

Konrad Waloszczyk

This article was first published in Polish by "Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria", a quart. of The Institute of Philosophy of the Warsaw University, n. 2 (82) 2012, p. 401 – 409. Also a Polish copy of it can be seen on the web page of the Polish Academy of Sciences:

<http://journals.pan.pl/dlibra/publication/108032/edition/93674/content>

With permission of the Publisher.

### **On the broken myth in the philosophy of religion and theology**

*Abstract.* The article deals with the concept of broken myth, thus named by the German theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich (1886 - 1965). The thesis related to this concept is that all religions, including Christianity, use a mythical language. This language is expressing moral truths and metaphysical intuitions, but not the objective facts and states of affairs that may provide knowledge. The broken myth does not imply the rejection of myth as a mere untruth, but rather its split into untruth, which is the garment of the story understood literally, and truth, which is (although not always and to varying degrees) a moral and spiritual inspiration. The broken myth is self-aware, but not discredited. The author formulates six reasons that can speak in favor of such view. He believes that its acceptance by the community of believers can be very difficult, so the traditional discourse of faith, in which one understands literally credo articles (including the notions of mystery and analogy), must be considered not as an anachronism, but as an autonomous partner of dialogue.

Keywords: broken myth, deliteration of religious beliefs, religious pluralism, biblical criticism.

#### **The concept of the broken myth**

Paul Tillich, the German theologian and philosopher, called the broken myth (*die gebrochene Mythe*) a myth that acknowledges its legendary and not factual character. Polish translator Adam Szostkiewicz aptly translated the German term as a "disjointed myth" (*mit rozłamany*), because in Tillich's thought myth should not be rejected, but cleaved into his truth and untruth. The religious myth may conceal a metaphysical or moral intuition which does not allow itself to be adequately translated into a discursive language. However, the myth is not true for its garment of a story or image; not true if it is understood literally as an real event or a state of affairs.

Like Rudolf Bultmann and many other liberal theologians, Paul Tillich maintained that not only Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions contain myths, but also the Christian faith:

The work of creation is considered to be a magical act that once took place. Adam's fall is located in a specific geographical location and is attributed to a specific human being. The virgin birth of the Messiah is understood in biological terms, the resurrection and ascension are considered physical events, the second coming of Christ as a telluric or cosmic catastrophe. The premise accompanying a similar literary approach is that God is a being acting in time and space, residing in a particular place, influencing and influenced by events like any other being in the world... If faith treats its symbols literally, it becomes idolatry (Tillich 1987 [1953]:70).

The German theologian believed that all religions were contaminated by the literal interpretation of their myths and that this was the cause of most attacks on them:

It is almost a truism to claim that religious language is symbolic. But it is no longer such a truism to maintain that, for this reason, the language of religion expresses a truth that cannot be expressed and communicated in any other language. And it is far from truism to say that most errors in religion and most attacks on it are caused by the confusion of the symbolic and literal language. This confusion, which must remain a major concern for anyone who takes religion seriously, is not only a mental failure but also a symptom of the idolatrous deformation that characterizes all religions and which makes divinity an object among objects so that man, as a subject, can wield it cognitively and practically (Tillich 1992 [1956]: 385).

Paul Tillich believed that the myth, aware of its mythical character, can and must continue to function as a symbol of faith, since it cannot be replaced by scientific or philosophical claims. Faith needs symbols, but it must be aware that they are just symbols, not literal historical or metaphysical truths. In solidarity with Rudolf Bultmann's views, the author of *Systematic Theology*, instead of demythologizing, proposed a milder concept of the *deliteration* of religious beliefs (see Tillich 2004 [1951 -1963], vol. 3: 143).

### **Who shares and who denies the thesis of the broken myth?**

Paul Tillich's view is neither isolated nor new in the philosophy of religion and theology. It was proclaimed by Arthur Schopenhauer, George Santayana, Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers and Paul Ricoeur, among others. The latter was a Bible lover and a Calvinist practitioner, but he preached "secondary naivety" in the reference to religious myths, i.e. not the primitive one, based on their literal understanding (see Ricoeur 1989 [1976 - 1981]).

The above mentioned thinkers postulated the recognition of the metaphorical character of religious beliefs, not excluding the most basic ones. They considered them as allegories, myths, a kind of poetry, ciphers of Transcendence. They stressed the basic, in their opinion, error of these beliefs, which would consist in their literal interpretation as historical facts and worldly states of affairs. George Santayana, for example, wrote:

Religion remains an imaginative achievement, a symbolic representation of moral reality, which may have a most important function in vitalizing the mind and in transmitting, by way of parables, the lessons of experience. But it becomes at the same time a continuous deception; and this deception, in proportion as it is strenuously denied to be such, can work indefinite harm in the world and in the conscience (1962 [1905]:14).

Ernst Cassirer is also expressed in the same way:

Religion, by its very nature, can never go beyond the sphere of "image", vision and fantasy. It draws its essential strength from it; it would die and die if it did not feed on this soil. On the other hand, however, she can never consider an image *as just an image* (it. in the orig.), as any free image of "fantasy". It has a definite meaning for her, as long as it not only presents the truth, but also the truth itself *is* (it.in the orig.). Every philosophy of religion has always revolved around this conflict, trying to reconcile its members in some way (Cassirer 2000 [1906]: Bd. 4, 342 - 343).

Nowadays, the metaphorical understanding of religious beliefs is postulated by religious pluralists such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, Perry Schmidt - Leukel, Roger Haight and others. It is a group of philosophers and theologians who demand recognition of the equality of world religions as means of salvation or liberation. This thesis entails two further ones: that the beliefs of all religions have the status of metaphors (myths) and that the criterion of their value should be ethical. Hans Küng, a controversial theologian, also deserves attention. His extraordinary erudition and intellectual honesty allow him to be recognized as a contemporary authority on religious matters. His book *Christ sein* (1974) presents Christology including philosophical and biblical criticism. A metaphorical interpretation of religious dogma is also postulated by some liberal Protestant and Anglican theologians and Biblical exegetes, such as the Protestant

sociologist and theologian Peter Berger, the Anglican bishops John T. Robinson and John S. Spong. We can talk about a broad camp, paradigm or discourse that demands delimitation of the religious beliefs, including the Christian ones – they too should be seen as mythical and not factual. This is not to lead to the rejection of myths, but to their self-awareness.

The Catholic Church, and similarly conservative non-Catholic churches, generally reject or simply ignore the paradigm of the broken myth. Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly expressed this, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has described symbolic understanding of dogmas as "far from true faith in Jesus Christ" (*Breviarium Fidei*, 1972: 588-590). The main concern of the Pope and conservative ecclesial dogmatics is the continuity of the Christian faith tradition. The first Christian apologists, the fathers of the Church, the great scholastics headed by St. Thomas, the doctors of the Church, finally ordinary believers have always believed in the articles of the creed literally, albeit with regard to the notions of analogy and mystery. This last reservation is important, since it brings both paradigms closer together. Nonetheless the difference remains. Cardinal Ratzinger speaks of it as follows:

While the Greek or Indian myth only wants to spread a variety of images of the eternally elusive True, faith in Christ in his fundamental statements cannot be exchanged. It does not erase the fundamental boundary between man and truth, i.e. it does not remove the principle of analogy, but analogy is something else than a metaphor. It is always open to enlargement and deepening, but within the limits of what is available to man, it expresses the truth itself (Ratzinger 2005a [1992]: 24, 63).

### **The reasons for the claim about the broken myth**

Let us take a brief look at the reasons for concluding that not only Islam or Hinduism contains myths, but also the Christian faith. 1) The first reason are the contradictions of religious myths when compared and understood literally. Except for the belief that there is some kind of divinity and immortality, there is not a single belief in one religion that, taken literally, would not be denied, otherwise expressed or simply absent in another religion. Major differences are already visible in the very concept of God. This fact is interpreted by the inclusivists (proponents of the priority of Christianity and of the need to include other religions in it) in such a way that only one, i.e. the Christian belief system is true, while others, even though not worthless, are but rays of truth which fully shines only in the Church. It is a modern, softened form of the medieval theological principle that there is no salvation outside the Church (*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*). Pluralists, however, go further, postulate the salvific equality of the beliefs of world religions, assuming that the ultimate criterion for the truth of all beliefs is ethical, and there is no reason to believe that the followers of other religions, at least of the six or eight main religions, behave less ethically than Christians.

2) The second reason for not treating religious beliefs literally is the bad fruit that such an interpretation has produced in the course of history and continues to produce today. For example, faith in the personal devil and eternal hell, combined with political motives and the ignorance of both people and clergy, has led to the deaths at the stake of tens of thousands of heretics and alleged witches. Hans Küng (2007: 698 - 702) believes that official theology is also part of this mass crime. Saint Thomas justified the rightness of punishing heretics with death, albeit only after two reminders, by the fact that "a much greater crime is the corruption of the faith that gives life to the soul than the falsification of money that sustains this worldly life", while the latter is rightly punished with death (*Summa Theologica*, II -II, q. XI, a. 3). This is a logical reasoning if one assumes that eternal life is something as sure as temporal life, and that there is only one faith that ensures eternal life.

3) The third category of reasons for the supporters of the broken myth are the results of critical biblical research. It has several hundred years of tradition, starting with Baruch Spinoza, through Herman Samuel Reimarus (*Vom Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, 1778), David Friedrich Strauss (*Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*, 1835), Albert Schweitzer (*Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung*, 1913) until Rudolf Bultmann, and the contemporary Third Search for Historical Jesus, represented for example by John Dominic Crossan (*Historical Jesus. Who he was and what he taught*. 1997 [1991]). These results were never entirely certain, and Pope Benedict XVI in his two-volume book on the life of Jesus considered them ideologically prejudiced, but some of their findings seem almost certain. The Polish reader may become acquainted with them for example from the book by Uta Ranke - Heinemann *Nie i Amen* (No and Amen 1994 [1992]). What is certain above all is that the Evangelists did not simply write down the facts, but the facts interpreted by faith, sometimes not taking the facts into account, but modifying them in such a way that they corresponded to earlier prophecies and spiritual edification. For example, the German author estimates St. Luke's account of the population registering (Luke 2:1-3), which has led Joseph and Mary migrating from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as a complete invention. First of all, such a census did indeed take place, but "not until the year 6 A.D. There is nothing known about the previous census"(p. 22). Secondly, "no Roman emperor has ever given such a senseless order for the peoples to travel alongside countries, to go to their cities and birthplaces, and then to return to their places of residence or domicile. Such a method of estimating the amount of taxes due on this basis (and this is what the censuses were all about - KW) would be absurd and impossible to carry out" (ib. p. 19). Besides, according to Ranke - Heinemann, it is completely incomprehensible why Joseph exposed his wife to a difficult, dangerous journey, about 130 kilometers long, without taking care of the decent conditions of childbirth. Ranke – Heinemann therefore believes that the whole story is not true, but serves to show that Jesus was born in the city of David, the king and hero, and not in any negligible place.

4) The fourth point, which is particularly emphasized by Karl Jaspers (1999 [1962]), is the unreliability of Revelation understood according to traditional theology. First of all, if God has revealed something unambiguously, there is nothing left for man to do but to obey the revealed content. There can be no discussion with God. At the same time, man's freedom and responsibility are reduced, and God himself appears as a competitor of man. And if Revelation was given at a particular time, place and culture, most of humanity has always been beyond its reach. The chosen people, and then their extension in the form of the Church, possess the fullness of truth, while other religions enjoy only its rays, as defined by the Second Vatican Council (1965: n. 2). This is a position that underestimates the moral and spiritual depths of other great religions, although the document of the Council as a whole, in comparison with the previous theology, represents a major advance towards interreligious dialogue.

5) Fifthly, as George Santayana put it, too human is the voice that supposedly comes from heaven. In the light of free thought, there are both true and untrue elements in it. It contains not only natural and historical errors, which is recognized by ecclesiastical exegesis today, but also moral. For example, what the Catholic Church proclaims today (encyclicals *Donum vitae* 1987, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, *Dignitatis personae*, 2008), although generally only in the indirect inference from the Revelation, is in many cases highly debatable in the light of humanistic ethics. Church absolutely condemns abortion, euthanasia, divorce, in vitro fertilization, contraceptives, sex without marriage, homosexuality, transvestitism, prenatal research if it were to lead to abortion, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, onanism. Of course, the

importance of these questions and, consequently, the degree of condemnation by the Church vary, and the intention is worthy of recognition: the protection of life, of love and of dignity. Proponents of the broken myth do not deny the role of the Church, to which they give a voice, even a very important one, but within the framework of a broad public discussion, the results of which should be decided only, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, "the power of freely fluctuating reasons". (Habermas 2004 [2001]: 38). Meanwhile, Church considers her position on these questions to be "authentic teaching", binding upon the faithful in conscience, usually under the sanction of grave sin.

7) The sixth point in favor of a symbolic interpretation of traditional religious beliefs is that the Bible, as well as the scriptures of other religions, were written in the pre-scientific period. The authors of these books were not aware of the evolution, the enormity of the universe, the ethical and spiritual depths of other religious centers. For example, what did St. John or St. Paul know about the religions of India or China? They do not seem to know anything about them. Therefore, their idea of Christ as being the only way and truth and life (Jn 14:6) could have, and perhaps had in their intention, only the outreach of their knowledge of the world and humanity. Today, the awareness, which Arthur Schopenhauer already had, that the ethics and spirituality of Buddhism and Hinduism are by no means inferior to Christianity, is becoming more and more popular.

To sum up, there are at least six reasons for interpreting religious beliefs not literally, but metaphorically, more as a kind of poetry than a knowledge of facts: 1) the contradictions of religious myths understood literally, which suggest that their truth be sought at a higher, metaphorical level, 2) the immoral consequences of literal interpretation: war on religious grounds, persecution of heretics, witches, violence against consciences, 3) Revelation interpreted too literally leads to an absolute ethic with which the humanism disagrees, 4) historical and literary criticism of the Bible shows, among other things, that little is known about the real life and teachings of Jesus and it is unlikely that he would consider himself the son of God in the literal sense, 5) ethnocentrism of the idea of Revelation given to a particular nation at a particular time and place, 6) the postulate of reconciling religious beliefs with the scientific image of humanity and the world.

### **Final remarks**

None of the two positions outlined above, both traditional and literal, as well as these applying the concept of the broken myth, has a definite method of proving its validity. It is obvious that in the sphere of religious and philosophical beliefs it is not possible to conduct such an experiment or observation that would determine the dispute, as is the case in physics or astronomy. Philosophical and religious discussions remain more indirect criteria of truth. In these areas, this theory is more true, whose ethical potential is higher, which inspires more the desire to live and to build, which is more conducive to the unification of humanity, which is in better harmony with humanistic and scientific knowledge, which simply does not reject rival theory, but integrates it into a broader paradigm. It seems that the concept of a "broken myth" better than the literal interpretation fits these criteria. It is more conducive to interreligious peace, tolerance and dialogue than that of inclusivism, it does not emphasize superiority towards other religions, and it is more in harmony with the results of comparative religious studies, historical and literary criticism of the Bible, and with the scientific image of the world.

In practice, however, the issue is much more complex than in theory. Religion is not only beliefs, but also practice, i.e. rituals, songs, prayers, sacraments, vows, pilgrimages. Religion is also the truth of feelings, intuition and irrationality, of which Blaise Pascal said that "the heart has its own reasons which the reason does not know". The metaphorical paradigm does not, at least so far, have its own religious practices. It is, in its present form, an elite faith, more philosophical than religious. If religion is not to be reduced to philosophy and, at the same time, the philosophical right to criticize religion is not to be taken away, then it must be recognized, that between these two approaches to Transcendence, there should be - for an indefinite period of time - a dialogue recognizing their autonomy and indispensability in the system of civilization.

### Bibliography

*Breviarium Fidei. Wybór doktrynalnych wypowiedzi Kościoła.* 2007 (Selection of the doctrinal statements of the Church). Ks. Ignacy Bokwa (red.), Poznań, Księgarnia Świętego Wojciecha. (Abbrev. *Breviarium Fidei*).

Cassirer, Ernst. 2000 [1906]. *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der Neueren Zeit* (The Problem of Knowledge in Philosophy and Science of the Modern Era). Gesammelte Werke Bd. 4 -5. Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2004 [2001]. *Działanie komunikacyjne i detranscendentalizacja rozumu* (Communicative action and detranscendentalisation of reason). Przeł. W. Lipnik, Warszawa, Oficyna Naukowa.

Jaspers, Karl. 1999 [1962]. *Wiara filozoficzna wobec Objawienia* (Philosophical faith in the face of Revelation). Przeł. G. Sowiński, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak.

Küng, Hans, 2007 [1994], *Das Christentum. Wesen und Geschichte* (Christianity. Nature and History). München, Piper Verlag.

Ranke – Heinemann, Uta. 1994 [1992]. *Nie i Amen* (No and Amen). Przeł. K. Toeplitz, Gdynia, Wydawnictwo URAEUS.

Ratzinger, Joseph. 2005a [1985]. *Prawda w teologii* (Truth in theology). Przeł. M. Mijalska, Kraków, Wyd. M.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1989 [1976 – 1981]. *Język, tekst, interpretacja. Wybór pism* (Language, text, interpretation. Selection of writings). Wstęp K. Rosner, przeł. P. Graff i K. Rosner, Warszawa, PIW.

Santayana, George. 1962 [1905]. *Reason in Religion*. New York, Collier Books.

St. Thomas Aquinas. (1265 and the next). *Summa Theologica*. Transl. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province: <https://dhs priory.org/thomas/summa/>.

Tillich, Paul. 2004 [1951 -1963]. *Teologia systematyczna* (Systematic theology), vol. I – III. Przeł. A. Marzęcki, Kęty, Wydawnictwo Antyk.

Tillich, Paul. *Dynamika wiary* (Dynamics of faith). Przeł. A. Szostkiewicz, Poznań, Wydawnictwo „W drodze“ (1987 [1953]: 70).

Tillich, Paul. 1992 [1956]. *Existential Analysis and Religious Symbols*, in: *Main Works/Hauptwerke* vol. 6, Berlin, Walter De Gruyter Verlag.

About the author: Konrad Waloszczyk (b. 1939) is a retired doctor in theology and a professor in philosophy. He taught philosophy at the Technical University of Łódź and at the Main School of Fire Service in Warsaw. His publications include: *Wola życia. Myśl Pierre'a Teilharda de Chardin* (The Will to Live. The Thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin), 1986; *Planeta nie tylko ludzi* (A Planet Not Only For Humans), 1997; *Dosłowna i niedosłowna interpretacja wierzeń religijnych* (The literal and non-literal interpretation of religious beliefs), 2012. His e-mail is: konradw@chello.pl