Religious Language

There are at least two ways language is used:

o univocally:

   a lion is an mammal;
   a giraffe is a mammal.

   Note that 'mammal' bears the same meaning in each case.

o equivocally:

   the tick of the clock;
   a tick bit me;
   tick in the box required.

   Note that 'tick' bears different, unrelated meanings in each case.

There is a third way in which a term can be used. When a term is used where there is *difference* of meaning but also some *commonality* of meaning we have something between the univocal and the equivocal - the *analogous*.

An example of an analogous term is 'healthy'.

o This term can refer to health itself.
o It can also be used in expressions such as 'healthy medicine', 'healthy cheeks' and so on. The expression 'healthy medicine' certainly has a relation to health, but is not health itself - rather a <u>cause</u> of health. Similarly, 'healthy cheeks' is not health itself, but is a <u>sign</u> of health.

The different meanings of 'healthy' are very far apart (almost equivocal) and yet there is some commonality of meaning. This is the specific character of analogy - there is some likeness of meaning, but more unlike than like.

Aquinas believed that analogies could be a way to speak of God. In order to justify this, Aquinas asserted that there was an analogy of being (*analogia entis*) between the cosmos and its creator, God.

For example, when a believer says: 'God is good', he or she is not using good in a *univocal* way (i.e. it is not the same 'good' as in 'Jenny is good'). Nor is it entirely different – 'good' is not being used equivocally. There is *some* commonality (and an awful lot of difference) in the use of 'good' in the statements 'God is good' and 'Jenny is good'.

Analogy of Attribution

Where a term - e.g. health or sickness - is applied in ways like a *healthy/sickly look,* we do not mean the look itself is healthy or ill; we mean that health or sickness causes the look – the look is a sign of the health or sickness. The terms 'healthy' or 'sickly' are *attributed* to 'look' in an analogical way. Aquinas used the example of 'urine'. This enabled him to put forward the following approach using this comparison:
  (a) The animal is healthy
  (b) The animal's urine is healthy.

A similar approach, Aquinas maintains, can be taken with talk of God. Take:
  (a) God is good.
  (b) Anne is good.

Just as the urine is produced by the animal, so Anne is produced by God as God created everything. It is therefore correct to say that God is good because God is the cause of goodness in Anne since he created everything that Anne is. 'God is good' is true, therefore, through Analogy Of Attribution.

Note that although this statement may be true the content of this statement is going to be very limited indeed. Aquinas says that just as the effects of the sun (for instance a tree) resemble the sun so God's effects resemble God - but this example shows how remote the resemblance may be between language about God's creation and language about God. You would learn very little about the sun by studying a tree.

Analogy of Proportion

To say 'God has life' and 'Jenny has life' and 'a carrot has life' is obviously not to say the same kind of life in each case. There is *analogy of proportionality*. A carrot has life in proportion to its carrotness, Jenny to her humanity and God to God's own essence. We must 'extend upwards' when we speak of God.

Assume you go to an unknown tribe in the Amazonian jungle who are expert mathematicians - although they have never seen a motor car. You may say to one of them 'I have the perfect motor car'. He may look at you slightly puzzled as he does not know what a motor car is, but then he may say, 'Look, I don't know what a motor car is, but I do know what it means for something to be perfect. I know what a perfect circle is even though I have never drawn one. So I understand that, whatever a motor car is, you have a perfect one - one that could not be better. A similar approach can be taken with God - we may not know what God is, but in describing God as good we can rightly call him perfect because he is perfectly whatever it is to be God.
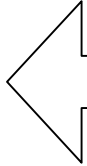
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Symbols, Myths and Metaphors

Paul Tillich (1885-1965) believed that religious language was *symbolic* rather than *literal* (and therefore it could not be subjected to verification principles).

Therefore religious language taps into the poetic, the mythical , the imaginative side of human nature to convey fundamental truths. In Tillich's view, *there is no other way* to get to these truths.

Perhaps we could think of how art functions. On the one hand, it 'creates symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way' and at the same time it opens up new sensitivities and powers of appreciation in ourselves.

On the other hand, according to Tillich, *language used in a literal way conveys a false impression of God*. For example, God is not a being (whose existence would then be open to question) so much as the *ground of Being*. In Tillich's view, the only literal, non-symbolic way of referring to God is to say that God is 'Being-itself'.

> Tillich wrote that a symbol 'opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us' and at the same time 'unlocks dimensions and elements of our souls'.
>
> He also asserted that symbols have a 'sell-by date' – their power to point to the ultimate alters through time.

> Man is never literal in the expression of his ideas except in matters most trivial.
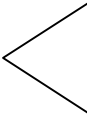>
> Rabindranath Tagore, Indian philosopher and poet

Discussion

o   What is art?
o   Does it open up new levels of reality for you?
o   Does it convey any messages?
o   Is religious language more poetry than prose, more art than diagram?

When applied to Judeo-Christian theism, Tillich's ideas:
o   coincide with Thomistic analogy theory in asserting the inadequacy of language: analogies conceal more than they reveal; symbolic expressions have their meaning 'negated by that to which they point'.
o   help, according to Hick, guard against the idolatry of thinking of God as though a greatly magnified human being (anthropomorphism).
o   can be confusing, as Tillich failed to spell exactly how religious symbolic expression participates in or connects with the ultimate reality to it points.
o   overemphasises, in Hick's view, the aesthetic aspect in religious language at the expense of other valid modes of communication.
o   can create difficulty of interpretation – how do we know how valid are the insights conveyed about the ultimate through symbols?

> Sometimes, religious language does not seem symbolic. To say that 'God is not dependent for his existence upon any other reality other than himself' is a carefully formulated theological statement. Is it really like a powerful symbol, designed to open up levels of reality otherwise closed to us and help us discover hidden depths in our own being?

Metaphors

Metaphorical language is symbolic language of a certain kind. Strictly speaking, a religious metaphor is something like: 'God is my rock', 'The Lord is my shepherd', 'God is my shield and my strength'. Most understand immediately that such language is not to be taken literally.

The power and pervasiveness of metaphorical language in, say, scripture has attracted much recent study – particularly among feminist theologians. Some argue that traditional theology is built out of patriarchal metaphors (for example, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit') which ought to be replaced (in this case by: 'Mother, Lover and Friend').
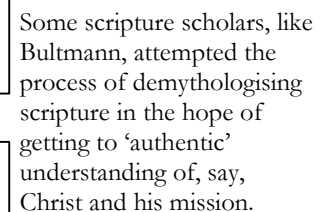
Myths

Myth combines all the elements of symbol and metaphor in a powerful mix. Many people see myth as something not to be taken literally – and is therefore untrue. In a religious worldview, a myth is not to be taken literally – but is nonetheless fundamentally true.

o Myths are timeless narratives that escape fixing into historical time frames.
o Myths speak of what believers hold to be most true and meaningful, what they think is eternal; and original, what they hope will happen, and what they see as ultimately real, however pleasant or terrible.
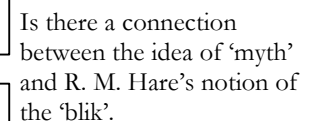
Some scripture scholars, like Bultmann, attempted the process of demythologising scripture in the hope of getting to 'authentic' understanding of, say, Christ and his mission.

Is there a connection between the idea of 'myth' and R. M. Hare's notion of the 'blik'.

> **Discuss**
>
> o Think of the Greek myth of Icarus.
> o What does this myth attempt to convey as ultimate truth?
> o What other myths do you know?

Karen Armstrong, the religious writer and commentator, advanced the view in her book 'The Battle for God' that there are two complementary ways of understanding the world. One is the way of *mythos* – whose purpose was to provide meaning and help people survive and conserve (see the Chesterton reading below). Another way, evident in the Greeks, was the way of *logos* – the spirit of restless enquiry, conquest, invention, rationalism, and so on. She maintains that whereas the ancient world balanced *mythos* and *logos*, the modern has lost the way of *mythos*. For her, fundamentalism ensues when modern believers try to turn the *mythos* of their religion into *logos*.

My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery. I generally learnt it from a nurse; that is, from the solemn and star-appointed priestess at once of democracy and tradition. The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies: compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth. I knew the magic beanstalk before I had tasted beans; I was sure of the Man in the Moon before I was certain of the moon. This was at one with all popular tradition. Modern minor poets are naturalists, and talk about the bush or the brook; but the singers of the old epics and fables were supernaturalists, and talked about the gods of brook and bush. That is what the moderns mean when they say that the ancients did not "appreciate Nature," because they said that Nature was divine. Old nurses do not tell children about the grass, but about the fairies that dance on the grass; and the old Greeks could not see the trees for the dryads.

But I deal here with what ethic and philosophy come from being fed on fairy tales. If I were describing them in detail I could note many noble and healthy principles that arise from them. There is the chivalrous lesson of "Jack the Giant Killer"; that giants should be killed because they are gigantic. It is a manly mutiny against pride as such. For the rebel is older than all the kingdoms, and the Jacobin has more tradition than the Jacobite. There is the lesson of "Cinderella," which is the same as that of the Magnificat -- *exaltavit humiles*. There is the great lesson of "Beauty and the Beast"; that a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable. There is the terrible allegory of the "Sleeping Beauty," which tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep. But I am not concerned with any of the separate statutes of elfand, but with the whole spirit of its law, which I learnt before I could speak, and shall retain when I cannot write. I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts.

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy