

Metaphorical Language and Polysemy of the Religious Texts

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Abstract

The current study undertook to compare two paradigms of interpretation, paralleling multiple senses in religious and literary texts and analyzing them through philosophical and semiological means. We pointed out features of sacred text interpretation in contrast with the way of depicting meanings involved in daily language, also employed in literary productions. We remarked that while the former paradigm is meant to lead to spiritual elevation, the latter is less capable of providing such experiences, unless with oriented and experienced readers. From the countless types of hermeneutics of religious texts, we chose literary hermeneutics to approach the Bible. Works of Paul Ricoeur and Northrop Frye are a must for such endeavor, as are the narrative criticism and the reader-response criticism. In pursuit of peculiarities that make Scripture reveal the sacred, we employed ideas of Jean Paul Sartre, Umberto Eco, Mikhail Bakhtin and Mircea Eliade to render the indeterminacy and polysemy related to the metaphors and parables. The study resulted in the conclusion that every interpretation of the Bible should consider its final goal: to alter the readers' being-in-the-world and provide them with a wide perspective of the numinous.

Keywords: literature, religious texts, metaphor, parables, polysemy, hermeneutics

1. Literary Works vs. Religious Texts

A common perspective of viewing both the literary and religious texts is that of reader-response criticism.

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The text is not an autonomous object with a determined, single way of understanding it. It is seen as a raw material in the production of the meaning which is created by the reader in the very process of reading. Thus, the meaning of a text depends on the reader's previous experiences and on the circumstances of the reading.

First, we need to focus on the relation between the reader and the author of the text. For literary texts, in *What is literature?*, Jean Paul Sartre (1949) pointed out that a sort of narrative agreement is necessary: the author sends an appeal – his literary work – to which the reader responds in a personal way. The appeal must contain a message, somehow flexible but with no endless possibility of interpretation. If the narrative world of the text does not resemble, at any point at all, his real life, the reader could reject the appeal. The authority given to the religious text by a devotee reader makes this agreement inherent. The need for multiple interpretative valences of such texts is triggered by the variety of the personal experiences of human beings. The religious text copes with the very intimate parts of the mind; thus, the Bible is seen by the devotee as a personalized letter written by the divinity to him: "God is mystically speaking to him *hic et nunc* via the divine scripture. Only the reader can interpret what it means for him when God tells him, 'Do to others what you would wish them do to you,' and it all depends on his life situation in that moment" (Evola, 2005, pp.14-15).

The authority of the texts depends on the renewal of the faith. Paul Ricoeur outlines the importance of the basic events narrated by the Bible: "The unconditioned trust would be empty if it weren't supported by the permanently renewed interpretation of the sign-events presented in the Scriptures, such as the Exodus in The Old Testament or the Resurrection in The New Testament. It is these events concerning liberation that unlock and reveal the very likelihood of my own freedom and thus becoming for me a word of God." (Ricoeur, 1999, p.122)

As Bakhtin notes, unlike everyday words, the word of the canon, "is located in a distant zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse.

It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, that is, a name that must not be taken in vain." (Bakhtin, 1994, p.78)

As opposed to this power within the words of the religious texts, the everyday language seems to be at a lower level, the latter being incapable of leading us to religious experiences and unable to express the mystical ones, the dreams, the phantasms. These experiences, translated into the common, daily language, lose their essence, their immediacy; hence, a need for a special means of transmitting these experiences to other people. When this communication occurs we may speak of indirect communication.

What makes the difference between an ordinary, everyday life situation and the experience of what transcends it? In other place (Horea, 2013, p.72) we suggested that in the works of Mircea Eliade, there is a special interest for the signs with lots of meanings. He was concerned with the revelation of the sacred even in situations not connected with religion. Man belongs to a world in which each element is a potentially sacred element. Consequently, it is his task to search and recognize the multiple meaning which gives the object this special characteristic. Mircea Eliade (1959) himself even conceived a semiotic theory, starting from the Saussurian model and adapting it to his own philosophy, of phenomenological inspiration, upon sacred and profane.

In some of his exegetes' view points, this philosophy does not agree with semiotics: "The world of the signifieds is by definition, in Eliade's opinion, eternal, unchangeable, living prior and beyond semiosis, separated ontologically from the world of the signifiers. The profane observer does not have access to the world of the signifieds, he does not even know, actually, that under his eyes there is a semiosis going on, and supposing he could suspect something he would not make out what its signified is, he would only perceive an unstable signifier. The initiated, on the contrary, is the one who understands the semiosis, perceives the relation immediately established between the signifier of the natural, profane world and the sacred signified." (Alexandrescu, 1999, p.231)

In the Saussurian semiotics there are two possibilities: the semiosis does not take place (a case of indifference) or it occurs (a signified S corresponds to a signifier s) – this being the normal semiosis. The Eliadian semiotics has two more possibilities, as seen in figure 1, and it is only these extra variants that interest Eliade: more signifieds correspond to a signifier (this leading to a semiologic overflow) or a signifiers floats free (this representing the semiologic non-fulfillment). These two situations are relevant to Eliade as they are in connection with the sacred, the normal variants belonging to the profane semiosis. A similar view can be found with Alexandrescu (1999, pp.232-6).

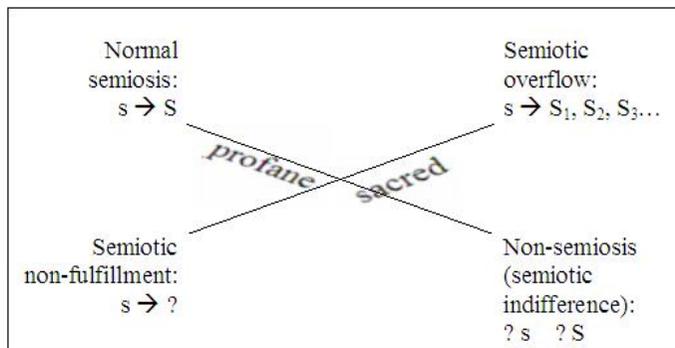


Figure 1. Semiosis with Eliade

For the historian of religions, what proved to be an attention booster was that semiotic overflow as it foresees and sheds light upon the manifestation, the irruption of the sacred into the profane, while the semiotic indifference characterizes the modern man that has grown incapable of recognizing let alone understanding a sign, and the semiotic non-fulfillment would represent a sort of forgetting process this man suffers from, an amnesia, still curable, a partial fall by sliding towards the profane.

As a consequence, the sacred signified cannot be expressed, named, as such an act would transform it into profane. On the diagonal of the sacred, the signified will remain untouched either because of the overflow or of the non-fulfillment, lack of comprehension. Much in the same way, including a multitude of significances, and directly claiming the fact they signify something but without disclosing exactly what, covering in mystery that particular signified, Eliade's short stories will mean more than the sum of signifiers perceived, more than their strict literary sense.

2. Metaphorical Language of Religious Texts

Extension of meaning being so important, first we must turn our attention to means of non-logic connections such as the metaphors. The similarity of the two terms connected by the metaphor can be seen as a function that creates a relation between an element of the real world, the direct and easily comprehensible one, and a somewhat more complex element, implied for the powerful image its occurrence shall render in the context. Namely, the latter becomes a peculiar representation of the former. In Thomas Luckmann's view (1967, p.60), this process of metaphorical transposition is one of the processes involved in describing the sacred: "The linguistic articulation of a sacred cosmos, however, rests upon what we may term the symbolic potential of language which appears in the personification of events, the formation of divine names, the construction of 'different' realities by *metaphorical transposition*, and so forth" (Knoblauch 1999, p.91). Some have argued that it is not the use of metaphors proper, – these are not so frequent in the Bible – but the involvement of a way of symbolizing, the one that creates the process of describing a sacred world (Cording, 2002, p.161).

The relation between the terms of a metaphor is based on a subjective experience. This leads to an ambiguity of the metaphor. It cannot express the inner life of a human, but it can provoke the reader to search the way to similar experiences. These experiences assimilated emphatically by the reader are important in the sense that his *Weltanschauung* is modified and even reconstructed. In the confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, Paul Ricoeur (1995, p.47) emphasizes the power of the metaphor to re-describe the real world: "I came to say that metaphorical and narrative statements, taken in hand by reading, aim at refiguring reality, in the twofold sense of *uncovering* the concealed dimensions of human experience and of *transforming* our vision of the world. ... refiguring seemed to me ... to constitute an active reorganization of our being-in-the-world, performed by the reader following the invitation of the text." (Laughery, 2000, p.163)

According to Northrop Frye, in the reading of the biblical text there is a distinction between the events related and understood at a primary level – an ordinary story called *Weltgeschichte* – and the more meaningful story – the sacred story or *Heilsgeschichte* – whose comprehension is the ultimate goal of the Bible (Frye, 1993, p.37).

In his book, *The Great Code*, Frye (1981, p.137) also suggests an understanding of the Bible as a "radically metaphorical" mediating presence: "The Bible ... is not a book pointing to a historical presence outside it, but a book that identifies itself with that presence" (Harrisville, 1995, p.211).

The revealing of the sacred is due to the power of the metaphors and of the exemplary stories that touch us in the deepest corners of the mind. Frye uses the word of kerygma to express this extraordinary capacity of the myths of New Testament: they "become what the literary myths can't, myths we live by; its metaphors become, as purely literary metaphors cannot, metaphors to live in. This transforming power is sometimes known as kerygma or proclamation." (Frye, 1993, p.39).

Frye argues that the kerygma is based on metaphoric language because only the myth and the metaphor can teach us the spiritual mode of living and it can detach us from the real world, a world of demonstrations and arguments. The metaphorical phase was the first stage in the development of language when humans used a figurative language that described reality more efficiently. The origin of the metaphors of the biblical texts is to be sought in this primary form of language.

Nevertheless, the archaic, prehistoric man – a landmark and reference point for Eliade – who does not conceive to live otherwise but as a *homo religiosus*, always resorting to rituals, tries thus to accomplish this *coincidentia oppositorum* in order to restore the cosmic unity, integrating himself in it, endowing his existence with realness.

The sacred time, in opposition to the profane one, is the time into which the religious man dives, in rituals, which he periodically resorts to, at essential moments in life or at well established intervals (in accordance with the cosmic cycles). It is a mythical time, a continuous present in which man exceeds his limits, the human condition, in which the primordial, exemplary deeds of the gods are repeated, it is a locating in the fabulous time of the origins, of the creation of the Universe. These divine model-gestures are preserved by the sacred histories of the events at the beginnings of Time, the myths.

The moment of the origins constitutes an archetype, people repeating the words and the gestures expressed in a significant time (*illo tempore*), when the Universe was born. It's a golden age when people, mythical heroes and gods lived in harmony. But there was a moment of desacralization, of the birth of passing and sufferance, having as a result the nostalgia for the lost state of beatitude, the attempts to recall that time representing genuine initiations.

The sacred being an element in the structure of the consciousness, the lack of religiosity means an estrangement from the own essence, thus the modern man, who refuses the transcendent, to whom the only real existence is that of the human history (lacking the sacred one), to whom the sacred is an obstacle in the way to his freedom, is lost in a profane world. The torments of the desacralised man have not ceased to manifest themselves and certain elements keep the relation to the sacred indestructible; the man partakes in the cosmic rhythm, the dream and the art are ways out from the profane time.

There is one preoccupation that always marked Mircea Eliade's works: how the ideas comprised in them will be perceived. They permanently incite to searches, the ultimate goal being the awaking of the religious consciousness of the modern man, which would provide him with a wide range of initiations, the latter existing, according to the scholar, in any life no matter how obscure or profane. As an edifying example in this respect, Eliade disseminates to us the way found by the Indian philosophy, the way of a ritual death and a mystical birth: "The perspective of a profane existence is false: and that, for a double reason: the desacralised life is sufferance and illusion and, on the other hand, none the final problems could be solved from the perspective of such a life ... they are insolvable problems of the current human condition; in other words, they are 'mysteries' for any unleashed intelligence [...]. If we want to reach the comprehension of these 'mysteries', we have to grow to another way of being, for this purpose being forced to first 'die' from this life and sacrifice the personality born in temporality and created by history. The ideal of Yoga [...] is to live in an 'eternal present', beyond Time." (Eliade, 1993, p.309)

The sacred, as a fundamental attribute of religiousness, does not allow definitions, psychological, philosophical interpretations etc., as these would cause the loss of significance, of the essence of the sacred: "All these dreams, myths, nostalgias ... do not allow themselves to be exhausted by a psychological explanation.

There always subsists a nucleus irreducible to explanation and that something irreducible reveals us maybe the real position of man in Cosmos, which is not just a historical one" (Eliade, 1964, pp. 11-12).

The sacred is manifest in the empirical reality (that is in something different from itself, a profane object) by the so called hierophanies, which cause a rupture between the space and the usual time; moreover, these 'irruptions' (in whose absence man would have no contact with the sacred) reveal the existence of a fixed point, a centre of the infinite and meaningless world. The sacred belongs to another level of reality, but, paradoxically, through hierophany, this absolute reference point is limited and made relative, an aspect not at all discordant, because divinity is always perceived as a totality of attributes, a sum in which the contraries coincide: "a sacred object, being, divine gesture – i.e. transcending this world –, still continuing to remain what they had been by that moment: an object, a being, a gesture; participating to the world and transcending it at the same time" (Eliade, 1998, p.260).

A common element from which both the Eliadian theories, which the writer implemented in his fantastic short-stories, and the semiotic ones, revealed in Eco's novels (the search to reveal a secret, a hidden plan), derive, would be the following explanation of the search for the sacred, for the exotic in the profane world, exposed by Eco in *The Limits of Interpretation*: "The truth is something around which we have lived since the beginning of time, it's just that have forgotten it. As long as we forgot it, somebody must have kept it for us and we are incapable of comprehending his words anymore. This wisdom has thus to be exotic. Jung explained to us that when a certain divine image has become too familiar, it has lost all mystery and we have to address to the images of other civilizations as it is only the exotic symbols that preserve an aura of sacred." (Eco, 1996, p. 48)

3. Polysemy of the Jesus' parables

Besides the multiple layers of a single word or expression forming a metaphor, the equivoque can be further developed in the form of a story with no determined meaning: the parable, a literary form which is also found in the Bible, in the so-called Parables of Jesus. J. D. Crossan (1977, p.106) relates the parable with the paradox: "Polyvalent narration, ... that is, a paradox formed into narrative so that it precludes canonical interpretation and becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutical multiplicity it engenders.

I would like to retain the term parable for this most profound and disturbing form of story" (Laughery, 1999, p.147).

Frye argues that "the metaphors are paradoxical and again we suspect that it is, probably, within the paradox solely that there are words which give us everything they can possibly do" (Frye, 1993, p.38).

The Holy Word is a paradoxical one: it is based upon reality but it is much more. It can be associated with Rudolf Otto's notion of *Ganz Andere* (or Wholly Other). In this respect, we can note Eliade's view of the sacred: "By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality." (Eliade, 1959, p.12).

To teach someone how to recognize the sacred is a difficult task that involves the unfamiliar and contradictory paradoxical thinking. Crossan gives an example of such teaching of Jesus: "I will tell you, it says, what the Kingdom of God is like. Watch carefully how, and as I fail to do so and learn that it cannot be done ..., the more magnificent my failure, the greater my success" (Crossan, 1979, p.120).

The unusual situations are introduced upon a realistic background and we should be aware in order to accept the unexpected turns: "We are persuaded to accept the story as a slice of real life. In the biblical parables everything is in accordance with nature and life. The events noticed are carefully rendered, the characters' actions are in consonance, even if we find them surprising ... But in order to accept this surprise of the being in real life one needs an eye capable of being surprised" (Popescu, 2006, p.165). This quality is acquired following a sort of initiation.

For Crossan (1977), the polyvalence of the parables leads to indetermination and this induces the idea that there is no absolute interpretation. The void of meaning is a negative feature of the parables: one can interpret forever, without an orientation, being lost in a hermeneutic labyrinth with no centre.

Eco explained that the more polyvalent, metaphorical and symbolic our language, the closer it is to accomplish that *coincidentia oppositorum* – moment when, paradoxically, everything connects to everything, because of that infinite glide of the meanings: "In the attempt to look for an ultimate meaning impossible to reach, an imminent glide of the meaning is accepted. A plant is not defined by morphological and functional features but on the basis of its resemblance even partial with another element of the cosmos. If it vaguely resembles a part of the human body, the plant makes sense as it reminds of the body. But that part of body is at its turn significant as it reminds of a star; this means something as it reminds of a musical scale and this last one is again as resembles a hierarchy of angels and so on infinitely." (Eco, 1996, p. 49)

Sartre also, in his theory on *tout se tient* (1952), explains the chain relation that can be established between everything and anything, just by finding the right path, the linking chain units.

On the other hand, man has always searched for explanations of the incomprehensible phenomena, since he realized that each thing hides a certain "initiatory secret", and the enigmas, the cryptic, the meanings at the limit of his comprehensiveness have always got to him, challenged him to search. Following this way of the drift of senses – called by Eco unlimited semiosis -, a partial revelation of these secrets will be reached, but at the same time it will become obvious that this revelation will do nothing else but drive to another secret, deepen the mystery more, leading, in a vertigo of signs that one by one demand decryption, towards a great ultimate secret of the "hermetic initiation" – this proving to be in the end the exact idea that "everything is secret" (Eco, 1996, pp.49-50). The same theory could be found with Mircea Eliade (1959), in whose opinion the ultimate truth cannot be revealed, is not bound for us, is unavailable for the profanes. With Eco as well, the secret hides everything that is more profound and more relevant, that is why there occurs the error that any mysterious thing is essential. Intrinsically scared of remaining surrounded by incomprehensible things, he always tries to decode, to elucidate, but, as he proceeds, the unknown is amplified.

This reminds us of the classical paradox of knowledge. The greater one's sphere of knowledge, the easier one becomes aware of its limitation. The explanation is as simple as it is plausible.

Considering the interior of the sphere as representing the things known, the side of knowledge, and the exterior as the unknown, a dark zone, it can be noticed, as seen in figure 2, that the bigger the sphere – the more knowledge added, accumulated – the more extended the surface of contact with the exterior, resulting in threatening perception of the unknown as larger, more and more expansive.

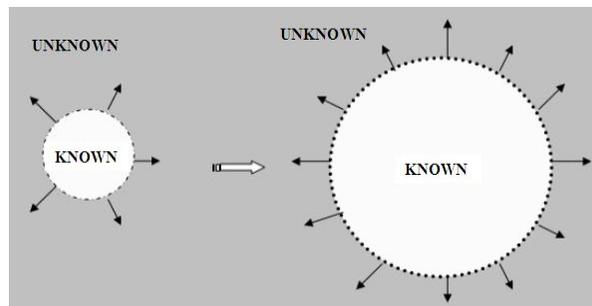


Figure 2. The knowledge spheres

Northrop Frye is not so pessimistic and for him the lack of explicit meaning is a positive feature of the parable. He considers that the parable starts to communicate only when we heard it and we felt that we had exhausted its explicit meaning. "From this explicit meaning, it [the parable] begins to amplify up to the farthest mysteries which it expresses and clarifies but does not «utter»". (Frye, 1993, p.119).

For Paul Ricoeur, the parables are full of meanings and the failure to reach an absolute interpretation is a starting point to reveal there is a surplus of meaning. It has become a verified fact that much more is meant than the parable's normal situational context delivers (Laughery, 1999, p.149). Ricoeur also emphasizes that the meaning in the first level of interpretation – the historical one – must not be neglected: "Nothing is said about God, about the human being, about the relation between them, unless first passing it through the act of gathering the legends and the isolated sagas and that of rearranging these in significant sequences in order to link them in a unique story, centered on a core event which has at the same time a historical importance and a kerygmatic dimension." (Ricoeur, 1999, p.113)

The multiple possibility of interpreting a text may lead to arbitrariness or to endless reinterpretations. In the search for the limits of interpretation of the parables, we can follow, for instance, Frye's ideas: for an interpretation to become valid, it needs a community's validation, in the most cases this being the religious community.

From the literary interpreter's view, Eco's opinion can be employed: the meaning of the text is that there is no explicit meaning. It's hard to describe the Whole, the Absolute, without linguistic tools that approach the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum*: " Neoplatonic Christian thought will try to explain that we cannot define God in clear-cut terms on account of the inadequacy of our language. Hermetic thought states that our language, the more ambiguous and multivalent it is, and the more it uses symbols and metaphors, the more it is particularly appropriate for naming an Oneness in which the coincidence of opposites occurs." (Eco, 1990, p.151)

The experience of trying to understand the Scripture transforms us from passive readers to active participants, not only observers of the mysteries the Bible speaks about. It is a process of passing over the limited image of the world that the common sense taught us. After that, being exposed and vulnerable, leaving behind the image of a God made from our needs and desires, we can start receiving the message of the Bible, having in front of us interpretational gaps to fill in. In other words, as Frye noticed in his *Words with Power* (1990, p.313), we "try to clear a space in which we can experience the "double vision" for which the Bible prepares us: the recognition of our own limits of understanding; and, after that, "perhaps the terrifying and welcome voice" that "annihilate[s] everything we thought we knew, and restore[s] everything we never lost" " (Cording, 2002, p.168).

Conclusion

The religious text can, as well as cannot, be read as any other text. The tension between the two ways of acknowledging these texts seems to be productive. This conflict is due to the openness of the metaphors when confronted with the narrative forms that have a closed structure. Also, the metaphor unifies the subject and the object that logic and common sense separate.

For Frye, the polysemy of the biblical texts implies that they form a myth "transformed from the kind of story we can construct ourselves to a spiritual story of what has created and continues to re-create us" (Frye, 1993, p.110).

The task of the parable is to disclose the tools needed to understand the unconventional world of the sacred: the paradoxical thinking, the view of the individual as part of the general, but also of the general as part of the individual. The endless power of the Biblical truth, which is unlimited and manifolded, is revealed in the biblical narratives. They are exemplary stories that edify us about what unifies our fragments of everyday life and therefore create a permanent "mirror of perfection": "The characters of the stories represent roles to be filled by the reader, and they represent *exempla*. What is read needs to be studied, repeated, memorized, and applied to one's personal life constantly, thus becoming an absolute mental space which will be present during everyday life activities. This is a teaching to be applied to one's life, to be meditated, and to be given life through one's actions, thoughts and words." (Evola, 2005, p.14).

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