PARABLES AND THE ORAL MEDIUM:
A METAPHORICAL APPROACH TO
RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Jeffery L. Bineham

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Western culture's dependence on the print medium sets it apart from the oral cultures of the preliterate, preprint age. This paper argues that dependence on the print medium blinds people to the relativity of their interpretive contexts. Thus the movement from oral tradition to print tradition has led away from a tendency for metaphorical interpretations of God's relationships with people toward a tendency for literal interpretations of God's nature. A metaphorical theology which makes parables central to religious language can help to recapture some of the positive characteristics of oral culture.

Marshal McLuhan's concern for the extent to which different media influence messages, thought processes, and values should prompt scholars of religious communication to examine how the movement from oral to print to electronic media has influenced how we talk, think, and believe about God. This paper suggests that the movement from oral tradition to print tradition has led from a tendency for metaphorical interpretations of God's relationships with people toward a tendency for literal interpretations of God's nature. Dependence on the print medium, I will argue, blinds many to the relativity of their interpretive contexts. Sallie McFague argues at length that religious language thus becomes idolatrous, for one perspective is established as the absolute truth; and religious language becomes irrelevant, because those whose experiences do not mesh with the absolutized perspective are excluded. My argument, then, is that the change in basic media has led us away from the metaphorical, which emphasizes the open-ended and tensive nature of language, and toward the literal, which emphasizes more dogmatic and absolute interpretations of religious experience.

Section one depends upon the work of James Chesebro and Walter Ong to provide theoretical rationale for this argument. Section two suggests that attention to the metaphorical nature of parables in theology can help us to recapture the more positive characteristics of oral culture.

The Movement from Orality to Print

James Chesebro's essay on the epistemological functions of media argues several points which are central to this paper. He argues, first, that the medium employed to convey messages not only influences how the messages are understood, but also engenders specific patterns of understanding. "Specific media," Chesebro writes, "are linked to particular modes of understanding." I will argue that a dependence upon the oral medium, especially in preliterate cultures, tends to engender analogic or relativistic modes of understanding, while dependence upon the print medium tends to engender logical or objectivist modes of understanding. These patterns or modes of understanding can become habitual and lead to selective perspectives or viewpoints. Indeed, Chesebro

Jeffery L. Bineham is an assistant professor of speech communication at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

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asserts that "the persistent use of any one medium [regardless of content, evidently] as both a source of information and as a leisure activity reinforces a particular worldview or orientation." This link between media and worldview is central to this paper. But more specifically, we must explore how the move from orality to print influenced the dominant worldview.

Walter Ong argues that the evolution from orality to writing to print constitutes a more basic movement from the aural to the visual. Preliterate cultures depended upon sound for their knowledge and orientation. Literate cultures depend upon sight. These different emphases "foster different personality structures and different characteristic anxieties." In the preliterate world of sound people were "enveloped in a certain unpredictability." The spoken word, the word as sound, was not a fixed product. For, in Ong's words, "the spoken word vanishes immediately." Its nature as sound indicates movement and change. Preliterate oral discourse was delivered with a heightened sense of spontaneity to an immediately present and changing audience. What was said was for a particular place and time.

The visual nature of the written word, in contrast, provides a sense of stability and permanence. While sounds are fleeting, the imprint of words on paper fixes language on external documents. Words are disembodied; their relationships to specific people, times, and circumstances may be made evident in print, but those relationships are no longer necessitated as they were in oral cultures. "Writing...terminates in fixity; it fixes marks in space...by virtue of a rigid code of rules." Writing, according to Ong, imposes upon words a "thing-like" quality that did not characterize their preliterate existence as sounds. "[Spoken] words fly away"; he says, "what is written stays put."

The basic difference between these two media—the aural nature of the spoken word and visual nature of the written word—is linked, as Chesebro warned, to different patterns of understanding. While the literate in print cultures tend to learn by rote memorization, people in oral cultures learned by themes and formulas intimately connected with their life experiences. "For oral-aural man, utterance remains connected to the concrete life situation. It is never remote." Because oral discourse was heard as an active force in the present, understanding also was "of the present." This pattern of understanding focuses upon the spoken word's relationships to present contexts and experiences. It is more apt to draw metaphorical associations, less apt to be literal and absolute.

The pattern of understanding associated with the print medium, however, features individualistic, abstract, literal thought and interpretations. "Writing and print," states Ong, "created the isolated thinker, the man with the book" who depends upon print for the "accumulation of exact knowledge which makes possible elaborate and passionate causal analyses and sharp abstract categorization." The print medium led to a worldview which no longer featured the kind of oral disputation characteristic of preliterate society. Knowledge became reified, a thing stored in books, apart from the interlocution which marked oral culture.

Chesebro's recent essay on "Text, Narration, and Media" develops this same point. Chesebro argues that in the change from oral to literate culture "the nature of knowledge itself changes." In oral cultures "the knower and what is known are related," but in literate cultures "the knower and what is known are typically unrelated." In literate cultures the status of knowledge is granted in a manner foreign to oral cultures. Oral cultures could not have conceived of knowledge as a fixed and unchanging body of ideas located apart from people.

I have argued thus far that the pattern of understanding engendered by the oral medium emphasizes the metaphorical and relative characteristics of language and knowledge, while the pattern of understanding engendered by the print medium emphasizes the logical and literal characteristics of language and knowledge. This argument is based
on the nature of the word in preliterate and literate societies. The same conclusion can be reached by a focus on the nature of the interaction encouraged by oral and print media.\(^\text{18}\)

In an oral setting the delivery of a message involves a complexity of verbal and nonverbal symbolic forms. Chesebro notes the importance of verbal characteristics such as "amplitude, pitch, duration, quality, and overtones," and of nonverbal characteristics such as "touch, eye contact, smell, proxemics, chronemics, kinesics, and the use of objects."\(^\text{19}\) The oral medium places the speaker and audience in "a common context" so that "messages are constructed and received in terms of present events" and so that "the listener knows by experience."\(^\text{20}\) The oral medium then, emphasizes interpersonal interaction and instruction; it allows for explanation and the creation of "truths" through discussion and practical application.

In literate cultures the print medium encourages a different kind of interaction. Reader and writer typically are both alone. Print fosters solitary activity. "The mode of interaction," in Chesebro's words, "is individualistic and passive."\(^\text{21}\) Because no possibility exists for immediate interaction or explanation, written messages tend to be propositional, logical, and sequential.\(^\text{22}\) The relationships among reader, writer, and immediate context are downplayed, and the knowledge which emerges from such an interaction is thus more abstract, general, and unrelated to specific experience and practical application.

Media, Parables, and Religious Language

The main problem identified by Chesebro and Ong is not that the print medium is inherently evil, nor that visually oriented cultures are necessarily closed-minded. They argue, rather, that dependence upon one medium creates patterns of understanding which embody particular values and exclude others.\(^\text{23}\) Western print culture tends to assume "that vision alone gives satisfactory access to the real."\(^\text{24}\) This assumption leads us to see literal and absolute images as the most meaningful. We value that which we can see. We embrace what is written on the printed page in black and white.

Again, our problem is not with print per se, but with our over-dependence on print. As Ong writes, "we are the most abject prisoners of the literate culture in which we have matured."\(^\text{25}\) Contemporary Western people typically are unable to sense the primacy of the spoken word, but view language as "something which normally is or ought to be written."\(^\text{26}\) One result of this incarceration is that religious language becomes idolatrous and irrelevant. It becomes idolatrous because we "absolutize one tradition of images for God", and it becomes irrelevant because "the experiences of many people will not be included within the canonized tradition."\(^\text{27}\) Feminist theologians, for example, have argued convincingly that the dominant metaphors for God are masculine.\(^\text{28}\) Not only are we left with a limited view of God, but those unable to embrace God as masculine are forced to reject the Christian tradition or to operate as a submerged group within that tradition.

If this problem stems from a basic media choice, as I have argued, it might well be resolved by a similar choice. Though we cannot return to a preliterate dependence upon the oral medium, we can benefit from understanding the oral culture of early Christianity. Even that understanding, however, occurs within a literate culture that is almost completely structured by the print medium and thus assumes that legitimate knowledge is written. Our residence in a culture defined by print makes it difficult to appreciate either the reverence for words or the way of thinking characteristic of preliterate oral cultures. Ong insists, nevertheless, that to understand "the religious question as it exists in the modern world," we must somehow grasp how "the word existed in a sensorium by now grown utterly strange to us."\(^\text{29}\) Our fundamental problem, and perhaps
it is insurmountable, is that we cannot understand the oral “sensorium” because we cannot think as if we were not privy to print and to the manner of thought it engenders.

I will not provide, consequently, a comprehensive examination of the oral culture in which early Christianity flourished. My goal, instead, is to argue that a theology which makes parables central to religious language can begin to recapture some of the positive characteristics of oral culture. Parables, or “teaching stories,” are, in William Kirkwood’s words, primarily “acts of oral communication” and as “tales told by religious leaders and teachers [they] were a central part of the oral tradition of their faiths.”30 They thus illustrate a pattern of understanding associated with the oral medium. They do not, of course, come to us in oral form. But though they are written now, their impulse is oral (Christ, for example, initially told his parables), and I will argue that even in their current written form parables feature the metaphorical rather than the literal mode of understanding.

Sally McFague’s book entitled Metaphorical Theology provides a rich and comprehensive analysis of the pattern of understanding engendered by parables. McFague argues that Christian scripture is characterized best by the parables of which it is comprised. The stories which make up the Old and New Testaments provide topics and teachings for theological reflection; but more importantly, those stories provide a pattern of understanding which can guide how that theological reflection is conducted. This pattern of understanding, which can be associated primarily with an oral rather than print medium, can be summarized briefly.

First, McFague states that “in the parables the kingdom is not said to be this or that . . . . The kingdom of God is always intimated indirectly through telling a story.”31 Thus parables about the pearl of great price, the prodigal son, the sower of seed, and the house built on rock all tell us about relational principles which reflect the kingdom. They do not posit the literal nature of God.

McFague’s second point extends the first. Parables exemplify metaphorical thinking. They intimate the kingdom indirectly by comparing it to principles pictured in a story. Metaphorical thinking is significant, states McFague, because while “we say ‘this’ is like ‘that,’” we realize that it is also not like ‘that’ and that other ways of linking up the similarities and dissimilarities are possible.”32 Parables do not delineate one preferred interpretation, but call for a variety of interpretations. This characteristic, like the first, is consistent with the oral nature of parables. While the print medium encourages literal systematic thought, the oral medium encourages holistic application to experience.

An example of how one parable can be variously interpreted will illustrate the principles highlighted by McFague. The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 29:1-15) begins with a vineyard owner hiring workers to labor for him from early morning until evening. He agrees to pay them one silver coin for the day’s work. At several points during the day the owner ventures into the market place and hires more workers, telling them he will pay them a fair wage. When evening comes the owner pays all of the workers a silver coin. This angers those who have worked all day and they complain about the inequitable treatment. But the owner tells them to take their pay and go home; he has treated them fairly and has a right to be as generous as he wishes with the others he hired.

This parable clearly intimates the kingdom of God through the relational principles illustrated in the story. But those principles are open to various interpretations. Some equate the owner with God and the groups of workers with the faithful who have lived during different historical epochs. There are thus many workers but only one God. The one vineyard illustrates one call to righteousness, and the equal pay represents the equal calling and reward provided for all of the workers.33 Others, such as Augustine and the German scholar Ernst Fuchs, interpret the parable less specifically and see it as
“a pattern for the community of faith” which rejects conventional concepts of prudence and justice in favor of “kindness as an act of God.” This reading emphasizes that the last are paid first and surmises that no disappointment will be experienced by those who thrust in God. Dan Otto Via, finally, states that the parable can be read either as a story of the owner’s generosity, similar to the interpretations rendered above, or as a story of the complaining full-day workers. Via suggests that the workers’ flaw is their desire to be paid according to what they have done, because this “shows that they believed themselves capable of maintaining their position in the world, of deserving their reward.” The owner’s abrupt dismissal of the workers indicates that by their attitude they have excluded themselves from the source of grace. God thus disrupts “our calculations about how things ought to be ordered in the world.”

The few interpretations recounted here support McFague’s assertion that parables exemplify metaphorical thinking by implicating the kingdom indirectly while calling for a variety of interpretations. Though the parable comes to us in written form, and though these interpretations do not exhaust the possibilities, they do illustrate the propensity of parables to emphasize the metaphorical, open-ended, and tentative nature of language. The pattern of understanding characteristic of parables provides the basis for a theology consistent with the pattern of understanding encouraged by the oral/aural medium. McFague describes how the oral nature of parables suggests criteria for theology and religious language in general.

What must always be kept in mind is that the parables as metaphors and the life of Jesus as a metaphor of God provide characteristics for theology: a theology guided by them is open-ended, tentative, indirect, tensile, iconoclastic, transformative. ...in such a theology no finite thought, product, or creature can be identified with God and this includes Jesus of Nazareth, who as parable of God both “is and is not” God.

McFague makes clear (as do Lakoff and Johnson in Metaphors We Live By) that these characteristics are not exclusive to religious language, for all language and knowledge is inherently metaphorical. The metaphorical theology described by McFague clearly matches the characteristics of oral culture described earlier. The spoken word, as sound, infers unpredictability, movement, and change; and it leads not to abstract thought, but to interpretation according to one’s present situation and experiences.

CONCLUSION:
METAPHOR AS EXEMPLAR OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The Reformation is noted for its “insistence upon the primacy of the Scriptures.” This insistence, as Ong notes, “was closely connected with the invention of print” and the subsequent consecration of “inscribed communication.” Suddenly the scriptures could be seen. The notion of scripture as a living testimony was replaced, to some extent, by the notion of scripture as a historical record which could be studied and interpreted once and for all. Theology as parable recaptures some of the sense of scripture as an oral tradition.

Religious language no longer need be idolatrous or irrelevant, for parables can free us from the myth of the print medium which asserts “that in order for images to be true they must be literal.” Indeed, in the Old Testament, where the word was experienced as “a living something like sound, something going on,” an abundance of images exists, “none of which was to be regarded as literal or even adequate.” And religious

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language no longer need be interpreted as descriptions of God's nature, for parables
direct us to understand "patterns of relationship."43

Kirkwood argues, in fact, that "as metaphors parables cannot and should not be reduc-
ed to 'moral generalities' or articles of faith."44 And indeed the recognition of parables' 
significance can lead people to break from the rational, detached, and impersonal pat-
terns of intellectualizing characteristic of literate cultures.45 Once one recognizes the 
metaphorical quality of any religious discourse (the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, etc.), 
then that text not only is opened to a variety of interpretations but demands a variety of 
interpretations.46 One is thus awakened to the polysemic meanings and various ap-
lications of texts, and freed from enslavement to an absolutist literalism. For while 
metaphor is central to parable and to oral cultures, metaphor certainly is not limited 
to oral communication. Indeed, McFague argues that "the modern post-Cartesian split 
of mind and body is radically anti-Christian; meaning and truth for human beings are 
embodied, hence embodied language, metaphorical language, is the most appropriate 
way—perhaps the only way—to suggest this meaning and truth."47

An emphasis on parables is appropriate to religious language in general, and perhaps 
to Christianity in particular, because stories are central to the expression of faith. But 
parables are also appropriate because they recall the oral tradition of the major religions, 
and remind us of the ways in which our dependence on the print medium influences 
how we talk, think, and believe about God.

NOTES

1 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language 

2 James W. Chesebro, "The Media Reality: Epistemological Functions of Media in 

3 This is not to assert a deterministic link (as Chesebro does) between media and 
modes of understanding. My position is that particular media tend to foster particular 
types of perspectives; no necessary one-to-one link between medium and worldview 
needs to be postulated for the importance of this position to be realized. Further, I do 
not see analogic and relativistic, or logical and objectivistic, as synonymous. These terms 
describe characteristics of the different perspectives discussed in this paper. And finally, 
I am concerned primarily with the oral and print media, not the electronic media. 
Though the importance of contemporary electronic media cannot be underestimated, 
those media still operate primarily according to the dominant characteristics of literate 
society.

4 Chesebro, 119.

5 Walter J. Ong, The Presence of the Word (1967; rpt. Minneapolis: University of 

6 Ong, 131.

7 Ong, 131.

8 Ong, 95. The electronic media of our contemporary age offer the ability to fix and 
save even spoken discourse. My concern, however, is with the characteristic worldview 
engendered by preliterate, pre-electronic orality.

9 Ong, 95.
Ong, 229.

Ong, 42.

Ong, 24. Classical rhetoricians translated the concept of themes and formulas into the rhetorical conventions of topics and commonplaces. But the topics and commonplaces, even then, were memorized by rote. The intimate and immediate connection to experience was not present.

Ong, 33.

Ong, 54.

Ong, 203.


Chesebro, "Text," 12.

Thanks are due to Professor Debra Japp for drawing my attention to this point.


Chesebro, "Text," 14. Plato of course, notes some of these same concerns in his critique of writing in Phaedrus, sections 275-276.


Chesebro, "The Media Reality," 120.

Ong, 10.

Ong, 19.

Ong, 19.

McFague, 3.


Ong, 16.


McFague, 45.

McFague, 34.


Kissinger, 23, 186.


Via, 154.

McFague, 19.

McFague, 32-42; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Ong, 265.
McFague, 32.

Ong, 12.

McFague, 42.

McFague, 134.


McFague, 60.
