



### **Explain religious language as symbol (20)**

Religious language, often seen as confusing and potentially meaningless, is any language which purports to express God or religious belief. It can range from talk about God's existence to religious worship and prayer.

Some have suggested that religious language can have meaning through the use of symbol. A symbol here doesn't simply refer to the traditional concept of a symbol as an image, but simply means anything which represents something else. In this sense, a symbol can range from a model of a Christian cross to represent Jesus' death and atonement to a Muslim's prayer ritual.

One of the main scholars to discuss religious language as symbol is 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar Paul Tillich. In his book *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich suggested that religion is the 'ultimate concern' about the ultimate and he insisted that "the language of faith is the language of symbols". Tillich grounded symbolic language in the relationship between a necessary infinite God, and our contingent and finite existence. Because of this, Tillich argued that humans MUST use only segments of their finite experience in order to even talk about God, as any 'god talk' has to transcend our normal day to day experience. For example, when a Muslim performs Hajj at Mecca, they are using their own finite experience of walking around the Ka'bah to represent a focal point for Muslim prayer across the world. The Ka'bah is a symbol of Allah's greatness and the importance of prayer to Allah who is infinite and necessary despite the Ka'bah itself being contingent and finite.

Tillich suggested that there are many characteristics of symbol. Firstly, Tillich distinguishes between a sign and a symbol. Whilst both point to something beyond themselves, only a symbol can participate in that to which it points. This means that a symbol can't be arbitrary and has to grow out of personal consciousness. For example, the Kippah worn by Jewish men is worn where it is for a reason as it represents how God is above them and more powerful than man. The Kippah has to be worn where it is rather than randomly being worn anywhere else on the body. However, because symbols grow out of collective consciousness they do grow and die. In this sense, a symbol may have meaning to one group of people at one time, but then lose their meaning over time.

Tillich argues that symbolic language has a deep and profound effect that can only be explained in a limited way. This means that symbols evoke an emotional response. He even goes as far to say that symbols can open up new levels of reality and unlock dimensions of the soul. In this sense, symbols can make someone feel a way that they cannot express using normal language. To say they speak to the soul means to say that they are intrinsically connected with elements of belief that point away from this finite world. For example, when Christians see the cross this reminds them of the pain that Jesus endured to atone their sins. This emotional response is connected to afterlife and a sense of eternal justice which normal words cannot describe. This shows how symbols can be used to give religious language meaning.