

# Interpreting Tillich's Symbolism as a Corollary of Scholastic Doctrine of Analogy and beyond

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## ABSTRACT

*The elaboration of symbolism in Paul Tillich's philosophy of religion is a crucial element in the dynamics of faith as articulated by him in terms of man's ultimate concern. Tillich asserts that human language of God or the ultimate concern can be only symbolic, since the truly ultimate must transcend the finite infinitely. No finite reality can therefore ever express the ultimate directly and properly. God's nature is so transcendent that man's grasp of it, however refined human language be, is hopelessly inadequate. Whatever is spoken of God, therefore, must have only a symbolic meaning. This symbolic theory of religious language advocated by Tillich has its roots in the doctrine of analogy developed by the Scholastics even though it can by no means be reduced to the latter. The difference between the two, perhaps, is in the conception of the nature of the referent of the language they adopt. While the Scholastics conceived of God as the creator, Tillich conceived of God as the ground of being. In this context, the present paper is a brief attempt to understand the trajectory of Tillich's theory of religious symbolism beginning from the doctrine of analogy to its expression in terms of the idea of participation.*

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## 1. Introduction

Tillich's theory of religious symbols and the Scholastic doctrine of analogy are both theistic interpretation of religious language. The two are similar in the sense of containing within itself both a positive and a negative content. It is the philosophical insight of both that human language cannot be used literally while speaking of the ultimate. Since all language is derived from finite experience, it may not apply to the infinite univocally. Hence, a religious discourse may be said to permit a negation by what lies beyond the language. On the other hand, the meaning of religious language cannot merely rest on the refutation of literalism. It must assert something affirmative in order to be meaningful. This is the positive element in both the Scholastics like Aquinas and in Tillich. Yet, Tillich, if he were to dwell on the Analogy of the Being as espoused the Scholastics, it may be construed that his methodology would be cosmological and not ontological as contended by him. The key to understanding this conundrum is the concept of participation which is fundamental to Tillich's symbolism. This view asserts that all beings participate in the Being-itself and religious symbols are said to be what they are in virtue of their participation in the ultimate, the Being-itself. But how does Tillich explain this concept of participation? What is the difference between the participation of a religious symbol, say, a 'cross', and of a non religious symbol like a 'chair'? Answers to such imperatives have been sought for in the subsequent discussion.

## 2. Methodology

The method followed in this study is both descriptive and critical. It is descriptive in its effort to correctly highlight the understanding of Tillich with regard to the issues discussed. To this end, generous reference has been made to the writings of Tillich. The method is also critical in its exposition of the various

concepts touched upon with the objective of unraveling the manifold interpretations possible.

## 3. Symbolism and Analogy

The concept of ultimate concern as being-itself and of its language of symbolism, as developed by Tillich, make one feel that it would not be wrong to associate Tillich with the doctrine of ineffability, familiar to philosophers in the East and the West. This doctrine holds that, though there is something that may be appropriately called "God" (or .the One, or the Divine, or the Void etc.), manifestly and literally nothing affirmative can be said about its nature. 'That it is' can perhaps be said, but 'what it is' cannot ever be said. God's ineffability to a philosopher is negative. Tillich was aware of this truth, when he was compelled to speak of the knowledge of God. He said, "We speak about what is our ultimate concern in the language of our traditional religions, in positive statements referring to the 'highest', the 'divine', the 'good', the 'true' and so on. But such statements must be deprived of the finite connotations they have in ordinary language ... The attempt to speak about it is an attempt to say Yes and No at the same time." (Tillich, 1965, p.265) The theory of symbols, therefore, as the language of the ultimate concern, has within itself the positive and the negative content. Symbols are applied to the ultimate in a spirit of dialectic of affirmation and negation. The 'Yes', or the positive content, is based on the power of the symbols of faith to point beyond itself to that in which they participate. The 'No', or the negative content, is the elimination of the literal connotation - the ultimate concern is not such and such. This negative content corresponds to the negation implicit in the Scholastic doctrine of analogy. Tillich does refer to the knowledge of God as analogous for it is dependent on the nature of the relation between God and the world, and can be discussed only in the context of the doctrine of God. But two possible misunderstandings must be mentioned and removed. If the

knowledge of revelation is called 'analogous', this certainly refers to the classical doctrine of the *analogia entis* between the finite and the infinite. Without such an analogy nothing could be said about God. But the *analogia entis* is in no way able to create a natural theology. It is not a method of discovering truth about God but rather the form in which all knowledge of revelation must be expressed. In this sense 'analogia entis', like 'religious symbols', points to the necessity of using materials taken from the finite realm in order to give content to the cognitive function in revelation. (Tillich, 1968, p.145)

Tillich thus acknowledges that symbolism and analogy both are similar in that they use segments of finite reality in talking about God. And they both, at the same time, deny the ordinary meaning of the material used in the context of its application to the infinite. It is the philosophical insight of the symbolists and Scholastics alike that human language cannot be used in its literal sense, while speaking of the ultimate concern. In other words, univocal predication is right away precluded. Since all our language is derived from our finite experience, it cannot apply to the infinite univocally. Hence, religious discourse must be said to make for a negation within itself by what lies beyond the literal language. Religiously, to Tillich, this negation is a warning against all forms of 'idolatry', which is the conception of God in finite forms. Philosophically, it is a warning against all forms of anthropomorphism, which is the conception of God in the human form. Too often religions are prone to conceive of God as a greatly magnified human being. The basic epistemological dynamics in the Judeo-Christian thought is the constant tension between affirmation and negation, when it comes to speaking about God.

#### 4. Scholastic Philosophy

The Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages were aware of this linguistic difficulty in speaking of God. God, to be God of the Bible, must be so utterly different from all finite created things that no proper and direct statement, with God as referent, can ever be made. It must therefore be denied that statements, attributing proportions and qualities to God, can properly be understood univocally. If this is so, the predicate terms themselves cannot have the same sense, or carry the same meaning, appropriate in other contexts, and any claim to knowledge of God would also seem profoundly thwarted. However, the Scholastics were also aware that genuine knowledge of God, in one way or the other, must be asserted, if God has somehow been revealed to man, of which the Scholastics had no doubt, both on the basis of revelation and natural theology. Statements about God must not be totally unintelligible and the terms attributed to him must continue to mean something. The rejection of univocality in regard to God must not be allowed to drive whatever talk we have about him into sheer equivocation. As a direct result of these two apparently incompatible necessities, the doctrine of analogy was developed. It is clear that terms applied in religious discourse to God are used in a special way, differing from their uses in ordinary mundane context. When it is said that "God is good", it is not meant that there are moral values like 'goodness', independent of the divine nature, in relation to which God can be judged to be 'good'. Nor does it mean that God, too, is subject to temptations, but he succeeds always in

overcoming them. It is rather a kind of language, which derives its meaning from the doctrine of analogy of being. This doctrine was most eloquently explicated by Aquinas. (Aquinas, 1912-36) Aquinas held that, when a word such as 'good' is applied to both a created, a human being and to God, it is not used univocally (that is, with exactly the same meaning) in the two cases: God is not good in identically the same sense in which human beings are said to be good. Nor, on the other hand, do we apply the term, 'good', to God and humans equivocally (that is, with completely different and unrelated meanings). There is, however, said to be a definite connection between divine and human goodness, reflecting the (religious) truth that God has created mankind. According to Aquinas, thus, 'good' is applied to creator and creature neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically. That is, our own directly known goodness, love, wisdom and so on are the thin shadows and remote approximations of the perfect qualities of the goodness, love and wisdom in God. Their existence and the measure in the Godhead are known to us only by analogy. Thus, when we speak of the goodness of God, we are saying that there is a quality of the infinitely perfect being that corresponds to what at our own human level we call goodness. In this case it is the divine goodness that is true and unbroken reality, whereas human life only shows, at best, a faint, fragmentary and distorted reflection of this quality within itself. Such is the case in respect of love, wisdom and other perfections. Only in God can the perfection of being occur in its true and unfractured nature – only God knows, loves, and is righteous and wise in the full and proper sense.

But since the deity is hidden from us, the question naturally arises as to how one can know what goodness and the other divine attributes are in God. How does one know what perfect goodness and wisdom are like? Aquinas' answer is that we do not know them as they are in God. We know them only analogically, that is, by way of an indirect comparison with that fractured goodness and wisdom, however, directly known within ourselves. Thus, Aquinas reminds us, that the doctrine of analogy does not profess to spell out the concrete character of God's perfection, but only to indicate indirectly the relation between the different meanings of a word when it is applied both to humanity and to God. Analogy is not an instrument for exploring and mapping the infinite divine nature; much less, to describe the divine nature. Rather it is an account of the way in which terms are used of the deity whose existence is, at this point, presupposed and whose nature, is acknowledged to be ineffable. The doctrine of analogy of the Scholastics is pivotal to its philosophy and theology. It is true that it can be subjected to endless scrutiny, as has been done and is being done still in the history of western philosophy. It has not lost its philosophical edge. A detailed discussion of the debate is uncalled for in the present context. It suffices to say that this doctrine is cosmological in nature. It proceeds on the basis of the similarity actual in a cause and its effect in order to establish a certain link between the creator and his creation. It falls back on the causal relation between the creator and the creature. It is rooted in the conception of God as a being, and, hence, presupposes an *a priori* and non-analogical knowledge of God, in the first place. God's handiwork, in as much as the items thereof are effects, must have, however vague, an imprint of their cause, the maker.

## 5. Tillich's Position

It has been pointed that the Scholastics doctrine of analogy and Tillich's language of symbols both make use of finite reality in speaking of the ultimate. They are, as admitted by both, not necessarily the methods of discovering and describing the truths about God, but are rather the only form in which statements about God can be, however inadequately, expressed. The form is that the proper meaning is negated. Tillich goes a step further. Tillich's positive assertion of symbolic language is based on the power of the symbol for pointing beyond itself. Therefore, while Tillich's theory of religious language has some similarity to the Scholastics' analogical theory, it can by no means be reduced to the latter. The main difference between the two, in this regard, is in the nature of the referent of the language they adopted. While the Scholastics conceived of God as a supranatural theistic God, Tillich spoke of it as being-itself – the God beyond the dialectics of naturalism and supranaturalism, theism and atheism, for reasons specific to his own philosophy of religion. (Kegley & Bretall, 1952) For Tillich, being-itself is an ontological category, and it serves as a brake against forms of idolatry in its manifestations, through symbols, to which the individual relates himself in his ultimate concern. And, of course, nothing could be said about it directly and properly except that it is being-itself. Whatever else is said of it is said only indirectly or 'improperly', in short, symbolically. (Tillich, 1965, p.13) The infinitude of God is not compromised, at any cost. Understood thus, Tillich speaks of religious language as the expression of the human spirit, of its longing for the ultimate concern.

Tillich's approach to the language of symbolism is existential in nature. It expresses the 'finite situation' of man, as ontologically grounded in God, the ultimate concern. It is not something that can be detached, observed, analyzed, and verified. It comes alive only in the relation of existential commitment to an ultimate concern. The language of symbols is the expression of the commitment of the believer, and not an expression of an objective observation. It is less of a relational statement between the Symbol and the ultimate, and more of an expression of existential truth experienced in the life of the man of faith. For the Scholastics, however, though the language of analogy is not meant to be statements about God's nature, it nevertheless seems to be an effort to understand God, whose existence is presupposed, and the causal relations of the finite beings with God taken for granted. What is more, the relation can be observed and philosophically analyzed and known to some extent. According to this analogical theory of religious language, the meaning of a religious assertion is thus partly similar and partly dissimilar to what we obtain in our day-to-day experience. Both Scholastics and symbolists were equally concerned about not limiting God, when talking about God. Thomists, and other theists, admit that they think of God as a centre of consciousness and power, but they insist that this does not limit him in the way that particular beings are limited in their consciousness and power. They, in this spirit, insist that God is both everywhere and nowhere. They believe that such a conception of God does not delimit God. Tillich however believes that, even though we accept that God is not limited in the way finite beings are, it is the necessary fallout of the language of the Scholastics that God is limited in a certain way. The cosmological approach conceives of God as a being,

the absolute being, of course, this 'being' is not like other beings, but it is still limited because it is a 'being'. This presupposition may be said to be always present in Scholasticism either implicitly or explicitly. This is the background of the Scholastics' doctrine of analogy.

Tillich, however, desired to go beyond the God of theism as well. Has he succeeded in his attempt, the more so, because he is not hostile to the concept of analogy? In giving his tacit approval to analogy, is he compelled to give up his ontological methodology? Despite his sympathies to the Scholastic analogy, it would be wrong to assume that Tillich wanted to model his language of symbol on the pattern of the analogy of being of the Scholastics. Had he done this he would then be cosmological in his method and approach to philosophy of religion, in as much as analogy of being presupposes causal relation and a process of reasoning from effect to cause, as is abundantly used by the Scholastics. Tillich would then be compelled to give up his ontological approach. He holds, on the contrary, that the religious language symbolizes the ultimate reality, about which nothing can be literally said, except that it is ontologically ultimate. In attempting to classify the function of religious language, he develops the notion that it is an expression of the ultimate concern, a complex of devotion, commitment and orientation – in short what bestows on human life both being and meaning. The expression of ultimate concern is not abstract but, through the medium, or symbol, of something non-ultimate – a human being, an icon or a 'deity' of a religion – concrete. Religious statements, which literally refer to such relatively concrete, overshoot the concrete, in conveying the ultimate concern the sense of sacredness. The concrete object serves as the symbol of the ultimate. (Tillich, 1957) Tillich thus keeps close to a type of reasoning that may be said to be ontological, in as much as his ultimate concern symbolized through a concrete object is at once the ground of being and meaning of human life.

## 6. Concept of participation

What is it that makes it possible for an object to be taken for a symbol of God? Tillich's concept of participation is an attempt to overcome some of these conceptual difficulties involved in finding a solution to this question. He realized that the infinitude of God and his limitlessness cannot be compromised, but, at the same time, a kind of relation has to be asserted between God and the finite world. Religious symbols, he believed, are able to perform this function, because they 'participate' in God, that is to say, in symbolizing they participate in the reality symbolized. Tillich explicates the participatory power of the symbols of faith, first, in comparison with ordinary symbols like an art object, or a flag and so on. These symbols are said to participate in the reality they symbolize, and, at the same way, Tillich seems to suggest that the religious symbols too participate in the unconditional nature of the ultimate concern which they represent. Making use of the illustration, he said, "(The symbol) ... participates in that to which it points: the flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation for which it stands." (Tillich, 1957, p.42) Again, speaking of the artistic symbols, he said, "All arts create symbol for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way. A picture and a poem reveal elements of reality which cannot be approached scientifically. In the creative work

of art we encounter reality in dimension which is closed for us without such works. The symbols ... not only open up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable but also unlock dimensions and elements of our souls which corresponds to the dimensions and elements of reality." (Tillich, 1957, p.43) The result of this power of artistic work is that many people encounter the aspects of empirical reality hitherto unknown to them in terms of art. Similar is the case with the religious symbols. But, if we were to accept his comparison of the religious symbols with the political and artistic symbols, is our explanation satisfactory? The explanation that the religious symbols participate in the ultimate, in the way the flag is said to participate in the power and the dignity of the political reality of the nation, or in the way an artistic symbol may be said to express art reality, is likely to render the symbols of faith purely naturalistic in essence. Where does Tillich stand on this? Do religious symbols participate in a different way in what they symbolize? The trap of naturalism is the danger of the above comparison and interpretation.

Tillich also expounds his concept of symbolic participation on the basis of the ontology he assumed. He holds that every being participates in the being-itself as the ground of its own being. (Tillich, 1959) The ontological claim that God is being-itself and thereby beyond all limitations, is the basis on which Tillich accommodates the element of ultimacy in the idea of God. The claim, on the other hand, that every being participates in being-itself makes possible, Tillich thinks, a theory of religious symbols, which is said to adequately account for the element of concreteness in the idea of God. Not everything is a symbol of being-itself even though every being has the potentiality of becoming a symbol. It means that all things can be symbols of the ultimate. If this interpretation is accepted, we at once open ourselves to another set of philosophical problems. What is the difference between the participation of a religious symbol and a secular symbol? Do things participate in the being-itself in the same way? If it is the case, why should the latter be not venerated, or worshipped, as much as the former? One would now expect a very different account of participation. (Tillich, 1968, p.177) William P. Alston captured the difficulty for us when he said, "On Tillich's principle, everything constantly participates in being-itself as a necessary condition of its being anything. Of course it may be that religious symbols participate in being-itself in some special sense of 'participate'. But, to my knowledge, no such sense has been provided." (1961, p.19)

## 7. Religious Symbols – The Two Dimensions

Alston's observation is on the mark. Tillich did not give a straight forward answer to the problem. Nevertheless it is possible to make sense of Tillich's concept of participation by a careful sieving of his writings. Tillich's elaboration of the participation of the religious symbols is both subjective and objective. It is subjective to the extent that it has a reference to an experience of an ultimacy. Likewise, it is objective to the extent that it has a reference to his ontology, or the analysis of being. On the objective side, it is obvious that each and every being can point to being-itself, because every contingent being, so long as it is not relegated to the non-being, must participate in the being-itself or it would not exist. It is this ontological necessity which makes it possible for man to articulate about

God. Tillich was aware of this truth as witnessed by his remark that, "The infinite is being-itself and because everything participates in being-itself .... (this) gives us our only justification of speaking at all about God. It is based on the fact that God must be understood as being-itself." (Tillich, 1968, p.265) Tillich opposed the narrow view of religions that confined piety to officially sanctioned objects or patterns of behaviour. He insisted that the things and events, that are labelled 'religious' - churches, Bible, picture of Jesus, hymns etc. - are often devoid of religious power. 'God' may be absent from the manifestation of official religiosity, and, yet, he may be present in what is called 'secular art' and in ordinary forms of human experience in work-a-day places like factories and farms. After all, Tillich claims that every being participates in being-itself and it is not surprising that every being should, in his view, have latent symbolic power. He said, "No thing however is merely a thing, since everything, that is, participates in the self-world structure of being, elements of self-relatedness are universal. This makes union with everything possible." (Tillich, 1968, p. 97) Every moment of life and every individual being we encounter can be holy. It is nearly impossible to read meaning in Tillich, if we do not sensitively fall back upon his ontological approach. His ultimate concern is not only the being-itself, it is also the ultimate meaning of human existence. Human life itself is the symbol of the divine.

On the subjective side, it can be said that each and every being or concept can serve as a symbol, only if it engages individuals within the religious situation. It means religious symbols are actualized only in the context of the religious situation of man. Even though everything has the potential to be a religious symbol, only some actually are. For some a tree may be a religious symbol, for some it may be a concept of the 'Trinity', still for others it maybe a person. Religious symbols are symbolic expressions for an experience of what concerns us ultimately. Religious symbols are thus meaningful only when understood in the light of the subjectivity, or the attitude, of the believer. Ultimate concern as the faith of man is inextricably linked with the understanding of participation. The key to understanding the participation of symbol is man, because religious symbols are religious, not in themselves, but in so far as they are related to the faith of man. They are symbols for man. The crucial factor is the attitude that the individual manifests. People cannot, and do not, shop for symbols, as if they were things in the market place. But rather a symbol is that which answers man's existential quest for being and meaning. Ultimate concern is the total existential commitment of man. It is the attitude of man directed towards something in the hope of the fulfillment of his being and the meaning of life. This something expresses *something* about the ultimate. In other words, this something is said to provide the answer to man's quest for the meaning of his being. When he can relate 'such a connection', symbols come into being and they become 'alive' in the life of man. Symbols convey a sense of ultimacy in the state of faith. Here, the inner attitude, which is oriented to the symbol, does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolized in it. (Tillich, 1961) The participation of symbols can be understood only in the case of such a relation of existential engagement.

## 8. Conclusion

Tillich's theory of symbolism is philosophically rich. Yet, this is one theory that is repeatedly attacked by his critics. One of the grounds of this attack has been the contention that the theory of symbolic expression can also be developed in a purely naturalistic direction, by no means intended by Tillich. Tillich himself, in spite of his denial of the God of 'theism', has developed the theory in a theistic direction. For him, symbols derive their power from something beyond themselves, described by Tillich as 'the unconditional', 'the infinite', or simply as 'Reality'. This obviously suggests some sort of a

supranaturalistic nuance, which he could not do away with as a Christian philosopher. But, then, other philosophers, not necessarily subscribing to the Christian philosophies, have been quick to point out that it is not necessary to anchor symbols to some extra natural 'power' as Tillich does. It is plausible to explain symbols purely naturalistically, for instance, in terms of its cultural functions. J. H. Randall (1958) paradoxically claiming to have been inspired by Tillich's symbolic theory, has done precisely this.

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