

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

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Lecture V – Oct. 13, 1955

Tuesday we started the discussion of religion and language. I told you that there are two main problems in connection with our whole subject, religion and culture. The one problem is, "Which is the ultimate concern expressing itself in language *as such*?" – and the other is, "Which is the nature of religious language in contrast to other forms of language?" We discussed the first question. I tried to show that language is an encounter between mind and reality, and that this encounter is guided by an ultimate concern, and that the different ways in which a language-creating group *is* concerned ultimately, has consequences for the different forms of language – I gave you some examples from ancient and modern languages.

Finally, I said that in all languages there are two elements, as in all spiritual life of man, namely an element of meaning (a word, a sentence, are bearers of meaning), and an element of power (they have connotations, which have power over the mind, not only through the meaning but also above the meaning).

This last remark brings me to the next step in our consideration, namely a discussion of the special character of religious language. This special character is symbol and myth. Expressions of ultimate concern are symbolic and mythological. We have to devote today's lecture, and probably more, to discuss the meaning of these terms generally, and in their special religious character – always on the basis (which I like to repeat in every lecture) of the duality of the meaning of religion:

- 1) the universal, general, large meaning: the state of being ultimately concerned;
- 2) the concrete, expressive meaning; religion as expressed in a special group, with special symbols and myths, with special ritual and ethical activities. Never forget this duality of the meaning, because without this, the *whole* relation [of religion?] and culture becomes un-understandable.

I said that religious language is symbolic. When we speak of symbolic language, then we presuppose implicitly that there is non-symbolic language. Our first task is to distinguish symbolic and non-symbolic language.

The relation of word and content is a profound problem of semantics in itself. I cannot go too much into it, but I will a little. Every word has signifiatory character; it signifies something. It is a combination of sounds or letters which signify a thing, or a relation of things, or an action of things – things, relations, actions. All this is directly signified by words, by sounds, or letters. [39]

Understanding a word, either spoken or written, means combining this combination of sounds, or visual drawings on a paper, with a definite reality. I use the sound “*desk!*,” or I write the word “desk,” and you understand in both cases that this thing, here, is meant. I call this “direct significatory.” You can show directly, for the senses, for the external or in some cases internal experience, what is meant. This is non-symbolic. In all these cases, the words, the sounds, or letters are directly significatory. But there is one class of words which are not directly, but indirectly, significatory.

But before going to them, let us see for a moment how these directly significatory words come into existence. They are derived from the technical dealing with reality, from handling reality. It was one of the important contributions of the philosopher Heidegger – whose name you all know in terms of his existentialism – that he described the human situation in such a way that our first relationship to reality is not a relationship of looking at things for the sake of contemplation, but it is a relation of handling them, of using them, of making them into tools. The tool-relationship, as I said already in my first lecture, precedes the theoretical relationship. Of course, some element of theory is always implied in the using of a tool, but this is not developed for its *own* sake, before the rise of scientific or other forms of cognition. Therefore we can say our language is, first of all, designating things not as theoretical things, not as things in terms of theoretical description, but as things as tools. And our language shows this character, that it has been produced for the sake of *using* the world which we encounter. I come back to this fully when we will speak of religion and the technical realm. But here I only relate it to language. Later, then, the theoretical develops, but also in terms of a direct significatory act.

All directly significatory words point to things in time and space. They try to grasp realities as tools, and later on as independent things. Our whole language is created in this way. It includes, however, as I said before, not only things but also their relations and their actions. This produces a very special character of language, which we all [40] observe, namely that in all language the spatial category, the spatial relations, the relation in space, are decisive for the grasp of the human mind. Not the *other* categories are of such primary importance as the category of space. Neither time nor causality nor substance nor quantity or quality, but space is decisive. Why? Because we encounter things within the context of our world in terms of “here” and “now.” Things are here; then we can point to them. They are there; we point to them as absent. They are here; we point to them as present. And this is decisive. The now-element is much later. The element of time is much more abstract and much more complicated. Therefore the modes of time are not as genuinely expressed in our direct language as the dimension of space.

This leads to a phenomenon in language which we call metaphor. When we speak about inner experiences, we must use the language of outer experience, we must spatialize – not “special-ize,” but “spatial-ize,” put into spatial relations – even those things which are matters of our inner experience. Now if we do this, then we say we use language metaphorically.

In all levels of culture which we have discussed, this origin of language is still visible. I can now give you immediately an example in terms of the word which I just used, namely “level.” “Level” is a spatial term. Levels are strata above each other. Words like “level,” “strata,” are used in all psychology, in all value realms. Or we speak of higher, lower, up, down. In all levels of man’s spiritual activity, wherever language is used at all, there it is used with spatial metaphors.

Now this is very important because we will find that this is also a predominant thing in religious symbolism. But these are metaphors, these are not yet symbols. A metaphor is

not a symbol. The word comes from *meta ferein*, which means “transferring,” transferring an image from one realm to the other. But even so, metaphoric language is still direct language. When we speak of “high” tension in our soul, or of the “lower” levels of our moral behavior, or of the “higher” levels, then we still grasp that reality directly; we don’t use symbols yet, but we use metaphors. And it is important to distinguish symbol and metaphor. Metaphor is based on the fact that the first origin of language is technical, using things as tools, and that words point to things which are *for* something, and which encounter in spatial relations. On this basis, all direct signification has spatial character, and if it is used for other realms of reality, then again it is a |spatial concept; then it [41] is used as metaphor. This is only a preliminary introduction into the main problem, in order to get rid of confusing connotations.

We come now to the symbolic form of signification, and must remove further confusions. The greatest confusion, which almost cannot be removed, is the confusion between sign and symbol. Words are signs, they are direct signs grasping something directly which can be found in the context of time and space. And even if they are used metaphorically, they are still used directly. But symbols are *not* direct.

Now language has done great harm to the understanding of man’s spiritual life by not distinguishing signs and symbols clearly enough. We speak of mathematical and logical symbols, but mathematical and logical signs are signs and not symbols! If they are called symbols, then the term symbol is devaluated, it has lost its genuine power. So I would be happy if I could transform again this linguistic confusion into a pure distinction between the realm of sign and symbol. I am afraid it is impossible. I am afraid that the mathematicians and symbolic logicians will use the word “symbol” all the time, happily, ever since it was used the first time, because it sounds much better! But if we cannot change this trend, we must at least make a distinction. There are some attempts to make distinctions. Some people – for instance my friend Professor [John Herman] Randall at Columbia University, with whom I had a few “distinctions” about this already! [smiling], distinguishes “reflective” symbols, which I call “signs,” and then “intuitive” symbols. Now, however we do it, I sometimes call these “sign-symbols,” and not in contrast to genuine symbols. Genuine symbols appear in the following realms: in all the arts, in politics, in history (historical intuition), and in religion. There we have genuine symbols, and not only sign-symbols, or reflective symbols. So I make a compromise because I am not almighty, but I would like to be almighty very often, not in order to change the word itself, but in order to change the linguistic confusions in philosophy and theology – in theology not less than in philosophy. But even this little bit of almightiness is not at my disposal! So I can only try to help clear up the situation. And it is very important to do this with respect to sign and symbol.

Let us now try to do this from the point of view of symbols generally, and later on go into the problem of religious symbols. Both signs and symbols have one |thing in common: [42] they point beyond themselves. The sound of the word “desk” points to the thing “desk,” which I can also touch, look at, smell, and throw away, if I am angry. In this sense a sign points beyond itself. There are other signs where this is very clear; for instance, there are signs which are very important because they are matters of life and death for all of us, namely the signs at the street corner: “red” and “green.” But they are signs, they are not symbols; they point to something else. “Green” means “go” and “red” means “stop.” But “greenhood” and “going,” and “redhood” and “stopping,” have nothing to do with each other. This means this is a mere matter of expediency and convention. For expedient reasons, convention has decided to use these lights for these different purposes.

In this way signs are always matters of convention, and conventional products can also be changed, removed, you can do with them whatever you want, if there is a sufficient support from those who decide about what shall be valid conventionally and what not.

Now this is one main difference between signs and symbols. Signs are matters of expediency and convention; symbols are produced in a creative process which goes down to the unconscious – and, if I could use the phrase without danger of being criticized as a wild-going [?] realist and not nominalist, then I would even use Jung’s term “collective unconscious” – but I use it with reservation.

It cannot be invented, therefore, and removed by decisions from the point of view of expediency. It grows, and it may die. Signs are invented and removed; symbols grow and die.

This means something even more important. It means that symbols participate in the power of that which they symbolize; signs do not. The letter “A” does not participate in the sound “A.” They have nothing to do with each other. In many alphabets the sound is quite different, and the letter is different for the same sound. This is a matter of convention. And the sound “M” or “P,” used in mathematics, could have been different and can be changed if a congress of mathematicians of the world would decide [so]. They don’t decide about the older signs, which are now so much used that it would be almost a catastrophe to change them. But if something new comes out, someone suggests, “Let us call it ‘I’ – [?] (one of the most mystical mathematical signs) [?] – the others follow and convention is established.” Others could say “No, there is something better,” and they don’t follow. But if a symbol has grown, you cannot do that with it. |

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Let me give you something from the realm to which we return later more fully. The flag of a nation: what does it do? In itself it is a piece of cloth with special colors, and nothing else. But this cloth and these colors have become symbols by a process which originally, perhaps, was a conscious decision, but after it has been introduced, it stands for the majesty of the nation or the state. And in doing so, it participates in its power. For centuries the attitude of the citizen to the flag is a matter of discussion. And many injuries have been done, either to the majesty of the nation by people who didn’t regard it, or to people who were accused of not regarding it. I remember from the last book of Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst, that he tries to show what is a real symbol, with all the power of a real symbol, for most people today. And he gives as an example also the flag, and imagine that somebody publicly, in the marketplace, desecrates the flag, treads on it with his feet, and does to it something which makes it a matter of contempt. There would be a tremendous reaction of the unconscious of the group for which this flag is a symbol, because this flag, after it has become a symbol, participates in the majesty of the reality, which cannot be expressed in other ways, or which must be expressed symbolically, because a nation is not given in the sense in which this desk is given, and therefore it needs symbolic expression.

Let me make a footnote here about monarchy. No one can understand monarchy and its meaning who does not understand what symbols are. It is not a form of government – that it is also, but this is not important. Why should not forms of government change, and could have always changed? Laws have always changed. But it is more than this. It is representation in the person of the king or queen [of] the reality which *otherwise cannot be expressed*. And the participation in the power of this reality, namely the nation, is not only expressed in the fact that this person *has* some power – in many cases, he or she has very little power, as in present-day England – but from the point of view of the *representative* power, the power which is expressed in the *majesty* of the nation, *there is*

the real reason for the tremendous importance many people have always contributed [i.e., attached – ed.] to this symbol. One has often ridiculed – especially from religious sides – the fact that kings usually sign [their name], “We, King, e.g., Wilhelm *ii*, Emperor by the grace of God” – what does that mean? This does not mean he has a special grace, but it means that here, in this [symbol, the reality of the political realm cuts into the reality of the religious realm. In the moment you rationalize this symbol in such a way that you say that suddenly he has not such a grace, he is very *dis*-grace-ful (which he was!) – but the point is the symbolic representative power. [44]

Now these are symbols in contrast to signs. In this way, all symbols participate. E.g., the tremendous power of the Crucifixion, simply the Cross, even if there is no body on it: what does it do? In itself it is a sign pointing to an event of the past. But it has become a symbol of such power that it has [been?] shown to blind people, and gives them participation in the power of that event to which it points. Therefore it cannot be simply treated as a sign, it is something which, one can perhaps say, for some people, is largely laden with power. But in any case it has power, it participates in the power. And that makes it so different from the sign.

So we can say, briefly: the sign and the symbol point beyond themselves – the sign in terms of expediency and non-participation, the symbol in terms of creativity and participation. The symbol participates in the power of what it represents. The word “represents” is also a very fine word, and I have sometimes thought whether the whole linguistic confusion would not be overcome if we said “representative,” instead of “symbolic,” but this has other disadvantages. In “represents,” there are two elements: “re” (it *repeats* the reality of that for which it stands); and “-present,” which means the present (it makes it real here and now, in this moment). And this is the power of every great symbol.

Now I would like that for all these reasons, you never should use a combination of words which is used very often, and for which I am also guilty by slips of tongue sometimes, namely to use the combination of the words “only” and “symbol”! This is a very wrong combination of words because a symbol is *more* than anything else. You can say “only a sign” – certainly, and you *must* say that. And if, for instance, the religious symbols are understood only as signs, then the word “only” is justified. But if you speak of genuine symbols, you should never say “only a symbol,” as if there were something higher! This is something fundamentally important for religion and theology because it means that if we call the religious symbols symbols, and someone wants to have them literalistically, then you say this is *less* than if they are symbols. Literalism in religion is not more, but is *less* than symbols. For this reason, [my life-long experience with this phrase “only a symbol” brings me to this very strong warning never to combine these two words! There is no language which is *truer* to some levels or dimensions of reality than the language of symbols. All non-symbolic language is *untrue*, with respect to *some* levels and dimensions of reality. It is true with respect to *other* levels of reality, but it is untrue to *some* levels of reality. Therefore the question is not whether the one language, the directly signficatory language, is truer, but the question is to which level of reality do you apply it? [45]

To transform symbolic into discursive language means to speak of something else than of that to which the symbol points. Therefore it is a deterioration, if one speaks of “only symbols.”

But now another characteristic of symbols. We already have some of them: it points beyond itself, but at the same time participates in the power of that which it symbolizes;

it grows and dies; it is not invented and removed. The next is: it opens up something – or if you want the word, it has “revelatory” character. I don’t use this word here in the typical religious sense – this also will happen later on, but not here. I therefore prefer, sometimes, the word “opening up.” Artistic symbols open up a level of reality which otherwise is closed. A painting whose subject matter is a landscape does not repeat a landscape, but it opens up a dimension of a landscape which otherwise is closed, is shut off from our mind, and never could be experienced by us. This is the main criticism of the so-called naturalistic art. It is impossible and futile if artists try to repeat nature; that is not their function. Their function is to create symbols which open up levels of reality which otherwise cannot open to us, and which cannot be discovered in any other way.

If you have a poem, for instance (to remain nearer to language, in the special sense of the word), and it expresses something, then it is impossible to express the same thing in a commentary to the poem. If you comment on the poem, then the poet would say, “That is alright, but read the poem, read it aloud, hear the sound, hear the rhythm, hear the words I have chosen. When you give your philosophical comment to it, you do something else. There may be something in common, but it is not the same.” The level, the dimension, of reality which is opened up by a [poem, can never be opened up in [46] any other way than by a poem. The same is true with those levels of reality opened up by music, for instance. Music is not only an expression of an emotion, but through the sound something which is hidden in reality, comes to us. Then it does something which the other symbols also do – all symbols do – it opens up a level in our own being. All symbols have a subject-object character. They open up a level in the encountered reality which otherwise is never attainable. And they open up a level in our mind – or I would like to use the word “soul” here – because unconscious elements also belong to it. This dimension of our soul never comes into action except through the symbols which open it. So symbols have a double side of opening-up: they open up reality, and they open up the soul. And in the encounter of reality and mind, both experience something which cannot be experienced in any other way than through these symbols. And I think this is the most important part of it. Genuine symbols have revelatory character. And *all* revelation is correlate between an objective structure and [a] subjective one. And so also, therefore, is all genuine symbolism: it is always objective and subjective at the same time. It has “encounter” character.

Now I return to what I said before: culture is based on man’s encounter with reality; all languages are based on such an encounter. This encounter also produces symbols, and if a symbol is produced, reality has revealed a dimension of it which otherwise remains unrevealed. And the soul or mind is opened in a special respect in which otherwise it would not be opened. Therefore we enter the realms in which symbols are used, expecting them to give us something they otherwise would not have. Why do we go into a museum and look at pictures? (I speak now of artistic symbols). Why is the political system full of symbols? Because otherwise the reality which is meant can in no way be experienced.

Now we have, therefore, the most important characteristic of symbols: they disclose (if you prefer that word) something which is otherwise cut off, which we cannot reach in any other way. |

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I now come back for a moment to what I said about language having both meaning and power. The power element is stronger in the realm of symbolic language; the meaning element is stronger where we use signs. In mathematics we have definite meanings expressed in signs. In art also we have meaning, but a meaning which is united with

power in such a way that the power element, the opening element, is stronger.

Now let me give here something which we have forgotten. If symbols have the power of opening up reality and the soul, then they must have healing power. That is what they actually have. I believe that the mental disorders which are growing so tremendously in our culture are partly due to the fact that there are no sufficiently healing symbols any more. Of course symbols have healing power *only* if they are acknowledged as symbols, if they really express what they are supposed to express, for people. But *if* they do so, then the vision of a symbol, the hearing of music, the looking at a picture – not to speak about religious symbolism – have in themselves healing power because they open up things which are shut off, which are repressed, which belong to the totality of our being, but are not allowed, because there are other elements in our being [which are] more strong – technical, intellectual, etc. – and they are shut off. Now they are opened; and if they are opened, then healing power *proves* that symbols are not only bearers of meaning, but also bearers of power.