1. The Issues at Stake

This Special Issue crisscrosses three theoretical questions that the ten contributions gathered here integrate into a unified subject of investigation. Let me begin by first specifying each of these questions.

The first question pertains to *emplotment*. Do religious narratives follow models of emplotment (the ones identified by Northrop Frye in *The Great Code* (1982) and Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973), for instance), which are identical to the ones found in novels or historical accounts, do they rather tend to privilege some modes of emplotment over others, or do they sometimes craft specific plots that defy current categorizations?

The second question pertains to rhetoric, specifically *structural rhetoric*. Do these narratives preferentially follow rhetorical patterns such as the ring composition discussed by Mary Douglas in *Thinking in Circles* (2007) and by the School of Semitic Rhetoric (Roland Meynet’s *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric* (2012))? Further, how do modes of emplotment and rhetorical patterns interact in the crafting of narratives loaded with religious and/or theological content? Do specific traditions privilege some patterns over others, or are rhetorical patterns evenly distributed among the various religious traditions?

The third question pertains to the *scope* taken by religious narratives, and the *channels* through which they are shaped and transmitted. Can rituals, architectural designs, or exhibits held in museums obey the same compositional models as the ones followed in the production of written or oral religious narratives?

Taken as a whole, these questions delineate a specific field of research, which could be dubbed “religious narratology”. The latter endeavors to spell out the rules governing the composition of religious narratives in their dynamics, organization, and ornamentation. It does so within a given religious corpus, but it also attempts to look for similar patterns from one tradition to another. It investigates whether or not these rules significantly differ from other types of narratives (such as historical or fictional ones). Finally, it seeks to apply a consistent set of rules to texts, oral accounts, and artefacts.

2. Scope and Channels

In which ways do the ten contributions gathered in this Special Issue answer this array of questions? Reversing the order just followed, I will first consider the contributions dealing with the third set of issues.

Valérie Gonzalez shows that any discourse that has to do with religious expressions is spontaneously wrapped into a specific plot. At the same time, by working on exhibits centered on Islamic art and artefacts, she raises the issue of what could be dubbed “the ethics of exhibition emplotment”: in the West, a number of concerns drove curators to engage in the suppression of the “religious plot” in the exhibits’ narrative, substituting it with a distinction between the religious and the secular that relegates the faith to a theme among others in the museum displays, forcing a storyline upon objects that is different from (or even the opposite of) the one in which they were originally inserted.
Also focused on Islamic practices and artefacts, Shunhua Jin similarly enlarges our understanding of what “emplotment” is about by describing how the meeting between spatial designs and ritual guidelines results in a narrative that gives meaning and depth to the actions being performed in a specific spacetime. Borrowing the concept of the “ritual-architectural event” from Lindsay Jones, Jin surveys the correlations that link the Islamic dome, cosmological patterns, and the ritual practice of circumambulation into a whole. A complex of interactions between geometrical patterns applies to texts, images, spaces, and ritualized behaviors.

Still enlarging the meanings attached to the term “religious emplotment”, Liang Zhang extends it to the way believers apprehend the whole of their existence (in both their personal and communitarian dimensions), as rhythmed by a succession of sacramental practices. In the example she develops, Chinese Catholics living in the Jiangnan area progressively appropriated the doctrine and practices of the Church, and, by doing so, organized the sacraments of baptism, marriage, and extreme unction into a “lived narrative” that unified both their faith communities and the course of their lives. Said otherwise, the sacramental topoi enabled communities and individuals to endow their existence with accrued meaning and blessings.

3. From Rhetorical Devices to Structural Rhetoric

“Rhetoric” refers to a number of techniques that, most of the time, are anchored into a given cultural context, though one may wonder whether some devices are not endowed with a quasi-universal efficacy when it comes to winning over interlocutors. This is what suggests the contribution by Sha Liu, focused upon the use of the a fortiori argument in a pedagogical treatise (published c. 1632) written by the Italian Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone: the use of animal simile that bear on the love for one’s offspring paving the way to the models to be followed by Sages and Saints. Vagnone’s ascensional construction associates Confucian and Catholic references. Here, the a fortiori rhetorical device extends into an overall narrative that spells out the continuity existing between Nature and Grace.

With Wei Mo’s contribution, we continue to investigate Jesuit rhetoric in China, this time in the context of the Christian Missions of the 19th and 20th centuries. A traditional focus on Ciceronian rhetoric combined with a new focus on the discursive techniques of Chinese Classics operated a kind of “rhetorical hybrid”, which a growing interest for local dialects and conversational styles further enriched. The quest for “le mot juste” (in a missionary context, the words that would touch hearts and minds) was determined by contextual considerations that triggered rhetorical inventiveness.

Zimin Wang investigates the transposition (and sometimes misappropriation) of rhetorical tropes from another perspective: originally borrowed from the Huainanzi (a Western Han Chinese classic with strong Daoist undertones), the Japanese wartime propaganda slogan Hakkō Ichiu 八紘一宇 (“unify the whole world under one roof”) fostered a specific interpretation of the Shinto myth of how Jimmu, the first emperor, founded the nation. The reworking of the slogan in imagery, ritual occurrences, and architectural designs shows again how (quasi)religious metaphors, storylines, cultural artefacts, and ritual practices can become linked into a rhetorical continuum.

Reflecting upon the status of metaphorical language in spiritual and mystical Christian literature, Cécile Xie locates her contribution at the frontier between our second and third cluster of issues. Are metaphors to be merely considered as a rhetorical device, which we may substitute for more rigorous formulations? Starting with insights provided by Lakoff and Johnson in Metaphors We Live By (1980), C. Xie shows that a cognitive content bearing on things divine needs to be channeled through a language that gives to realities located beyond sensory perception a communicable configuration. Additionally, metaphors construct a spacetime where a narrative can be developed: they naturally develop into storylines conveying a form of knowledge. Metaphor-based mystical narratives allow, on the one hand, to give new dimensions to everyday experiences, and, on the other hand, to translate transcendental experiences into resources for discernment and action.
4. Models of Emplotment

In a perspective similar to the one explored by C. Xie, Benoît Vermander’s article circulates between transcendental realities and the world fashioned by human action through the study of a specific metaphorical discourse, namely the one typical of the Gospels’ parables. It selects four parables representative of the four modes of emplotment. These four models are determined by a specific complex of actions and counter-actions, the narratives they determine culminating in strikingly dissimilar results. The strength of the parabolic language is that it applies to the relationships occurring between humans and the natural world, within the social world, and between humans and the supranatural world. “Images” loaded with rhetorical efficiency trigger narratives, and narratives connect one order of reality to another, while encouraging listeners to take a stance in the world they live in as the parables decipher its hidden workings.

The distance between the Gospels’ parables and the metaphors and narratives told by Mencius about Water (the subject of Boxi Fu’s investigation) is not as wide as one may think. Besides the Mencius, other texts from Early China have given a quasi-sacred status to the aquatic element. This status is highlighted by a narrative model that follows the cycle of Water. This cycle unveils both earthly and celestial realities: being attentive to the characteristics of Water (humility, ductility, strength hidden behind apparent weakness) allows the observer to better understand their heart and mind, as well as the intimate connection between the latter and Heaven. Additionally, as is the case with the Gospels’ narratives, these metaphors are transformative: they are meant to trigger changes in the subject’s consciousness; these changes will impact the way one discerns, decides on, and engages in action or non-action (wu-wei).

The text of the Mencius is also at the center of the research conducted by Min Jung You. The Joseon Korea scholars (whose commentarial works she introduces to us) were sensitive to the religious dimension of this classic, and they did not separate its content from its rhetorical elements. Selecting various rhetorical features (and, notably, patterns close to the ones of the ring composition) was akin to receiving and assimilating the dao of the Mencius. In other words, textual patterns were revelatory of the workings of the dao present in all realities. The “rhetorical commentaries” crafted by the Joseon Korea scholars were already an investigation into the rules governing “structural rhetoric”.

5. Results and Openings

Even if the extent of material they cover remains relatively modest, one may want to draw some propositions from the contributions I have just summarized.

(1) Firstly, it is difficult to draw a clear demarcation between religious images/metaphors and religious narratives. Indeed, when taken in its widest extension, an image (such as those of fire, the abyss, or water) is polymorphous: it can give rise to a number of narrative patterns and directions. However, further associations very quickly load an image with a potential storyline; the imagery associated with the Islamic dome, or with the Spanish castle as perceived and narrated by Teresa of Avila, possesses a dynamic of its own that determines how a story relying on it will be patterned and narrated.

(2) Religious narratives seem to privilege rhetorical patterns similar to the ones found in “ring compositions”. In other words, models of textual, ritual and/or architectural structuration that give the subject a sense of completion—of “repleteness” as Mary Douglas put it—rather than a feeling of opening and unfinishedness. This may distinguish religious narratives from the “historical imagination” described by Hayden White, the latter often struck by the provisional character attached to any historical sequence. It may even be said that the historical imagination becomes religious when it endeavors to erase history’s essential unfinishedness. Such patterning is formal and not content-focused: both the myth of the eternal return and the story of a world going in a linear way from the time of divine creation to the day of the Last Judgment can be narrated through organizational patterns that will make the story “replete”, fostering a sense of consummation.
(3) The mechanisms highlighted by narratology and rhetorical studies apply not only to oral or text-based stories, but also to rituals, artistic and architectural manifestations, or even to the way people apprehend their existence and reverberate the meaning they attach to it in their everyday conduct. For sure, the way tropes and storylines circulate from one form of expression to another is not limited to the religious domain. Still, the fact that religious narratives and rhetorical patterns naturally extend to texts, practices, and a whole range of artefacts is revealing: their force pervades the whole of existence, and shapes the way both individual and communal destiny is understood. One may object that this also applies to the way national myths translate into ceremonies, music, and paintings, for instance. However, this process of translation testifies to the quasi-religious nature of the Nation (as already noticed by Durkheim), and to the state-sponsored crafting of a “civil religion”.

(4) What oral, textual, artistic, or ritual religious “narratives” share in common is not merely a “storyline”, but also infra-textual patterns modelled on geometrical shapes—the circle, the square and the triangle, first and foremost. Nikolay Koposov, in De l’imagination historique (2009), suggests that the shapes that our mind conceives function as an autonomous mode of thought, just as the linguistic model does. In particular, they enable us to represent ourselves within the “whole”. Here, metaphors work like concepts (for example, for Cardin Le Bret (1558–1655), “sovereignty is no more divisible than the point in geometry”). The way the imagery of the circle and the square, of the octagon, or even of the crystal is inscribed into texts, monuments, and associated rituals illustrates how religious rhetoric spontaneously makes use of shapes and figures for connecting all manifestations into a unified complex of meanings.

(5) Finally, what may distinguish religious narratives and rhetoric from the use of stories, images, and rhetorical devices in other domains is the fact that the metaphors, and the patterned storylines with which they combine, are indispensable when it comes to the crafting of a specific form of knowledge, namely religious knowledge. Sensory perceptions necessarily mediate an inner experience that is not reducible to the impact it receives from them. At the same time, inner experience needs to be expressed through metaphors, patterns, and stories, in order to become conscious of itself. The language of religious knowledge needs to be metaphorical and storied, because the nature of the knowledge being transmitted is never fully contained in factual statements and linear reasoning (though facts and reasoning serve to check the limits that separate experiences from hallucinations). At least five of our contributions hint towards this last thesis. Xie’s study on mysticism clearly presents religious metaphors as knowledge. Vermander’s essay on parables shows how the Kingdom of God is necessarily approached through the observation of natural realities and human patterns of action. Similarly, Liu’s contribution on Vagnone’s treatise shows how the continuum between the world of Nature and the realm of divine Grace appears through the micro-stories that testify to the love that animals feel for their offspring. Finally, Fu’s and You’s articles on the Mencius highlight the fact that the workings of the dao are revealed both by the nature of Water and the patterns through which the text organizes its narratives.

These five theses do not conclude our investigation. Rather, they are provisional propositions, partly substantiated by the findings of the contributions gathered here, partly in need of critical and comparative examination. By combining detailed case-studies and theoretical overtures, this Special Issue hopes to draw the lineaments of a fruitful research program.

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