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## THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH IN RELIGION

For several years *now* men have debated the validity of various definitions of religion and religious experience. Many characteristics have, at one time or the other, been pointed out as constituting the essence of religion, such as God, morality, emotive attitude, prophets, holy books etc. But very few of the theoretical attempts at definition have taken into account myths, which form the *raison d'être* of every religion. Hinduism has no prophet and no organized church; Buddhism and Jainism are atheistic; but both these religions have a large variety of myths, though not as many as in Hinduism. Purānic Hinduism in particular revolves around innumerable myths which constitute its very basis. The language of myths has posed a special problem for the student of the philosophy of religion and one is not surprised to find the so-called rational or natural theology bewildered and confused faced with this problem which it is unable to explain. One is also quite puzzled at the attempts of some of the great minds of the English-speaking world when they try to understand religion in terms of the analysis of what they call religious statements or religious assertions. Such analytical thinkers completely ignore the character of myths because they are unable to explain them satisfactorily. This essay will first of all seek to analyse the reasons for the failure of rational theology in understanding myths and symbols of religions. It will then proceed to emphasize the importance of myths in religious experience before, finally, giving a critical estimate of the significance of myths and symbols.

The contemporary Western mind has been somewhat uncharitable to Eastern thought, and this is particularly noticeable in the attitude of the theologians and philosophers of religion to non-Christian religions. Their study is somewhat clouded by their dogmatic outlook in favour of Christianity and greatly hampered

by problems of a linguistic and cultural nature which act as to the study of the great religions of the World. Since all of us in this world share a rich spiritual heritage of the past, we have to achieve a totality in the understanding of the various religions of the world, without being influenced, consciously or unconsciously by any limited religious framework into which we are unfortunately born into, Christian or non-Christian. It is in this context that we have to enquire into the nature of myths and their significance. Karl Jaspers has in very clear terms provided us a workable methodology: "...an over-all view attempted by the philosophizing of a single person must set its task quite differently: not to know everything, not to give completeness of material, but a concise description of the fundamental modes of historical conception, constantly illustrated by significant examples; to arouse the mind to a sense of historical wholeness, of hierarchical order and of greatness, and of the few singularly great men; to find orientation in what is essential in a given period, in a given problem, in the forces that affect the thinking;—to gain intuitive insight into the great historical independent origins in China, India, in Asia Minor and in the Occident;—to make perceptible the historical itself in distinction from the abstractly universal."<sup>1</sup>

British philosophy during the last one hundred years has been totally indifferent to the thought and culture of people other than their own. During the period when Absolute idealism dominated its thinking in the early part of this century, serious attempts were being made to reconcile Hegelianism (as the only possible philosophical outlook from their point of view) with Christianity (as the only possible religion again from their point of view). Caird, Bosanquet, Pringle Pattison and Campbell were all exponents of this kind of outlook. And so they only succeeded and in exhibiting their total or at least partial ignorance of great philosophical currents from the East—they were certainly not interested in the religious beliefs of the colonial people. This attitude continued even after the illustrious missionaries threw open the vast stores of spiritual thought in India, China and Japan. Myths, which form an essential structure of the religions of the East, and their significance failed to attract their attention

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1. "Philosophical Autobiography" in P. A. Schilpp (Ed.) *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, New York: The Library of Living Philosophers. Tudor Publishing House, 1957, P. 83.

as their minds were determined to pursue natural theology and myths did not certainly fit into their mode of enquiry. Natural theology of the Hegelian type is now being forgotten, and so it does not seem necessary to dwell further on this type of religious thought.

But the Oxbridge type of linguistic analysts seems to be making the same mistake in another form. They seem to be aware of religious assertions only as they are made in the English language, whereas, in fact, a vast majority of religious texts are in languages other than English. One example will suffice to demonstrate how absurd the religious thought of the logical analysts can be. R.B. Braithwaite, a distinguished moral philosopher from Cambridge, published a book in 1955 entitled *An Empiricist View of the Nature of Religious Belief* in which accepting the views of Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* he says (i) that the meaning of any statement is given by the way in which it is used; and (ii) religious assertions are used in a moral and conative sense. Hence the religious assertions express an agapeistic way of life; (iii) the difference between ordinary morality and religious morality is that the latter is backed by what Braithwaite calls "stories". These "stories" are just empirical propositions. Naturally, no verification is possible, and at any rate this is of no consequence in the case of the propositions asserted by these stories. They are powerful psychological weapons for fulfilling agapeistic aims.

Braithwaite does not believe that religious assertions are about supersensible realities. He claims that even assertions about God have an agapeistic purpose. Granting that all these views of Braithwaite are acceptable we still cannot understand why he talks about "stories". Why not call them myths straight-away? These "stories", Braithwaite maintains, are simple and clear, consisting of "empirical propositions". There is no obscurity in them. The example given is the "story" of Christ in the New Testament, which has a powerful impact on the mind of the believer. But for these "stories"—which have an agapeistic character—there is, according to Braithwaite, nothing to distinguish religious from moral assertions, as both have a conative character. Braithwaite, no doubt, refers to "stories" in Buddhism (Jataka tales, for instance). Incidentally, Braithwaite would give no importance to rituals as constituting one of the basic characteristics of religion.

The student of religions in the course of his study of the religious texts will come across various forms of expression, para-

blems, allegories, myths etc. To put all these together under one cover-term "stories" would do great damage to the serious study of religious language. Moreover, they certainly deserve to be distinguished from epic poetry, novel, drama, short story, fairy-tales, fables etc. For instance, Milton's *Paradise Lost* deals with a religious theme; but is certainly not one of the holy works. All narratives are not of the same kind and quality and do not express the same meaning or significance. Some of the fairy-tales may not have any moral content at all and cannot be regarded as empirical assertions, though they may in stories dealing with Christmas for example—have a religious content. In other words, each form of narrative has its own peculiar features, and to call myths "stories" can only arise as result of the non-recognition of the significance of symbolism in religious experience. In general, one may say that the empiricist understanding of youth and symbol does not attain the *depth* essential for understanding the religious phenomenon. One cannot, in any case, reduce all religion and religious experience to just a set of base statements changing the language of the scripture to modern English prose—to Oxbridge English—will definitely deprive it of its natural flavour and the great beauty which we associate with it. This is not merely a matter of personal taste, or of subjective likes and dislikes; the myths have to be expressed in the language in which their authors first conceived them. When as mere 'stories' expressed in journalese, they lose all their significance as myths.

Further, myths have a historical significance about them. The believer regards them as part of the spiritual history of the world; he is convinced of their veracity and believes that they actually happened in the past. The ardent orthodox Hindu has no doubt whatsoever that the events mentioned in the *Bhāgavata-Purāna* or the *Rāmāyana* are authentic and actually happened. This is true of the events mentioned in the New Testament. They are not therefore merely "stories" which makes only a psychological impact on the believer. They are sometimes agapeistic in character, but that is not all. Their "sacred, exalting power" (to borrow a phrase from Mircea Eliade, in a slightly different context) has the potential to secure an active participation of the believer. In fact, they act as instruments of active religious participation. Anyone who has witnessed the passion plays at Oberammergau in the Bavarian Alps will bear witness to one's religious participation in the myth. The Rāmīlīa celebrations throughout India during the Dasara festival provide another illustration. Many of the

festivals are in fact associated with such myths. An event of deep religious significance in the distant past is sought to be revived in each of these festivities, and they call forth a spontaneous sense of participation from the people year after year. Such myths have therefore also a cultural significance in as much as they influence and transform the mode of living of all believers.

It is in this light that we have to understand Rudolf Bultmann's well-known views about "demythologization" of the myths of religion and their translation into modern, Heideggerian terminology of *Fundamentalontologie*. Such attempts, even if they escape the criticism of being somewhat arbitrary, are quite narrow in their scope. Bultmann's method might at best help us in understanding the myths of the New Testament, but what about myths of other religions? If we try to translate the myths of all religions into existentialist terms, would that not be somewhat arbitrary? It is difficult to visualize demythologizing the Purānas and translating them into a set of existentialist concepts. Moreover, the process of "translation" of myths would lead to consequences, beyond the control of the theologians, once the principle that the scriptures are translatable is accepted. It might and—thus happened—has led to their translation into various other kinds of terminology, including the ideologically based ones.

Hence it would be most desirable to leave the myths alone and attempt to understand them as they are. The Christian tradition is tied up with a series of New Testament myths right from immaculate conception to resurrection. The Hindu tradition makes no sense unless we understand it by reference to the vast Purānic lore associated with it. And since Hinduism is (at least in its Purānic or popular version) polytheistic, the myths associated with the various gods and goddesses are many in number, and one cannot reduce them to some convenient forms of interpretation. Bultmann's method of demythologization might perhaps be applicable to Christianity, but it will certainly not work with other religions. It also seems doubtful that kerygma could be discovered in the myths of all non-Christian religions. It would therefore be improper to apply the hermeneutics of Christianity to other religions. Perhaps some texts like the *Bhagavad-Gita* might be regarded as kerygmatic in a non-Christian sense, but the Purānic texts do not belong to the same category. And in any case Bultmann's method is totally irrelevant to Buddhism. The basic mistake of a Western-oriented theology is to universalize its me-

thods even if Christianity claims the largest number of believers in the world.

Again, myths create a new order of rituals every time a new religion is born. One can easily see this the truth of history examining the development of Christianity and Islam. Thus myth and ritual are inseparably bound to each other. Braithwaite and other empiricists find it impossible to explain rituals in the context of myths. If they had only studied religion in its various anthropological aspects, they would have discovered that all ceremonies, worship and even prayer are related to the myths. The various festivals in Hinduism are not always seasonal in character. Many of them are mythical in origin in the sense that they are associated with the gods and goddesses and the mythical stories about them. It is, of course, impossible to explain why and how the myths came to be associated with ritual. It only demonstrates the tremendous impact that religious myths have had on our everyday life. We cannot theorise about them. Natural theology, or for that matter a philosophy of religion, would fail to explain why the myths have had such a powerful influence on our lives.

Furthermore, one cannot help noticing the tremendous impact of myths on art and literature of the various forms of culture. Those who are acquainted with the literatures in various Western languages realize full well the extent of influence of Greek mythology on them. The classification of thought in the West into the Apollonian and the Dionysian is itself based on myth. Fine Art and Literature in the West are characteristically Dionysian, drawing their inspiration from what Spengler has called "the underworld and the lower spirit of ancient culture" ("die Unterwelt und unterseele der antiken Kultur"). As opposed to this science and to some extent philosophy have drawn more on the Apollonian spirit. The birth and development of tragedy in the Western world has its roots in Greek mythology. The cosmic and the common place have always been regarded as closely related to journalese, as the symbolism in them is naive and lacks depth. What the empiricist fails to realize is that mythical lends itself to various forms of literary symbolism, metaphor and allegory, tragedy etc. which the empiricist can hardly visualize. Under the impact of religion, art and literature have been able to create new forms. Men have learned to use language more significantly and with telling effect under its influence. It is not unlikely to assume that even poetry as a literary form has grown out of religious chants. Music and

prayer and worship have long been mutually associated. It is only recently that music has been secularized in the West; in India, this has not yet been completely achieved. This is also true of the plastic arts and painting. The religious myths have always provided powerful themes for creation of art forms. It is quite possible that even architecture may have developed out of the art of temple and church building.

Metaphor and allegory have a direct relation to myths. Under the impact of science and science-oriented philosophies, we have recently learned to use language strictly in accordance with rules of analysis and logic. This shift has seriously affected freedom of expression. Religious thought has always enjoyed a greater measure of freedom of expression and has made use of allegories, metaphors, aphorisms and parables. The Vedic and Upanisadic seers and the Buddhists did not hesitate to use poetry. The Bible has passages which are marked by the highest levels of poetic imagery as well as profound depth of meaning. The philosophers, initially learned their art of thinking from the religious men; in recent years the model has been set by science. Indeed in some sacred texts of the East like the *Upanisads* or the *Gita*, the dividing line between philosophy and religion is very thin. This seems to be one reason why myths and allegorical ways of history passed into philosophy.

Closely linked to myths are the miracles, which are mentioned in almost all the great religious traditions of the world. They also partly account for the origin of the latter. In recent years theologians and philosophers of religion have tended to reject miracles although they are not incompatible with religious belief. There has been an urge in recent years to enquire into such phenomena, which are not subject to natural or scientific laws. Even C.D. Broad felt the urge to enquire into such psychical phenomena, which defy rational explanation. Many religious myths are woven around such miracles, for example *te* in Taoism and Kundalini in the Yoga tradition of Hinduism are referred to as magical powers in man, but they have no empirical basis. The supernatural is inseparable from the miraculous. The more primitive a religion is the more dependent it is on miracles, and consequently the forms of worship also conform to the primitive pattern of theistic explanation. Some of these so-called primitive patterns of religious behaviour have filtered down also to the great religions of the world. Hence, in spite of the opinion of some

thinkers,<sup>2</sup> religion would not be the same if miracles were left out of them. The very idea of the supernatural, which is the backbone of any religion, depends on revelation through miracles.

The significance of the symbolic is nowhere so conspicuous as in Indian religions. The great *Upanisads* are full of them. The allegorical meaning of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for instance, rests on our interpreting the battlefield as a moral battlefield and the warrior and the charioteer representing the two selves: the lower and the higher, respectively. The rest of the chariot allegory is to be found in the *Katha Upanisad* and also in the Buddhist texts. It is also to be found in Plato and provides evidence that a myth or allegory can travel from one culture to the other. It is the task of a serious philosopher of religion to bring to light the various forms and types of the symbolic in religious texts, religious lore and various other forms of religious literature.

C.G. Jung has done signal service to the study of religious consciousness by studying the archetypes that constitute the totality of religious symbolism. One may not agree with his conclusions, but his emphasis on the study of the symbolic within the depths of man's consciousness is unique, and has not been emulated by anyone else. It seems very necessary to go into the symbolic structure of various religions, without any sectarian bias. Such an objective study is bound to yield far reaching results in the study of the language of myths. Various types of imagery exist in the mythical context: the visions of the underworld; of a life hereafter carrying us into the realms of the occult; of the demonic which forms an important part of all religious traditions; of the symbolic imagery of wanderings like that of Hercules or of Dante Alighieri; of the struggles of peoples like the Jews or of the Kauravas; of man's rebirth; of God's incarnation; of the Utopiac visions of the City of God or of Rāmarājya, and many others. (There is such a wealth of mythical symbolism that it is not possible to enumerate all). All these need to be studied by every student of religions.

Paul Tillich says: "The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God. It is always present in any act of faith, even if the act of faith includes the denial of God."<sup>3</sup> Although faith in

2. E.g. E.W. Barnes in his *Rise of Christianity*.

3. In his essay on "Symbols of Faith" in G.L. Abernethy and T.A. Laingfor (Eds.), *Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962), P. 358.



the ultimate is common to all religions, it is not necessarily explained by reference to any concept of the deity; God in this sense is one of the many symbols of the act of faith. Nirvāna in Buddhism occupies a place somewhat similar to Godhead, and it is always present in any act of faith of the Buddhists. But Buddhism apart, God still remains one of the powerful symbols of any religion, and most myths are connected to this symbol either directly or indirectly. The various Purānic myths are directly related to the symbol of the deity in its various forms. The epics, which form the link between mythology and poetry, also deal with the heroic, with the triumph of the good over the evil, and the divine over the demon. God is still the supreme symbol and the epics are intended only "to justify the ways of God to men". Much of epic poetry therefore is mythical in character. Throughout this essay, the word "mythical" has been used not in the sense of "fictitious", but in the sense of "religious", the symbolic and the narrative both rolled into one. As in traditional philosophy "mythos" must be taken as an antithesis to "logos", and in that sense the former includes all emotive expressions that draw us nearer to the divine, to the ultimate, including the scriptures, and the epic, mythological, the allegorical (e.g. Thomson's great poem *Hound of Heaven*), the tragic, as well as reflective poetry. Again, unfortunately, no exhaustive list can be made of the various forms of mythical expression.

The symbol of the ultimate, of the divine, cannot be regarded as something external to man, which can be analysed by the help of rationalist or empirical logic. It is a matter of internal or personal faith, and no argument can help either to establish or overthrow it. And myths which deal with this powerful symbol cannot be subjected to any rational or empirical analysis. For example, in Vaisnavism, the symbol of Visnu is basic to the various myths that deal with the cycle of his re-incarnation from age to age in order to establish the divine order whenever disturbed. Such incarnations cannot be subjected to scrutiny by the empirical historian. Like the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, they are, the main symbols of religious belief, and subject only to the logic of the heart, to borrow a phrase from Pascal. Therefore, it is in this context that we have to view the entire wealth of myths in religious history. This calls for a new approach to hermeneutics; new because hermeneutics hitherto has been moulded to suit the needs of Western-oriented philosophy. What is required is universal hermeneutics based on

the recognition that a religious and reflective tradition is not confined to Western culture alone.

But as Enrico Castelli has remarked, demythologization is always the result of hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> And the need for a hermeneutic arises out of a state of dissatisfaction. The myth leaves behind it a great deal of ambiguity and unintelligibility. Its meaning has to be made clear and for this purpose metaphors, allegories and the entire symbolic structure have to be broken down to unveil hidden meanings. Even then one cannot be sure of the final result, and faces the danger always of over-simplifying or distorting the original sense. It is for this reason that translation of myths into simple "stories" might yield negative results. It is futile to try to modernize or rationalize a myth: one must "live" it. Instead of trying to puzzle out the riddles of the myth, or to discover the genesis of the motives behind them, one must, as Mircea Eliade has said, endeavour to "understand their meaning, to endeavour to see what they show us."<sup>5</sup> Or one must seek in the understanding of the myths what Schelling has called "geheime Mitwissenschaft mit der Schöpfung, a secret co-knowledge with creation." One can then inevitably pass into the realm of mysticism.

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4. *La Critique de la Démythisation, Ambiguïté et Foi* (Tr. from Italian by E. Valenziani, Paris: Aubier, Editions Montaigne, 1973), P. 73f.

5. *Cosmos and History*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), P. 74.