

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture VII

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"  
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Oct. 20, 1955 There are several [written] questions [here] which I shall try to answer after I finish the lecture, and perhaps some of them will be answered implicitly anyhow. [58]

Now what I said in the last minute of Tuesday's lecture was that in all religions, there are movements of anti-mythological criticism, and that this refers not only to polytheism (which means a *divided* ultimacy), but that it also refers to attempts to take the monotheistic symbolism literally. I refer here to a concept which is as ugly as it is important—namely "demythologization." Everybody breaks his tongue when he uses that word for the first time! Nevertheless, the word has been used and is now in the center of many theological discussions, especially on the European Continent. The word has been used in connection with the elaboration of the mythical elements in the stories and symbols of the Bible, especially of the New Testament—stories like those of the Paradise, of the Fall of Adam, of the Great Flood, of the Exodus from Egypt, of the Virginal Birth of the Messiah, many of His miracles, of His resurrection and ascension, of His expected return as the Judge of the universe—in short, all the stories in which divine-human interactions are told, are considered mythological in character and therefore as objects of demythologization.

Now the question we must ask, in connection with our problems here (namely, religion and language) is: what does the word "demythologization" really mean? I would say it can mean something very sound and necessary, namely the necessity of acknowledging a symbol as a symbol, and a myth as a myth, and rejecting the transformation of a symbol or myth into a literal statement about things and events happening in time and space. On the other hand, the word can mean something very wrong. It can mean the *removal* of symbols and myths *altogether*. And if it does mean this, then demythologization must be rejected. Then it becomes an attempt which can never be successful because symbol and myth are forms of the human consciousness which are always present in all of us. One can replace one myth by another one, but one cannot remove myth from man's spiritual life, for the myth is the combination of symbols of our ultimate concern. | [59]

A myth which is understood as a myth, a symbol which is understood as a symbol, *is not removed* by this fact that it is understood; it has the power to live. Such a myth which is understood as a myth, could be called a "broken" myth, a myth which is broken, which is not what a myth in natural growth was, but something has happened to it. And I suggest calling this whole realm (the realm in which we actually live) the realm of the broken myth. Christianity, for instance, denies by its very nature any *unbroken* myth,

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and so do all the great mystical religions of the East. In all of them, the myth is broken. And this is done just because of the monotheistic criticism in these religions. And we can say it is done in Christianity because the presupposition of all Christian thinking is the First Commandment, namely the commandment which rejects any ultimate besides the truly Ultimate, which rejects any kind of idolatry.

All mythological elements in the Bible, doctrine, and liturgy should be recognized as mythological. All Christian symbols should be recognized by Christian theologians and by those who are estranged from Christianity, *assymbols*, *as myths*. They should not be removed, but they should be interpreted and understood. You cannot create substitutes for a living myth, but you can interpret it. There is no substitute for symbols and myths; they are the language of faith.

The radical criticism of the myth is due to the fact that the primitive mythological consciousness resists all attempts to interpret the myth as myth. It is afraid of every act of demythologization. And this fear can be noticed in many people, even in our time. There is always a kind of shock if demythologization is done, if a symbol is understood as a symbol and a myth as a myth. The primitive mythological consciousness believes that the *broken* myth is deprived of its truth and has lost its convincing power. And certainly, those who live in an unbroken mythological world feel safe and certain, and they resist (often fanatically) any attempt to introduce an element of uncertainty of questioning by breaking the myth, namely by making conscious its symbolic and mythological character. Now this is a *fact* which cannot be denied, and you all will have examples for it not only in traditional religious groups but also in groups which believe in *other* kinds of myths, [60] for instance in the ultimacy of science, or of the nation, or of family relations. Wherever a myth develops and wherever somebody lives safely and certainly in a myth, there is resistance against an attempt in these people themselves, and from outside, to make the mythological or symbolic character, conscious. And often such resistance against making the mythological character of the myth conscious, is reported by authoritarian systems, religious or political. These systems, both religious and political (and in our time especially political) want to give safety to the people under their control, and at the same time, unchallenged power to those who exercise the control. For this, I recommend you to re-read once this very well known piece of great literature, namely Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*—but not the whole novel, although this also is worthwhile to read, all the time—but the famous symbolic story of the Great Inquisitor and his arguing with Jesus about the safety of the people, and his absolutely *true* attack on Jesus, that Jesus, by His demand of spiritual freedom, takes the people out of the safety in which the Church of the Inquisitor keeps them. This is one of the greatest symbols itself of the meaning of *unbroken* symbolism, and should be understood by everybody who resists the attempt to make symbols conscious.

The way in which the resistance against demythologization expresses itself is literalism. The symbols and myths are understood in their immediate meaning. The *material* of the myths, taken from nature and history, is used in its natural and proper sense. The character of the symbol to point beyond itself to something else, is disregarded. For instance, Creation is taken as a magic act which has happened once upon a time, either 5000 years ago or, as the Pope has now declared, five billion years<sup>1</sup>—but once upon a time. The Fall of Adam is localized in the land of the two streams, Tigris and Euphrates,

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<sup>1</sup>In a speech in November 1951, Pope Pius XII linked Lemaître's uratomic theory and God as the creator of the universe, declaring that Big Bang cosmology was compatible with the Bible. Reactions during the Cold War to this appropriation of an academic idea were ambivalent.

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and attributed to a human individual. The Virgin Birth of the Messiah is understood in biological terms; Resurrection and Ascension as physical events which, in principle could have been photographed; the Second Coming of the Christ as telluric, or cosmic, catastrophic. The presupposition of such literalism is the idea that God is a being, subject to the categories to which all beings are subjected—time and space; and He is acting, dwelling, Himself, on a special space, affecting the course of events and a being affected by them, like any other being in the universe. This leads to my fundamental criticism of literalism: |

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Literalism deprives God of His ultimacy; religiously speaking, of His majesty. It draws Him down to the level of that which is, by its very nature, not ultimate: the finite, the {un}conditional. In the last analysis, it is not rational criticism of the myth which is decisive—it never was, in the history of religion—but it is the inner-religious criticism. Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous. This is what has been felt by the classic leaders of the great religions (which became great by this very fact) as the shortcoming, the danger, of all symbolism and mythology in the religious realm.

Literalism calls “ultimate” something which is less than ultimate. Faith, conscious of the symbolic character of its symbols, gives God the honor which is due to Him. Therefore one should distinguish two stages of literalism: the natural stage and the reactive stage. The natural stage is the stage in which the mythical and the literal are undistinguishable for human consciousness. The primitive period of human groups and of individuals in all periods consists in the inability to separate the creations of symbolic imagination from the facts which can be verified through observation and experiment. This stage of the human mind is *fully justified*, and should not be disturbed artificially, if somebody lives in it. It should not be disturbed, either in individuals or groups, up to the decisive moment in which man’s questioning mind breaks the natural acceptance of the mythological visions as literal in their meaning. If this moment has appeared in the development of an individual—all those of you who have to deal with children, as parents or teachers, know that this is one of the most critical moments— then two ways can be taken. The one way is that one replaces the unbroken by the broken myth, not that one removes the myth—one cannot—but that one is aware of the symbolic character of the mythological symbols. This is the way which is objectively demanded, although it is impossible for many people who prefer the repression of their questions to any kind of unsafety which appears with the breaking of the myth. People who *want* to remain safe, they are forced into the second stage of literalism—the conscious one—in which they repress the questions which have come up in their minds. And this is the wrong way, the way of repression. The tool of repression is usually an acknowledged authority—the sacred qualities (like Church or Bible) to which one owes unconditional surrender. |

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Now such a stage is often very undefined and non-definite, and then it might go on, without too great damage. But such a repression is unjustifiable if a mature mind is broken in its personal center, in its integrity, by political or psychological methods of repression, of questions concerning the symbolic character of symbols. In this moment, the person is split in his personal unity, and he is hurt in his personal integrity—and *this is the way he should not go!*

Very often, if somebody goes this way of repression, he does not fully succeed—probably in most cases, he does not fully succeed. Then it happens that whenever, from outside, somebody represents the freedom to understand the symbolic character of the symbols, he becomes fanatical. This is the greatest danger, and the danger of much persecution, which follows the fact that there is no completely successful suppression of

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the questions which are in us. But there *is* suppression, or repression, even, and out of this repression the anxiety follows that one may be wrong, and this anxiety also is then repressed. And then if somebody represents freedom and *non*-repression, then he becomes an object of fanatical attack.

So let me conclude this: Not *natural* literalism is the enemy of critical thought, but conscious literalism, with repression and aggression against autonomous thought.

But one question arises, namely whether myths (or special types of myths) are able to express every kind of ultimate concern. Christian theologians, for instance, argue that the word “myth” should be reserved for natural myths, for this large group of mythological self-expression of the human mind in which the repetitive natural processes, for instance seasons, are understood in their ultimate meaning. And one continues saying: if, however, the word is seen as a historical *process*, with a beginning and an end, and a center, as in Judaism and Christianity, in Persia and Islam, then the term “myth” should not be used. In other words, the term myth should be reserved for a special type of myth. This would be a rather radical reduction of the realm in which the term myth would be applicable. Myth could not be understood any more as the language of our ultimate concern, but only as a discarded idiom of this language, which we cannot use any more.

But this again is not valid if we look at the history of religion, including [Christianity. [63] History proves that there are not only natural myths (meaning myths in which the movement of the sun and the moon, and day and night, etc., are mythologically understood, and deepened), but there are also historical myths which are not repetitions. If, for instance, the earth is seen as the battle-place of two divine powers, the divine and the demonic (as in ancient Persia), then this is a historical myth. It is linear, not circular. If the God of creation selects and guides a nation through history, towards an end which transcends all history, this is a historical myth. If the Christ, the transcendent divine being, appears “in the fullness of time,” lives, dies, and resurrects, this is a historical myth. Christianity is superior to those religions which are bound to a natural myth, which are not the Asiatic ones, but partly the Greek religions and most of the Semitic religions. But Christianity speaks the mythological language, like every other religion. It is a broken myth, of course, in which Christianity expresses itself, but it is a myth. Therefore Christianity would not be an expression of ultimate concern if the concern about the really Ultimate were expressed in any other way.

Now this is enough about the language of religion, and I will not go on today, but I will try to give the 15 minutes we still have for answering questions which must have come up in your minds. And here are some written—I will try to read them. If not, those who wrote them may ask them again:

*Questions from students:*

*Question:* If God is completely unknown—that is, no direct knowledge of Him is possible—how do we know that the fact of ultimate concern is grounded in Him? It is not a risk we dare, but a blind chance.

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* Now let me go into this question. What does it mean when the question asked, “God is completely unknown”? It presupposes, first of all, the concept of God. Therefore if it uses the word “God”—I mean now the question—and asks about His being completely unknown, there is a contradiction in this. If He were completely unknown, it would be meaningless to use these three letters, *G-o-d*, presupposing that they have a meaning. If they have a meaning, there is knowledge. [And this is my first answer to this question: you *never* can say that God is completely unknown if you say [64]

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“God” *at all*. If you speak of *anything* in the world, you can never say it is completely unknown because you know at least about it enough that you can ask this question. And that is already very much.

Now the further answer is that this is not the position I take at all. I didn’t speak about God directly here, but I spoke about religious language, i.e., the language of our ultimate concern. This language, I said, is symbolic. Symbolic knowledge is not less, but *more*, than ordinary knowledge! Of course, symbols can be true, and they are true if they express the actual relationship in the religious experience between man and that which he wants to symbolize in his symbols. Therefore, “God” can be a true symbol, He can be a demonic symbol, He can be a divine symbol. In any case, the question of the *truth* of what is expressed in the symbol is always open, and one cannot speak of “completely unknown.”

Then the other element of this question, “the fact of ultimate concern is grounded in God.” This is a complete reversal of my kind of arguing. I never said that, but I said there is an ultimate concern about the Ultimate. And this is simply a statement of the only thing which is certain, more certain than we ourselves are [probably: “more certain than we are of ourselves”?—Ed.], that the question of the meaning of our existence is beyond all our lives and expresses itself as passionate concern in many ways.

Therefore, I cannot turn the argument around and have, first, “God,” and then say the ultimate concern is grounded in it—this is just what I want to avoid.

This brings me to a statement which is perhaps illuminating for the whole [course of] lecture[s]: the method of a philosophy of religion—and of course if you speak about religion and culture, you give a philosophy of religion, implicitly, and largely explicitly. It is always wrong if you begin a philosophy of religion with the statement that you believe in God and then give arguments for His existence. This can never lead to an understanding of the phenomenon of religion. But you must always start the opposite way: you must start with the human situation in which there is the experience of ultimate concern—or, as one also could call it, the experience of the holy. [And then you can go on: How does this experience express itself? And the universal expression of it, even if something else is named, such as success, or nation, or money, is God. “God” is the name for the expression of our ultimate concern. [65]

Then, as I said in the last hour (shocking many of you), the question of the existence or non-existence of God is not only not a justified question, but it is a blasphemous one because the presupposition of this question is already the ultimacy of our concern—if it is a *real* question, if it is not only a dialectical play, or a desire to be shocking for other people. But if it is a *real, serious* question, it is done out of ultimate concern, and then it is affirmed already. But then, not the existence of *God* is affirmed, but [what is] affirmed is the truth of the ultimate concern and the possible truth of a special expression of this ultimate concern.

So I announce—somebody reminded me of it in the very first hour—that I would speak about the dialectics, or dynamics, of the holy. I didn’t do it because time is too limited, and I will not go too much into it. But what I called here as experience-of-being-ultimately-concerned can also be called the experience of the holy, because that which has the character of ultimacy, has also the character of the holy. Now in order to help you, I can only say: do read (and I underline this “do” ten times) the book of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. There he describes the nature of holiness as the mystery which both *fascinatum* (fascinating) and *tremendum* (producing trembling, producing holy awe about it). The analysis of this experience of the holy is one of the very great things in

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modern theology in the 20th century. This is the way I go. If you go the other way and start with God and come to man, then you must return to the old arguments for the existence of God, or to a simple authoritarian statement. If you want to avoid these two impossible ways, then the only way which you have is a way from ultimate concern, or experience of holiness, to its expressions; and certainly its central expression is God. Now that was my answer to this first question.

*Question* (P. H. John): You said symbols grow and die; they are not invented. How, and why, does a symbol degenerate—especially a religious symbol? You have stated that the symbol of the Virgin Mary is a dead symbol. How did it die? For whom? Obviously for Catholics it is very much alive. What does it symbolize? Is it dead only for Protestants? [66] How can Protestants recover the element of the female, mothering ground in the Divine? Is this necessary? Wise? [laughter] Finally, please elaborate fully: “Protestantism, in rejecting sexual symbolism, is in danger not only of losing much symbolic wealth but also of cutting off the sexual realm from the ground of being and meaning in which it is rooted and from which it gets its consecration.” —*The Protestant Era*, p. 119.

*Answer* (Paul Tillich): Now I am very grateful for these questions too. First a very simple answer, which I hope I said when I spoke here in class, namely that of course the dying of a symbol happens by a transformation of the fundamental relationship between a man and the ultimate, as it happened in the Reformation. So obviously this symbol didn't die for the Catholics; on the contrary, it has almost removed all other symbols of Christianity, in the last decades. The main theological interest of Catholicism today is Mariology, the doctrine of Mary. But for Protestants it has been removed because of the reestablishment of the radical monotheistic element, the exclusiveness of the ultimate in the sense of prophetic religion. This is my first answer.

Now your second question does two things for me: first it gives me the occasion to affirm that your question is quite justified. I believe that Protestantism *really* has lost something by having lost the female symbolism—to a great extent, not completely. And one of the ways in which I try personally to regain it—what you call “motherly ground” is absolutely justified—terms like “ground of being” have a mystical connotation in which the motherly element, the carrying, embracing element, is contained. And this is my way in which at least, preliminarily, I try to overcome the exclusive and often intolerable male character of Protestant symbolism, especially in the Calvinistic realm of Protestantism. There is much more of infant symbolism and mother symbolism in Lutheranism.

And then finally, you bring me to a statement about symbols which I left out, and I am glad you reminded me of it, namely the two-edged character of all religious symbols. I pointed to this briefly, when I spoke about [the] symbol as healing power, and I will use the realm of medicine, of healing, as an example for what I mean by the two-edged character of genuine symbols. They symbolize the ultimate—ground of being, the object of our ultimate concern, or however you call it—that is one edge of the sword. The other is that they take their symbolizing material out of the realm of our daily experience—for instance out of the realm of medicine. Now this has a consequence that the highest religious concept, salvation, is taken out of the realm of healing—*salvus*=healing, salvation means healing. And it is a very profound thing that we all shall remember, that salvation does not mean moral betterment, but healing, namely reestablishing the unity, *making-whole*, as the Greek term for healing is, which still appears in the New Testament. *This* has the consequence of the other edge, namely that the medical realm itself gets consecration from these symbols. The state of things in which, for instance, the medical realm is completely separated from the realm of the holy, the *unconsecrated* existence of the cultural realms [67]

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(amongst them for instance, the medical realm) is due to the fact that we have lost the understanding for the symbolic material which underlies our traditional religious symbols (for instance, that of salvation). Salvation is healing, and, as the New Testament stories show, it is also bodily healing—and it is certainly, very much so, psychological healing: the throwing-out of the demons, these ever-repeated stories in the New Testament, point to what today has become the great emergency of the American mind, namely the neurotic and psychotic diseases.

Finally, it is healing in the *center* of the personality and creates an ultimate unity in it.

Now all this is expressed in a symbol which is understood. And we can carry this through also to the political realm, to the social realm, even to the economic realm, and I will do some of this in all these lectures. But here, from the point of view of religious language in which we still are, the decisive thing is to know the double-edged character of all symbols: they are taken from the ordinary material in which we are living our daily life, to which healing belongs, for instance; they apply it to our ultimate concern, and in doing so they give consecration to the realm from which they are taken. So if you keep in mind this double-edged character of symbols, then you will probably feel, much profounder than ordinarily, the necessity for the realms of our daily life (for instance, eating and drinking). |

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*Question* (Sam Keen —after class): (about fundamentalism): ... Don't Fundamentalists, with their primitivism, derive healing power from their beliefs? ...

*Answer* (Paul Tillich): Very much so!—What was your first question?

*Question* (Sam Keen): (Did you say there is no healing power there?)

*Answer* (Paul Tillich): *No*, I did not *at all!* That would be a great error because in all primitive stages of unbroken myths, you have a lot of healing power.