ANALOGY, METAPHOR, AND LITERAL LANGUAGE

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We may set up the problem to be discussed in this chapter by considering the famous slogan of the early Karl Barth: God is ‘wholly other’ (‘ganz anders’). Barth later described this phrase as a ‘battle cry’ rather than a precise theological statement, but it will serve to define our problem. What has not usually been noticed is that the phrase is radically ambiguous, with two quite different meanings, each of which is relevant in different ways to the task before us. As it is most frequently interpreted, it signifies the absolute qualitative difference between God and anything creaturely – that ‘you cannot talk about God by talking about man in a loud voice’. However, although that was part of Barth’s intent, what made it a ‘battle cry’, signalling his opposition to his nineteenth-century predecessors, is another, quite distinct reading of the phrase. If we talk of God as ‘wholly other’ – ‘completely different’ – we have to ask ‘different from what?’ Barth’s opponents could certainly allow for God’s transcendence and refuse to identify Him with any worldly phenomenon. What Barth was protesting against was another sort of domestication of God, a different sort of anthropomorphism in which we project onto God our values, aspirations and fears, imagining God in terms of what we conceive to be the highest form of human morality, religion, or culture. God becomes a cupola erected upon our human religion and morality: ‘Gott ist noch ganz anders, und das wahre Leben ist noch ganz anders, als du dir es jetzt einbildest!’ (Barth 1913: 252).1

The question then immediately arises: ‘How is it possible to use human language to speak and think responsibly about such a God?’ Human language – the only language we have, and can have – is the language that has evolved and that we have learnt for talking about human beings, their relations, and their empirical environment. What is more, such a language is deeply imbued with human values, fears, and aspirations. Does not the use of such a language inevitably compromise the radical difference between God and everything in the universe that He has created? Can we talk about God’s activity without equating it with human activity or at least assimilating it to one or another of the causal processes with which we are familiar, or talk about God’s love and compassion without seeing Him as subject to human passions, or talk about the justice of God without thinking of the last judgment as a law court meting out punishment for crime? In brief, can we talk about God while retaining the meaningfulness of the language we use, without lapsing into crude or subtle anthropomorphism, and without simply projecting onto God our human wishes and ideals?
The questions involved here are not just abstract technical questions; unless we have an appropriate answer to them, we shall seriously misrepresent belief in God. Atheists will then be tilting at windmills, while believers have a gravely distorted faith.

In the present chapter, I shall examine and compare two traditional answers to these questions, on the one hand that the linguistic use of analogy provides the key, and on the other hand that religious claims are all to be interpreted metaphorically. Both proposed answers have a long history, represented classically by Aquinas and by Maimonides, respectively. I shall look at Aquinas in what follows, but here we may sketch the broad thrust of Maimonides’ position. For Maimonides, God’s transcendence was such that it was impossible to make any claims that were literally true of Him. All that was possible would be a purely negative theology. If you say this, however, you are confronted by the fact that God is apparently spoken of in the ways that have been declared illegitimate not only by believers, but also above all in the Hebrew Bible. The reply is that we are to take all this use of language about God as metaphorical.

Here is an initial statement of the difference between the two approaches. On the one hand, those who have advocated a metaphorical theology have supposed that literal uses of language are completely inadequate to the task at hand, and have therefore identified a need to resort to purely non-literal figurative uses of language such as metaphorical uses of language. On the other hand, those – from Aquinas to Kant and Barth – who advocate the way of analogy have seen the apparent impasse at this point as arising from an overly simplified conception of the resources to be found within the literal uses of language, and have insisted that, with appropriate safeguards, there are literal ways of speaking of God that still respect the radical otherness of God.

In what follows I shall look in turn at these two approaches and argue that, despite an initial apparent similarity, the difference between them runs deep. Since the way of analogy has, beginning with the Enlightenment, been widely misunderstood, I shall spend time simply expounding it.

**Analogy**

To be sure, the debate about analogy has usually been carried on within recent Evangelical theology with an astonishing lack of understanding and horrifying carelessness.

(Jüngel 1977: 281)

It is easy to sympathize with this. In fact the situation is worse than Jüngel indicates. As part of the reaction in the Enlightenment against scholastic philosophy there was a widespread suspicion of appeals to analogy, and a broad misunderstanding of the way the term had traditionally been used. As a result it has been used with considerable looseness, sometimes meaning little more than similarity, or even as a synonym for metaphor. Even in the crucial debate over the nature of the analogy between God and the world between Erich Przywara (1932), Karl Barth (especially Barth 1940), Gottlieb Söhngen (1934) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1951) we find, beginning with Przywara’s idiosyncratic use of traditional terminology, a lack of clarity as to how the language of analogy is to be understood. As a result, the occasions for misunderstanding among themselves and in further discussions are rife. The point here is not a pedantic insistence that there is only one proper way to use the word ‘analogy’, but rather that, unless an author strives to make clear precisely what is to be understood by it, the whole discussion becomes opaque. The contrast with medieval discussions of analogy here is sharp: there, among the major theologians, it is almost invariably possible to grasp their meaning, whether you agree with it or not. It is this earlier use of the word that is not only precisely statable, but also that provides the distinctions necessary for theological discussion.
The second confusion current with the word ‘analogy’ is the failure to distinguish analogy and metaphor. In everyday usage, people will frequently describe a metaphor as an analogy, but again for clarity of discussion the two concepts need to be kept separate. William Alston (1989: 19) writes:

I believe that in many cases in which writers speak of ‘analogy’, ‘symbols’, ‘parables’, or ‘models’, the basic linguistic mechanism is that of metaphor.

Alston goes on to cite some authors whom he regards as ‘guilty’, including Bultmann and Barth. In both these cases, such a reading would lead to a travesty of their positions.

With these warnings, we now explore the ways in which the linguistic application of analogy is to be understood in talking about God.

The Aristotelian background

The inevitable starting point for our enquiry is Aristotle. He shows great sensitivity to and frequently draws attention to the ways in which significant words in our language have several different but interrelated uses. Among these cases of words ‘said in many ways’ he identifies two patterns of usage designated as ‘homonymous but not by chance’:

But in what way are different things called ‘good’? For they do not seem to be called by the same word by chance homonymy. Possibly they are all called ‘good’ because they derive from one good, or all contribute to one good. Or perhaps they are called ‘good’ by analogy: for as sight is good in the body, so is reason in the soul, and similarly another thing in something else.

(Nicomachean Ethics, I 1096b 28)

I shall give a preliminary sketch of these two possibilities, both of which play a key role in all the subsequent discussion. Although later discussions will describe both of these possibilities as ‘said by analogy’, Aristotle himself always only uses the term for the second. In this sense, an analogy is a four term relation ‘A is to B as C is to D’. Aristotle’s interest in this is that it is this formula that permits us to compare ‘things that are remote’ – things that are too unlike to share common intrinsic properties or are even in different categories, and so cannot be compared directly, can still be compared by introducing a third and fourth thing and comparing the first’s relation to the third with the second’s relation to the fourth. To take an example that he gives from Archytas of Tarentum: consider the concept calm. This concept is explained by the formula ‘windlessness is to the sky as wavelessness is to the sea’. We may clearly extend this pattern so as to talk of a calm mind or a situation being calm after a riot. We see here how in virtue of an underlying analogy the same word may be intelligibly applied to radically different things.

The second of Aristotle’s patterns of words ‘being said in many ways’ is explored by him at Metaphysics IV, 1003a33–1033b18. Here the basic idea is that we may distinguish a primary use and a range of secondary uses of a word. This is best understood by looking at one of Aristotle’s own examples. Consider the word ‘healthy’. We may talk of a healthy cow, a healthy climate, a healthy complexion, and so on. Of these, the primary use of the word is illustrated by ‘a healthy cow’, and the others are secondary uses. Roughly speaking it is only animals and plants that are ‘really’ healthy. There is a clear ordering of priority and posteriority, which can be explained by saying that one may explain what it is for an animal to be healthy, whereas one cannot explain what is meant by describing a climate as healthy without mentioning its relation to the health of
animals. The priority claimed here is a purely linguistic priority: in the case where the primary use of ‘F’ is to say that ‘As are F’ and a secondary use to say that ‘Bs are F’, we can explain what it is for A to be F without mentioning Bs, but we can only explain what it is for B to be F by explaining the relation of Bs that are F to As that are F: a healthy climate is one that promotes health in animals.

Are we to say that such words are ambiguous? It is rather that our normal criteria for sameness and difference in sense leave us in the lurch: The question ‘Do we mean the same thing by “calm” when we talk of a calm sea and a calm mind?’ has no obvious answer. Aquinas talked here of these cases as lying between univocation and equivocation (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 1a 13 5). I take it that the thought here is that the word ‘healthy’ is univocal in its various uses, in that all refer to one and the same thing, health, but equivocal in that they refer to it in different ways. Perhaps the best thing to say—and I believe that this was Aristotle’s intention—is that although these various uses of the same word clearly belong together, it is not in terms of the objects to which the word is applied sharing a common property.

As Aristotle’s discussions make clear, we are talking about pervasive and familiar features of natural language. If, then, appeals to analogy can, in principle, explain how it is possible to use human language to talk about God and yet respect His radical difference from any worldly phenomena, then the claim is being made that our ordinary language, just as it is, can in principle make genuine claims about a God who is ‘wholly other’. The appearance to the contrary would then rest on an impoverished conception of the resources of that ordinary language. This is so even if there are respects in which the theological application of these words is sui generis.

**Systematicity**

As just said, when Aristotle talks of words ‘said in many ways’, he contrasts the cases which concern him with ‘chance homonymy’. To make sense of his discussion the notion of chance has to be taken strictly. There are many cases where a word is used in more than one way, where there is a relation between the two uses that falls short of being ‘not by chance’ in the sense required. Consider the word ‘species’: it is used in a logical sense and in a biological sense, among others. These are two quite distinct senses of the word ‘species’, but there is a quite intelligible connection between these two senses, and to that extent it is ‘not by chance’ that we use the word in these two ways. However, the reason that the word has these two senses is due to an historical accident, dating from an earlier time when it was thought that the different animal species could be defined using the logical notion of species, dividing the animal kingdom using the machinery of genus and species. To that extent, it is still by chance that the word is used in these two ways. In such a case we can easily suppose that there are people who are familiar with the word in its biological sense but who are wholly ignorant of its logical sense. As opposed to this, the various words that Aristotle is concerned with belong together in a much stronger sense. The various different ways of using the word go together to constitute a single use. Here if someone learns a word like ‘calm’ at all, they learn to use it in all its different applications. What is more, this use is generative: we can understand novel applications just as a simple continuation of its use in the applications with which we are familiar.

The importance of this point in the present context is that this means that, if we can develop an appropriate theory of analogy, our ordinary human language, just as it stands, has at least the potential to talk of God, while still respecting the radical otherness of God. I shall look at the question of how Aristotle’s two patterns can be exploited in this way. In this I shall follow medieval practice and call them both species of analogy, such that what Aristotle called ‘analogy’ is called ‘the analogy of proportionality’, and his other pattern ‘the analogy of attribution’.

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Analogy of proportionality

If it can be applied in such a way as to give a coherent account of language about God, the attractions of Aristotelian analogy, the ‘analogy of proportionality’, are clear. The theme that runs through all Aristotle’s writings about analogy is that there are two different ways of comparing things – a direct comparison, noting common properties of the two things, and an indirect comparison according to the formula A is to B as C is to D. The interest of the second comparison is that it enables us to make comparisons that are too unlike for any direct comparison to be possible, even comparisons across the Aristotelian categories. We can for instance represent the changes in the popularity of a political party by the rising and falling of a line on a graph. It is because of this ability to explain comparisons between things that are completely unlike that, for instance, Cajetan gives this analogy pride of place in his account of analogy.

The question then is: How is the formula A is to B as C is to D to be understood in our context? We may mention three interpretations that have been given.

(Cajetan 1959: 5)

Although there is no trace of this in Aquinas, for a long time, Thomists, under the influence of Cajetan, supplemented their account of Aquinas with a formula along the lines ‘God’s justice is to God’s being as human justice is to human being’ (see for example Garrigou-Lagrange 1914: 218). This has now largely been abandoned as a misunderstanding of Aquinas, and an unnecessary addition to his account. For me, the major difficulty is that I do not understand what it means. (What is the relation of God’s justice to His being?)

Very differently, Kant (1783: §§ 57–59) gives an account that compares God’s activity with human activity, using such examples as God is to the world as a builder is to a ship or a general to a regiment. In fact, of the authors that I mention, only Kant seeks to give an account appealing only to the analogy of proportionality. In so doing he brings out one of the limitations of an account exclusively in terms of this analogy. Kant’s whole theology stresses God’s transcendence as a purely noumenal being, whose nature as He is in Himself is wholly unknown to us. From Kant’s perspective, he is content that God’s nature as He is in Himself should remain wholly unknowable by us; all that matters is the implications for religious life of His governance of the world. What the analogy of proportionality gives to Kant is not ‘an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things’ (ibid. § 58). What this means is that correctly understood this tells us nothing about God’s nature but only about His relation to the world. If we are told that God governs the universe, all that amounts to is that the universe is governed by something.

Barth, who develops his main account in Vol. II of the Church Dogmatics in terms of an analogy of attribution, complements this in Vol. III with a use of the analogy of proportionality which he terms analogia relationis. From the very outset Barth develops his account within a Trinitarian context, coupled with his conception of the image of God in humanity. This is presented in two stages: in the first the Father’s relation to the Son is mirrored in God’s relation to the creation (Barth 1948: 220), and in the second the Father’s relation to the Son is mirrored in human relations – man’s relation to his neighbour (paradigmatically, the relation of man and woman) (ibid. 323–24). This depends upon a particular construal of the doctrine of the image: ‘God is in relationship, and so too is the man created by Him. This is his divine likeness’ (ibid. 324). These two patterns are elaborated in a rich variety of ways, but at bottom it rests on a rejection of the traditional conception of the image consisting in some property of humanity – such as rationality, in favour of seeing relations between human beings as echoing, however defectively, relations within the Godhead.
Both Kant’s and Barth’s applications of the analogy of proportionality make perfect sense, given their respective theologies. The question left open is the question of the qualitative superiority of God to humanity – Aristotelian analogy is a symmetric relation, so without qualification this analogy would seem to place God and humanity on a level. This is why Barth develops his account in a context that has already used the analogy of attribution, to which I now turn.

**Analogy of attribution**

At first sight, the analogy of attribution looks a much less promising basis for an account of talking about God. After all, when we say that the climate is healthy all we mean is that it promotes health, but when we say that God is just, we are not merely saying that God is related to other things that are just, but that He is just in Himself. It was for this reason that Cajetan advocated the analogy of proportionality.

However, the apparent difficulty here only arises if we restrict our attention to a narrow range of examples. The general notion of the analogy of attribution is that if A is called F in the primary use of F, B is called F in the secondary use, if B is related to A. There is wide variety in the possible relations between A and B, and an example such as ‘healthy/healthy’ is potentially misleading and almost certainly responsible for the idea that the analogy of attribution is powerless to express what we really mean in talking about God.

To understand the classic advocacy of the analogy of attribution – that of Aquinas – we must start with his idea of ‘equivocal [or analogical] causation’ (Aquinas 1955: Chapter 29). His initial premise is that every effect resembles its cause. In the simplest case, ‘univocal causation’, the cause and the effect share a common property, but in some cases there is a diminution and the effect receives from its cause a lesser property than that of its cause. He illustrates this with a case that relies on medieval cosmology. The Sun heats a stone. But the Sun is an immutable and incorruptible body, whereas a stone is only capable of the heat with which we are familiar, which is a property of mutable bodies. We therefore posit in the Sun a superior version of heat, which is a different property from familiar heat. However, since the Sun’s heat is responsible for that of the stone, there is a likeness between the two properties. Leaving on one side the obsolete cosmology which is only there for illustrative purposes, we turn to the case of God. God is goodness itself and, as such, is the cause of all goodnesses that we find in the world. Since the effect resembles its cause, these goodnesses resemble God’s goodness, but in a diminished form. On this conception, the primary application of words such as ‘good’, ‘just’ and ‘wise’ is their application to God, since other things are called ‘good’, ‘just’ and ‘wise’ only in so far as they approach God. It is God’s goodness which is the standard by which all other goodnesses are judged. It is important to recognize that although this account is developed in a causal context, the linguistic theory can be stated without reference to that causal background: when we say God is ‘just’, that is the primary use of the term; and when we describe earthly instances of justice as ‘just’, that is a secondary use, since they are only so-called in virtue of their resemblance to divine justice.4

Barth’s whole approach to his appeal to the analogy of attribution is completely different. Although he agrees with Aquinas that the primary use of the words to be used in talking about God is their application to God, and their everyday use in human affairs is a secondary use, his grounds for this are not in any kind of metaphysical theory, but are based purely upon the scriptural witness to divine revelation. When we encounter God’s self-revelation – above all in Jesus Christ – we encounter for the first time what true lordship, love, wisdom, power and kingship really are, and realize that what we had elsewhere described by those terms...
were caricatures of the real thing, and that it is only in a secondary sense that they can be so described.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

(I Cor. 1 20–21)

Both Aquinas and Barth are in the apparently paradoxical position of claiming that the primary use of the words we use may not be their everyday mundane use, but a use with which the natural man may be unfamiliar. This is the issue that must now be addressed.

**Semantic externalism**

Someone such as Barth or Aquinas, who takes the analogy of attribution as the basis for their account of religious language, is committed to the idea that the primary use of the words that we use in speaking of God is not their familiar, everyday use, but their application to God Himself. How can words such as ‘Lord’, ‘just’ or ‘wise’ apply in the first instance to God, and not to the human beings that we ordinarily describe by these words, particularly since the only way we can learn to use these words is by seeing them applied to human beings?

The answer given by both Aquinas (1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13, 2) and Barth (1940: 227–29) is to appeal to a form of what is now called ‘semantic externalism’. Semantic externalism is an idea introduced into recent discussions in the philosophy of language by Saul Kripke (1972) and Hilary Putnam (1975). The claim is that for a wide range of cases, when we use those words to designate features of reality, the meanings of those words are to be explained not in terms of our ideas of what those features are, but in terms of the actual nature of the features themselves, including features which may be completely unknown to the speakers of the language. This can be understood best by considering what is for me one of the most intuitively plausible cases – the names of diseases. Diseases are typically first identified by a syndrome of symptoms before the causes of those symptoms are known. In many cases, those causes will be unknown to the layman and sometimes even to the medical profession. Nevertheless, there is a strong case for saying that we use the name of the disease to designate not the symptoms but the underlying pathology. Thus measles is a viral infection caused by a paramyxovirus of the genus *Morbillivirus*. It is safe to say that the vast majority of users of the word ‘measles’ are completely unaware of that fact. Nevertheless it is right to say that they use the word as a name of a viral infection and not of its familiar symptoms. There are two reasons for saying this, one of which is already given by Aquinas. Different diseases may share almost identical symptoms, and so we cannot individuate the disease simply by citing its symptoms. The other reason is that it is the actual disease, and not its symptoms, that is of primary interest to human beings. If we visit the doctor with measles, we do not only want to be rid of the symptoms, we are after a cure for the infection causing those symptoms. If I understand Aquinas, he would say in such cases that the thing signified was the disease itself, but for us (ignorant) users of the language, the way it was signified (the mode of signification) was via the symptoms (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: I, q. 13a. 6).

But how does this apply to language about God? Although the example just given serves to introduce the idea of semantic externalism, the case of divine perfections looks at first sight very different from it. To understand this, we need first to consider another case: the case of geometrical terms such as ‘straight’ or ‘right-angled’. These terms have both an everyday use, say by carpenters, and also a use by geometers. But these are quite distinct uses: there are things we can
say about the carpenter’s straight line that it makes no sense to say of the geometer’s and vice versa – we can say that the carpenter’s line is straight enough, or that it’s too thick, and of the geometer’s straight lines that any two meet at exactly one point. Is it appropriate to say that the carpenter’s line resembles the geometer’s? Not in the straightforward way in which two carpenters’ lines may or may not. What would be completely inappropriate to say is that the geometer’s line is like the carpenter’s only straighter. In this case, it is the geometer’s use of these terms that is the primary use since we explain what it is for the carpenter’s line to be straight by citing the standard for straightness set by the geometer. This example shows two things. First, we see here the way in which terms that have a normative sense typically generate an analogy of attribution, in which the primary use of the words specifies a standard and where objects are described by those words in a secondary sense if they satisfy that standard. Second, in such cases we are necessarily familiar with the carpenter’s use and only by subsequent reflection do we explicitly grasp the geometer’s. So although the geometer’s use is linguistically primary, our first acquaintance with the word is with the secondary use, which is in that way epistemologically prior to the primary use. With that in mind, we now consider the words we use in talking about God: ‘wisdom’, ‘mercy’, ‘Lord’. All of these words have an everyday (secular) use which we have all mastered as part of our standard vocabulary. But at the same time, all of these words have a normative force. In fact, it is part of their everyday use that they have such a force. But in this case, unlike the geometrical case, although a word like ‘just’ is a word we have all learnt, and we all have grasped that there is a standard as to what is and what is not just, that is quite compatible with our having radically defective conceptions as to what really constitutes justice. In that sense we may say that although we have mastered the use of the word, we may have misconceptions as to what it really means. The position then espoused by both Aquinas and Barth is that although natural man has mastered the use of a word such as ‘just’, its meaning – its primary use – is to refer to the justice of God, and that for Aquinas remains ‘higher than we can know or understand’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13 2) and for Barth closed to us unless God chooses to reveal to us in Christ something of His justice.

Barth and Thomas Aquinas compared: a proposed focus for the current debate

We may conclude this examination of analogy by comparing the positions of Aquinas and Barth. The agreement between the two accounts is apparent and real enough. Both are agreed in espousing a version of the analogy of attribution in which God as justice itself is the standard by which all worldly justice is measured, that the primary meaning of the word ‘just’ is its application to God, and as a consequence both adopt a form of semantic externalism. The differences, however, run deeper. It is instructive to look at these contrasts because they indicate where the current debate over the use of analogy in theology should focus – in fact they are at the centre of the disagreements between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Progress here calls for a confrontation between the best modern interpreters of Aquinas, such as Hampus Lyttkens (1952), and the followers of Barth.

The most obvious disagreement is also the one from which all the others follow. Aquinas bases his account on a metaphysical theory of causality – the claim that every effect resembles its cause and the idea of an analogical cause where the cause is superior to its effect. Barth will reject such a metaphysical grounding of theology, not only because this particular metaphysics is highly dubious, but because he rejects any attempt to ground theology, whether in religious experience, morality, or metaphysics, outside God’s self-revelation – finally and definitively in Jesus Christ.

Aquinas clearly wishes to establish his account of religious language prior to his account of revealed theology, so that we already have the context in which to interpret God’s self-revelation.
For Barth, prior to and apart from God’s self-disclosure, natural man lacks any access to the primary meanings of the words he uses and misunderstands the claims made in speaking about God unless God in His revelation reclaims the language.

Finally there is the question ‘How much do we know?’ Both agree that knowing how to use a word does not guarantee that you grasp its real (primary) meaning. Aquinas’ thought always tends towards agnosticism – we know that God is the highest good, but what that amounts to is ‘higher than we can understand or signify’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13, 2). Because an effect resembles its cause, we know that Solomon’s wisdom is a pale reflection of the wisdom of God, but we become ever more conscious of how far it falls short of its original. For Barth, fallen humanity is closed off from any natural knowledge of God, and thus has no understanding of what the justice and power of God are really like. Hence their normal use is a kind of misuse embodying false conceptions of such concepts. Apart from revelation, we have no knowledge of God, but as and when God chooses to disclose Himself, it is possible to have real, if limited knowledge of God’s nature.

The use to which [our words] are put is not, then, an improper or merely pictorial one, but their proper use. We use our words improperly and pictorially – as we can now say, looking back from God’s revelation – when we apply them within the confines of what is appropriate to us as creatures.

(Barth 1940: 229)

Metaphor

Before looking at the proposal that the solution to the problem of religious language is to be found in metaphor, there are two preliminary clarifications that should be made.

In the first place, no one will dispute that, if it is possible to talk about God at all, it will also be possible to use metaphor, and that even if there are other claims made about God that are to be regarded as straightforwardly literally truth-apt, there is extensive use of metaphor, both in the Bible and in sermons, theological writings, and the everyday talk of believers. What concerns us, however, is simply the claim that we can only talk about God by the use of metaphor. The position we must consider is that expressed for example by Janet Martin Soskice (1985: x):

In view of the Christian’s insistence that he will not or cannot transpose his concept of God into supposedly imageless speech, attacks on the meaningfulness of his metaphorical language are, in fact, attacks on any of his attempts to speak of a transcendent God.

On this conception, the metaphors we use in talking about God form a closed circle and there is no way to break out of this circle.

In the second place, some authors have a completely different intent from that which interests us in talking of religious language as metaphorical. They wish to retain a use for religious language that carries with it no commitment to a God over against the empirical world, but simply as a way of giving expression to fundamental features of human life or giving expression to a commitment to live in a certain way – namely, as if they were answerable to God for their thoughts and actions: no one will think of ‘the devil makes work for idle hands’ as carrying with it serious theological implications. (I have just heard someone on the radio say, ‘This music is inspired by God, whether or not there is a god.’) Some of Wittgenstein’s scattered remarks about Christianity seem to point in that direction. What is less clear in Wittgenstein’s case than in that of many who have sought to follow him – such as D.Z. Phillips – is whether his remarks are intended as an interpretation of what believers have always meant in their use of religious
language, or merely as expressing the use of religious language that he, as an unbeliever, can continue to wish to adopt.

What concerns us in contrasting the linguistic use of analogy with a metaphorical account of religious language are those authors who have appealed to metaphor precisely because of their commitment to a transcendent God, and who see metaphor as providing the means for doing justice to the radical difference between God and all worldly phenomena, including human phenomena. I may mention here Sallie McFague (1982), Soskice (1985), and Eberhard Jüngel (1974, 1977). Of these, Soskice in particular is to be commended for a highly intelligent discussion of the phenomena of metaphor in general, and for seeking to confront the technical challenges confronting a metaphorical theology, such as that metaphor is compatible with theological realism, and that metaphors are capable of truth and falsity. However, in our present context, McFague and Jüngel are of most direct interest, since they are most explicitly concerned to do justice to the radical otherness of God, and since they both present themselves as influenced in their accounts by Barth, thus forming a foil for his appeal to analogy in his account of talking about God.

The correct analysis of metaphor is a complex and controversial business, and for our purposes I will have to rest content with an informal and intuitive characterization which is easy enough to understand once illustrated. By a ‘metaphor’ is meant a figurative use of language – a deliberate departure from the literal – in which we talk about A as if A were B. For this chapter, this will suffice when coupled with the Aristotelian claim that the most successful metaphors are those based on analogy (for some C and D, A is to C as B is to D – the proportional analogy that we have already looked at) (*Rhetoric* III, 1411a 2). It is this last idea that may have led some people, including in particular Jüngel, into thinking that there is little difference between appealing to analogy within the literal use of language that I have examined above and seeing religious language as metaphorical. However, taking my cue from Aquinas, I shall argue that in theological appeals to analogy there is a profound difference between the two cases, which makes the appeal to metaphor in particular completely misguided.

Before turning to that, I shall look at what are for me the two most significant technical challenges confronting those who wish to see all talk about God as metaphorical. I myself believe that at least the second of these challenges cannot be met, but whether or not I am right, the onus is on those who appeal to metaphor in this way to present a theory of metaphor that is adequate to meeting them. Many authors have stressed that metaphor is a parasitic use of language. In one way the point being made is obvious enough: we cannot make sense of the idea of a word being used metaphorically unless there is already a literal use of that word. In that way the metaphorical use of words depends on the literal use. But there is a deeper concern here. To make sense of the idea that we can only talk about God metaphorically, we have to accept the idea of a being that can be talked of metaphorically without those metaphors depending in any way upon being able to talk literally of that being, and it is far from obvious that this is possible. The problem arises if we consider an example such as Othello’s description of Desdemona: ‘She was false as water’ (*Othello*, V, 2). Here Othello is comparing Desdemona’s being fickle with water’s being fluid – that is to say, comparing what is literally true of Desdemona with what is literally true of water. In the case that here concerns us when we use a metaphor about God, we are comparing God’s being X with, say, a man’s being a king, when we are not permitted to substitute anything for the ‘X’. The onus is clearly on those who advocate a metaphorical theology to offer a theory of metaphor that makes that possible.

That technical difficulty may be surmountable, but the other main difficulty is to my mind impossible to overcome. This is that, without independent access to the subject of the
metaphor, the significance of a metaphor becomes radically indeterminate. This is not just something comparable to the vagueness that pervades all language. The indeterminacy here is such that it is completely unclear what the metaphor might mean and how it is to be understood, which is indeed what one frequently experiences when told that all religious language is metaphorical. To see this indeterminacy consider an example of metaphor:

Come, seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale!  

(“Seeling” is the process of taming a young hawk by stitching up her eyes.)

Macbeth is calling for the coming of night when murders may be committed unseen. However, this metaphor is only intelligible because we already have independent access to the concepts of night and day. Suppose that you had to introduce someone to the ideas of night and day only using metaphors derived from falconry, or that you asked them what Macbeth meant if he had said:

Come, seeling X,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Y;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale!

The chances that they would arrive at a correct understanding of what was meant would be negligible. ‘And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?’ (1 Cor. 14: 8). The reason is plain: any two things resemble one another in countless different ways, and so may, in appropriate contexts, be profitably compared with one another. Hence, if you do not already know what A is, simply being told that A may profitably be compared with B gives you no guidance as to the nature of A. For that reason, a metaphor that is based upon a comparison between A and B only tells us something about the nature of A if we already have a non-metaphorical understanding of what A is.

It may be objected that what I have just said depends for its force upon my having chosen a somewhat far-fetched and unnatural metaphor. The reply must be to ask, ‘Are not the comparisons between God and worldly phenomena also themselves going to be “farfetched”? In the case of both Jüngel and McFague, we are talking about authors who are resorting to metaphor so as to do justice to the radical otherness of God. After all, when we look at the parables of Jesus, He compares God to a corrupt magistrate ‘who neither feared God nor regarded man’ (Luke 18: 2), to a woman turning the house upside down to find a lost coin (Luke 15: 8), to a hard man who ‘reaps what he did not sow’ (Luke 19: 21), and to a man who cannot be bothered to get out of bed to help a friend (Luke 11: 7). Here the ‘farfetchedness’ of the comparisons looks to be deliberately foregrounded.

It is at this point that a contrast with the literal use of analogy becomes apparent. I stressed above the strict systematity involved in the literal application of analogy. That implies that whether or not in a form that is accessible to us, everyday literal language fixes what the words are to mean when they are applied to God, so that the sense of theological claims can be fully determinate. Metaphor, however, is completely uncontrolled and unsystematic in its exploitation.
of analogy, leaving it to the imagination of the hearer to grasp what is meant – an imagination that can only act if it has independent access to both terms of the analogy.

The theological objection to metaphorical theology

The real objection to metaphorical theology, however, is theological: far from protecting the otherness of God, using metaphor as the basis for your account of religious language inevitably leads to anthropomorphism. The reason for this lies in putting together two points already made by Aquinas. I shall look at them in turn.

Thus all names applied metaphorically to God, are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only likenesses to such creatures.

(Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: I, 13a 6)

Here Aquinas is contrasting the use of metaphorical language in talking about God with his own account of the literal use of analogy, where, as we have seen, he has argued that the primary use of words is their application to God.8 What he says is clearly correct – it is a version of what we looked at above, the idea that metaphor is a parasitic use of language. If we take any metaphor, such as the one from Macbeth I cited above, the words are used metaphorically in terms of their use outside the metaphor. Thus ‘seeling’ is and remains a word from falconry, even when it is night that is said to be seeling. We are being invited to view the eclipsing of day by night using the image of a falconer taming a young hawk.

[T]he creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God. But we cannot in the same way say that God has what belongs to the creature. Neither, then, can we appropriately say that God is like a creature, just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him.

(Aquinas 1264/1955: I, ch.29)

Aquinas frequently stresses that ‘is an image of’ is an anti-symmetric relation. In particular, although man is created in the image of God, we are not to see God in the image of man. Seeing God in the image of man is precisely what we mean by anthropomorphism. But this is what treating all theological language as metaphorical ineluctably draws us into. We take some familiar human or in any case worldly situation and invite people to see God in terms of that situation. We are trapped in a network of human images with no independent access to any other way of thinking or talking about God. McFague protested against the patriarchal imagery – King, Lord, and Father – that is rife in the Bible and traditional theology, and urges us to replace metaphors based on God as Father with God as Mother, say. But as long as we remain in the realm of metaphorical theology that is simply replacing one human ideology by another and projecting that in its turn on to God.

The contrast with the literal use of analogy here is sharp. Whereas a metaphorical description of God as king invites us to see Him in the image of some medieval despot, here the primary use of the word ‘king’ is seen in its application to God, and the human, all too human, phenomena of kingship as at best pale imitations and at worst perverted caricatures of true kingship.

[T]here is no such analogy which can explain or reveal the original itself unless we already know something of the original, for example, of Jesus Christ. Then we may detect him also in such reflections, such mirroring.

(Barth 1962: 173)
We are now in a position to engage in a radical critique of the human phenomena of kingship, and see it for what it is – a shabby parody of the true kingship of God.

Notes

1 ‘God is completely different, and the true life completely different from the way you now imagine it.’
2 For clarity: a ‘negative theology’ should not mean that it was possible to put forward true negative claims about God, such as ‘God is not composed of matter’. What we should say is that it is inappropriate to say of God either that He is, or that He is not, composed of matter.
3 It must be acknowledged that at least in Söhngen’s contributions there is a serious attempt to introduce rigour and clarity into the debate.
4 McInerny (1961) presents Aquinas as offering a purely linguistic theory of analogy. However, Aquinas undoubtedly supports that theory by a metaphysics of analogy – the theory of the analogical cause. In White (2010: 102–3), I look further at the possibility of accepting the linguistic theory without this backing that Aquinas gave it.
5 Jüngel makes the crucial transition from an examination of classical accounts of the analogy of names to his own talk of talking about God as metaphorical, by giving Aristotle’s authority for stating that ‘Analogy is a special case of “metaphor”’ (Jüngel 1977: 267). But this is a misunderstanding of Aristotle. For Aristotle, metaphor based on analogy is a special case of metaphor, but Aristotle pointed to a wide range of other uses of analogy that had nothing to do with its use in metaphor.
6 The main reason for commending Soskice’s book especially is that she, unlike most of the other authors known to me who have proposed a ‘metaphorical theology’, does confront the difficulties involved head on, even if I am not altogether satisfied with her answers.
7 I develop in detail a theory of metaphor that makes clear the nature of that dependence in White (1996).
8 It is interesting to compare this with the position of the fourth century theologian, Ephrem of Syria. For Ephrem, there was a ‘chasm’ between the Creator and His creation such that almost everything said about God, including what is said in the Bible, is metaphorical. There are, however, the ‘perfect names’ of God (‘creator’, ‘father’, ‘son’, ‘spirit’, ‘king’ …), which belong properly to God alone – only God is truly a father: He is a father eternally, but men only happen to become fathers. In the case of the perfect names, God lends them to us to describe human fathers; in the case of metaphor God borrows our names to describe Himself (see Brock 1992: Chapter 3). How do we distinguish which are the ‘perfect’ and which the ‘imperfect’ names of God? Ephrem would seem to have a quite restricted list of perfect names, whereas Barth, for example, would have a much broader category. This is an important, and urgent, theological task: how, for instance, are we to regard talk of God as suffering?