Religious Language and Myth

Within Theology and the discipline of Religious Studies, the notions of myth and mythology have tremendous significance. The last thing that the terms mean here are anything we might connect with legends or fantasies! Rather, the view is that in religious traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism and other developed religious views – and Islam would be included too – texts, narratives and traditions exhibiting mythic form can be found. Examples of mythical narratives within the biblical literature include the Creation narratives in Genesis, and the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke.

In this context the myths are textual versions of earlier oral traditions where fundamental questions of meaning, purpose or value were explored in a setting that was pre-scientific and pre-historical. Myths thus reflect explorations of fundamental concerns about human destiny in ways that relate to historical existence as, in part at least, interpretations of what is perceived to be the truth of it.

From this we must see that in the setting of theological discussions and in the context of the study of religion, ‘myth’ denotes a story or narrative which may have some basis in history, but historical accuracy and detail are not the key focus; the myth will use metaphors or parabolic teachings or symbols, analogies or allegories to present

1 Early Christian symbols.
insights, truths and understandings that have to do with fundamental questions of meaning and purpose.

**A key function of myths** is that *the narratives provide inspirational and motivational readings of the moral vision for life*...

Another is that *myths provide an indirect means of expressing or interpreting something of the infinite and inexpressible ‘Holy’* (remember Otto!)

Myths are important to students of religion as well as to those within the religions in questions because the they appear to represent a tradition on insight into a fundamental problem or series of problems that are characteristic of the religion in question, and characteristics of the tradition of faith within that religion back to that religions earliest times. Myths thus predate ‘theology’, doctrine, philosophy and so on. One implication of this is that mythical understanding is via faith rather than through theological interpretation or reflection...

However, myth should not be seen in isolation from the other aspects of religion.

Here we can consider the work of **Ninian Smart** (1927-2001). In a number of his writings he has developed a persuasive phenomenological view of religion which is what is in evidence when the seven following ‘dimensions’ are present:

1. **Myth** – narratives expressing and exploring fundamental questions of meaning, being, value and truth.
2. **Ritual** – patterns of ceremony and worship, devotions expressive of the faith and belief characteristic of the religion – mythic narratives may be re-enacted in devotional rituals, cf. Eucharist
3. **Dogma** – doctrines, teachings, principles and theories constituting the theology and philosophy of the tradition in question. The ideas here may be expressed in myth and ritual.
4. **Ethics** – principles for the practice of life, moral values and principles for how life is to be fulfilled. Mythic and allegorical writing may explore and present the ethical principles.
5. **Experience** – the experiential dimension of religion might entail the special or distinctive experiences the religion involves or it may denote the particularity of engagement with the religion through all of the dimensions.
6. **Social** – the communal aspect of the religion – this may be closely linked to the experiential and ritualistic dimensions.
7. **Material** – the physical aspects of religion within an historical and cultural tradition; buildings and shrines and the like.¹

¹ Smart sets out his dimensions of religion in *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, Fontana, 1969, and in *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, UCA Press, 1998 Amongst the academic posts that he held, Smart was Professor of Religious Studies at Lancaster University.
All we need to appreciate from Smart’s definition is that **Myth is clearly a key component in what religion is**…

*  

A vital feature of myth follows from the fact that the language of myth is infused with images, metaphors and symbols – and so the idea that a literal or factual meaning is here relevant is a major mistake! Nevertheless, it is a mistake commonly made within religious traditions and by the critics of religion! From both camps we will find evidence of arguments that assume that mythical writing is to be taken literally! Fundamentalists thinkers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, will not like to see the stories of the Old Testament defined as ‘myth’ as this will be too close to the idea that they cannot be true!

*A brief task:*

Take as an example the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2:3. Outline how the story might be read literally by a fundamentalist. How does this fit with scientific views of the origin of the universe? How does a liberal ‘mythical’ reading of Genesis fit in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literalist view</th>
<th>Scientific view</th>
<th>Mythical view</th>
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*Stephen Loxton A2 Religious Studies*  
The Problem of Religious Language
Bultmann & Demythologizing the New Testament.

The New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) argues\(^1\) that it is wholly appropriate to describe the mind-set of the first-century as exhibited in the texts of the New Testament as ‘mythological’. He means by this that the world-view assumed by the writers of the New Testament is one infused by spiritual realities and powers, by forces and agencies that are how reality is for the age in question.

‘The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological, i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events; and the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits.’\(^2\)

Bultmann’s view remains in current scholarship. In a recent work, James M. Robinson (b1924) suggests that the Q-based Temptations narrative found in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus is confronted by the devil, is the ‘mythical expression’ of Jesus’ historical wrestling with the question of what sort of mission he should embark upon\(^3\). Thus the texts are written to convey a reading of reality as understood in the context of composition. For the modern or post-modern reader, the texts include much that runs counter to what we take to be common sense, and counter to what we assume as viable from the scientific and anthropological point of view.

For example, biblical cosmology involves the earth in a suspended state above the murky world of Sheol and beneath the heavens; evil spirits from below and divine influences from above invade ‘our world’ in and as a cosmic battle. This is a sacred view of reality as in the quotation from Eliade cited above, but the point is, in the time of the world being seen in this way, this way of seeing the world is normal.

The world-view of *The Gospel of Mark* is a classic example of this sort of thing…. Think of the instances of possession, of healing via the casting out of spirits, of the relation between disease, sin, healing and forgiveness\(^4\).

Bultmann’s idea is that we need to ‘dymythologise’ the New Testament: thus we do not judge it directly via the intellectual criteria of modernity; we need to re-interpret the mythic world-view and the texts composed under its assumptions, by working our way into the human situations that the myths address, so that we can gain an understanding of the message about the human condition that the texts deal with. Bultmann’s idea is that we are able to examine a mythic text – the birth stories in Luke and Matthew, for example – and by unpeeling the mythical layers we disclose the reality of God’s purpose being fulfilled through the lowly and the excluded – ‘the

\(^1\) See R Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, Scribners, New York, 1958

\(^2\) Bultmann, Op cit, p15


\(^4\) Read *Mark* 1:22 - 5 for a reminder!
humble are exalted’. In similar manner, Bultmann points out that in the First Century it was a cultural norm to have a myth of a redeemer of heavenly origin or significance who a) is killed and b) resurrected. In the Christian experience this myth is attached to the historical Jesus and writers from Paul onwards express an eschatological version of the resurrection myth to prepare the followers of ‘the way of the Lord’ for the judgment that is believed to be at hand.¹

Bultmann thinks it is clear that this whole mythical structure is to us an anachronism and so taken literally it is of no significance; ‘demythologised’, the resurrection stories are seen as expressive of the transformation of the self that occurs in and through the commitment of faith.

Bultmann takes it as read that we need to demythologise so as to negotiate the problem of cultural relativism, which in evidence when a text from a prior period of history is written within and for the intellectual and cultural assumptions of the day.

A problem with this is that we can argue that there is always the difficulty of accurate translation as we deconstruct a myth from a prior age and seek to reconstruct its meaning of modernity. But we might say that this is a major problem only if we undertake the business of translation on isolated occasions; if we made a coherent effort we are likely to be able to make a much more accurate job of it!

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¹ See Bultmann Op Cit, p16ff
A2 Question:

‘To what extent is myth an effective way of conveying religious truth?’
Religious Language as the Language of Symbols

John Macquarrie (1919-2006) on the relation of symbols to myth:

‘In myth itself, the symbol and that which is symbolised have not yet been clearly distinguished. As soon as we recognise a symbol as a symbol, we have taken a step back from the myth and emerged from a purely mythological way of thinking and talking. Thus although it is often said that myth is indispensable to the expression of religious truth, this statement is not accurate. What is meant is that religious or theological language cannot dispense with symbols, specifically, the symbols drawn from myth... But the fact that these symbols are now understood as symbols and that they can be discussed and illuminated in an alternative interpretative language indicates that the person who can handle them in this way has transcended a merely mythical apprehension of the symbols.’

Maquarrie’s point is a) to endorse the idea of the mythic mode of expression that we find in religious traditions, and b) to suggest that the key images – the symbols – that are embedded in myth are in fact the key theological motifs that we need to review and which can be ‘discussed and illuminated’ in linguistic mind sets other than that of the original.

The idea that the language of religion should be considered significant as a form of symbolic expression is developed by a number of scholars: two who are particularly influential are J.H. Randall and Paul Tillich (1886-1965). We will also look at Macquarrie’s ideas.

J. H. Randall’s thesis is set out in The Role of Knowledge in the Western World

Randall portrays religion as

• A natural phenomenon
• A human activity
• A culturally vital activity
• Religion functions to nurture and sustain moral and communal values
• Religious ideals and values inspire and motivate us to heroic action
• Religion opens up our awareness of the depths and wonders of experience and thereby gives is a means to communicate these insights
• Randall suggests that just as Art opens up our appreciation of beauty, so Religion via its symbols opens up the possibilities for moral and communal life, indicating the ways in which humans can transcend how they are and move towards what they can be.

1 J Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, SCM London, 1966, p122
2 The book was published in Boston, 1958.
Religion employs symbols to express the patterns of indication and the key symbol any sense. Rather ‘God’ is ‘an intellectual symbol for the religious dimension of the world, for the divine.’

We can see from this that Randall endorses Religion within and for human experience, and his view is to promote a broad view of the domains of understanding humanity can employ. He is anti-reductionist in the sense that he opposes reduces all meaning to the criteria of empirical science, but he is not defending a realist view of religious truth.

Interestingly, Randall’ view of religion echoes Ludwig Feuerbach’s theory set out in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). In a number of ways Feuerbach’s thought has had immense influence on the development of ideas in Philosophy & Religious Studies and it is worthwhile taking a quick look at his key ideas:

*Feuerbach.*

In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach (1804-1872) wrote a highly influential and radical critique of Christianity.

Feuerbach was a critic of Hegel's philosophy. Like Hegel (1770-1831), Feuerbach sees no ultimate ontological distinction between the finite and the infinite, but this is not because the finite is the expression of the infinite - it is because the infinite is a projection of the finite. Whereas for Hegel thought and reason are determinative of and essentially identical with social and practical reality, for Feuerbach social and practical reality is determinative and thought or ideas are expressive. Hegel thought that reality was the expression of an idea – *Geist* (‘Spirit’) - Feuerbach believes that reality gives rise to thought and to regulative ideas expressive of all that seems best in experience.

To illustrate; Hegel would argue that the ‘spirit of an age’ provided evidence of *Geist* coming to expression and self-realisation. Whether it is the insight and character of Hellenism, the creative and expressive spirit of the Renaissance, the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, the radical spirit of the age of revolution, or the technical and pragmatic spirit of the industrial age, for Hegel the determinative force is *Geist* in and as which all things essentially are.

Against this Feuerbach suggests that when we speak of the ‘spirit’ or ethos of an age, epoch or culture all that we mean is that the term in question functions as a collation and summary representative of the sum total of the phenomena within that age or period. The term has no other, further reality or meaning. In consequence, to suggest

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1 Randall Op cit p112.
Feuerbach thus denies that the driving force in history is ideational. In developing this critique of Hegel, Feuerbach's alternative account of that to which Hegel's system offers an explanation – i.e., progress and/or change in society and through history - uses the inverted Hegelian ontology and thus preserves the dialectical process as the general means by which to account for change. But Feuerbach does not stress dialectical processes - he maintains that the determinative forces in history could not be spiritual in the romantic-idealist sense. Instead, and this was to interest and influence Marx greatly, the material circumstances commonly experienced by the collective group in question is put forward as the determinative force.

To Feuerbach material and physical circumstances have the key role in shaping ideals and thus in the promotion of change. As he once wrote, ‘The true relationship of thought to being is this; being is the subject, thought the predicate. Thought arises from being-being does not arise from thought.’

Feuerbach's view is, for example, that poor or difficult material conditions give rise to a desire for security and salvation. The danger is that circumstances will be such that the ideals of value which arise cannot be attained and are thus consecrated with a transcendent character in a religious world-view. Thus Feuerbach - as in his *The Essence of Christianity* - sees religion as the consequence of an inversion and projection of human concerns and interests. All that is desired and all that is expressive of human hope and potential but which is absent within material and social circumstance is projected into the Kingdom of Heaven: justice, peace, equality, immortality, beauty, goodness, and so on. These virtues and aspirations are seen to be obtained beyond finite life and thus to these ends a world-negating attitude is cultivated.

To combat this tendency Feuerbach proposes an application of empirical knowledge to social and material life to confirm the priority of being over thought and to thus enable the actualisation of human potential.

To illustrate in more detail: in *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach developed his analysis of religion. The criticisms apply to Hegelianism with more or less equal force.

Christianity is seen as the general consequence and theology as the particular expression of the human disposition towards abstraction and projection - the habit of abstracting the best from experience and understanding and projecting it as a goal or ideal. This is not unimportant in social and human development. ‘God’ is thus a cipher for human potential, since God' denotes the essence of human aspiration/potential. i.e., wisdom, compassion, creativity, etc. It was thus that Feuerbach could assert that
‘That which I recognize in the understanding as essential, I place in God as existent: God is what the understanding thinks as the highest’. 1

Also

‘That which is the highest for man, from which he can make no further abstraction, which is the positive limit of his intellect, of his feeling, of his statement, that is to him God…’ 2

Although Feuerbach denies that he holds to an atheistic doctrine, the ‘God’ he affirms in these texts is certainly not the objective Divinity of orthodox realist theology.

Feuerbach maintains that

‘The beginning, middle and end of religion is MAN’ 3

and that the

‘objective essence of religion, particularly the Christian religion, is nothing but the essence of human, and particularly Christian, feeling; the secret of theology therefore is anthropology…’ 4

Reality and existence is for Feuerbach empirical and sensate. The idea of an objectively existent transcendent God is so untenable to him that he never bothers to consider its possibility. All that exists in this regard is the ‘God’ of religious belief which exists in a ‘qualitative sensational’ sense. This ‘God’ is ‘essentially an empirical existence, without having its distinctive marks, it is in itself a matter of experience, and yet in reality no object of experience.’ 5

The problem seen by Feuerbach is that instead of remaining as a goal or ideal, ‘God’ has, via traditional doctrine, become enshrined in a false heaven, removed from the human sphere from which it came, which it should inform and to which it is subject. This Feuerbach terms the danger of ‘religious subjectivism’ 6 and it has the consequence of ‘disuniting man from himself’, of setting God before man ‘as the antithesis of himself’ instead of as the authentic expression of human potential. 7

Thus religion functions as a repressive force in society. That which is truly and properly human is absolutized. Human action and self-realisation is inhibited. The deified essence of man - which is the essence of a particular view of man - then remains as an institutionalised force well beyond the time through which it was

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1 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p38
2 Op cit p198
3 Op cit p184
4 Op cit p270
5 See *Essence* p200
6 Op cit p204
7 Op cit p33
relevant. Its retention despite its obsolescence and in the face of the newer and better notions which man needs to live by amounts to a tragic betrayal of the human spirit.

Feuerbach's view is that traditional religion is seen as being mythical in the worst of senses, i.e., as false and as misleading. Interpreted realistically, religion actually betrays its function by keeping that which it has at most only a temporary hold over, i.e., the essence of humanity, rather than allowing that which it holds be reshaped by that to which it is subject, humanity. Because the Divine is actually human potential - the criticism of religion is a vital and necessary means to the end of liberating true humanity.

What then is the role of ideals, according to Feuerbach? He suggests that ideals offer constructive solace via representing aspiration. This is a positive role, insofar as ideals can provide a critical perspective and a creative initiative in relation to the ongoing business of life. Ideals can thus provide means to the end of eradicating injustice, inequality, poverty, etc. But this positive function is too often obscured.

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_Tillich_

Paul Tillich writes as a systematic theologian and as a philosopher of religion. He develops an ‘apologetic theology’ with a ‘method of correlation’, seeking to relate the message of Christian faith to the questions posed in the contemporary situation. For Tillich that means the 1920s to the 1960s, the period when he was operating.¹ This was a period when existential thinking was prominent and so we find a great deal of existential philosophy in Tillich’s work.

As a starter:

*What about the idea of ‘symbols’ in relation to a) language and b) communication?*

If we think of the letters in the alphabet, (A,B,C, - X, Y Z): are they not symbols used to represent sounds made in verbal communication?

If we see an arithmetical proposition like ‘12 x 17 = ?’ – do we recognise the symbolism of ‘12’, ‘17’, ‘x’, ‘=’ & ‘?’ so we know what to do?²

How about the symbolism below?

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¹ For Tillich’s ideas on religious symbols see his _Systematic Theology_, (1968 single volume edition) & _Dynamics of Faith_ (1957).

² The answer is 204.
Why is this clearly symbolic?
These examples serve to remind us that it is not at all uncommon for us to use symbolism in various aspects of our communicative experience!

*It is obvious that we find symbolic language in religious and theological expressions:*

‘Give us today our daily bread’

It would be a big understatement to say that the vast majority of New Testament scholars would see ‘bread’ here as symbolic of things over and above ‘bread’.

And how about the use of ‘twelve’ as a symbol in Mark:

‘… a woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years.’

‘Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old).’

‘They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of pieces of bread and fish.’

We have some visual religious symbols on the front page of these notes – have another look at them!

Have a look at the next image:

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1 The opening bars of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No 29: Opus 106
2 Mtt 5:11.
3 Mk 5:25
4 Mk 5:42
5 Mk 6:42-43
Paul Tillich’s Theory of Symbols and Symbols

Tillich makes a distinction between signs and symbols & uses the familiar concept of a traffic light as the illustrative example:
The traffic light is a sign: it ‘points to the order to the stop the movement of cars at certain intervals.’

Thus the traffic light – and all signs, points ‘beyond itself’.

However, Tillich thinks that the sign has no essential relationship to that to which it points.

The relationship – of the red light to the job of pointing the command to ‘Stop’ is, Tillich suggests, a convention that could be changed.

In a key move Tillich says that ‘signs do not participate in the reality of that to which they point, while symbols do.’

Thus a key feature of a symbol as distinct from a sign is that it ‘participates in that to which it points.’

Tillich takes as his example the flag of a nation. He was writing in the USA and so he had in mind the Stars and Strips:

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2 Ibid.

3 Op cit p137
This flag participates in the ‘power’ and the ‘dignity of the nation for which it stands.’

How can a flag function as a symbol of a nation, participating in the power and dignity of that nation?

Perhaps we need to consider the flag below?

How does this flag work for you as a symbol? How does the flag ‘participate in the reality to which it points’?
How about this symbol? What reality does it ‘participate’ in?

Tillich claims that the participation of the flag in that to which it points means that ‘it cannot be replaced except after a historic catastrophe that changes the reality of the nation which is symbolizes.’

Tillich is almost certainly thinking of the symbol of the Swastika and the post-War situation where The Federal Republic of German and the German Democratic Republic had new flags!

Tillich suggests four further characteristics of a symbol that distinguishes a symbol from a sign. The first two are as follows:

Symbols ‘opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us’ and ‘also unlocks dimensions and elements of our souls which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.’

Tillich thinks, for example, that the arts all employ symbols to open up reality in a distinctive way: a picture or poem can portray reality in way that is distinct from a biologist or geologist. And a great novel or play might give us ‘not only a new vision of the human scene, but it opens up hidden depths of our own being… There are within us dimensions of which we cannot be aware except through symbols, as melodies and rhythms in music.’

A fifth aspect of symbols is that they ‘cannot be produced intentionally’. Symbols have a ‘social function’, they grow from the ‘individual or collective unconscious’ and they cannot operate ‘without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being.’

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1 Ibid
2 Ibid
3 Ibid
4 Ibid
A sixth characteristic of the symbol is that they ‘grow and die’: a symbol grows within and for a situation that is ‘ripe’ and symbols ‘die’ when that situation fades away.

Tillich takes the symbol of ‘king’ as a classic case of a once potent symbol that is far less active and so far less significant for the modern period. Tillich argues that the live and death of a symbol has nothing to do with human longing or the advances of scientific and historical understanding. Symbols die ‘because they no longer produce responses in the group where they originally found expression.’

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1 Op cit p138. An example Tillich discusses in a number of contexts is that of the Virgin Mary: a powerful symbol in Catholic Christianity but one that has died away in Protestant Christianity.
Tillich on Religious Symbols

On the basis of his distinction between sign and symbol Tillich moves to consider the nature and role of religious symbols.

Two key statements are these:

‘The language of faith is the language of symbols.’

‘...faith, understood as the state of being ultimately concerned, has no language other than symbols.’

As we might infer from the above, Tillich defines ‘faith’ as state of ‘ultimate concern’ with God as the object or ‘content’ of the ultimate concern. Here it is vital to understand how Tillich distinguishes matters of preliminary concern from matters of ultimate concern.

Tillich asks rhetorically why it is that we can’t express faith as ultimate concern ‘directly and properly’?

Tillich then notes that a variety of things might be the focus of a person’s faith, as that which is the focus for a ‘state of ultimate concern’:

For example:

(Write notes to explain how each could be a focus of ‘ultimate concern’ & explain why each can be seen as a matter of ‘preliminary concern’.)

Money

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1 Op cit p138 – the quotations which follow are all from this and the following pages.
We can unpack the idea of ‘the nation’ becoming a person’s ultimate concern. Here Tillich is almost certainly mindful of what had happened in Germany in the 1930’s as Nazi ideology became a dominant form of nationalism with a religious or quasireligious fervour.¹

Suppose the nation becomes someone’s ultimate concern:

‘… the name of the nation becomes a sacred name and the nation receives divine qualities which far surpass the reality of the being and functioning of the nation. The nation then stands for and symbolizes the true ultimate, but in an idolatrous way.’

Similarly with ‘success’ – still a potent motivator in our contemporary experience! –

‘Success as ultimate concern is not the national desire of actualising potentialities, but is readiness to sacrifice all other values of life for the sake of a position of power and social predominance. The anxiety about not being a success is an idolatrous form of the anxiety about divine condemnation. Success is grace; lack of success, ultimate judgement. In this way concepts denoting ordinary realities become idolatrous symbols of ultimate concern’

Tillich them makes explicit a familiar theological view:

‘The reason for this transformation of concepts into symbols is the character of ultimacy and the nature of faith. That which is the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly. Religiously speaking, God transcends his own name. This is why the use of his name easily becomes an abuse or a blasphemy. Whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately, whether or not we call it God, has a symbolic meaning. It points beyond itself while participating in that to which it points.’

¹ In recent books the historian Michael Burleigh has endorsed the view that the Nazi phenomenon has a distorted religious character in a fashion akin to Tillich. See Burleigh’s Sacred Causes 2006 & The Third Reich: A New History 2000
Also:

‘God is the basic symbol of faith, but not the only one. All the qualities we attribute to him, power, love, justice, are taken form finite experiences and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity. If faith calls God “almighty”, it uses the human experience of power in order to symbolize the content of its infinite concern, but it does not describe a highest being who can do as he pleases. So it is with all the other qualities and with all the actions, past, present and future, which men attribute to information about what God did once upon a time or will do again sometime in the future. Faith is not the belief in such stories, but it is the acceptance of symbols that express our ultimate concern in terms of divine actions.’

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Problems in seeing Religious Language as Symbolic

Against Randall:

We noted how Randall’s ideas reflect Feuerbach and so how his view is anti or non-realist: thus the term ‘God’ does not denote a reality – ‘God’ is an expression of human imagining, an expression of human values and concerns.

Many religious believers and thinkers dislike this notion! John Hick argues that we take the affirmation made by theists that ‘God is Good’, it matters here that God is in some sense ‘Good’ and that the phrase ‘God is Good’ is not wholly symbolic. In addition, orthodox theologians want to defend a realist notion of God!

Against Tillich:

John Macquarrie is one among a number of scholars who have criticised Tillich’s distinction between signs and symbols. Tillich is perhaps handicapped by being a native German speaker. He left Germany in 1933 at the age of 47 and began a new life teaching in America and having to adopt English as the language of communication for his lectures. He does not seem to appreciate how, in use, we might say ‘These clouds are a sign of snow’ where the cloud really does have an intrinsic link with that which is signifies. Mathematic and logical symbols, on the other hand, are altogether more arbitrary in their relation to the functions that they stand for. So clouds are said to be signs but they ‘participate in the reality of that which they point to’, and mathematical symbols appear not to participate in the reality of the functions to which they point. We might add that Tillich is on questionable ground when he says that the red traffic light has no intrinsic relation to that to which it points – the necessity of stopping. Isn’t red a generic cultural symbol for danger? Wouldn’t this make replacing ‘red’ a very difficult thing to do?

Further to this we should stress that many scholars have questioned Tillich idea that symbols are distinctive because they ‘participate in the reality of that to which they

1 See Hick, Philosophy of Religion Prentice Hall 1990 p87

2 See Macquarrie Op cit, p122ff
point.’ The concern is with the sense and meaning of the term ‘participation.’ We explored this earlier with the flag of the nation, and the question of how the flag operates to share or participate in the dignity and power of the nation….

Tillich’s use of the notion or participation is of course neo-Platonic (all goods participate in the Form of the Good) and is also based in the Judaeo-Christian notion of creation – the creation expresses and participates in the life and reality of the creator.

Tillich uses the notion of participation to put into what we might term counter-poise the religiously significant aspect of life that thereby becomes and active religious symbol: in such a symbol we need an ‘element of concreteness’ which is taken from our experience and applied ‘symbolically to God’ and the ‘element of ultimacy’ that is not symbolic and which the symbol also expresses. In this sense the symbol ‘affirms and denies itself’ and it is this that signals ‘participation’.

In a recent study the theologian Keith Ward writes as follows:

‘In Christian understanding, the divine mind is expressed or manifested in the created cosmos, as all things participate in the archetypes subsisting in the divine mind. (All things have been created through him and for him’: Colossians 1:16)

There are many kinds and degrees of manifestation, which reveal the nature of the creator with different degrees of adequacy. Christian’s find in the person of Jesus a full manifestation of the archetypal form of humanity and a prefiguring of the fulfilment of the cosmos by its final transfiguring union with God (Eph 1:9, 10).’

This perhaps sheds handy light on how the notion of ‘participation’ works!

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**John Macquarrie on Symbols**

Macquarrie thinks that the importance of symbolic language is such that we can’t abandon it – but he thinks that Tillich’s sign/symbol distinction is too clumsy. Macquarrie suggests we have the following distinction:

*Conventional Symbols*: here we find an arbitrary link between the symbol and that to which it points. Symbols on a TV remote control might be conventional…

*Intrinsic Symbols*: here there would be a relation of ‘kinship’ between the symbol that which it symbolised. The wine in Eucharist would have ‘kinship’ and this would, for the Christian adherent, involve an ‘existential response’ of faith and an understanding of a ‘similarity of relation.’

These ideas can be unpacked a bit;

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Symbols evoke feelings of awe, devotion, trust – and they are akin to the feelings we should have towards God. A good example is the rite of washing in religions – the ritual symbolises the cleansing of sin…

Symbols are like analogies. Think of the images of Jesus in The Gospel of John: the Living Water, the Light of the World, Good Shepherd; the True Vine. Symbolic relations of proportion are in operation.

Symbols and Myths revisited.

Tillich also links the language of symbols with the concept of myth.

Thinking of classical Greek mythology Tillich says:

‘Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters.’

Myth is present ‘in every act of faith, because the language of faith is the symbol.’

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. Above all, it divides the divine into several figures, removing ultimacy from each of them without removing their claim to ultimacy. This inevitably leads to conflicts of ultimate claims, able to destroy lie, society and consciousness.’

In his view of the relation between myth and symbol Tillich is emphatically critical of Bultmann’s idea of ‘de-mythologizing’ the biblical narratives. Myth and symbol must remain as they are ‘forms of human consciousness which are always present. One can replace one myth by another, but one cannot remove the myth from man’s spiritual life. For the myth is the combination of symbols of our ultimate concern.’

A danger, Tillich, suggests, is the literalisation of myths and symbols. This is a defence mechanism that comes in the face of the fear of de-mythologising. In a view that perhaps anticipates much of more recent experience, Tillich thinks that the fear of the orthodox is that the liberal critique of religious expressions will result in a defence of orthodoxy that becomes more literal and more fundamentalist and thereby, anti-intellectual and ill-disposed to rational scrutiny and development.

On literalism Tillich writes as follows:

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1 Tillich in Santoni, p141
2 Op cit p142
3 Op cit p143
The symbols and myth 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 is disregarded. Creation is taken as a magic act that happened once upon a time. The fall of Adam is localized 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 the 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 ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty. It draws him down to the level of that which is not ultimate, the finite and the conditional. In the last analysis it is not rational criticism of the myth which is decisive but the inner religious criticism. Faith, if it takes symbols literally, becomes idolatrous! It calls something ultimate which is less than ultimate. Faith, conscious of the symbolic character of its symbols, gives God the honor which is due to him.’
Against Myth and Symbol

The American philosopher Alvin Plantinga (b1932) has developed a number of views that challenge the ideas of such as Randall and Tillich.

1. One key philosophical problem is the problem of other minds. Rationally and experientially we seem to have minds as individuals. On the basis of encounter and dialogue we infer and deduce that other people have minds too – that other minds exist. But knowing that they do and proving that they do, and proving what they are like and how they are is a major issue in philosophy, philosophical psychology, and in other disciplines. However, we don’t seriously doubt that other minds exist; it is rational to believe that they do and speak of them normally.

2. The problem of God’s existence is, Plantinga thinks, a problem of exactly the same kind. There are all kinds of problems with the issue of proving whether God exists and of making sense of religious language. But, Plantinga argues, for religious people there is no serious doubt that ‘God exists’. This is a ‘basic belief’ that some people have on the basis of certain sorts of experience and it is analogous to the basic belief we have that other people have minds too. It is just as rational to talk about God as it is to talk about other minds.

3. From this religious believers make claims about God as a special kind of being of whom things can be said directly: thus ‘… there exists a person of a certain sort, - a being who acts, holds beliefs, and has aims and purposes. This person, secondly, is immaterial… is perfect in goodness, knowledge and power, and is such that the world depends on him for its existence.’

4. This view suggests as religious believes regard God as real then it follows that we use normal methods of expression even in the special case of talk of God. God is special being but those who encounter him can speak of this normally.

Questions (A2-like) arising:

Religious belief is devalued if religious language is regarded as ‘symbolic’. Discuss.

‘Seeing religious language as the language of myth and symbol solves the so-called problem of religions language’ Discuss.

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1 A Plantinga, ‘Religious Belief as “Properly Basic”’ in Taliaferro and Griffiths, eds, A Companion to Philosophy of Religion, p45-46