

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
Harvard University, 1955-56

Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

2025

(version: December 19, 2025)

[48]

Lecture VI – Tues., Oct. 18, 1955 Last Thursday we discussed the general nature of symbols in order to prepare our discussion of the special character of the religious language. I said that symbols have the following characteristics: they point beyond themselves; they participate in the power of that to which they point; they are irreplaceable; they grow and die; they have revealing power and have the power to open up the soul for what is revealed to it; they have healing power, in the sense that they make us able to find in those levels which they reveal, the power of the reunion of our whole being.

I was asked about the word "faith-healing" in connection with this remark. This is a very unfortunate term because it is really a healing by magic concentration, either by somebody else upon the patient, or by the patient upon himself. Now in both cases it is a confusion of magic power and faith, so we shouldn't use the term "faith" for this at all. The combination of faith and healing has some quite different meaning, namely that *if* a human being is in the state of being ultimately concerned, then *all* the elements of his nature are in some way united in this central act of the personality which we call "faith." But I cannot go into this now. I will come to it in a very full way in the section on personality development and religion – probably not before the next semester.

But today I have to deal with the application of this characterization of symbols generally, to religious symbols. Nothing which belongs to the realm of ultimate concern can be expressed in any other way than a symbolic way. Now you may ask, "Why is this so? Are there not things which are of ultimate concern and which can be described in the ordinary proper sense of the word? For instance, if 'nation' or 'success' have, in an idolatrous way, become matters of ultimate concern, then is this not a *non*-symbolic kind of speaking? Success, nation, money: why do we need symbolic language for these things?" – This is a very interesting question, and a keen observation of the situation easily gives the answer. Even in such cases, that which *is* a matter of unconditional concern is made into a god. If, for instance, the nation is somebody's ultimate concern, the name of the nation becomes a sacred name, and the nation receives [divine qualities] which by far surpass the reality of this actual nation. The nation, then, is not seen empirically and is not meant in the ordinary sense of the word "nation," but it stands for that which is the *true* ultimate and symbolizes, but it does so in an idolatrous way.

[49]

If success is the ultimate concern, it is not the natural desire of actualizing one's possibilities, which we *all* have, but it is the readiness to sacrifice all other values of life for the sake of a position of power and social predominance. The anxiety, which I

find in so many young people in our period, of not being a success, is an idolatrous* form of the anxiety of divine condemnation. One is not afraid of the possibility of divine condemnation, in the original sense of the religious tradition, but one *is* afraid of being condemned to non-being by not being a success! In such a feeling, success is grace (again, a religious word); lack of success is final judgment. In this way, concepts which designate ordinary realities (such as nation, money, success), become idolatrous symbols of ultimate concern. They become divine beings, they become idols. The reason for this transformation of concept into symbols is the character of ultimacy, based on the nature of faith. That which is the *true* ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely, and therefore no finite reality can express it directly and properly.

I want to express this in a seemingly very paradoxical way. I want to say: *god transcends his own name*. God transcends His own Name. This paradoxical situation is the [reason] why the use of the name of God *easily* becomes an abuse – or, as the word says, a “blasphemy.” Therefore the fear of the people of the Old Testament to use the right name of God, because if they use His name in any way in which it is brought down to the level of ordinary objects besides [beside?] which He *also* can be found, then His name is abused and one speaks, in using it, a blasphemy. Whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately, even if we call it “God,” has a symbolic character. It points beyond itself, but at the same time (as we have seen last time), it participates in that to which it points.

Faith can express itself adequately in no other way. The language of faith, the language of religion, is the language of symbols, and there is no other language for religion! If faith were what we have declined and strongly rejected (the acceptance of—————

*We shall replace “idolatric” with “idolatrous,” hereinafter. (Ed.) [statements without evidence], then this wouldn’t be true because statements without evidence don’t need to be symbolic. But if faith is the state of being ultimately concerned, then of course *only* symbolic language is possible. And I want to resist what I said last time: “Never say ‘only a symbol,’ in a depreciating sense.” Instead of “only a symbol,” one should say, “not less than a symbol.” Every non- symbolic speaking about God would be less than a symbol, would be less than a symbolic speaking, and not more. Therefore don’t be afraid about losing the reality of the divine when you use symbolic language, or when you understand that religion necessarily uses symbolic language. Don’t fall down *below* the level of symbolic language: that is what I would say here. [50]

Of course the fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God. And this symbol is always present in *any* act of faith, even if the act of faith includes the denial of the concept of God. Where there is ultimate concern, God can be denied only in the *name* of God! Where there is ultimate concern, God can be denied only in the *name* of God. One God can deny the other one, but [ultimate?] concern *cannot* deny its own character as ultimate. Therefore it *cannot* deny its affirmation of what is meant with the word “God.”

Therefore: the word “atheism,” from a mere analysis of the religious language, is a very questionable term. It is very often used by *both* sides, those who defend it and those who attack it. But it should not be used because it is extremely ambiguous. It can only mean the attempt to remove *any* ultimate concern, to remain *unconcerned*, about the meaning of one’s existence. This is the *only* form of real atheism, this is the only way in which atheism can be affirmed at all. Indifference to the ultimate question ... is the only imaginable form of atheism.

Now whether this is possible is another question. I don’t believe it. I believe it is certainly possible to do that consciously, but whether there is an unconscious ultimacy in everybody is another problem, where I would say: you can show everybody, if you go

deeply enough into his being, where his ultimate concern lies. But of course it can be so hidden that one doesn't notice it, and that one can take on an attitude of indifference towards the ultimate question. |

[51]

So we can say: in any case, he who denies God as a matter of ultimate concern, affirms God. He who is really concerned about his atheism, is a very good theist. He is somebody who is *not* indifferent; he is concerned, and, being ultimately concerned, he affirms *even* – not “even,” [but] “*just*” – by denying God, because he affirms the passionate character of his ultimate concern. This is so because God is the fundamental symbol for what concerns us ultimately.

Now again, perhaps from the theological side, I may be asked: “Does that mean that ‘God’ is nothing but a symbol?” The next question would be: “If He is only a symbol, a symbol for what?” – because every symbol points beyond itself to something else. And then: If we say God is “only a symbol,” then we must answer: “God” is the symbol for God. And here we have exactly the same paradox to which I referred before: God is the symbol for God. This means that in the notion of God we must sharply distinguish two elements, the element of ultimacy (which is a matter of immediate experience and not symbolic in itself); the experience of ultimate concern is in immediate, *non*-symbolic experience. And on the other hand: the element of concreteness, the imaginary element, which is taken from our ordinary experiences and then symbolically applied to God.

The man whose ultimate concern is a sacred tree can be analyzed from the point of view of these two elements. He has both things: he has the ultimacy of his concern – he sacrifices many things, perhaps himself, for it; his life is centered around this point of holiness. At the same time, he has the concreteness of the tree, which symbolizes his relation to the ultimate. So in this man we have both elements, which belong to religious symbols: the one non-symbolic element, namely the ultimacy of the concern; and on the other hand, the concrete element, namely the tree. But of course the tree, if it appears in this context, is not a tree in the context of physical experience – this it is, *too*, but at the same time it means something beyond this, in another dimension.

Or let us give another example: a man who adores the Greek god Apollo is ultimately concerned, and his ultimate concern is symbolized by the divine figure of Apollo. The divine figure of Apollo is the material of his symbol, but what is meant is ultimate concern. The man who glorifies Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, |has both an ultimate concern [and as ultimate as possible] under the powerful message of the Prophets, but at the same time, he has a concrete image for what concerns him ultimately: the living, very personal, very dynamic, very individualized God of the Old Testament.

[52]

Now I hope you understand this seemingly cryptic statement that God is the *symbol* of God. In this qualified sense, God is the fundamental and universal content of every religious act.

Now let me give here a footnote, which belongs more to the philosophy of religion than to our immediate discussion about religious language. It is obvious that such an understanding of the meaning of “God” makes the discussion about the existence or non-existence of God meaningless, and I would say even blasphemous. It is meaningless to question the ultimacy of one's ultimate concern. This element in the idea of God is in itself certain. The symbolic *expression* of this element varies endlessly through the whole history of mankind. Here again it would be meaningless to ask whether one or another of the figures in which an ultimate concern is symbolized, does exist. If “*existence*” – as the word indicates, and should indicate – refers to something which can be found within the whole of reality, then no divine being does exist. In this sense I understand my friends

and critics, the logical positivists, namely that they distinguish meaningless questions from meaningful ones. And I would say that the question “Does God exist, or does He not exist?” is a meaningless question and should be rejected as such. The question is: is a special symbol of our ultimate concern adequate? – to which degree, and perhaps *finally*, adequate? The question is: which of the innumerable symbols of faith is most adequate to the *meaning* of faith? In other words, which symbol of ultimacy expresses the ultimate without idolatrous distortion? *That’s* the question. Which symbol of ultimate concern *expresses* the ultimate without idolatrous distortion?

So we have changed from the one question (which has to be rejected as meaningless): “Does God exist, or does He not exist?” – to a meaningful and extremely serious question which determines the life of all mankind in all periods of history, and which determines every individual life. Which symbol of one’s ultimate concern is most adequate [to the *ultimacy* of one’s concern? And which is less adequate? Which is distorted and idolatrous? This is the problem, and not the wrongly-so-called “existence” of God – which I would call in impossible combination of words. [53]

God as the ultimate in man’s ultimate concern is *more* certain than any other certainty, even the certainty of one’s self. God as symbolized in a divine figure is a matter of daring faith, of courage, of risk, of change, of error.

Now God is the basis [?]* of faith, but He is not the only one. There is a second level which I would call the qualities and actions of God – qualities such as power, love, justice: they are taken from finite experiences which we all have and are applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity. – Or if faith calls God “almighty,” faith uses the human experience of power in order to symbolize the content of its infinite concern. But it *does not do* something extremely absurd, namely [to] assert the existence of a highest being, sitting on His throne, and being able to do what He pleases to do, and nobody (not even Himself) knows what He will do the next moment. This is a caricature and absurdity, and many stumbling blocks against religion are derived from non-symbolic literalism of religion which leads us to a nest of absurdities. For instance the question of so many people: Why, if God is almighty, has He permitted misery on earth? – Now this presupposes a nonsensical and absurd concept of almightiness. But I cannot go into this in this moment.

So it is with all the other qualities: omniscience – I will only show how absurd this becomes in the moment in which symbolic language is understood literalistically. Then one can ask, with some medieval Scholastic: Does God also know everything which would have happened, if what has happened had not happened? – Now here you see what an amount of absurdity is possible if you distort symbols into literal statements.

The same is true of all the divine activities (past, present and future) which one tells about God. They are symbols taken from our daily experience, and not information about what God has done, or what a highest Being called “God” has done, once upon a time, or will do some time in the future. Faith is not the belief in such—————

*My notes recorded “the basic of faith,” with subsequent interpolations that T. may have said “basis,” and that perhaps the word “symbol” was understood, but not expressed; or perhaps he meant “basic” as “foundation.” – Ed. [absurdities, but it is the acceptance of symbols in which our ultimate concern is expressed *in terms* of divine actions. [54]

I will return to this when I discuss the term “myth,” but before doing this, let me speak about another level in which the religious symbols are moving. The level I just gave is – let us call it “transcendent symbolism.” But there is also, in all religious language, a level of immanent religious symbolism. The transcendent – going-beyond the finite

reality, in terms of symbolism – deals with God, His qualities, and His actions. The immanent symbolism (“remaining within” the limitation of time and space) deals with the manifestations of the divine within time and space. There we have different levels of such manifestations. We have the manifestations of the divine in special divine figures, usually called incarnations. We have incarnation myths in all religions, and especially in religions such as the Indian and Greek religions, in which the divine has become so transcendent that it was necessary for the religious consciousness to have more concrete symbolism, and this has been expressed in the mythology of incarnation, of the divine beings appearing in human, animal, vegetative figures, etc.

Now all this is one realm, and a very important one. It is a realm which one could call, with a Christian term, the realm of the epiphany (the Greek for “appearance,” making-oneself-visible). Another realm of the immanent symbolism is the sacramental realm: special things, events, gestures, which in themselves manifest for somebody his ultimate concern (that is the meaning of sacrament). Sacrament means the presence of the holy, of that which concerns us ultimately, in objects taken from our daily life. The word sacrament should not be restricted to the few so-called sacraments – two in Protestantism, seven in Catholicism – but sacramental means something much more universal. It means the experience of the holy in realities here-and-now – on the altar, or in the service, or in a book, or wherever it may be.

Then there is a third level of immanent symbolism which I would call, combining those terms I strongly distinguished in the beginning: signs and symbols. They are symbols. For instance: water, light, flowers, or other things which become symbols – parts of the church buildings, etc. All this can become symbols. They are sacramentalia, in the larger sense of the word, or they can be called signs-which-have-become-symbols – all these are sign-symbols: geometrical figures, colors. To repeat: we have the two fundamental realms of the symbolic language of religion. The one [is the transcendent realm: God. Second: [55] divine attributes and divine actions. Then, in the immanent realm, there are also three levels: divine manifestations, sacramental realities, and sign-symbols (signs which have become symbols). So we have six levels, and in these levels you will usually find anything belonging to religious symbols.

We come now to the way in which these symbols appear in actual religion. They do not appear in isolation. It is not so, that here is a symbol, and there is a symbol, but they appear in combination, and a combination of symbols is called a myth. So we come now to this very important term in religious language, and perhaps also in other forms of language – you can also speak of political myths, and of historical myths.

The English word “myth” is a translation of the Greek [mythos], which means “story of the gods,” in the later [use?] of the term. Myths are stories of the gods. The gods, in all mythology, are individualized figures: Zeus, Apollo, Dionysius, Hera, Aphrodite, etc. They are sexually differentiated, like human beings. They come from each other, and all together form an original chaotic state of things. They are related to each other in love and hate. They produce the earth, and man upon it. They act in time and space against each other, with man, and against man. They participate in human greatness and human misery. They produce creative and destructive works through man. They give to man cultural and religious traditions. They defend the sacred rites. They help and threaten the human race. They are especially interested in some families, tribes or nations. They have epiphanies and incarnations. They establish sacred places, rites and persons. They create a cult. But they themselves are under the command and threat of a fate (fatum, [heimarmene]*, which is beyond everything, even the gods.

Now this is mythology. I gave you this according to the pattern of Greek mythology, but you will find very similar things in all mythologies. Many of these characteristics are found everywhere. Usually the mythological gods are not equals, but there is a hierarchy among them, as in aristocratic societies. On the top of this hierarchy is a ruling god, as in Greece: Zeus. Or there is a trinity of ruling gods, as in India. Or a duality, as in Persia. And there are savior-gods who mediate between—————*cf. Helmut Koester, Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. I, pp. 158f. (Phila.: Fortress Press, 1982). (Ed.) [the highest gods and man, sometimes sharing man's death and suffering [56] (as [did] Apollo Adelphi [?], in spite of their essential immortality. This is the world of the myths, the mythological realm of mankind. It is a great and strange world. It is always changing, even in the same culture, but it is fundamentally the same, namely man's ultimate concerns symbolized in divine figures and actions.

Therefore we now can say: myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters.

From this follows that myths are *always* present, in every act of faith, because the language of faith is the symbol. But – and this is interesting in order to understand the history of *all* religions – these myths are also attacked, criticized, and surpassed in each of the great religions of mankind. The reason for this criticism is the very nature of the myth: it uses material from our ordinary experience. It puts the stories of the gods into the framework of time and space, although it belongs to the nature of the ultimate to be beyond time and space. But above all, it divides the divine into several divine figures, and in doing so, it removes ultimacy from each of them. But although it removes ultimacy from each of them, it does not remove the claim to ultimacy which is immediately given, with the name of God. If something is called “God,” it *claims* ultimacy, and must claim it, because it is an expression of ultimate concern. If there are many claiming this, there is a conflict of these claims, and this conflict of ultimate claims is the ultimate criterion against all forms of polytheism and idolatry, modern and present. It is the claim of different ultimates which disrupts the individual soul as much as it disrupts society. All imperialistic wars are ultimate claims of one or more of the nations, of the empires. And in the individual soul, the ultimate claims which fight in ourselves, with each other are the reason for all the disruptedness [sic.] of our personality, they are the reason for neurosis and psychosis. Most of our psychological sickness is based in the hidden polytheism of our soul. It is based in the idolatrous elements of our personality which fight with each other and produce disruption.

Now the criticism of the myth, wherever it appears, rejects the division of the divine. And there is a tremendous endeavor going on in all great religions, [as in all great [57] individuals, to overcome these splits of ultimate concern. One wants to go beyond the different claims, to one ultimate claim. One wants to go beyond the conflicting idols to the ultimate which is really ultimate.

When we have time to speak about the different types of faith and religion, we would find that here is the root of the different types of the great religions, namely the different ways in which these religions try to overcome the destructive split of consciousness.

Now in this way, history leads in the direction of monotheism. But let me state frankly: *monotheism is not necessarily a solution*, because even the monotheistic God can become a god of idolatrous character!

This is the point from which I will start and finish this whole discussion about religious [symbols] next time.