to seek an alternative future, which is God's own, and thus contributes to *orthopraxis*; it also conveys the affective and "experiential" dimension of union with God, which, in turn, nurtures *orthopathy*. Moreover, though metaphorical language has often been viewed as inferior to analogical in respect to control of meaning, the examples from Christian mysticism in the last part of this essay demonstrate that this is not necessarily so: metaphor can be deployed as a creative modification of the standard *triplex via* of analogical predication, an approach inherent to Thomas Aquinas's notion of God's transcendence-in-immanence.

## Introduction of Terms

Before launching into the Thomist account, which is the main focus of the first part of this essay, let me first introduce the terms: metaphor and analogy. "Metaphor" and "analogy" here are discussed as linguistic vehicles of meaning which communicate more than, respectively, what literal and univocal predication is capable of.[4] Metaphor is understood as the transference of the word from its realm of primary signification to the realm of another concept by way of some implied and suggested likeness.[5] For instance, when we say "God is the lion," "lion" is suggestive of certain attributes of

---

3. For instance, David Tracy maintains that analogical and dialectical languages function as the classic theological languages par excellence. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 408.

4. By "literal" here I mean the plain or direct sense of the text, the first signification "whereby words signify things" as Thomas Aquinas puts it in *Summa Theologiae* 1 q. 1, a. 10 c. For him, the things signified by words can have themselves also a signification, which is a spiritual sense (ibid.). Analogy communicates literal sense, but not univocal, as we will see later. I use here two English translations of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. English translation of *ST* 1, qq. 1–26 will be cited from *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006). English translation of other questions cited will be taken from *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby et al., vols. 1–8 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–73). Latin citations of *ST* will follow the online text available at *Corpus Thomisticum*, http://www.corpusthomisticum.org.

5. See more in Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 15; Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), vii.

God (e.g., power), even though the two realities are radically different. Metaphor thus allows for an often unexpected and a relatively open-ended cross-domain mapping of two concepts. As contemporary cognitive linguistics points out, linguistic expression is just one instantiation of a much larger and deeply embodied phenomenon called "conceptual metaphor."[6] The latter is understood as "a set of correspondences across conceptual domains where one domain, called the source, allows us to understand and reason about the other, called the target."[7] This "source domain" is usually more familiar and concrete, whereas the "target domain" is less familiar and more abstract. In our example, "lion" would be such a more familiar domain, whereas "God" would be understood as a "target domain."

Analogy is used here in the sense developed by Aquinas (his chief source being Aristotle). As we will see in greater detail later, it is a "middle way" between equivocacy and univocacy in the sense that it surpasses both. The usefulness of analogy for theology can be immediately seen from the following logic. No word can refer to God in entirely the same ("univocal") sense in which it refers to other things. Yet neither can such a term be completely different ("equivocal") in meaning from the same term otherwise applied (then it would tell nothing intelligible about God).[8] Thus, analogy serves as a genuine alternative for communicating something true and yet not "mundane" about God, as in the sentence "God is all-knowing." Such a saying entails affirming certain proportionality: we mean that God "knows" in the way which is proportional to God, that is, not in the same way students "know" or your dog "knows."

From the brief introduction of terms above, analogy's provenance and particularity, it would seem, lies primarily within the systematic enterprise of logic, whereas metaphor emerges through the embodied cognitive process of conceptual "blending."[9] However, as has been recently proposed, precisely this process of the complex metaphoric cross-domain mapping, otherwise called metaphoric process, undergirds a generation of new perspectives and possibilities for analogical predication.[10] In particular,

---

6.  Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT) was originally proposed in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980). For a recent overview of CMT see L. David Ritchie, *Context and Connection in Metaphor* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 31–55. The development of CMT over the last few decades prompted a lively interest of theologians and biblical scholars alike; some recent studies include Masson's *Without Metaphor, No Saving God* and Blake E. Wassell's and Stephen P. Llewelyn's "'Fishers of Humans,' the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, and Conceptual Blending Theory," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014): 627–46, https://doi.org/10.15699/jbibllite.133.3.627.

7.  Francisco José Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Alicia Galera Masegosa, *Cognitive Modeling: A Linguistic Perspective*, Human Cognitive Processing 45 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), 59.

8.  Cf. Roger Hazelton, "Theological Analogy and Metaphor," *Semeia* 13 (1978): 155–76 at 159.

9.  Caponi's "Pale Analogies" seems to support this inference: he defends the cognitive indispensability of metaphor while arguing for the logical primacy of analogy.

10. In a metaphoric process, two realities which previously were not thought of as compatible are joined, which results in a tectonic reconfiguration of the fields of meaning, e.g., as in a claim that a particle is also a wave, and vice versa, in quantum physics. The ubiquity

Robert Masson has suggested that the metaphoric process is a hidden "substrate" of analogy in Aquinas's and, especially, Rahnerian usage. According to Masson, to "make an affirmation that within a given field of meaning is unwarranted (i.e., breaks the rules) and that changes our larger fields of meanings is an example of . . . metaphoric process."[11] Masson's insight relates metaphor and analogy from a cognitive-linguistic perspective: the metaphoric process accounts for the creation of new conceptual and logical space which linguistic expressions of both analogy and metaphor inhabit. The present project draws upon and complements this insight by inquiring into the possibility of relating analogy and metaphor from a theological perspective, in particular, through the Thomist concept of *triplex via*, to which we now turn.

## Exploring the Thomist Tradition: *Triplex Via*, Analogy, and Metaphor

The Thomist approach to analogy and metaphor can only be correctly understood in the context of the fundamental methodological principal of Aquinas's theology, the *triplex via*. According to Rudi te Velde, Aquinas's threefold way of thinking and speaking of God "determines the form under which the ontological reality of God becomes knowable and meaningful for us" and "is constitutive of the very conditions under which any talk about God can be understood to refer to the reality of God."[12] Hence, let us first consider the *triplex via* in more detail and then turn to the notions of analogy and metaphor in Thomism.

---

and embodied quality of the metaphoric process can be demonstrated by pointing out that even the formation of a concept "category" happens through blending of the notion "word" and "container," the latter being largely shaped by physical experiences of the boundaries, of being "out" and "in." See Robert Masson, *Without Metaphor*, 40–47; Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 30–32; George A. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 269–303. Also see Mary Gerhart's and Allan Melvin Russell's *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).

11. Robert Masson, "Interpreting Rahner's Metaphoric Logic," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 380–409 at 397–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391007100206. Referring to David B. Burrel's analysis of analogy in *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 1979), Masson contends that in claiming that God's essence is *esse*, being-as-such, Aquinas breaks the rules of predication: an assertion (that something is) is used as predication (a statement that something has this or that quality) (ibid., 397). This "supra-conceptual blending," as I would call it, forces an identity between the grammatical logic of asserting and the grammatical logic of predicating and thus effects a tectonic reconfiguration of what constitutes knowing in the first place (ibid., 398–99).

12. Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The "Divine Science" of the* Summa Theologiae (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 174.

## *The* Triplex Via

Aquinas's *triplex via* refers to a triple theological movement, which can be summed up in the following way: (1) causality or affirmation: God is the *cause* of all things; (2) remotion or negation: the cause is *not* the effect; (3) eminence or perfection: the cause "*is"* the effect in a more eminent way insofar as it possesses excessively all the perfections of the effects.[13]

   This summary presupposes that, for Aquinas, the *triplex via* is inseparable from his metaphysics of being and creation. One may also say that the *triplex via* is a threefold way of holding together a seeming contradiction of God's transcendence-in-immanence. On the one hand, God is not merely another kind of being: the difference between God and creature qualitatively surpasses every difference between creatures. God is the self-subsistent ground of all being (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*).[14] On the other hand, God is the efficient, exemplar, and final cause of everything that is.[15] Thus, every creature which in some way exists (*inquantum est ens*) participates in God's existence:[16] it is created *ex nihilo*, sustained in existence, and moved toward its ultimate end, Infinite Goodness.[17] Hence, the finite, even if in a very limited way, is the likeness (*similitudo*) of its cause, the infinite.[18] The corollary of this is that, in the sense of creative causality, we can claim God's immanence in the world. Moreover, since the possibility of knowing is grounded in a certain likeness (*omnis cognitio est per aliquam similitudinem*),[19] God's immanence in the world allows us to know something of God. Specifically, through finite reality as God's effects, we can know that God is (but not what God is in God's essence) and that God has whatever must belong to God as the first cause that surpasses all that is caused.[20]

---

13.  See ibid., 76.
14.  Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 4, a. 2 c.
15.  See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 44, aa. 1–4.
16.  "Necesse est dicere omne quod quocumque modo est, a Deo esse." Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 44, a. 1 c.
17.  In Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 103, a. 4 c., the two elements of being sustained and moved toward the end which is absolute goodness itself (*conservatio in bono* and *motio ad bonum*) Aquinas calls God's governing (*gubernatio*).
18.  Rudi te Velde describes it in the following manner: "The received being—always received in a contracted manner—is said to be a 'likeness' of the uncontracted and absolute being of the divine cause." Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 141. By introducing the notion of creaturely participation in God's existence through limiting essence, W. Norris Clarke affirms this "likeness" even more emphatically: "On the one hand, it is clear how God as pure Subsistent Act of Existence (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) with no limiting essence, transcends all his creatures as composed of existence and limiting essences, and yet, on the other, . . . there is a deep similarity to God running through all creatures as all participate in the one central perfection of God himself, so that they can all be truly called 'images of God.'" Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 89.
19.  Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 14, a. 11, arg. 3.
20.  Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 12, a. 12 c.

Hence, Aquinas's metaphysics of being and creation grounds the *triplex via* as a theological movement, which is an inquiry into the intelligibility of God's *quid sit* through a reductive movement from effect to cause. As Te Velde points out, "first, the existence of the cause is affirmed, then its mode of being is determined by way of simplicity (as distinguished from its effects) and of perfection (as including in itself the perfections of all effects in a more eminent way)."[21] Thus, God can be thought of as an absolute mystery which, nevertheless, is known to human beings (negatively and indirectly) as the first and universal cause. Therefore (in some sense), God is everything but in a more eminent way than everything is in itself—as the first cause exceeding all things caused. In a nutshell, the *triplex via* allows for the unity of distinction and identity of God and creatures, the paradox of continuity-in-discontinuity and similarity-in-difference.

Since our knowledge of God is conceptually and linguistically mediated,[22] the *triplex via* is also operative in the Thomist account of our God-language. The concept of analogical predication, which closely relates to the threefold way of affirmation–negation–eminence, is one of the best-known insights of Aquinas. A closer look at the notion of analogy and how it stands in relation to metaphor in the Thomist tradition is thus our next step.

## Analogy and Metaphor

Though neither Thomas Aquinas nor contemporary Thomist scholars hold "analogical" and "metaphorical" in opposition, they consider metaphorical language to be inferior to analogical. In this regard, Thomas Aquinas's q. 1, aa. 9–10 and q. 13 (especially, articles 2, 3, 5, and 12) in the *Summa Theologiae* are of special interest. Primarily relying on these articles, I will now first discuss how analogy and metaphor are understood by Aquinas. Then I will relate this understanding to the insights of some Thomist scholars, viz., Rudi te Velde,[23] W. Norris Clarke,[24] Jacques Maritain,[25] and Bernard J. F. Lonergan.[26]

*Analogy and Metaphor in Aquinas.* In *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 1, a. 9, Thomas Aquinas explicitly acknowledges that theology should employ metaphorical or figurative

---

21. Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 173.
22. Cf. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 1 c.: "Voces sunt signa intellectuum, et intellectus sunt rerum similitudines. Et sic patet quod voces referuntur ad res significandas, mediante conceptione intellectus. Secundum igitur quod aliquid a nobis intellectu cognosci potest, sic a nobis potest nominari."
23. I will mainly focus on the fourth chapter of Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*.
24. I will refer to the third and the fifth chapters of Clarke, *The One and the Many*.
25. Of special interest to me is Maritain's discussion of the names of God and of the three wisdoms in Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York: Scribner, 1938), chaps. 5–6.
26. I will primarily refer to Lonergan's treatment of metaphor in Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2013).

language of God, but he assigns metaphor a lower place and certain limited functions. His argument can be summarized in the following way: though metaphors as sense imagery of "base bodies" do not make truth clear (rather, they "veil," "disguise," and "screen" the revealed truth), they are useful in three ways. First, by speaking figuratively in Scripture, God provides for us according to our nature (i.e., through sensible things): according to Dionysius, whom Thomas quotes, "the divine rays cannot enlighten us except wrapped up in many sacred veils." Second, metaphors are well suited to educate the ignorant: they can be grasped by "the uneducated (i.e. people who are not capable of understanding intellectual realities in their own terms)." Lastly, "the figures of base bodies" offer a triple protection: (1) from the error of human thinking (by taking the place of a potentially erroneous literal interpretation), (2) from undermining God's transcendence (by better representing what God is not rather than what God is), and (3) from the misuse of divine gifts (by obscuring the meaning of them from the unworthy).

Aquinas's defense of the multiple senses in Scripture in the next article (*ST* 1, q. 1, a. 10) implies another possible benefit of using figurative speech: by second-order signification it "transmits a mystery" (*prodit mysterium*). [27] One may also infer that, for Aquinas, the mystery revealed in the threefold spiritual sense (analogical, tropological, and anagogical) is both a mystery of God and of the human being. However, Aquinas is quick to relativize the relevance of the spiritual sense conveyed by the figurative language: "nothing necessary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense that is not elsewhere conveyed through the literal sense (*litteralem sensum*)."[28]

Other weaknesses of metaphorical language come to the forefront in *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 13, especially in a. 3, where Aquinas juxtaposes metaphorical and literal predication. Here he points out two liabilities of metaphor. First, metaphor signifies God's perfections only *improprie*, by part of its meaning (as opposed to the undivided literal signification).[29] Second, metaphor implies bodily condition as part of its meaning, whereas literal signification implies bodily condition not in what is meant, but in the way something is signified.[30] Since the bodily is considered to be inferior to

---

27. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 10 s. c.

28. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 10 ad 1. Later we will see that Janet Martin Soskice does not agree with Aquinas on this account.

29. Using Aquinas's example of "God is a lion" this can be illustrated in the following way. If we say "God is a lion," we mean that God is not a lion (literally), but that God is like a lion in that God is powerful (but it does not mean that God has four legs, for example). However, if we say "God is powerful," the whole meaning of the word refers to God's perfection, even if God is powerful in a more eminent way than anything in the created order. Of note, in *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 3, the English word "literally" translates Aquinas's Latin "proprie."

30. In other words, "bodily condition" pertains to the way of literal signification as a reductive movement from created effect as it is known to us (embodied) to the ultimate cause. For example, "God is powerful" signifies that God can subordinate things to Godself, but it does not imply that God achieves it by some embodied action, which is an exclusive way "powerful" is known to human beings. God is powerful in a more eminent way.

the spiritual, the metaphorical predication is again inferior to the literal. Likewise, according to Aquinas, metaphor is not among those literal names, which predicate of God substantially, even though imperfectly.[31]

More importantly, however, in *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 13, a. 5 Aquinas demonstrates how specific literal predication, viz., analogy, is a privileged way to speak of God. In the four articles preceding a. 5, Aquinas wrestles with the following question: How can we predicate of God something *substantialiter et proprie*, if what we say represents one and simple reality of God only by conceptual diversity proper to the created and finite reality? Aquinas's answer in a. 5 is that it is possible because our God-language is analogical. He begins his argument with the question whether we use words of God and creatures in the same (*univoce*) or different (*aequivoce*) sense. His objections defend the univocal usage by pointing toward God's immanence, whereas *sed contra* advocates the equivocal usage by emphasizing God's transcendence. In his reply, Aquinas argues for the third way: it is impossible to predicate anything of God and creatures neither wholly univocally nor purely equivocally, but only analogically, that is, according to a certain relationship between the two, the divine and creaturely. Aquinas's reason for proposing analogical predication is that univocal usage undermines the radical difference between finite and infinite, whereas equivocal usage subverts the very possibility of meaningful discourse on God. Analogy, however, allows affirming sameness-in-difference. For example, saying that God is wise indicates that wisdom belongs to God primordially, essentially and perfectly, and also implies that God's wisdom is not distinct from God's essence, power, existence, and so on (for God is simple), which is not true when we predicate wisdom of the human being. Thus, what wisdom signifies in God is not confined by the meaning of our word but goes beyond it.[32] However, by predicating wisdom of the human being, we refer to the same wisdom which "exists simply and in unified way in the cause," but is known to us as "divided up" and limited by the essence of the effect.[33]

*Analogy and Metaphor in Contemporary Thomism.* Recent studies in Thomism further clarify Aquinas's notion of analogy, especially in its relation to the *triplex via*, and open some new possibilities for rethinking the relative merits and appropriate uses of analogy and metaphor, a matter of primary interest to the present undertaking. Let us inquire into these possibilities by starting with Rudi te Velde's explication on how analogy is bound to the theological movement of *triplex via*.

Te Velde elucidates the relationship between analogy and the *triplex via* by situating them within the framework of the semantic triangle of reality, knowledge (concept), and language (*res–ratio–nomen*).[34] Most succinctly Aquinas expresses the relationship between the three in *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 13, a. 4 c.: "*Ratio enim quam significat*

---

31.   Cf. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 2 c.
32.   Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1, q. 13, a. 5 c.
33.   In Aquinas's own words, "ita ut quod divisim et multipliciter est in effectibus, in causa est simpliciter et eodem modo" (ibid.).
34.   Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 100–4.

*nomen, est conceptio intellectus de re significata per nomen*."[35] According to Te Velde, Aquinas's inquiry about God follows this Aristotelian semantic triangle of word, concept, and thing[36] and applies it to his concept of analogy. Since the way we name God follows upon the way we know God, the *triplex via* of knowing God "serves as a sort of guideline in the analysis of how names may be transferred from creatures to God."[37] Specifically, as we proceed in naming God from effect to cause, some names signify God in God's self (*res*), but according to an imperfect *modus significandi* in which God is known to us (*ratio*) from God's finite effects. Therefore, Te Velde notes, in the analogical naming of God we apply the movement of the *triplex via*:

> Some names are positively affirmed of God, even when we have to deny the way we conceive their meaning (the aspect of the *ratio*); but this denial must then be followed by a reaffirmation by which the name's meaning (the aspect of the *res*) is posited as in God himself "in a higher way than we understand." The transcendence of God and the immanence of language are not allowed to fall apart; they must be kept together in terms of a semantic relation of transcendence-in-immanence, following the transcending immanence of God in creatures.[38]

Hence, the diversity of signification means that the relationship between the analogates[39] is a relationship of certain proportionality, but not of identity.

A contemporary existential Thomist, W. Norris Clarke offers a helpful explanation as to how we should understand this notion of analogical proportionality in an extremely condensed text of Thomas Aquinas.[40] Clarke proposes that in Aquinas we find "analogy of participation," which encompasses both (1) analogy of attribution, based on the relation of causal participation of many analogates to a common source[41] and (2) analogy of proper proportionality, based on intrinsic similarity between all the

---

35. Also see Aquinas, *ST*, 1 q. 13, a. 1 c.
36. Questions 3–13 in *ST, Prima Pars* follow this threefold division of *res* (how God is in Godself), *ratio* or *conceptio* (how God is in our knowledge) and *nomen* (how can God be named).
37. Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 101.
38. Ibid., 102.
39. The word "analogate" here refers to the diverse modes in which the common predicate ("analogue") is in the various subjects to which it is attributed.
40. See Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 56.
41. "This type is found when the same term is predicated of several different subjects in such as way that it is applied according to its proper, literal meaning *only to one among them* (the 'primary analogate') and to others (the 'secondary analogates'), not because of any intrinsic similarity between them, but only because of some *relation to the primary analogate*, usually a relation of cause, effect, belonging to, or the like. Thus: 'this man is *healthy*; this food is *healthy*'. . ." Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 46. I think the analogy of attribution in Aquinas's discourse on analogical predication in God-language is best expressed in *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 5 c.: "quidquid dicitur de Deo et creaturis, dicitur secundum quod est aliquis ordo creaturae ad Deum, ut ad principium et causam."

analogates.[42] For Clarke, metaphor does not convey proper proportionality. Though he uses the term "metaphorical analogy," he also indicates that proportionality between the two analogates as expressed by metaphor is "improper": "the intrinsic similarity between two things is expressed by a term that in its proper and literal meaning applies to only one of the analogates."[43] Nevertheless, Clarke expands the possible benefits of using metaphorical language beyond those explicitly suggested by Thomas Aquinas. He points out that the metaphor also fulfills an important "rhetoric" function and, by means of symbolic imagination, illuminates inner psychic and spiritual realities. Specifically, the metaphor expresses "a genuine similarity . . . in a vivid and striking way" and carries "dramatic effect"[44] ("rhetoric" function) as well as conveys the "hidden bond of affinity between all beings"[45] ("symbolic" function). Thus, Clarke's analysis, both defends analogy as a means for achieving precision of theological language that aims at "properly" articulating the truth (which pertains to orthodoxy) and suggests that metaphorical language might have advantages for moving one affectively (thus, propelling toward orthopathy and orthopraxis).

It is worthwhile noticing, however, that another Thomist, Bernard J. F. Lonergan, finds precisely the symbolic meaning proper to metaphor problematic. For him, symbolic meaning is related to lower differentiation of consciousness and blending of the functions[46] of meaning:

> The source of symbolic apprehension . . . is the fact that prephilosophic and prescientific thought, while it can draw distinctions, cannot evolve and express an adequate account of verbal, notional and real distinctions; further, it cannot distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate uses of the constitutive and effective functions of meaning; the result is that it constructs its world symbolically.[47]

Lonergan continues by saying that "such construction, like metaphor, was not untrue" and was common in late Judaism, New Testament, and Hellenistic Gnosticism. However,

---

42. "This type is found when a term is predicated of several subjects in order to express some proportional similarity between them: e.g., 'A worm *knows*; a human being *knows*; God *knows*.' Note that the similarity expressed is not directly between two essences or natures as such, which in themselves are just different, but between their respective *activities*, what they do, as somehow truly similar, while at the same time these natures are quite different in how they exercise this activity . . . The analogous term thus signifies a similar type of activity going on in each, but carried out by each agent-subject in *its own distinctive way*, according to the structure and capacities proper to its own essence or nature." Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 46–47. The closest parallel with Aquinas's own wording perhaps is the following: "nomen quod sic multipliciter dicitur, significat diversas proportiones ad aliquid unum." Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 5 c.

43. Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 48.

44. Ibid., 47.

45. Ibid., 48.

46. For Lonergan, there are four functions of meaning: constitutive, cognitive, efficient, and communicative. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76–81.

47. Ibid., 306.

he notes, these symbolic representations "were used in a manner that kept them subordinate to Christian purposes."[48] Whenever this subordination was lacking, they were criticized and rejected.[49] Thus, Lonergan suggests that in early Christianity metaphorical language functioned as a vehicle for communicating revealed truths because it was deployed in a relatively controlled manner.[50] Only emergence of the fully metaphysical context in Scholasticism, for Lonergan, marks the "transition from the implicit to the explicit . . . a transition of Christian consciousness from lesser to fuller differentiation."[51] It is also the transition to speculative discourse, which uses clear distinctions and analogical predication. The emergence of the metaphysical context in Christianity thus, for Lonergan, marks the rise of theology to its proper realm, the realm of *theoria*.

Hence, Lonergan appraises analogical language as a culmination of the speculative undertaking of theology and points out that, as compared to analogy, metaphor does not provide the same level of control of meaning nor advancement in understanding. However, by placing the metaphor on the side of "implicit" (as opposed to "explicit" in the case of analogy), he creates a possibility for reclaiming metaphor as a linguistic vehicle which opens up one's imagination. That which is too precise and explicit, after all, might leave not enough room for imagining possibilities and alternatives. Moreover, Lonergan insists that "in religious matters love precedes knowledge."[52] Religious experience, which Lonergan describes as "being-in-love-with-God,"[53] is prior to objectification in theoretical categories but sets everything in motion: it is the "source and core" of any religious utterance.[54] It is an "experience of mystery."[55] Thus, similarly to Clarke, Lonergan locates analogy on the side of articulating the truth in the "right" and intelligible way, whereas he finds metaphor better suited to communicate the truth about God who addresses human being at the level of "heart's reasons," that is, "feelings that are intentional responses to values."[56] The connection of metaphor with orthopathy and orthopraxis comes to the forefront again.

---

48. Ibid., 309.

49. Lonergan observes that scriptural language has multiple purposes, such as affective, imaginative, volitional, cognitional, etc., but precisely for this reason it takes centuries to articulate with clarity and precision the exact meaning in doctrinal terms. Lonergan, "Theology as Christian Phenomenon," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958–1964*, Collected Works 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996), 244–72 at 267.

50. Though Lonergan is right in maintaining that, in early Christianity, there existed various mechanisms of safeguarding the orthodoxy of the Christian faith (such as the Rule of Faith and reliance on the apostolic tradition), the boundaries were still fluid, as exemplified in the multiplicity and striking liberty of various analogical interpretations of Scripture. See more in Roland E. Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 360–70, https://doi.org/10.2307/1583672.

51. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 309.

52. Ibid., 123.

53. Ibid., 105–7.

54. Ibid., 114.

55. Ibid., 106.

56. Ibid., 115. Lonergan's discourse on the "heart's reasons" here occurs in the context of his treatment of faith as "knowledge born of religious love" and is prompted by Pascal's phrase "the heart has reasons which reason does not know."

The question of the limits of analogical language in theology, which is implicit in Lonergan's speaking of the dynamic state of being in love, gets more explicit attention in the thought of French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain. To begin with, he obviously shares Aquinas's conviction that, for achieving the speculative goal of metaphysical knowledge, analogical language is the best means. The type of knowledge, which corresponds to analogical predication, he calls ananoetic intellection. It is knowledge by analogy or "specular" knowledge: "analogates which do not fall at first within our grasp" are known in the primordially apprehended analogate "as in a mirror, in virtue of the likeness it has with them."[57] For Maritain, this ananoetic intellection or intellection by analogy, if applied to God, is uncontaining or uncircumscriptive: "Ananoetic intellection crosses the infinite abyss which separates it from everything; but the analogous concepts it uses avow at the same time their impotence to enclose or delimit the reality they then designate. *Ut omne genuflectatur*. They make God known only by kneeling before Him."[58] Of note, Maritain deploys the metaphorical language of kneeling in order to convey that which is lacking to analogy, that is, the capacity to transmit that aspect of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, which can be imperfectly described as awe, reverence, and dependence. In the chapter "Mystical Experience and Philosophy,"[59] he further explores the limits of naturally attained knowledge. Since, for Maritain, ananoetic intellection operates precisely in the order of natural knowledge, its limits can be said to correlate with the limits of analogical predication.

In order to explore what those limits are, we now turn to Maritain's treatment of knowledge. Maritain distinguishes three wisdoms: metaphysical, theological, and mystical.[60] He defines wisdom as a supreme knowledge which has a universal object and judges things by first principles.[61] The three wisdoms have to be distinguished because they have different formal objects and correspond to degrees of light which are specifically distinct.[62]

Metaphysical wisdom is "the first and least elevated" of these wisdoms, for even if it rises by way of causality to the first Principle, it operates in the purely rational or natural order. For Maritain, it employs strictly speculative or an ananoetic knowledge, which is "by no means to be confused with metaphorical knowledge."[63] Similarly to

---

57.  Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 232.

58.  Ibid., 239.

59.  Ibid., 263–309.

60.  Maritain understands mysticism or mystical experience as *pati divina*, the suffering of divine things, which is a "quasi-experience," the *quasi* preserving the prerogative of divine transcendence, but not undermining the experiential dimension of the infused contemplation. Ibid., 263.

61.  Ibid., 264.

62.  I find a parallel between Maritain's three wisdoms and Aquinas's three-stage dynamic of knowing and loving God in the realization of the *imago Dei*, namely, *imago creationis, recreationis, et similitudinis*. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 93, a. 4.

63.  Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 264.

Aquinas, Te Velde, and Clarke, Maritain's objection to metaphorical knowledge relates to the fact that metaphorical predication is not a proper and substantial predication.[64] However, even if metaphysical knowledge "truly knows God in the divided mirror of transcendental perfections analogically common to the uncreated and to the created," it still "cannot attain the Divine Essence in itself."[65] The other two types of wisdom (theological and mystical), for Maritain, are above metaphysical knowledge, and have as their object divine essence itself,[66] even though they attain it in a different manner.

Theological wisdom has to be understood as knowledge of the revealed mysteries: it knows God not merely as the first cause, but as God in God's own essence and inner life, though "in the guise of mystery." The light of this wisdom is not the light of reason by itself (as it is for metaphysical knowledge), but the light of reason illumined by faith. Faith is the substitute for the beatific vision: in accepting revelation, God's inner depths are attained by faith without seeing it. The mode of communication of this knowledge is "in the signs of language and human concepts"[67] and, for Maritain, knowledge by analogy here is still the privileged way of knowing. However, he makes a distinction between analogical knowing in metaphysics and in faith: the latter he calls superanalogy. It differs from analogy in that the formal object of knowledge in theological wisdom is "superhuman": deity itself. Therefore, the disproportion between what is known and the human mode of knowing, the *modus significandi*, is so great that faith will perpetually strive to exceed its own way of knowing and to see God "face to face."

Such seeing "face to face," Maritain claims, pertains to mystical wisdom: it is the "experimental" knowledge of God's essence, which is achieved through the working of the Holy Spirit in mystical contemplation. It is not unlike the beatific vision itself, though not yet enjoying the "perfect possession" of it.[68] For Maritain, this knowledge is infused and "consists in knowing the essentially supernatural object of faith and theology—Deity as such—*according to a mode that is suprahuman and supernatural*."[69] Reason and faith do not suffice for this mode of knowing. Mystical experience is possible only under two conditions, Maritain proposes: in the ontological order, it is sanctifying grace, in the order of operation—knowledge by connaturality due to charity.[70] Sanctifying grace grants a new spiritual nature, which is proportionate to an essentially divine object, and unites the human being to God by love as charity:

---

64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Maritain explains that "Deity itself as seen or known quidditatively is the object of the knowledge of the blessed. Deity itself as believed and formally revealed is the object of faith. Deity itself as believed and virtually revealed is the object of theology." Ibid., 269. Mystical knowledge here below, for Maritain, is the beginning of the knowledge of the blessed. The difference in the manner of knowing between theological and mystical wisdom fundamentally is the difference of the natural and supernatural. Ibid., 279.
67. Ibid., 266.
68. Ibid., 275.
69. Ibid., 270, emphasis original.
70. See ibid., 271. By connaturality Maritain means "agreement in the same nature." Ibid., 288.

> What is it that makes us radically connatural with God? It is sanctifying grace whereby we are made *consortes divinae naturae.* And what makes this radical connaturality pass into act; what makes it flower into the actuality of operation? Charity. We are made connatural to God through charity. Charity . . . presupposes sanctifying grace, of which it is the property, and it lays hold on God as he is really present within us as a Gift, a Friend, an eternal life-companion . . . Charity loves Him in Himself and by Himself.[71]

Thus, charity, for Maritain, is the objective medium of knowledge of mystical wisdom: "then we not only experience our love for God, but it is God Himself whom we experience by our love."[72] Maritain suggests that mystical knowledge transcends the mode of concepts and analogy by charity. He also proposes that description of the ineffable relies on the natural analogies of mystical experience, such as aesthetic contemplation, metaphysical conspiracy (by which he means poetry), "metaphysical intuitions" and, "the most obvious and natural analogy of mystical contemplation," human love.[73]

Thus, like Lonergan, in relation to mystical and experiential knowledge of God, Maritain sides with metaphorical language. Nevertheless, he recognizes as genuine only the mystical experience that is bound to the faith context. Hence, again for both Lonergan and Maritain metaphorical language has to be subjected to doctrinal control. However, Maritain is more explicit about the advantage that figurative language offers for naming the ineffable. Moreover, Maritain's emphasis on the unity between the three kinds of knowledge and insistence on the incompleteness of the metaphysical and even faith knowledge, unless it ascends to the "experiential," allows for reclaiming both the unity of theology and spirituality, and correspondingly analogical and metaphoric God-language.

Let me briefly summarize my argument up to this point. The Thomist tradition advocates analogical predication as a privileged way to attain the speculative goal of theology. Analogical predication in naming God follows the theological movement of the *triplex via*, the threefold way of knowing God. Metaphorical predication is seen as inferior to analogical predication for achieving the speculative goal of metaphysical discourse, for it lacks proportionality and does not predicate of God *proper* and *substantialiter*. Nevertheless, as "right" thinking about God is lacking without proper "heart's reason" (i.e., right feeling which undergirds right doing), so analogical language cannot achieve the goal of theology without metaphor. Most importantly, metaphorical language might be better suited for "transmitting mystery,"[74] especially when it comes to faith knowledge and mystical knowledge. Due to its rhetoric and symbolic function it may offer a "surplus of meaning," which cannot be achieved by analogical predication. However, attempts to convey this surplus of meaning result in a meaningful talk of God only if metaphorical predication is used in a controlled

71. Ibid., 277, emphasis original. Again, note the metaphorical language Maritain slips in when talking of mystical experience.

72. Ibid., 279.

73. Ibid., 298–301.

74. See n. 27.

manner, both in terms of doctrinal control and control of meaning, which, as we will see in the next section, largely depends on the context.

## Metaphor as a Linguistic Medium for the *Triplex Via*

The preceding discussion revealed a preliminary portrayal of the relative strengths and limits proper to analogy and metaphor in the light of the Thomist tradition. In this section, I will further my argument for metaphor as an effective and credible theological language. By turning to the theories of metaphor, I will first reinforce the idea that metaphor is a linguistic strategy in its own right, able to capture theological truth in a way that analogy simply cannot. As we have seen, some works of Thomist scholars are highly suggestive of this. Then, building upon what has been said and bringing it into dialogue with Christian mysticism, I will propose that metaphor also has a potential to be a linguistic medium for the *triplex via*, the threefold theological movement of affirmation–negation–eminence and thus in certain contexts may offer a similar control of meaning as analogy. To my mind, this second step does not undermine the first, but rather shows that not only analogy but also metaphor can allow for a theological movement which is congruent with the metaphysics of creation.

### Theories of Metaphor as a Linguistic Vehicle of Meaning

In her book *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Janet Martin Soskice suggests that attempts to defend the usage of metaphor in Christian writings suffer a terminological imprecision.[75] To avoid this, let us review in more detail what a metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon is and how it functions.

Etymologically, metaphor (*hē metaphora*, from *meta* and *ferō*, Gk.), means "transference of a word to a new sense" (LSJ).[76] Though the term has a long history and was used already by the Ancients, particularly, Aristotle and Quintilian, Soskice suggests that it is not yet possible to come to a definition that would be equally useful across various disciplines which employ it. Thus, she offers a minimal definition, on which I largely rely in this article: "metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another."[77] Analogy carries a literal meaning (Soskice calls analogy a "stretched" literal predication), whereas metaphorical speech is "a figurative 'speaking about' that generates new perspectives."[78]

This brings us to the function of metaphorical language. Soskice provides ample criticism of the two dominant types of theories of metaphor (substitution and emotive), and sides with the incremental theories. The former two suggest that metaphor has only a decorative function (thus, can be substituted with literal predication) or provides only an affective but not original (in terms of meaning) contribution. The

---

75. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 15.
76. See *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, at http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=69198&context=lsj&action=from-search.
77. Ibid., 15.
78. Ibid., 66.

incremental theories, however, propose that metaphor is a unique and fully cognitive vehicle capable of saying that which may be said in no other way. Soskice calls her theory of metaphor a theory of "interanimation." Her theory regards metaphor neither as a simple substitution for literal speech nor as strictly emotive. The meanings of which metaphor is suggestive go beyond simple comparison, for they also entail consideration of the context in which the metaphor was told as well as the beliefs held mutually by both hearer and speaker.[79] Thus, Soskice argues against claims that reduce the concept of metaphor to a mere "dual sense" or "dual truth" vehicle. Such tensional conceptions of metaphorical truth, on the one hand, rightly observe that a metaphor simultaneously says both "it is" and "it is not." On the other hand, according to Soskice, they overlook that "the truth and falsity of the particular claim made (whether literal or metaphorical) can only be assessed at the level of complete utterance, taking context into consideration."[80] Soskice also insists that metaphor in religious language has a quality of irreducibility, especially when it comes to mysticism. Referring to Teresa of Avila's mystical writings, she maintains that "there are many areas where, if we do not speak figuratively, we can say very little."[81]

Thus, in conjunction with my analysis of the Thomist approach to metaphor, Soskice's argument lays ground for my hypothesis that metaphor can serve as a linguistic vehicle for the *triplex via*: it implies affirmation and negation, but also carries the irreducible and truthful "surplus of meaning" which correlates with the *via eminentiae*. Whereas the third step of eminence in analogy affirms the uncircumscriptive aspect of predication, the metaphorical "third step" conveys some felt experience of what lies beyond our limited concepts and cannot be reduced to conceptual expression. Let me demonstrate some evidence of this pattern in Christian mysticism.

## Metaphorical Language of Christian Mysticism and Analogical Predication: A Corresponding Dynamic

Since the Middle Ages, metaphorical language was predominantly employed by spirituality, whereas analogical language was employed by academic theology.[82] The former was associated with imagination, corporeality, and femininity, the latter with rationality, intellect, and masculinity. However, the borders were quite porous: a deeper inquiry into the spiritual tradition shows that often metaphorical language served the goal of analogical "strategy." As I will demonstrate, in the language of the mystical ascent (purgation–illumination–union), one may recognize the corresponding dynamic of the *triplex via*. Moreover, when some medieval women mystics turned to a more holistic approach and abandoned the language of the mystical

---

79. See Ibid., 24–44. Also see Ritchie, *Context and Connection in Metaphor*, esp. 174–202.
80. Ibid., 86.
81. Ibid., 96.
82. In the patristic era, however, figurative language is the main language of Scripture commentaries and the first "systematic" theologies, such as Origen's *Peri Archōn*. Interpretation of Scripture according to the "spiritual senses" is perhaps the most outstanding example of the former.

ascent, they did not abandon the dynamic of the *triplex via.* Their excessive metaphors and gender-role reversal in naming God as well as description of the mystical union as participation in God may be interpreted as serving the purpose of affirmation–negation–eminence. Let us take a closer look at this dynamic and some concrete examples of it.[83]

First, let me examine the parallel between the two *triplices viae*, the threefold way of the spiritual ascent (*via purgativa, illuminativa et unitiva*), and the *triplex via* of Aquinas. In the classical concept of spiritual ascent, as described by Ernest E. Larkin,[84] the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways are not necessarily successive stages of spiritual development. They can be experienced simultaneously and are distinguished by a particular mode of operation and the role each plays in a person's spiritual growth: *via purgativa* focuses on the removal of imperfections, *via illuminativa*—on enlightenment and growth in relationship with God, and the *via unitiva*—on a dynamic union with God.[85]

I propose that the way of spiritual ascent and the Thomist *triplex via* are correlated, even if correlation of the first two (so-called) "stages" is reversed.

First, the *via purgativa* primarily aligns with the *via negativa* (*remotionis*). In the *via purgativa*, human beings affirm themselves as an *imago Dei*, that is, their similitude to God, by the removal of imperfections, which implies that an even greater dissimilarity exists between the Creator and the creature, cause and effect. The

---

83. I will restrict my analysis to some examples of mystical accounts which use metaphorical language, primarily those that deploy the image of the spiritual ascent. This obviously represents a tiny portion of Christian mysticism and almost exclusively sets aside a more apophatic mystical tradition. However, I believe that such an approach best corresponds to the illustrative nature of this endeavor and the scope of my work. Thus said, I also believe that the current undertaking can become an impetus for a much more extensive study.

84. Ernest E. Larkin, "The Three Spiritual Ways," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 14:835–836, http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin092.pdf. Larkin relates that the earliest occurrence in Christian writing of the terms purgation, illumination, and union is found in Pseudo-Dionysius. The three ways correspond to the three stages of mystical growth set down by Evagrius Ponticus. Larkin notes, "The teaching of Evagrius, however, is the key to understanding the history of the three ways. While he used the twofold division of active and contemplative life, attributing to the first stage the active way of the *praktikē* aimed at moral perfection, or *apatheia*, he subdivided the contemplative way of *gnōsis* into a lower form of contemplation called *physikē theoria* and a higher form called *theologia*. These two degrees of contemplation came to specify and distinguish the illuminative and unitive ways in tradition." Larkin, "The Three Ways," 836. The medieval spirituality of the ascent culminates in the life and writings of John of the Cross. The modern authors such as R. Garrigou-Lagrange and Louis Bouyer further develop the threefold concept of spiritual ascent (see more ibid.).

85. According to Karl Rahner, these three modes of operation are effected "through the virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the blessings of beatitude." Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses' in the Middle Ages," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 104–34 at 110.

predominant mode of operation of the *via purgativa* aligns with the natural order, for the emphasis is on the practice of virtues. The knowledge of God of those who are in the *via purgativa* is primarily "negative": in the recognition of their own sinfulness, they are better attuned to what God is not and how that which is not of God needs to be removed from their lives.

Second, the *via illuminativa* parallels the *via affirmativa*, that is, in this "stage" of the spiritual ascent, one imperfectly affirms what God is. In the *via illuminativa*, the emphasis is on the work of grace in the soul. The person is enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the world and her/himself as it truly is—as God's handiwork. In the words of John Cassian, the practical knowledge of God (*praktikē*) gives way to knowledge by contemplation (*theorētikē*).[86] In relation to Maritain's three wisdoms, one may discern the stronger operation of theological knowledge (or wisdom) in this "stage." Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this wisdom attains to God as God is in God's Self, that is, God's transcendent "quiddidity," but still by the light of reason illumined by faith.

Finally, the *via unitiva* corresponds to the dynamic of the *via eminentiae* as the soul claims participation in God and begins to savor the blessing of beatitude. Mystics claim that the soul comes close to the erasure of a distinction between human and divine: in the words of Hadewijch of Antwerp, she is made "God with God."[87] Moreover, the metaphoric love-language for the mystical union with God by Mechtild of Magdeburg, a contemporary of Hadewijch, bears striking resemblance to Maritain's notion of "knowledge by connaturality due to charity" as described earlier. Mechtild has God saying to her,

> This is what Our Lord says:—Stay, Lady Soul—What is your wish, Lord?—That you should be naked.—Lord, how can this happen to me?—Lady Soul, you are so "co-natured" in Me that nothing can be interposed between you and Me . . . your noble desire and your insatiable hunger . . . I shall satisfy eternally with My infinite superabundance.[88]

Hence, in the *via eminentiae*, as encountered in the mystical accounts of union with God, the gains of metaphorical language are especially prominent: metaphor expresses that which speculative theology is incapable of articulating because of the breakdown of the subject–object distinction. As Dominic Doyle points out, "this breakdown echoes the breakdown of the categorically differentiating structure of ordinary language in the boundary-leaping moves of metaphor."[89]

As I have demonstrated so far, the coordinate usage of the metaphors of "purgation," "illumination," and "union" corresponds with the threefold movement of negation,

---

86. John Cassian, *The Conferences*, ed. and trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 57 (New York: Paulist, 1997), 505.

87. Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995), 140.

88. "Excerpts from Mechtild of Magdeburg's 'The Flowing Light of the Godhead,'" in Emile Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 54–68 at 59.

89. Dominic Doyle, personal communication with author, March 3, 2016.

affirmation, and eminence, and, similarly to analogical predication, communicates of God's transcendence-in-immanence. However, as has been noted, the first two ways of each triad correlate in a reverse order. This can be explained by the difference in the goal of each threefold way: the goal of speculative understanding requires a starting point of affirmation, whereas the goal of spiritual growth—the starting point of removal of that which separates from God. However, the significance of this reversal should not be overestimated, for each *triplex via* allows simultaneity in the threefold process.

A similar pattern of the threefold theological movement can be observed in the metaphorical language of Julian of Norwich. Denys Turner demonstrates how the excessive metaphorical language employed by Julian can be successfully used as apophatic strategy:

> Theologically *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Shewings* of Julian are equally apophatic, but by different routes . . . When, for example, in a provocative paradox, Julian deliberately confuses the gender attributes of Jesus, her strategy is consciously apophatic: "In our Mother, Christ, we grow and develop; in his mercy he reforms and restores us . . ."[90]

For Turner, metaphorical language can be used not only to affirm something about God, but also to negate: when mutually exclusive binary metaphorical predicates of Mother and Father, she and he, are simultaneously assigned to God, one knows that God is neither Mother nor Father, neither she nor he. Moreover, by aligning the explicitly apophatic language of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and of Pseudo-Dionysius with the metaphorically rich language of *The Shewings*, Turner suggests that both apophatic and kataphatic language can serve as a "linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language."[91]

Indeed, due to the surplus of meaning proper to metaphorical language, it can serve not only the goals of affirmation and negation, but also of eminence. In Julian's example, the metaphor achieves the goal of the movement proper to the *via eminentiae* primarily because of the context in which it is employed: the context of excessive metaphorical predication indicated above and the context of her narrative. The latter context can be exemplified by Julian's musing over the seeming irreconcilability of God's love and the presence of evil (which, I think, also represents her way of dealing with "God is" and "God is not"). The contradiction is not conveyed speculatively, but by deploying a narrative rich with metaphors. Finally, through the image of the hazelnut Julian gives voice to the hope that contradiction is not permanent. The hazelnut of her vision[92] stands as a metaphor of the world created, loved and sustained by God in

---

90. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 34.

91. Ibid.

92. "And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and I perceived that it was as round as any ball. I looked at it and thought, What can this be? And I was given this general answer: It is all that is made. I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I

whom all perfections abide and to whom belongs the future of humankind. She writes, "All will be well, and all will be well and every kind of thing will be well."[93]

To summarize, in the metaphoric language of Christian mystics, an approach to God and naming the experience of God follows the dynamic of negation, affirmation, and eminence. In the context where such a dynamic is operative, metaphorical language can achieve the goal of the *triplex via* to speak of God's transcendence-in-immanence. Moreover, figurative language seems to be the only possibility in trying to communicate something of the ineffable reality of mystical union.

## Final Remarks

Theology needs greater flexibility in its selection of linguistic strategies when speaking about God. Metaphorical language draws from the biblical, patristic, and spiritual tradition and therefore allows greater holistic emphasis. It also carries the potential of communicating intuition about Mystery, which analogical language, due to its nature, is incapable of. The "surplus of meaning" proper to metaphorical predication not only implies a rhetorical and affective effect, but also accounts for the irreducibility of the metaphor and its indispensability in certain theological contexts, of which accounts of mystical union are the most relevant. As examples from spirituality recalled above demonstrate, this surplus of meaning communicates something of God as *Deus semper maior* and of the world's trajectory towards an eschatological future, the ultimate "surplus."

It can be objected, however, that even if a certain usage of metaphorical language may correspond to the theological movement of the *triplex via* and therefore provide a similar control of meaning as analogical language, metaphor lacks the precision of order and proper proportionality inherent to analogy. Therefore, as compared to analogy, the interpretation of metaphor is more heavily dependent on the context in which it is used. On the one hand, such an objection is fair. It certainly indicates the limits for using metaphorical language. Theology as a discipline cannot exist without categorical objectification such as analogy offers. On the other hand, precisely metaphor's relative openness to meaning accounts for its capacity to generate new perspectives and to intimate a felt presence of what lies beyond the concept.

Thus, both analogy and metaphor are needed to speak credibly and efficiently of the Mystery of God. After all, as Rahner suggests, is not God "an almost ridiculously exhausting and demanding word"?[94] To speak in figures again, we need both C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa*. The

---

was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that he loves it, the third is that God preserves it." Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978), 130–31.

93.  Ibid., 225. See also 149.

94.  Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 51.

need to integrate both strategies is particularly true in the context of secularization, when the divorce between spirituality and theology is often accelerated by the "eclipse of transcendence," to use Charles Taylor's words.[95] In this context, the power of metaphor cannot be underestimated: as a linguistic tool, it is particularly compatible with locating us in relation to God as Mystery.[96] Furthermore, metaphor's capacity to move the "heart's mind" is not the least reason for advocating its use for theology which has not lost hope to influence social imaginary, as Taylor calls it,[97] and human choices. In sum, metaphor better serves the practical and mystical goals of theology and thus contributes to orthopraxis and orthopathy. At the same time, theology as *intellectus fidei* would be greatly impoverished if the notion of analogy where dismissed on the grounds that it is "mere" (and not "stretched," as Soskice suggested) literal predication. Without analogy's capacity to speak *substantialiter et proprie*, the speculative aim of theology (and, by extension, orthodoxy) is unattainable. Hence, a theology that values and appropriately employs both analogical and metaphorical predication has a better chance to address the mind, the will, and the heart of the reader, and to integrate the speculative and spiritual dimensions of theological discourse. Ultimately, orthodoxy does not exist without orthopraxis and orthopathy.

## Author Biography

Ligita Ryliškytė, SJE, is currently a doctoral student in systematic theology at Boston College. Her main areas of interest are Christology, theological anthropology, epistemology, and the Eastern European theological context. She has recently published "The Women of the Gulags and Nelson's Paradigms of Evil: Becoming a Sign of Hope against All Hope," in *And God Will Wipe Away All Tears from Their Eyes: A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women* (2013) and "Post-Gulag Christology: Contextual Considerations from a Lithuanian Perspective," *Theological Studies* 76 (2015).

---

95. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.
96. Cf. Richard Lennan, "The Church as a Sacrament of Hope," *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 247–74 at 272, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391107200201.
97. For Charles Taylor,  social imaginary is "the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146.