

# THE RATIONALITY OF METAPHOR AND ITS USE IN THEOLOGY

With Reference to the Works of  
Sallie McFague and Colin Gunton

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## Introduction

Since Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*", to Kant's critical philosophy, a philosophical turn has emerged — "a turn to human subjectivity." "Have courage to use your own reason!" — that is the spirit of the Enlightenment claimed by Kant. It affirms that man has ability to make use of his own understanding without direction from someone else. The thinkers of the Enlightenment embrace human autonomy, and see human rationality as the means of measuring or achieving the truth. By the use of clear and distinct ideas in the pursuit of rational certainty, human reason becomes the ultimate measure of different kinds of human activities. Man takes place of God to be the master. Therefore, any content of religion (including some traditional Christian doctrines such as the idea of God, the doctrine of atonement), which cannot be verified by human reasoning, should be questioned.<sup>1</sup> The result is, as C. Gunton

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<sup>1</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the terms "rational supernaturalism", "deism" and "natural religion" are used to refer to a group of thoughts which uphold that human reason has the right to judge religion. Such a view can be found in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious*, Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation*, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, etc.

says, "many aspects of the theology of the atonement, as they were formulated in the centuries before the modern era, have been argued to violate modern canons of morality, rationality, and truth."<sup>2</sup> Human reason reigns over every area of Christianity. Therefore, the rationality of Christian theology is distorted because it is determined by the autonomous human reason instead of the intrinsic rationality of God. In order to reconstruct a true rationality of Christian theology, Gunton realizes that it "cannot be evaded by simply ignoring or going behind the rationalists. Rather, an attempt must be made to go beyond and to some extent against them."<sup>3</sup> By doing so, Gunton seeks assistance from "metaphor". However, the rationality of truth can be achieved only by language which is clear and distinct as Descartes required. Unfortunately there is a traditional opinion, especially from the view of the Enlightenment, that metaphor, as a kind of poetic language, is too imaginative and obscure in meaning, and thus its functions are queried.<sup>4</sup> Such an understanding of metaphor as a kind of poetic language in the realm of art may be interpreted by Plato's "imitation theory of art". Since Plato has regarded highly the "form" due to its rational clarity and debased the "matter", the material world is just to be conceived as the imitation of the "form". And art, from his view, is only the imitation of imitation of the "form". Therefore, art just occupies a very low status in Plato's mind. The work of art cannot be treated as a clear and distinct means to probe the truth. Such a legacy of Platonic view indeed transmits to the minds of the Enlightenment rationalists and thus metaphor has no longer to be noticed by them. In spite of the skeptical attitude to the clarity of metaphorical language from the Enlightenment's view, the cognitive function of metaphor is re-examined and its value has been recognized since the 1960s. The philosophical and theological investigations of metaphor have grown increasingly in recent years. As Mark Johnson says,

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<sup>2</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> This view can be found in Hobbes's categorization of metaphor as an abuse of language, "when use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for; and thereby deceive others." See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962), 34.

We are in the midst of a metaphormania. Only three decades ago the situation was just the opposite: poets created metaphors, everybody used them, and philosophers (linguists, psychologists, etc.) ignored them. Today we seem possessed by metaphor.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, in the following sections I would like to illustrate some theories of metaphor (mainly the theories of Sallie McFague and Colin Gunton) and, to explain how Gunton uses it as a means to re-expound the Christian theology such as doctrine of atonement in order to reconstruct the true rationality of Christian theology.

### **The Plurality of Rationality in Sallie McFague's Metaphorical Theology**

There is no doubt that the Enlightenment rationalism has presupposed foundationalism, which is defined as "the idea that knowledge is the reflection of truth and that we can discover a stable foundation for it in God, History or Reason."<sup>6</sup> However, during the Enlightenment the rational subjectivity acts as the solitary subject and expels God from the centre of the world. Human reason takes the place of God to be the foundation in the pursuit of universal truth. Under the influence of foundationalism and logocentrism, it is believed that reason has a higher priority over will and desire; stability over mobility; certainty over ambiguity; universality over particularity and oneness over difference. According to the postmodernists the foundationalism of the Enlightenment expresses a kind of power and domination, so it is the real problem of the Enlightenment. As David Harvey says,

The Enlightenment project... took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it,... would provide the means to Enlightenment ends.<sup>7</sup>

McFague is one of the well-known contemporary theologians in the study of religious language and metaphor and she is also a non-foundationalist. She has written many books on this topic. The main

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Waugh, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 6.

<sup>7</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 27.

essay of her research on this topic, entitled *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*,<sup>8</sup> is a sequel to her other book *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*.<sup>9</sup> In the preface of *Metaphorical Theology*, she clearly discloses her intention of anti-foundationalism, she writes, "the present essay is such a limited attempt. It comes out of a post-Enlightenment, Protestant, feminist perspective, a perspective which I would characterize as skeptical, relativistic, prophetic, and iconoclastic."<sup>10</sup> As we live in such a modern world, McFague says, we are apart the sacramental universe in which everything is understood as connected to and permeated by divine power. Nowadays, God has been marginalized by us. Our world view and daily experience are no longer depending upon the direct reference to divine will. That is the outcome of the Enlightenment that I have mentioned above. However, when we are apart from a religious context, McFague claims that religious language will inevitably go away either in the direction of idolatry or irrelevance or both, which are two enemies her theological project aims to attack.<sup>11</sup>

The idolatry of religious language refers to the view which persists in the literal reference of language to God. According to McFague, the meaning of religious language is absolutized and becomes an authoritative idol due to literalism. The religious language is understood in a univocal way by which two realities are conceived — one is the reality of God and the other is the reality of language. The reality of God exists externally far from the reality of language, but they have a direct one-to-one correspondence relationship. The reality of language is conceived to be the copy of the divine reality. Using Richard Rorty's term, the religious language is an effect of "direct mirroring" which reflects the reality of God directly and immediately. McFague alleges that this effect can work because "we forget the inevitable distance between our words and the divine reality."<sup>12</sup> On top of this, the univocal understanding of literalism may reflect the problem of foundationalism because it assumes the existence of the *one* reality or the *universal consensus*.

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<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, viii.

<sup>11</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 2.



Thus for McFague the foundationalism must lead to idolatry of religious language. However, she continues to ask why this kind of religious literalism persists to exist. She then provides an explanation from a social anthropological perspective suggested by Clifford Geertz.

Human beings are 'unfinished' at birth and must construct and order their world in ways that no other animals must do... Having to construct our world, we are necessarily (if only subconsciously) protective of it and extremely anxious if it is threatened. We depend, says Geertz, so deeply on our constructions for our most basic sense of sanity that any threat to them is a threat to our very being. Thus, one can conclude that people will be less open, less imaginative, less flexible during times of threat. They will be more literalistic, absolutist, dogmatic when the construction which orders their world is relativized, either through pluralistic perspectives from within the tradition or competing systems from without.<sup>13</sup>

In fact McFague adopts the interpretation of Geertz, whom as a constructivist, again reflecting her agenda of anti-foundationalism.

The irrelevance of religious language refers to the view that some traditional understandings of religious language are meaningless to some group of people because they exclude them in a special way. McFague illustrates that the traditional Christian language, which is understood in a patriarchal framework, is an example of this kind of irrelevance for feminists. The feminist theologians are claiming that the world of Christianity is not their world because the maternal framework is lost. Moreover, the patriarchal perspective implies that it becomes an ideology of the way of life: masculine governance and domination permeate at different levels.<sup>14</sup> So, for McFague, the patriarchal religious language again expresses the structure of power manipulation of foundationalism. It becomes an idol for masculinists, but becomes a vacuity for feminists.

In order to reconstruct the relevance and avoid the idolatry, McFague is walking on the path of anti-foundationalism by means of her metaphorical theology. According to her, metaphor just represents the ordinary ways we think — "the only way we have of dealing with the unfamiliar and new is in terms of the familiar and the old, thinking of 'this' as 'that' although we know the new thing is both like and unlike the old."<sup>15</sup> And "a concept is an abstraction of the similar from a sea of

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<sup>13</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 18.

dissimilar."<sup>16</sup> That is also what she has indicated to be the difference between symbol and metaphor — "metaphor finds the vein of similarity in the midst of dissimilar, while symbol rests on similarity already present and assumed. But the difference is even more marked: metaphor not only lives in the region of dissimilarity, but also in the region of the unconventional and surprising."<sup>17</sup> We must notice that McFague has put much emphasis on the dialectical structure of metaphor — i.e. similarity and dissimilarity; likeness and unlikeness. Such emphasis would lead to two implications. First, she intends to tell us that such dialectical metaphorical structure is something like our ordinary rational thinking structure, so the conclusion is that metaphor is a *cognitive and rational language*. Second, the dynamic, unconventional and surprising nature of metaphor undoubtedly leads to a perspective which stresses mobility, openness and tentativeness. By doing so, she insists on piling up various metaphors and models (for instance, God as father, mother, lover, friend, savior, ruler, governor, servant, companion, comrade, liberator).<sup>18</sup>

For McFague, model is a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power, and it is in an organic, consistent, and comprehensive manner, provides us a "filter" which helps us to think about the less familiar in terms of a more familiar one. In that sense she would claim that, for instance, the metaphor "God the Father" has become a model.<sup>19</sup> However, she alertly identifies the potential danger of model, for although model gives us a way of thinking when we do not know how to think, the danger is its tendency of literalization. She says, "they (models) are also dangerous, for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking, and in so doing they can easily become literalized, that is, identified as the one and only way of understanding a subject."<sup>20</sup> Her alertness clearly reflects that she is very sensitive to idolatrous literalism as her enemy. Therefore, the tasks of a metaphorical theology, on her account, are:

... to criticize literalized, exclusive models;... and to investigate possibilities for transformative, revolutionary models. The goal of this analysis can then be thought

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 24.

of as an attempt to question the *didactic* tradition of orthodoxy over the more flexible, open, *kerygmatic* point of view epitomized in the parables and Jesus as parable.<sup>21</sup>

McFague claims that Jesus' parables and Jesus as a parable of God (i.e. Jesus of Nazareth both "is and is not God") is the starting point of a metaphorical theology. In fact she selects them as the starting point due to one purpose: reject to see Bible as authoritative in an absolute or closed sense, and so a tentative, open-ended, indirect, tentative, iconoclastic, transformative theology can be established.<sup>22</sup> In order to understand these characteristics clearly, it is necessary to explain how McFague sees the relations between model, root-metaphor and paradigm.

Root-metaphor is the broadest type of theological model, so McFague calls it "model of models". It is understood as "a cosmic, metaphysical drama of relationships, of action and response, which includes everything that exists."<sup>23</sup> In the Jewish tradition the biblical root-metaphor, which is expressed in terms of divine-human and divine-world relation, occurs within the Jewish paradigm. According to McFague, a paradigm constitutes the most basic set of assumptions within which a religious tradition functions, so it is an unquestioned framework or context. The Jewish paradigm manifests itself as a story of a group of elected people in a covenantal relationship with God, who created them and destined them to fulfill the divine promise through their loyal and trustful responsive acts. Then from the parables of Jesus and Jesus as a parable of God, it is proclaimed that the divine promise has been fulfilled in the kingdom of God which is actualized on earth by the coming of Jesus. Thus a revolution in the paradigm (i.e. a new quality of covenantal relationship) occurs with the aid of the new root-metaphor, the kingdom of God. This new root-metaphor, exemplified in Jesus' parables and in Jesus as a parable of God, describes a way of being in the world as the free gift of God. Therefore, as McFague says,

Root-metaphors are the guiding factor in a paradigm... A change in root-metaphor signals a revolution in the paradigm... when changes are proposed within a tradition: what are the limits of change in basic models, brought about by anomalies, which will still preserve the character of the religion? When we deal with the anomaly

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<sup>21</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 104.

posed to feminists by the model 'God the father,' we shall need to consider whether the proposed changes for that model affect the root-metaphor of Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

McFague has proposed a non-gender-related model of 'God as friend' as a complementary one, but she accepts that this model also has its limitations. Therefore, on her account, the root-metaphor of Christianity is not *any one* model but a relationship that occurs between God and human beings.<sup>25</sup> Only the paradigm, which is expressed in terms of divine-human and divine-world relationship, is the independent variable, all the rest are provisional.

Aware that we exist only in relationship and aware, therefore, that all our language about God is but metaphors of experiences of relating to God, we are free to use many models of God. Aware, however, that the relationship with God cannot be named, we are prohibited from absolutizing any models of God.<sup>26</sup>

After such explanation, we can see how McFague's metaphorical theology is open-ended, tentative and transformative.

### **Colin Gunton's Disagreement with Sallie McFague's Metaphorical Theology**

Colin Gunton disagrees with McFague's idea of metaphor. He comments that she over-emphasizes the protean capacities of metaphorical language. On McFague's account, the possibilities of the meaning of metaphor naturally become innumerable. Gunton warns that the danger is indeed derived from that width of possibility.<sup>27</sup> He points out that the perils of such protean view are twofold.

First, it refers to projectionism and its implications for theology. Gunton argues that McFague's theory of metaphorical language is a certain kind of equivocation between realism and idealism, but sometimes it seems to be inclined to the latter. He illustrates his argument with support of the evidence which is found in her book entitled *Metaphorical Theology*: "From the time we are infants we construct our world through

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<sup>24</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 109-10.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 194.

<sup>27</sup> Colin E. Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes: A Study in the Dialectic of Language in Disagreement with Sallie McFague," *Speaking the Christian God: The Triune God and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. F. Alvin and Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).



metaphor... We are not usually conscious of the metaphorical character of our thought... but it is the only way a child's world can be constructed or our world expanded and transformed."<sup>28</sup> These sentences reflect that McFague shares the view with an idealist or a constructivist. For a constructivist he would say that the world is socially constructed by the collective consciousness of a group of people and yet they experience the world as if the objective reality. McFague's tendency of projectionism may be caused by her inadequate treatment on the doctrine of revelation. The theology of revelation tells us that God the Father reveals himself through the Son, in that sense, the metaphors "Father" and "Son" just manifest the real ontological relationship between the first and second person of God, but irrelevant to the gender at all. Gunton mentions that we should be concerned with the articulation of the intrinsic intelligibility of the God who makes himself known in revelation, but unfortunately McFague's doctrine of God concerns the matter of naming God in order to make a balance of the patriarchal experience by a corresponding projection of maternal imagery. Thus she just makes the same mistakes of the past.<sup>29</sup>

Second, it refers to the peril of a weakening of criterion and loss of control. Obviously Gunton queries whether there is the possibility of absolute openness and absolute revolution. With reference to Michael Polanyi's conception of "indwelling in a tradition", he reminds us that the past is an essential matrix for what can be said in the present. Without the past nothing new can be said at all. That involves Gunton's notion of reality — how we see person and world to be related. He claims that the truth of reality is rooted in the belief of unity-in-relatedness: the universe is a network of particularities in dynamic interrelation, like past and present not totally disconnected. The universe's richness and plurality are connected in a unity. Here is the control of absolute relativism and hence it is the difference between Gunton and McFague. McFague's skepticism and renunciation of the concept of the unity of being is the main cause of her absolutely protean view of language which at the same time entails a relativist view of truth. Gunton then explicates that her problem may be also due to the inadequacy of the concept of revelation. Consequently people only concentrate on their relatedness to God who is shaped by their language. The doctrine of revelation

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<sup>28</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 15-16.

<sup>29</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 67.

reminds that there only one real God exists. No matter what kind of religious language is used to describe Him. He is the same God. As Gunton says, the difference between the literal and the metaphorical is a matter of usage, not reference.<sup>30</sup>

Overall speaking McFague can be said to attempt to construct a metaphorical theology as one of the ways to go beyond the Enlightenment rationalism. As she writes in the preface of her book *Metaphorical Theology*,

Our age, which has pressed home the lessons of historical relativity and pluralism, has also become aware of the relativity and pluralism of theology's resources: Scripture and tradition... there is no one way to express this event as there can be no one perspective from which to approach it... In other words, no one writes the full, complete theology. As Tracy rightly points out, each theology is an intensification of a particular, concrete tradition and sensibility.... The present essay is such a limited attempt. It comes out of a post-Enlightenment, Protestant, feminist perspective, a perspective which I would characterize as skeptical, relativistic, prophetic, and iconoclastic.<sup>31</sup>

McFague's theological project thus inevitably begins by minimizing objectivism and foundationalism but ends by collapsing into subjectivism (or what Gunton criticizes as "projectionism") and relativism. This result tells us that even though she begins by attempting to go beyond the Enlightenment rationalism, she ends by returning to the same gate only to continue what Immanuel Kant has done.<sup>32</sup>

### Colin Gunton's Own View of Metaphor

Although Gunton expresses many critical comments regarding McFague's metaphorical theology, he does not abandon the use of metaphor in doing theology. As mentioned in the introduction, Gunton attempts to go beyond rationalism by approaching and reinterpreting the traditional understanding of Christian doctrines such as doctrine of atonement by way of metaphor. Therefore, what he writes against McFague is not metaphor itself, but merely against her wrong view on

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<sup>30</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 68-71.

<sup>31</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, x.

<sup>32</sup> In order to redraw the boundaries between subject and object, Kant does it by the method of an epistemological turn – i.e. "turn to subjectivity". What we know about the external world is determined by the structure of our intellectual mind, so the world is shaped and constructed by us.

the nature of metaphor and her misuse of it that entails the failure to go beyond the Enlightenment rationalism. However, as we have seen, the rationalists see metaphor as an abuse of language in the period of Enlightenment. How, then, does Gunton achieve his project of reinterpreting Christian doctrine by way of metaphor? This involves both the historical development of the view on the nature of metaphor and the new perspective of world view.

As mentioned above, a legacy of Plato's "imitation theory of art" may transmit to the minds of the Enlightenment rationalists and thus leads to their distrustful attitude to metaphor. Unfortunately the Enlightenment rationalists can only see Plato's view while neglecting Aristotle's view. However, Aristotle claims his own view to be the imitation theory but it is somewhat different. Aristotle develops his classical "substitution theory" of metaphor in his *Poetics*, chapter 21. "A 'metaphorical term' involves the transferred use of a term that properly belongs to something else; the transference can be from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or analogical." The word "transferred" here means, according to Aristotle, to replace a word by a substitution of one in order to fulfill the rhetorical function only. Aristotle acknowledges that when the rhetorical or ornamental function operates, the semantic ambiguity would increase. But it does not mean that the metaphorical language is irrational. In his *Poetics*, chapter 9, Aristotle claims that a poet's task is not to record the past historical facts but to describe the universal truth. In that sense the rational element of poetic language can be preserved. Of course, according to Gunton, a substitution view must be inadequate, and he must reject to making metaphor only a decoration.

Before we can understand how Gunton intends to go beyond the Enlightenment rationalism, we must firstly realise the epistemology and world view of this period. It is not difficult to find some words of binary oppositions always appearing in the Western thought — i.e. transcendence/immanence; objectivity/subjectivity; reason/experience; essence/accident; necessity/contingency; and mind/body. Such a dualistic thinking structure has dominated the Western culture for many centuries since the ancient Greek period. This Western thinking structure comes to a climax and becomes a landmark of the Enlightenment. The possibility of mathematical physics is the starting point of Descartes' philosophy. He aims at the pursuit of a metaphysical certainty by the analytic mathematical method of doubt. The well-known notion "*Cogito, ergo*



*sum*" is indeed a product of that mathematical Archimedian point. Descartes claims that the locus of the certainty is found in the "Thinking I". Consequently, on one hand, the mind is distinct from the body and the former can exist independently from the latter; on the other hand, the mind can be guided and trained by the rules of Cartesian method to uncover the mechanical laws which govern the external physical world (body). Such subject-object dichotomy, mathematical (or geometrical) and mechanical world views continue to dominate the thought of Descartes' successors, Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant. Under the influence of the epistemology and world view of Enlightenment rationalism, Gunton comments that the approach of language attempts to find a more *direct* relation between mind and world — "the only words capable of being true are those which in some way directly 'fit' the world as a mirror image fits a face; that some words — supposedly 'literal' ones — directly reflect reality while others entirely or mostly fail to do so."<sup>33</sup> The result of such mirroring view of language is that too much is attributed to reason and sense experience, but too little to imagination. That is also exactly the reason why some rationalists such as Hobbes claim that metaphor is an abuse of language.

In the twentieth century, Michael Polanyi, one of the greatest scientist-philosophers, carries out a revolution against dualism of the Enlightenment. In the book *Personal Knowledge*, he alleges that all human knowledge must be personal in the sense that our knowledge must rest on the responsible and skilled judgment of persons. There is no knowledge which does not require a subject, for only subjects or persons are able to know. Of course Polanyi is aware of the distinction between the concepts "personal" and "subjective":

I think we may distinguish between the personal in us, which actively enters into our commitments; and our subjective states, in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the *Personal*, which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 32-33.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 300.



Polanyi does not agree that there is some kind of knowledge which can be purely the content of the mind. In fact he makes a critique of the purely subjective knowledge in his theory of "tacit knowing". He acknowledges that his theory is drawn from the insight of Gestalt psychology, which teaches the coherence or pattern of an object by a spontaneous integration of visual clues or stimuli that are impressed on the retina or the brain. We are unaware of the particulars or clues themselves, but we know them in the object that we recognize or the activity that we do.<sup>35</sup> From these he develops his two important conceptions — "two types of awareness" and "indwelling". In the process of knowing, Polanyi claims that we know by relying on subsidiary awareness (the proximal terms) and by attending to focal awareness (the distal terms).<sup>36</sup> Although we usually do not pay direct attention to subsidiary awareness, just like a pianist does not pay attention to every movement of the fingers on the piano during performance, "subsidiary awareness functions to guides us to the integration of a coherent pattern."<sup>37</sup> That is indeed a movement from particularity to coherent integration of wholeness. From this we can discuss another element of tacit knowing, *indwelling*. We can say that the nature of tacit knowing means that our knowing of the externality of objects lying outside our bodies relies on our subsidiary awareness of processes within our body. The subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded as the act of making them form a part of our own body. When a blind man uses a stick to walk, the stick is no longer treated as external object. It forms part of the blind man, the operating person. We pour ourselves out into the tools and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.<sup>38</sup> Gunton agrees that Polanyi's theory helps us to have a change in epistemology. At least in our knowledge of the physical world there is shown to be an interrelation of subject and object which maintains the distinction between the two without making either absolute. The world can be known because we indwell some parts of it as a means to know other parts.<sup>39</sup> Polanyi's

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 62.

<sup>36</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 55f.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 58f.

<sup>39</sup> Colin E. Gunton, "The Truth of Christology," *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance

such interactional and interpenetrative views indeed render great contribution to attack the structure of dichotomy between mind/body, reason/experience, subject/object and knower/the known dominated in the Enlightenment. Therefore, words and world are no longer two separated entities which keep a mutually external and an one-to-one direct relationship, for words are no longer mirrors of reality but the means by which we participate in reality, or as Gunton says: "words function as part of human interaction with nature."<sup>40</sup> And thus words and world are open to each other. In fact Polanyi's view is consistent with some recent scientific discoveries. They hold that "no advance in knowledge of the world is possible without changes in the meaning of words."<sup>41</sup> One of the approaches is suggested by Richard Boyd, he argues that new language and discovery happen together, with metaphor serving as a device to "accomplish the task of *accommodation of language to the casual structure of the world*."<sup>42</sup> Gunton says that Boyd's argument is very important because it gives us an insight that language, to speak about the world, must become "world-shaped".<sup>43</sup> From the above discussion, we can conclude that we can no longer know the external world in a *direct* one-to-one mirroring way. As Gunton says,

The key to the relation between language and world is... its *indirectness*. The world can be known only indirectly, and therefore metaphor, being indirect, is the most appropriate form that a duly humble and listening language should take. In all this, there is a combination of openness and mystery, speech and silence, which makes the clarity and distinctness aimed at by the rationalist tradition positively hostile to the truth. Thus the tables are turned: metaphor rather than being the cinderella of cognitive language becomes the most rather than the least appropriate means of expressing the truth.<sup>44</sup>

There is no doubt that Gunton advocates an interactionist view of metaphor in the sense of "reciprocity". That is to say, metaphor should not be used simply as a human response to reality, but also as the speech of reality that comes to a human. He has given a definition of his view of metaphor in an article, "that as the mind interacts with the

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(Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1980), 99.

<sup>40</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change: What is 'Metaphor' a Metaphor for?" *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Ortony Andrew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 358.

<sup>43</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 37-38.

world in a kind of reciprocity of asking questions and receiving answers, metaphor plays an essential part as the vehicle by which discoveries come to expression."<sup>45</sup> The word "reciprocity" is supremely important here. No real reciprocity, there is no real interaction. No real reciprocity, the surface interaction would finally become projectionism or subjectivism. That is also what Gunton has criticized about McFague's peril in her metaphorical theology that I have mentioned before.

How, then, does Gunton understand the term "reciprocity"? That involves our investigation of his Trinitarian view and the concept of "person". To be a person, Gunton says,

One must be constituted in one's particular otherness. This is the point of all that talk of relations: only in a process of mutual and reciprocal giving and receiving are we truly personal and so truly what we are created to be. All forms of pantheism, however, deny the reality both of otherness and of relation, for they ultimately render particularity and distinction unreal.<sup>46</sup>

According to Gunton's definition, I would say that pantheism expresses in the form of German Idealism. It perceives "I" (the mind or spirit) as the starting point of all philosophy. All forms of subject-object dichotomy are absorbed into a higher absolute "I" (absolute spirit). The many are inevitably submerged in the one. Thus finally the absolute spirit and the world become identical and lose their real distinction. A relation without real distinction is not a real relation. Therefore, "otherness" is a very important element in a real relation because it serves as a "barrier" against pantheism or idealism. For the "I" exist, "thou" ("other") must also exist. The content of "I" is determined by "thou" and the content of "thou" is also determined by "I". Every "I" presupposes a "thou" and every "thou" also presupposes an "I". However, on Gunton's account, such concept of relationality is grounded on the ontology of the triune God. He says, "the prior relation is that in which God the creator and redeemer so relates himself to the world that particular patterns of finite relationality are constituted. It is only as the finite responds appropriately to the creator's self-relatedness that it fulfills that which it was created to be."<sup>47</sup> Gunton insists that the personhood of God must

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<sup>45</sup> Colin E. Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices: From Metaphor to Transcendental?" *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement. Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (Notre Dame University Press, 1990), 212.

<sup>46</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 76.

<sup>47</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 75.



act as an objective reality which is also the ontological ground for metaphorical language. The interactionist view of metaphor, which is only established on the base of this Trinitarian language, is a real interactionist one. Gunton finds the root of McFague's problem in her denial of the real personhood of God, so she understands the divinity in the sense of gender instead of Trinitarian ontology. So when we say "God the father", it is not a matter of gender. It only refers to an ontological reality: an ontological relation between God the Father — Jesus Christ the Son and God — human beings. Gunton claims that only if we respect such reality, language may not be absolutely protean.<sup>48</sup>

### **An Application: The Metaphor of Christ as Sacrifice**

In the period of Enlightenment, the doctrine of atonement receives scorn because some of its "classical" concepts such as substitutionary suffering, blood sacrifice and victory over Satan appear to be immoral and irrational. Now I would explain how Gunton makes a defence by way of his interactionist view of metaphor which is grounded on a Trinitarian perspective. However, my discussion will be focused upon the metaphor of Christ as sacrifice only.<sup>49</sup>

The notion of sacrifice in the Old Testament originally has a literal meaning of a religious behaviour in the cult — slaughtering animals ritually for God's demand of blood of an innocent animal due to various reasons. In the modern age such ritual of sacrifice disappeared a long time ago. If the death of Christ on the cross as a sacrifice is still literally understood in the ritual sense of God's demand of blood of an innocent victim, it puts the notion of sacrifice in a debased form. However, the language of sacrifice is still frequently used in an age when the ritual has disappeared. Gunton thinks that there may be one reason: the notion of sacrifice derives from something deep in human nature which is rooted in a universal or near universal feature of our life on earth. Thus the usage of it points to an area of human experience that cannot be described except by means of such language because it is in some

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<sup>48</sup> Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 74-75.

<sup>49</sup> Gunton defends the doctrine of atonement by ways of an analysis and reinterpretation of the three classical metaphors of atonement: victory, justice and sacrifice in his book entitled *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).



way basic to our human indwelling of reality, and it in some way reflects a basic human response to the world in which we live.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the language of sacrifice, according to Gunton, is not just a metaphor, but also a transcendental because by means of it the being of God and the being of creaturely reality at its most fundamental are revealed to us. That is also why Gunton claims that we can understand sacrifice as one of the essential marks of being.<sup>51</sup> In that sense the rationality of metaphor is established. It can even claim that it has gone beyond the Kantian philosophy because on Kant's account, the quest for some "objective" transcendental would seem to be even more absurd, a search for a chimera.<sup>52</sup>

How does Gunton achieve the transcendental exploration by means of the metaphor of sacrifice? What does the transcendental refer to? Firstly, he sets up a clear and crucial goal for his exploration — a link between past historic event and life in the present must be made.<sup>53</sup> Then he does so by the following procedure. On one hand, he gets the insight from the work of Mary Douglas.<sup>54</sup> For her, sin is understood in the sense of uncleanness or pollution, which becomes a violation of the good created order; while sacrifice is seen as a means in the removal of the uncleanness which pollutes the good creation, it is a re-ordering of life both in the cosmos and in relation to God. Therefore, the notion of sacrifice can be read metaphorically in the sense of a universal human desire for good and wholeness, and a human pursuit for dependence on and relation to the other (including God) as the most fundamental mode of our existence.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Gunton does the transcendental exploration by returning to the biblical teaching. In the Old Testament Gunton finds that the literal meaning (the slaughter of animals) and the metaphorical transformed meaning (Ps 51:17) of the notion of sacrifice exist side by side. But their common point is that both of them are the human gifts to God in order to achieve a re-ordering of life both in the cosmos and in relation to God. In the New Testament the universality

<sup>50</sup> Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices," 210-11, 213.

<sup>51</sup> Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices," 226.

<sup>52</sup> Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices," 214.

<sup>53</sup> Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices," 213.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Douglas has written a book on the study of the rationale of the classifications of clean and unclean beasts in the book of Leviticus. Her book entitled *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Books, 1966).

<sup>55</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 118-19.

of sacrifice is given concrete expression by reference to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus Christ as a sacrifice has a twofold meanings: first, Jesus is the gift of God to man; second, Jesus acts as a true human response to God and offers a true human life to the Father. In that dimension, the doctrine of atonement can be understood in two ways by this concrete realization of the transcendental. First, the metaphor of sacrifice expresses the inner-trinitarian relations of giving and receiving as the being of the triune God. Second, in the light of Jesus' sacrifice and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we are able to understand and practise the realization of a true humanity at our creaturely level in two forms: firstly the offering of the perfected creation back in praise to God and; secondly the reciprocity of giving and receiving among the creaturely level. Thus the notion of sacrifice not only expresses the being of God, but also the being of creaturely existence.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Because of its characteristics of mobility and openness an interactional metaphorical structure of language may be seen as a process of becoming. However, the process of becoming must not be an absolute one because an absolute becoming without any control would finally become an absolute relativism. J. Derrida's deconstructional language has the danger of relativism because it tends to destroy the foundationalism and logocentrism. Indeed, McFague's "is and is not" dialectical structure of metaphor bears similar peril. She intends to attack the dominant masculine religious language system which acts as the foundation in order to legitimate oppression. However, Gunton's contribution is that on one hand, he can preserve the advantages of metaphor — i.e. its mobility, mutually-inclusiveness and openness; on the other hand, he is able to keep good control by means of the Trinitarian theology, so that his theory of metaphor avoids the peril of absolute relativism. The Triune God, who creates and keeps a close relationship with the world, is the objective ontological reality of everything. This divine reality makes the reference of religious language possible and avoids the unceasing mutability. On the other hand, by way of such Trinitarian doctrinal perspective, the dualistic world view (mutually exclusive in character) is transformed into a relational and interactional world view (mutually inclusive in character). Under the influence of

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<sup>56</sup> Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices," 216-26.

dualism, the patterns of one-to-one mirroring and subject/object dichotomy may be seen as rational; but when the world view changes, the concept of rationality is changed, too. Polanyi's thinking pattern of "tacit knowing" may be seen as more "rational" than the dualistic pattern. Therefore, in that sense, metaphor can be treated as a rational "epistemic access"<sup>57</sup> to the reality, for its rationality, which being grounded on the triune divinity, is beyond the rationality of dualism. That also explains why Gunton says that he does go beyond the Enlightenment rationalists by way of metaphor.

### ABSTRACT

From the view of the Enlightenment philosophers, metaphorical language is too imaginative and obscure in meaning, and thus its function is queried. In spite of this skeptical attitude to the metaphorical language, the cognitive function of metaphor is re-examined and its value has been recognized in the fields of theology and philosophy since the 1960s. This paper aims at studying Sallie McFague and Colin Gunton's theories of metaphor because they both have the intention to go beyond the Enlightenment rationalists and reconstruct the rationality of Christian theology by way of metaphor. In the first part I attempt to comment that McFague's over-emphasis of the protean capacities of metaphorical language would inevitably lead to the problems of projectionism and relativism by way of Gunton's criticism. In the second part I would introduce how Gunton develop his interactionist theory of metaphor from a trinitarian perspective. Gunton insists that the trinitarian personhood of God must act as an ontological ground for metaphorical language. Therefore, on one hand, the mobility and openness of metaphor can be preserved. On the other hand, the metaphor avoids the peril of relativism by way of a good control by the trinitarian theology. Gunton's theory of metaphor obviously reflects his relational and interactional world view, which he finds to be more "rational" than the Enlightenment dualistic structure. Thus it explains why Gunton uses metaphor as a means to re-expound the doctrine of atonement in order to reconstruct the true rationality of Christian theology.

### 撮 要

由於隱喻 (Metaphor) 在意義上帶有太多想象性及模糊性，因此其功能往往受到啟蒙運動的哲學家所質疑。但自從六十年代以來，隱喻的理性元素被哲學界

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<sup>57</sup> Boyd uses this term in his article "Metaphor and Theory Change: What is 'Metaphor' a Metaphor for?" *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Ortony Andrew, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 358.

與神學界重新發掘。本文主要探討兩位神學家麥克法格 (Sallie McFague) 及岡頓 (Colin Gunton) 如何利用隱喻去超越啟蒙時期的理性思想而重新建立基督教神學的真實理性。在第一部分筆者會透過岡頓對麥克法格的批評，從而帶出麥克法格的隱喻神學 (Metaphorical Theology) 之投射性 (Projectionism) 與相對性 (Relativism) 的問題。第二部分則引用岡頓自己對隱喻的觀點，他試圖建立一套三一神學作為隱喻的本體性基礎。因此，一方面能保存隱喻的能動性及開放性；同時亦避免令它跌入相對主義的陷阱。岡頓這種對隱喻的觀點充分反映他重視關係性 (Relational) 及交往性 (Interactional) 的世界觀。而他也承認這種世界觀比啟蒙的二元對立的世界觀更具理性。同時也解釋了他以隱喻來重建救贖論的真實理性的原因所在。