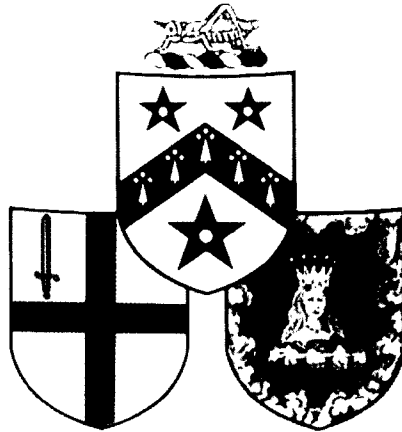


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THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY

Lecture 1

CHRISTIANITY AS MYTH

by

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THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY:

THE BROKEN MYTH

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One of the most significant and influential books of the Twentieth Century was Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argued against the common view of science as the steady and incremental accumulation of observation, data, discoveries and inventions.

Instead, he argued that the history of science is characterised by periods of peaceful and normal research punctuated by epochs of crisis and transformation. He called these crises 'scientific revolutions'. What Kuhn calls 'normal' science begins when a community of scientists agrees about the nature of the basic entities they are talking about. They operate within a constellation of basic agreements he called a 'paradigm'. A paradigm is a scientific achievement universally accepted within a community of practitioners that, for a time, provides solutions to certain recognised problems.

These paradigms are not permanent and unalterable descriptions of reality. They work as long as they work or until they are challenged by anomalies they cannot explain. It is the persistence of these unexplained anomalies that precipitates a scientific crisis. Sometimes the going paradigm can be made to solve the problem. Sometimes no solution can be found and the problem is put on hold till a solution comes along. But sometimes a new paradigm emerges that replaces the old one, by solving current difficulties and so the process continues. Speaking in very broad terms, and using astronomy as an example, we can see how the Copernican paradigm succeeded the Ptolemaic, and was itself succeeded by the Newtonian paradigm, by answering new questions and by providing better solutions to new problems. It would not, however, be accurate to say that the Ptolemaic paradigm was false or mistaken. It worked until it ceased to work, as was the case with the Newtonian, mechanistic universe, which was succeeded by the quantum paradigm. As far as I understand these things, the current quantum paradigm no longer supplies satisfactory answers to certain anomalies discovered at the sub-atomic level, and a more complete paradigm will probably emerge. The new paradigm will, in time, be succeeded by another that does the job better.

One of the important things to notice about Kuhn's work is that it can be applied not only to science, but to human knowledge in general. And it makes the notion of 'truth' contingent upon who and where and what we are. It does not seem to be the case that there is an absolute objective 'truth' about the universe out there waiting for us to stumble upon, the way we might find a lost treasure in a sunken galleon. What seems to happen is that a point of view works for us, answers our questions, helps us to operate in life, so we hold it until it no longer does the job it was designed for. In fact, we come to realise, our viewpoints were not pieces of concrete truth that we discovered and logged into our minds; they were practical ways of working, ways of dealing with what lay before us, problem-solving devices. And when better ways of doing things came along we transferred our loyalties to them.

This notion that there is no fixed truth out there is extremely difficult for many people to accept. Their anxiety may have something to do with the normal human resistance to change and the over-turning of perceptions we have become comfortable with; but it probably has even more to do with an ancient attitude to reality that has been around at least since Plato. This is the notion that there is an ideal, perfect, truthful, transcendent reality out there and that we should struggle to get our minds and wills to correspond to it. Kuhn's theory suggests that what we think of as 'true' at any one time is always related to where we are in history, so it is contingent, not fixed or absolute. The Platonic or dualistic view holds that there is a steady state of fixed value and truth somewhere, which in our present situation we only catch glimpses of, but which we must constantly struggle towards.

Associated with the dualistic approach to truth or absolute value there usually goes a system of authority, because a potent way to resolve the dilemmas of actual human experience and the disagreements they generate is to assert that there are agencies who already possess this absolute knowledge and it is our duty to obey them and receive their revealed insights with humility. The history of philosophy would suggest that you are in either one of these groups or the other. You are either some kind of idealist, who believes that there is an absolute perfection of truth out there to be submitted to; or you are a pragmatist, someone who sees 'truth' as contingent upon where you are in history, as a way of talking about attitudes that work for you or of which you approve.

As a matter of fact, most people seem to *operate* in the pragmatic way, though they may claim to *believe* in an overarching theory of absolute truth. Let me suggest an example of this anomaly from the history of moral attitudes. If we think about the status of women, for instance, we can see the matter from several different angles. If you are a dualist, who believes that there is absolute truth or value somewhere, you will probably believe in the existence of what you call 'objective standards', independent moral realities that stand somewhere on their own, irrespective of where we happen to be, and it is our duty to correspond to them, obey them. But then anomalous things begin to happen. The objective standards may indeed still stand where they did, but we keep moving. The authoritative systems that mediate these objective standards have conveniently, if fatefully, provided documentary evidence to support their claims upon us. In the case of the status of women, for instance, these authorities will probably have defined them in very precise and specific ways, usually as helpmeets to men, with carefully circumscribed roles. This is the certainly the case with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. For instance, in Genesis 3.16 God says to Woman, after she has caused the Fall of Adam: 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'. Paul's version of this is found in I Corinthians 11.3ff: 'I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband...for man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man'. You don't have to be Einstein to see how these prescriptions for women clearly had their origin in a specific historical context. At a certain stage of historical development, biology will dictate an absolute destiny for most women, so that the exigencies of developed theories or explanatory myths to account for this fact. The narrative in the Book of Genesis about the disobedience of Eve and her seduction of Adam to the same sin is the classic explanatory myth within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It offers an explanation for the laborious lives of women in primitive societies, as well as the pains of childbirth. The Fall narrative is what Kuhn would call a paradigm or a set of basic agreements that explain the way things are.

However, history is not static and one of the things it has clearly done in our culture is to deliver us from absolute biological necessity, so that we today define ourselves less by the pure processes of nature and more by the dynamics of human culture. As far as women are concerned, this means that they are increasingly liberated from biology to become agents of their own destiny, within the usual limits that define us all. In Kuhnian language, what we then begin to experience is a bad fit between the old paradigm and the new reality. The paradigm of biological necessity, or of objective gender standards, no longer answers the questions women are asking or solves the problems created by the new claims they are making. Since the old paradigm cannot resolve these anomalies, a revolution in our attitudes takes place and a new paradigm emerges. In the case of women today, there is a generally accepted agreement that they should no longer be totally bound by reproductive necessity and the gender roles that developed from it, and should be seen to be, at least in theory, the equal of men.

It is obvious that this kind of paradigm shift in gender roles creates difficulties for groups who do not understand or refuse to accept the historically contingent nature of truth claims or of so-called objective moral standards, as they have related to men and women. The chances are that if you adhere to one of these systems you will be experiencing considerable unease today because, while you have probably accepted many aspects of the new paradigm, your belief system or underlying theory of life is probably diametrically opposed to the new reality. One way of dealing with this discomfort is to retreat within a moral community that is firmly rooted in the old paradigm or state of development. This is best done by the process of cultural separation that you get in certain ethnic groups, such as the Amish in Pennsylvania or the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Brooklyn and Jerusalem. It is less easy to do that when you are actually living fully within a society that has accepted the new paradigm and organises itself accordingly. Here, there is bound to be considerable inner tension, as is the case, for instance, within the Roman Catholic Church, the majority of whose members in this country are clearly influenced by the new gender paradigm in most aspects of their lives, except in the religious sphere.

Metaphysical dualists tend to belong to communities that follow, at least in theory, some version of objective or enduring standards, so they are prey to the particular discontents I have described above. What is more frustrating, however, is not their personal discomfort, but the fact that they will probably be operating fairly competently within the new paradigm, which is based on an action or practice approach to truth, while continuing to adhere to a theoretical metaphysic that contradicts it in theory. This is an example of what Paul Tillich called the dishonesty of 'the unbroken myth'. Tillich's analysis of the role of myth in religion bears close parallels to Kuhn's paradigm theory, and it is to Tillich that I now turn.

I want to begin this transition by quoting from a book by Alan Watts. In *This is IT*, he writes: 'There is a kind of speech that may be able to convey something without actually being able to say it. Korzybski ran into this difficulty in trying to express the apparently simple point that things are not what we say they are, that, for example, the word "water" is not itself drinkable. He formulated it in his "law of non-identity", that "whatever you say a thing *is* it *isn't*". He was trying to show that we are talking about the unspeakable world of the physical universe, the world that is other than words. Words represent it, but if we want to *know* it directly we must do so by immediate sensory contact. What we call things, facts, or events are after all no more than convenient units of perception, recognisable pegs for names, selected from the infinite multitude of lines and surfaces, colours and textures, spaces and densities which surround us. There is no more a fixed and final way of dividing these

variations into things than of grouping the stars in constellations'.¹ We usually find the distinction between things and what we say about them fairly easy to grasp. It is obvious that language is a kind of sign system we use for communicating with each other about things outside ourselves, and we see the process at work when children speak their first words. They point to a round, red object on the floor and say 'ball' and we are thrilled, because they have spoken their first word, made their first linguistic connection. Certain philosophers go so far as to say that it is language that creates the world for us, that we can never get hold of things as they are in themselves apart from the words we use to talk about them. This is one of those endless debates that is hardly worth entering, except to note that even it has to be conducted in words, because they are the only connective means we have for expressing our concern with these matters. The important distinction to note is that our words may *represent* external reality, but they are not the thing itself, they are only what we have decided to call it.

This distinction becomes particularly important in religious language. It is quite obvious that in religion we have what Tillich called 'an ultimate concern'. We are trying to talk about, make a connection with, that which concerns the very meaning of our own existence. There is something about our humanity that causes us to feel apart from or separated from the purpose or depth of our own existence. If we compare ourselves to the other animals with which we share the planet, the thing that distinguishes us is precisely this ultimate concern, this concern about ourselves, and not just about our physical survival. We look out on life and we look in on ourselves, making both out there and in here the object of our own gaze, our own concern. That act of looking or gazing or being concerned gives rise to 'religion', which means a kind of connection to the mystery of what is beyond ourselves, however we define it. That is why even atheism can be religious, because it is also about that ultimate concern, that final question we ask about ourselves. What we call faith, of one sort or another, is unavoidable here. Faith is our response to that which we cannot establish with certainty. Atheists express their attitude to these final or ultimate matters in a God-denying faith, but there is no doubt of their passionate concern over the matter. For Tillich, the only real atheism was a complete lack of concern for the meaning of our existence. 'Indifference toward the ultimate question is the only imaginable form of atheism'.² Tillich defined 'ultimate concern' in this way: 'One is ultimately concerned only about something to which one essentially belongs and from which one is existentially separated'.³ Because of that potent experience of the combination of longing and separation, we create a language both to express our ultimate concern and to connect ourselves with it. It is the language of myth and symbol. Since our concern is for that mystery from which we feel separated, yet whose possibility haunts us, we develop a language of symbols with which to talk about it. The word *symbol* is from the Greek for 'bringing together' or making a connection. A national flag is an example of a symbol that stands for or makes concrete the abstraction of the nation. It becomes an emotionally potent way of expressing national loyalty, as when athletes at the Olympic Games wrap themselves in it after winning a gold medal, or of foreign hatred, as when it is burned by the enemies of the nation.

¹ Alan Watts, *This is IT*, Rider, London, 1996p.221

² Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1958, p.45.

³ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1957, p.112

In religious discourse, God is the ultimate symbol. This little word, with all its potent associations, connects us to all the questions we ask, and all the longings we have, concerning ultimate meaning or its absence. The symbol 'God' is one of the most ambiguous of human inventions. The Hebrews were so aware of the unbridgeable gap between this symbol and what it was intended to connect us with, that they were afraid of using it and constantly pointed to its dangers. Since, by definition, God could not be what mortals said God was, they preferred to speak in circumlocutions or descriptive analogues rather than try to name God. This was the reason for their radical fear of idolatry, which is the identification of God with an object, either physical or phonetic. The classic text is from Exodus 32 where the people grow frustrated with the God of Moses, who hides behind clouds on mountain tops. They want an accessible, portable God, and Aaron, the pliable religious functionary, obliges them: "Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me". So all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt".⁴ Idolatry is always a greater danger to religion than atheism, because it identifies something we ourselves have created, something that is essentially an extension or projection of ourselves, with that which is beyond our knowing or creating. Even more significantly, the idolatrous tendency mistakes the nature of symbols. Symbols may represent something beyond themselves; they may even, in some sense, connect us with it; but they are never the thing itself. We may appropriately show reverence and respect for the religious symbols we have created, because they link us to the real object of our worship; but we must not treat them as though they were the equivalent of the thing symbolised. If we fall into that trap, we confuse the finite with the ultimate, the medium with the mystery it delicately bears. Radical theism of this sort is close to atheism, and may even be described as a form of practical atheism, because it denies that the symbols of religion can ever be perfectly identified with the mystery we call God. Those geniuses of the spirit we call mystics know this intuitively and often express it brutally. 'I pray to God to rid me of God', said Meister Eckhart. 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him', goes a commandment from the eastern mystical tradition.

If we have to be careful in the claims we make for religious symbols, we have to be doubly careful when we come to the way we use religious myths. Tillich defines them in this way: 'Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters'.⁵ He points out that since the language of faith is the symbol, the expression of faith is inextricably connected to myth. Myth is the way we mediate our deepest experiences of God. He goes on to point out that our myths have to be constantly criticised and transcended, because of their very nature. He writes: '(Myth) 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'.⁶ The first criticism of the divine myth takes us from polytheism to monotheism, by rejecting division within the divine. But even the notion of one God is unavoidably mythological, because to speak of God at all is to draw God into time and space. This is the same paradox we saw in discussing the symbol 'God': to name God is already to limit God, make God an entity or an idol. There is no escape from this paradox of speaking about that which is beyond all our speaking. And the same goes for our stories or myths. They, too, run the unavoidable risk of becoming idols, divine objects, instead of humanly constructed symbols that may mediate, but can never enclose the divine.

⁴ Exodus 32.2-4.

⁵ Tillich, *ibid.* p.49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49.

The important thing to remember here is that we cannot do without myths; they are the way we express and give form to our transcendent longing, our ultimate concern. But we must constantly reflect on the way they work and refuse to offer them any final status. This process is what theologians call 'demythologisation', which is a self-conscious act of reflection on how myths operate. To demythologise the myth of Adam and Eve, for instance, is not to abandon it as a uselessly primitive way of speaking about abstract matters. It is to understand it as a myth, a narrative way of speaking about abstractions, which is valued for that very reason. The myth is seen as a powerful metaphor for real human experience. It is kept not because it is bad history, but because it is good poetry, because it provides us with a powerful shorthand for complex human experiences of alienation and regret.

Retaining, but demythologising a story in this way gives us what Tillich calls 'a broken myth'. He writes: 'A myth which is understood as a myth, but not removed or replaced, can be called "a broken myth". Christianity denies by its very nature any unbroken myth, because its presupposition is the first commandment: the affirmation of the ultimate as ultimate and the rejection of any kind of idolatry. All mythological elements in the Bible, and doctrine and liturgy should be recognised as mythological, but they should be maintained in their symbolic form and not be replaced by scientific substitutes. For there is no substitute for the use of symbols and myths: they are the language of faith'.⁷ However, this process of breaking or interpreting the myth in order to release its power for our own day is always resisted by the official keepers of the myth. To challenge or criticise the myth of which they are the official guardians not only threatens the guardians' authority, it threatens the peace and security of the people who have submitted themselves to the systems they control. This is why the people who challenge religion's claim to be a carrier of objective knowledge rather than the poet of symbol and metaphor are invariably denounced as faithless apostates. The irony here is that these prophetic challenges to the misuse of myth and symbol are usually made by people who have a radical fear of idolatry and who would rather be accused of, or even fall into, atheism than submit to the worship of human constructs, which is what the failure to recognise the real status of myth amounts to. Tillich is eloquent on the subject: 'The resistance against demythologisation expresses itself in "literalism". The symbols and myths are understood in their immediate meaning. The material, taken from nature and history, is used in its proper sense. The character of the symbol to point beyond itself to something else is disregarded. Creation is taken as a magic act which happened once upon a time. The fall of Adam is localised on a special geographical point and attributed to a human individual. The virgin birth of the Messiah is understood in biological terms, resurrection and ascension as physical events, the second coming of Christ as a telluric, or cosmic, catastrophe. The presupposition of such literalism is that God is a being, acting in time and space, dwelling in a special place, affecting the course of events and being affected by them like any other being in the universe. Literalism deprives God of his (sic) ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his (sic) majesty. It draws him (sic) down to the level of that which is not ultimate, the finite and conditional'.⁸

⁷ Ibid., pp.50-51.

⁸ Ibid., pp.51-52

He goes on to describe two stages of literalism, which he calls the 'natural' and the 'reactive'. In the natural stage of literalism, the mythical and the literal are indistinguishable. This stage is characteristic of primitive individuals and groups who do not separate the creations of the imagination from natural facts. Tillich says that this stage has its own rights and should be left undisturbed right up to the time when humanity's questioning mind challenges the conventional acceptance of the myth as literal. There are only two ways to go when this moment arrives. The first is to replace the unbroken myth with the broken myth, which yields its inner meaning through interpretation and the power of metaphor. Unfortunately, many people find the uncertainty of the broken myth impossible to live with, so they repress their own questions and denounce the questions that others put to the myth. They retreat into reactive literalism, which is aware of the questions but represses them, either consciously or unconsciously. The instrument of repression is usually an acknowledged authority, such as the Church or the Bible, which claims our unconditional surrender.

Natural literalism is obviously an honest response to myth and symbol. In Kuhnian language, it is to remain within a traditional paradigm that is still working and still offers the best answer to the going questions. Reactive literalism, on the other hand, is usually a rear-guard action on the part of those who are still emotionally invested in a breaking paradigm. Their fear is that if the myth is broken it will lose its power. In these lectures I shall try to show that it is only the broken myth that can speak to us today, and still speak with transforming power.

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