

**BEYOND**

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RELIGION AS METAPHOR

SAMPLE

DAVID TACEY

  
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Dedicated to future generations:  
may you make more sense of religion than the  
generations before you.

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*Faith is unwilling to give up the primitive, childlike relationship to mind-created figures; it collides with science and gets its deserts, for it refuses to share in the spiritual adventure of our age.*  
— C. G. Jung

*Every religion is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck to its own metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble.*  
— Joseph Campbell

*My point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally. They knew what they were doing; we don't.*  
— John Dominic Crossan

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# Preface

Many of us in Western societies have given up religious practices and taken on secular attitudes. Of those who maintain a spiritual attitude, some have turned to Eastern pathways and New Age interests. A few have clung to their natal Jewish or Christian traditions, often for cultural or community reasons. Some have turned fundamentalist, in a bid to strengthen religion in unpropitious times. Like many of my generation who grew up in the Christian tradition, I lost interest in religion in early adulthood, not seeing its relevance. The miracles and wonders seemed bizarrely out of step with the world around me. But today I realize that there is an error in Christianity that has brought on this disconnect between religion and society. The religious story has been misinterpreted as history and fact. This worked while believers remained uneducated; in fact the claim that everything was historical added to its appeal. But as the West became more sophisticated, people abandoned religion in droves. They treated it with contempt, as an insult to their intelligence. The problem is not with the scriptures as such, but with how they are interpreted.

The original sin of religion is literalism, the habit of reading texts literally. This is not only an intellectual problem, which has given many a distorted view of the world, but it is also the cause of sectarian conflict and religious violence. Literalism engenders idolatry and aggression, and is the bane of civilization. It is the reason why the new atheists of the post-9/11 era are trying to get rid of religion. Getting rid of religion is an absurdity, but getting rid of literalism is something we need to seriously consider. This book will argue that scriptures were written primarily as myth and have been misunderstood as history. We have to reconfigure religion in light of the knowledge that has emerged from various quarters over the last 150 years. In this book I will attempt to interweave personal reflections with the insights of several disciplines, including contemporary scripture scholarship and depth psychology, in a bid to present a new view of religion and its metaphorical approach

to the spirit. It is important that this new approach be conveyed to a wide audience in accessible language.

Scholars around the world have been saying for some time that the stories of the Bible are not to be read literally. Not only this, but more startling is the news that the stories were not intended to be taken literally. This is known only to a few specialists; it is not known, as yet, to the general public. Nor is it known to a great many clergy. Clergy often turn a blind eye to scholarship and treat the scriptural narratives as historical. They think this is treating them with respect, but they are destroying their true meaning by constructing them as eyewitness accounts of real events. One cannot blame individual priests or ministers for this confusion; it is a crisis of Western culture not to be able to discern the deeper dimension of religion. We are technologically advanced, but spiritually impoverished.

History is present in these ancient works, but it is overwhelmed by myth and wrapped in metaphor. All the “big” moments of scripture, the miracles and wonders, are acts of imagination, not acts of history. Unfortunately, myth and metaphor have such poor reputations, often synonymous with lies or deceit, that many assume I am adopting a negative approach to religion. Some imagine I am trying to reduce it to incoherence, but the opposite is the case. I have great respect for religion, and value faith as a guiding light in culture and life. But a distinction needs to be made between belief and faith. If religion is seen as “belief in impossible events,” it hardly has much of a future in an age of science. Faith, however, is a different matter. My hope is that faith will be reignited by the realization that we need to read scripture nonliterally, as stories of soul and spirit.

This book follows a pattern found in my life and in other lives. The pattern begins with literal religious belief in childhood, shifts to reason and doubt in early adulthood, and moves to a deeper yet questioning faith as a mature adult. Mature faith leads to the realization that scriptures point to spiritual realities that do not exist in a literal sense, but may be considered true in nonliteral terms. If our imaginations are poor, we need miracles or signs to buoy us up. Once we become educated, naïve belief is crushed and we are unable to find a spiritual orientation. When our imaginations are reignited, we realize that scriptures can be “true” again, but in different ways from previously imagined. They can be true as metaphors, and if we regain respect for metaphors and myths, we are able to rediscover a spiritual life for ourselves and civilization.

I am hoping that adults of all ages, and of all beliefs and non-beliefs, will read this book and be energized by it. I am hoping that students will find their way to this book, as young adults need something more than the cynical, debunking mindset that is offered by the media and society. Due to the influence of Richard Dawkins and the new atheists, it has become commonplace to see religion as delusional.<sup>1</sup> In the early twentieth century Freud wrote *The Future of an Illusion*, in which he claimed religion was a universal obsessional neurosis.<sup>2</sup> He covered the same territory as Dawkins, and the only difference is that Freud's illusion became Dawkins' delusion. Both arrive at atheism as the best response to the crisis of religion, but Freud is slightly kinder, arguing that despite its illusory nature, religion provides social cohesion. As time goes by, attacks on religion become more sweeping and desperate. Atheists are right to reject religious statements if they are claimed to be historical. But atheists do not seem to realize they are attacking a misunderstanding. Freud and Dawkins are laboring under illusions of their own.

The argument of this book is that religion is not delusional but metaphorical. It is only delusional if we take the metaphors literally. Once we understand this, a lot of puzzling things make sense. The atheists throw out too much, and there is precious cargo in religion that "enlightened" people are losing. I am not in favor of nihilism, nor am I keen on fundamentalism. I think the challenge today is to overcome these -isms and aspire to a mystical vision that beckons us at this time. It is what religion has pointed to all along, but it has taken the West some time to get there. Some will find this book challenging and perhaps offensive. But it only offends a certain attitude that is based on misconceptions. Truth can be uncomfortable, and if we have to go through a period of discomfort before we realize that metaphor is the primary carrier of truth, then so be it. Our times are leaning toward atheism, but I want to arrest this development and tilt the balance the other way, toward a renewed interest in faith. The problem is, will this faith be recognized as faith, or seen as make-believe? It is a risk I have to take, because that is what faith is, a risky business, a leap into the unknown.

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August 15, 2014

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 21 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953).

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Anne Boyd, Janet Galos, Helen Littleton, Peter Vardy, Bernie Neville, John Carroll, Wayne Hudson, and Matthew Del Nevo asked challenging questions and offered useful suggestions. Conversations with radical clerics John Spong, Don Cupitt, and Lloyd Geering were illuminating, even if I disagreed with them. I recall a defining conversation with Alan Jones, former dean of Grace Cathedral (San Francisco), at the Merton Institute in Kentucky. Jones said he found himself saying, "It's a metaphor, stupid" to those who enquired about supernatural aspects of scripture. People were keen to know how he, an educated man, managed to believe them. He replied that some religious statements are not meant to be "believed," but reflected on for their significance.

I thank my partner and distinguished poet, Lisa Jacobson, for her interest in this project and her encouragement when the way was tough.

I would like to acknowledge the writings of C. G. Jung, Alvin Kuhn, Tom Harpur, Eugen Drewermann, Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong, Northrop Frye, and Richard Holloway. Without their distinguished works, I would not have been able to complete this book.

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# Personal Introduction

*Take care not to interpret physically what is intended spiritually.*  
— *The Cloud of Unknowing*<sup>1</sup>

As a child I used to believe that the miracles and wonders of my natal faith were literally true. My parents inculcated this view, and I tried my best not to disappoint them. Some of the children in my neighborhood questioned what was taught in the churches, but I plugged my ears and tried not to listen. I knew that faith was important to my family and did not want to lose it. I was required to believe in the Word of God and if this meant literal adherence to the “words of God” then so be it. If the Bible said Jesus had a virgin birth or a physical resurrection, or walked on water, or fed the five thousand, this must be true, because it came from the holy book. It was the “greatest story ever told.” I was to accept this without questioning and not doubt God’s ability to perform miracles. These wonders were to become the cornerstones of my faith. But as childhood came to an end I was forced to concede with St Paul: “When I was a child I thought like a child and reasoned like a child—but now that I am an adult I have put away childish things.”<sup>2</sup>

I clung to my early faith until I was about thirteen, when it began to dissolve in the course of my education. Indeed, thirteen is about the outer limit of the developmental phase that can accept religion as it is presented. As I began to find out more about the world and how it works, and to think about God in a deeper way, my belief in these miracles dissolved. I realized that religion was basically mythological, but regarded as history and fact. I noted that my schoolteachers, and later, university professors, regarded it with contempt, and although I did not share their contempt, I felt that this kind of religion might be fatally flawed. It can speak to children but not to grown-ups. It is little wonder that what is called “faith” is in short supply, if it is based on such a misunderstanding of scripture. Believing in impossible events

is not faith but credulity, and leads not to an understanding of God but to mere superstition.

When I was fifteen, my sister, a few years older than me, announced that religion was a fraud. She said it was mythological and to her mind that meant it was false. This is a real problem in society today: as soon as the mythic dimension of religion is glimpsed, it is regarded as lies. As I will go on to say, we need to recover respect for myth and metaphor, and appreciate their capacity to reveal truth. Spiritual truth is different from literal truth. At the time, I did not have the language to convey this to my sister. I felt she was throwing out too much, too quickly, but was unable to suggest an alternative. She tried to convince me that atheism was the only option, and offered me books on existentialism and psychoanalysis that had convinced her to throw religion out. She said our God-fearing family was behind the times to the tune of 150 years, and she added, “All thinking people are atheists now.” I was reminded of her comment recently when, stuck in traffic, the car ahead of me had a bumper sticker that read: “I think, therefore I am—an atheist.”

But soon after making this shift to atheism, my sister went mad, suffering from paranoid schizophrenia for the rest of her life. I could not help linking the two phenomena in some way, although I was never quite sure of the connection. Was there a causal link, or was it mere coincidence? Our family and its ancestral lines (one side Irish, the other English/French) had been religious for centuries, and I imagined that one could not suddenly throw out this legacy or orientation without consequences. But the fact that her paranoia expressed itself in delusions of a supernatural kind made me think that when religion is denied, it projects itself into the world in distorted ways. The mystic and the paranoiac are both responding to nonhuman reality, the one spiritually, the other psychotically. I often think that what happened to my sister is happening to society at large: it once had a spiritual orientation, it has ditched it in favor of materialism, and it is going mad.<sup>3</sup> This is what fundamentalists think as well, but they are approaching it in a different way, with formulas I don't like.

We have to make allowances for the spiritual in our time, and if we can no longer believe in the “big nouns” (God, Holy Spirit, and so on) that expressed spirit in the past, we have to find new ways to define or point to it. If the traditional images of God have become unbelievable, as they have for countless people, this means our old images are useless, but it does not mean the sacred is dead or no longer exists. It

means we lack convincing ways of calling it into being. Science and education have changed our understanding of the world, and the notion that spirits, demons, and gods stalk the world in the ways described in scripture has to be revised. I smile at the alacrity with which I once believed that God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening.<sup>4</sup> But we can't just annihilate the old myths and live in a flat, spiritless world. We are composed of spiritual as well as physical forces, and these have to be respected if we are to live properly. One of the challenges is to invent new images of the sacred, lest we slide into the void of nihilism. But no one could argue that the myths of the past will suffice in their present form. They can no longer be interpreted as literal accounts of real events, and in this regard fundamentalism represents a serious regression.

As a university student, I had a short phase as an atheist that lasted for about a semester. I tried this partly to impress my professors, who were all atheists. Indeed, university study is an induction into the atheistic mindset. My family lived in Alice Springs, central Australia—a thousand miles from the nearest university—and so I had to live away from home, in Adelaide. When I returned home during vacations, I told my father what I had been studying. In my philosophy class, I was taught that God did not exist, never did exist, and never could exist. My father went ballistic hearing this news, and said he would not financially support me in my study, and I should leave the university if the pursuit of knowledge led to a loss of faith. I understood his fury but did not share it. If so-called “faith” can exist only in a state of ignorance, if it cannot dialogue with knowledge, I wanted no part of it. Again, I did not have the language that I needed at the time. If I had had the language, I would have said that knowledge can destroy belief, but not faith.

Atheism did not suit me, nor did the university mindset that preaches this doctrine today. I am a spiritual person by nature, and if my father had known me better he would have realized this. I would say I am “religious,” if the term is understood in its original meaning, deriving from the Latin *religio*, meaning to “bind back” or “reconnect.” My life has been about trying to bind back to the sacred, and I see myself as following the path of *religio*. But the term religion generates confusion and one has to use it advisedly. Today this term is conflated with the current forms and beliefs of religions, many of which I cannot accept. I inhabit a different universe to the churches and belong to a “religion-less” religion, as the scholars who have influenced me in recent years, such as Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney, would say.<sup>5</sup>

I accept that there are spiritual forces in the world, but these are not to be interpreted literally, and insofar as religions are systems of literal thinking I cannot accept them. Spiritual forces are beyond our range of comprehension, and as soon as we attempt to describe them we enter the field of culture, which is governed by metaphor. Derrida said, “The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of metaphors.”<sup>6</sup> I agree, but this need not lead to nihilism or loss of faith. Metaphors are all we have, and we need to treasure them, and deepen our appreciation of them, which is what I am doing in this book. There are realities beyond metaphors, but we can only *know* them through metaphors that are transparent to the transcendent. Many fail to understand this point of view, believing that if religions are metaphorical this means they are false. As a culture, we have a long way to go before we grasp this point. Our prejudices derive from centuries of rational indoctrination, which have taught us that things are only true if they happened in time and space, as historical events.

Despite my university degrees and scholarship, I remain true to my family of origin and its need for faith. I still share my family’s longing for God, even though they could not possibly accept my criticisms of their understanding of God. The God whom they believe in has long since exploded for me, and this is so devastating that I rarely use the word “God” in my university teaching, lest students think I am advocating a belief which has disappeared from my world as well as theirs. The word “God” is difficult, since it carries much literal and historical baggage. But there is, and must be, a new way to speak of God. I like what Paul Tillich did in his attempt to rescue God for modernity. He said God is not a supernatural being, but Being Itself.<sup>7</sup> God is not a man or person, but a depth or quality of existence; a personification of what is sacred.

God is the proper noun for mystery, and does not point to an object in space. Nor does God point to anything known, as tradition has asked us to believe. Tradition has tried to put a familiar face on mystery and protect us from the fact that the finite can never perceive the infinite. All attempts to describe God are provisional, relative. God is a metaphor for what is purposive in creation. The mystics have long known this, and have tried to say so. The institutions, on the other hand, have pretended that God is a person who “looks over us.” Institutions have not been able to bear the uncertainty of not knowing. They hoodwink many good and uneducated folk, such as my family members. But when God is called upon in times of trouble, and does not respond in

the supernatural ways that we have been led to believe, such folk lose their belief, because there was never an interventionist God to begin with. Western religion, with its infantile images of God, has set up the conditions for widespread and pervasive atheism.

I have never been able to take on uneducated belief, nor have I been able to accept educated disbelief, making me an outsider in both camps. I have a critical mind that refuses blind belief and a receptive heart that is open to faith. Much of my writing has attempted to bridge the gap between the belief of my background and the disbelief of my academic training.<sup>8</sup> I have spent a lifetime searching for a middle ground, an alternative to naïve belief on the one hand, and educated nihilism on the other. We deserve something better than these options, and I would hope that the future will deliver something new along these lines. Intelligence and faith need to be brought together, but it has not yet happened in Western civilization. Or rather, it has not happened in the mainstream, in public view, but it has happened in the mystical sub-traditions.

At university I specialized in literature, and it was during my years as a student that I began to wonder if the Bible were not a form of literature, perhaps a form we still do not know much about. Why did people assume that the Bible was history and should be read as fact? Why not a work of poetry or myth, in which stories were used for the purpose of teaching about the spirit? I had these thoughts in the early 1970s, and it has taken me until now to formulate them in a book. Forty years I have pondered these possibilities, and during this time I have wondered why many have not wanted to discuss these issues. On the one hand, believers find the proposition to be offensive, as they assume I am implying that the Bible is nonsense and I am devaluing the word of God. On the other hand, most nonbelievers can't be bothered to think about the Bible at all, since they are sure it is unreliable history and have ditched it.

But why is there such a dismissive approach to these texts? If they are sacred, as claimed, then we should continue to reflect on their meaning. To view the writings at face value, as history or fact, may be mistaken. The miracles and wonders might not be intended to be read as facts, but as symbols or metaphors of a level of significance inherent in what is being narrated. My view of miracles is often mistaken for atheism by those who don't understand where I am coming from. To me, there are two actions needing to be performed as we come to terms with religious statements. The first is to bring doubt and suspicion to religion and the

way it has been presented. We cannot swallow the creeds or dogmas whole, and to that extent, I am similar to the disbelieving types who fill our universities and halls of learning. But there is a second action to be performed: after doubt and suspicion, we need to ask, What were these stories all about? What did they, and what could they, mean? We can't believe them in their literal form; but what if we regard them as myths? How might we bring new value to them?

Robert Johnson reports that an American schoolteacher once asked her class, "What is a myth?" A young boy raised his hand and replied: "A myth is something that is true on the inside, but not true on the outside."<sup>9</sup> I met Johnson numerous times during his lecture tours, and knew what he was thinking when he recounted this story. It is a profound story, and I have used it as an inspiration in writing this book. Contrast this boy's wisdom with the silliness of celebrity Joanna Lumley, who has no understanding of the "inside" life of myth. Lumley was brought up in the Christian tradition, and in contrast to what she calls her "dear friend Richard Dawkins, who believes in nothing," Lumley is at the opposite end of the spectrum, since she "believes in virtually everything."<sup>10</sup> Celebrity believers and celebrity atheists are not to be trusted. They are both on the wrong track. Lumley says her passion was to search for the remains of Noah's Ark:

It's so familiar to us all, from the animals going in two by two and the dove of peace, and the olive branch and the rainbow. But who was Noah, and what was the Ark and what was it made of? When and why did the flood happen? It has fascinated me all my life, and I'm going in search of the truth.<sup>11</sup>

She is asking all the wrong questions. It never seems to occur to this celebrity that the truth of Noah's Ark might be found in symbol and myth, not in history and geography. It is not found "out there," but "in here," as we reflect on its symbolism. The notion that it narrates a literal flood and a literal Ark is fanciful, and yet this actress "would never be so ill mannered as to insist that it is a myth."<sup>12</sup> Myth has lost so much respect in our world that to refer to a story as a myth is impolite.

Canadian writer Tom Harpur puts it well when he says:

Mention "myth" or "mythology" to the average person, and he or she will assume you are speaking of remote, insubstantial, irrelevant matters. In our culture, the word is synonymous with, at best, fairy tales and, at worst, outright lies and deception. If you pay attention, you'll

be amazed at how often you'll read or hear someone say, "It's only a myth." It is of paramount importance that this disastrous distortion and misunderstanding be met head on.<sup>13</sup>

With this negative understanding of myth, how is religion ever to get back on track and announce to the world that its stories are primarily myths? Public opinion declares myths to be untrue, since they appear to conflict with reason. But this is only on the surface. If we peel back the outer layer and look at what they mean, they are true, as the schoolboy surmises. What they *denote* is false (fictional), but what they *connote* is true (spiritual). But most of us in the West see only the outside layer, which is believed or disbelieved, according to temperament and background. The inside truth is ignored by believers, like Lumley, who only grasp the external layer of myth, and by disbelievers, like Dawkins, who assume that myths are delusional.

Believers and nonbelievers don't seem to realize how similar they are. Both are looking at the outside husk. Both are misreading myths, and drawing opposite conclusions. Joseph Campbell puts the dilemma in memorable terms:

Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.<sup>14</sup>

This points to the widespread confusion in the modern world. In a semi-facetious manner, Campbell says "myth might be defined simply as "other people's religion," by which he means that few followers of a tradition are prepared to see their religion as mythology.<sup>15</sup> Myth, believers say, is what others have, whereas they have the truth, often claimed to be absolute truth, and literalized as historical truth. Campbell offers a serious but shocking definition of religion as "misunderstood mythology." He says "the misunderstanding consists in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as references to hard fact."<sup>16</sup>

Several factors contribute to this misunderstanding. One is the lack of imagination in religious adherents, who find sacred stories so arresting they assume them to be historical. Another is the emphatic mode in which scriptures are written, which encourages readers to take them at face value. A further problem is that such texts were written long ago, when mythos,<sup>17</sup> not factual reporting, was the favored mode



of writing. Finally, religious institutions do little to prevent adherents from reading texts literally, and often encourage this kind of reading. The churches have constructed themselves as bastions of literalism, and are destined to continue their downward course, since most modern people cannot abide their point of view. The receptive heart will not accept what the thinking mind rejects. This has been a dilemma in my own life, and I have received criticism from both sides: scholars tend to find me too religious, while the religious find me not religious enough.

Ironically, to present an interpretation of religion that might be acceptable to our age, I have upset a number of people who are settled in their beliefs. I don't belong to their fold, and they know it. Along the way to completing this book, I have presented numerous talks in which I have tiptoed around people's sensitivities, not wanting to create too much disturbance. I am not a fighter by nature, and I don't want to "fight" for this cause. I want people to understand the nature of religion as mythological discourse, and increase the appreciation of this discourse. I don't see myself as doing anything startlingly new; after all, the argument of this book is that scripture was deliberately written in a mythological mode and has been misinterpreted for centuries. If I am perceived as a radical, it should be in the true meaning of this term, where "radical" derives from the Latin *radix*, meaning "roots." I see myself as going back to the roots of religion and trying to understand it from this perspective.

Inevitably, what I will write in this book will shock some readers. This gives me no pleasure, and I shudder to think that I might be responsible for some "losing their faith," as the saying goes. But if faith is constructed as belief, it is hard to see how such disturbance can be avoided. According to Bishop Spong, a radical in the field, the possibility that such revelations might offend those with traditional pieties is unavoidable:

To suggest that these miracle stories might not be literally true engenders shock, is greeted with fear and not infrequently creates anger. That emotional response is sometimes mistaken for either zeal or firm conviction. It is neither. It is an expression of the primal anxiety of a self-conscious creature manifesting itself, as the religious security system of yesterday begins its inevitable slide toward death.<sup>18</sup>

I am not entirely sure of my audience. Those with traditional pieties tend to avoid "modern" ideas, viewing them as anathema. Such people tend not to read many books anyway, as they believe they already possess



the truth. On the other hand, those who have dispensed with religion don't see the point of rescuing it at this late stage. But I can only hope there is an audience in between the ardent believers and despisers of religion. I think there is, and hope such an audience will grow once the field is laid out and explained in language they can understand.

But what some will find shocking has been commonplace in academic circles for at least two hundred years. The philosophers Hegel, Strauss, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century were well aware of the mythological nature of religious statements. In the twentieth century, psychoanalysts Jung and Freud were writing on this subject. Later, theologians began to take note, including Tillich, Bultmann, Tracy, and more recently, thinkers such as Karen Armstrong, Dominic Crossan, and Eugen Drewermann have made important contributions. But little of this has filtered down to the general public, or to the religious institutions, which saw these thinkers as dangerously modern. Part of the problem is that the "case" for the metaphorical reading of scripture has still not been put in an accessible form. Much of this work is locked away in academic tomes and scholarly papers that the general public would not read. Therefore, in this book I aim to simplify what has been known in scholarly circles for some time. My originality, if such it is, is to provide my personal stamp on an existing field.

There are some leading lights in the churches who are on the same page as me. As well as John Spong in New Jersey, there is Alan Jones in San Francisco and Richard Holloway in Scotland. There are many others, but I haven't had the opportunity to meet them. In the company of clergy, I am reluctant to raise this topic, as I am greeted with disapproval, and such clergy seem to think it is their duty to put me right by trotting out the party line. It is a sad state of affairs. Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, wrote in *How to Read the Bible*:

Unimaginative literalists have destroyed the reputation of the Bible by insisting on [its] factual truth rather than encouraging us to read it metaphorically.<sup>19</sup>

There are "unimaginative literalists" on the other side of the fence. We have the celebrity atheists, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, who are literalists coming from the disbelieving fraternity.<sup>20</sup> They and a host of others are trying to wipe the horizon of religion and telling us the world is better off without it. Although the new atheists come out of a post-9/11 context and are concerned with warmongering

fundamentalism, they do not differentiate between good and bad religion, or realize that what they are rejecting is a misreading. They want to throw out religion, but I want to renew it by reconnecting it with its roots in mythos. Nevertheless, some will not see any difference, and I will be accused of destructive activity because I question the frame in which religion is conceived. Be that as it may, and despite the possibility of being misunderstood, I have to press on with the task, which is vital to rediscovering the integrity of our spiritual lives.

My greatest fear is not offending traditional pieties but encouraging people to accept the metaphorical approach and then having them decide that scripture is a tissue of lies. One has to battle against a flood of prejudices to get people to understand that religious metaphors are meaningful. As a youth, I used to be haunted by the song of Aretha Franklin and Bobby Darin: "It ain't necessarily so, the things that you're liable, to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so."<sup>21</sup> The song is right and wrong. The things in the Bible "ain't necessarily so" if read literally. But if read as metaphors, they are true, as faith has asserted. These metaphors are not empty, they are not arbitrary, but point to spiritual realities that need to be respected. I want us to see beyond surfaces, to the connotations behind the stories. In this way, we conduct *midrash* in the modern age, where midrash is seen as the recovery of truths in a tradition that is failing to speak to the modern world.<sup>22</sup>

The task today is to switch from literal to metaphorical thinking, and not fall into the gap between them. I am anxious that many will fall, and have fallen, into the gap. The disbelieving majority has already done this. When my daughter was a teenager, I saw she was outgrowing her religious beliefs and tried to explain the metaphorical approach. She later said it destroyed her faith, and this made me realize that this way is fraught with problems. Still, I see signs that some will get the point, and this inspires me. I see no other way to renew faith than to dissociate it from belief. Mine is the faith of the nonbeliever, the faith of those who cannot believe in impossible events. However there will come a time when we can redefine belief, when the current battles have been fought and won and we can understand belief in a different way.

As a young adult, most of my friends abandoned Christianity and moved across to Eastern pathways, Buddhism mostly, but also Hinduism and Taoism. I was interested in this turn to the East, but I could not join them because I felt there was treasure in the Judeo-Christian tradition that had not yet been discerned. People were throwing out this heritage too quickly, and pointing this out did not make me popular.

I did not wish to shift to the East merely because it was fashionable, with the allure of exotic practices and remarkable philosophies. I have always felt that the West is sitting on a treasure trove that is not understood. But the dead hand of convention keeps this wisdom from us, locked up in what Jung called “sacrosanct unintelligibility.”<sup>23</sup> If we could overcome convention, and the instruction to read things literally, the West might experience a renewal of its own, and Westerners might find wisdom closer to home.

### Notes

1. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, authored by an anonymous writer of the late fourteenth century, in Clifton Wolters, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 136.
2. 1 Corinthians 13:11.
3. I explore the connection between spirituality and mental health in *Gods and Diseases* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2011; London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
4. Genesis 3:8.
5. See for instance my essay “Jacques Derrida: The Enchanted Atheist” in *Thesis Eleven: Critical Theory and Historical Sociology* (London: Sage), 110, 1, June 2012, pp. 3–16.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 353.
7. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 61.
8. This was the personal context of my book *The Spirituality Revolution* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003; London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
9. Robert Johnson, *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love* (1983; New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 2.
10. Joanna Lumley, speaking of her film *The Search for Noah's Ark*, in *The Age* (Melbourne), 6 March 2014, p. 7.
11. Joanna Lumley, narrator, *The Search for Noah's Ark*, Matt Bennett, director; Rebecca Harris, producer; Burning Bright Productions, UK, December 2012.
12. Lumley, *The Age*, p. 7.
13. Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Is Blind Faith Killing Christianity?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 7.
14. Joseph Campbell, “Metaphor and Religious Mystery” (1985), in Eugene Kennedy (ed.) *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor. The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell*, Vol. 1 (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), p. 2.
15. Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion* (1986; Novato, CA: New World Library, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002), p. 27.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Mythos* (sometimes *muthos*), Greek for sacred story or tale, will be further discussed in future chapters.
18. John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 66.

19. Richard Holloway, *How to Read the Bible* (London: Granta Books, 2006), p. 5.
20. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).
21. Aretha Franklin and Bobby Darin, "It Ain't Necessarily So," in their 1959 album, *That's All*. The lyrics were by Ira Gershwin and music by George Gershwin for the 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*. In the opera it is sung by Sportin' Life, a drug dealer who expresses doubt about the veracity of religious statements.
22. The Jewish term "midrash" is described by S. Aarowitz as "the attempt to penetrate into the spirit of the text, to examine the text from all sides, to derive interpretations not immediately obvious, to illumine the future by appealing to the past"; in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1925).
23. C. G. Jung, "A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity" (1942/1948), *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (hereafter *CW*), 11, § 170.

SAMPLE

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## Miracles as Imagination

*The symbolic language of myth will always be degraded into a language of the tangible. Every epoch has the critical task of correcting such perversions.*  
— Karl Jaspers<sup>1</sup>

### Mythos and History

There are elements of history in scripture, but the miraculous moments with gods, angels, devils, and other visitations are metaphors pointing to the presence of spirit in human experience. Such moments of presence are personified as supernatural “beings” according to the conventions of myth, which we today do not understand, and tend to either dismiss as nonsense or believe literally. Many secular people assume scripture writers were deluding themselves by seeing things that did not exist. Many religious people assume scripture writers were taking eyewitness accounts of supernatural happenings. Neither is true. Scripture writers were engaged in literary conventions and tropes that today’s believers and unbelievers fail to appreciate. Religion is literature and art that has been distorted by literal readings.

If modern poets, visionaries, or novelists write about their experience, and use myth or legend to amplify their thoughts and feelings, we do not assume they are talking about literal gods if they draw on Greek, Roman, or Hebrew mythology. On the contrary, we assume they are using mythic figures symbolically to amplify themes or visions. Then why do we read “the good book” in such a narrowly dogmatic way? Imagination has to be brought to bear on holy scriptures, so we can read them correctly.

Religious stories are to civilizations what dreams are to individuals. They are symbolically encoded messages from the depths of the human soul. Just as it would be inadvisable to interpret our dreams literally, in which case we would get into all sorts of trouble with the real world

and human relationships, so we miss the inner meaning of scriptures by unimaginative readings. They are only loosely related to “reality” as we understand it. They demand reflection, contemplation, and an understanding of symbolic language. If we bring imagination and knowledge to bear on religious stories they can come to life in unexpected ways. At the same time, this metaphorical turn brings with it the advantage that religion loses its arrogant and absolutist sting, allowing us to combat the violence and discord to which literalism gives rise.

The metaphors of religion do not appear in a cultural vacuum. History and myth work together: there are historical occurrences that trigger metaphors to describe their inward meaning. Unless history has been turned into myth, the significance of historical events is not realized. As T. S. Eliot said: “history is a pattern of timeless moments.”<sup>2</sup> Events by themselves do not establish truth. These events “mean” something, “want to say” something, and their timeless truths can be communicated only in metaphor. In the case of the gospels, the fact of Jesus’ existence (which I do not doubt) triggered the myth of the Christ who is eternal. The fact of his ministry, its emphasis on love and compassion, triggered the myth that he was God’s only begotten son. The fact that his disciples felt that his spirit still dwelt among them after the crucifixion triggered the myth of the resurrection, and so on. Metaphor and history work together to weave sacred history. Metaphor draws out the spiritual significance, while history acknowledges that certain events took place in time and space. But for too long, we have treated the significance as fact; a simple but fatal error.

The churches have failed to understand that the scriptures are a mixture of mythos and history, not pure history. I use the Greek term “mythos” advisedly. This term means sacred story, whereas the modern term “myth” has been debased and refers to falsity. We can revert to the English word “myth,” but only after we have familiarized ourselves with the proper meaning of the term and its Greek origins. It is impossible to call for a recovery of myth, or more respect for myth, if the word itself subverts all attempts to restore value. The debasement of the term is part of the crisis we face in trying to recover the meaning of religion. Western intellectual history has virtually undermined the platform upon which religion stands.

In recent times, partly as a defense against critical thinking, some churches have pretended that the Bible is primarily historical. The Bible is aware of history, to be sure, but “being aware of history and being historical are different things.”<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye admits that “the

degree to which the Bible does record actual events can perhaps never be exactly ascertained.” The Bible looks at first like a historical narrative, but this impression is misleading, as Frye makes clear:

The historical narrative in the Bible is not really a history but a *mythos* or narrative principle on which historical incidents are strung. The narrative of the Bible is much closer to poetry than it is to actual history, and should be read as such.<sup>4</sup>

This is scandalous to naïve believers who imagine every word is historical. Frye is adamant that the Bible is least historical when it comes to the miracles and wonders, which have to be read as sensational symbols of the life of the spirit, its quest to “overcome” our finite nature and material conditions. To take the miracles literally is to misread the Bible and end with a belief based on falsity. Such belief has almost nothing to do with faith, and does not give faith a chance to mature, confining it to childhood ideation.

Some scholars within the church attempt to preserve the cherished sense of history, as well as admit to the presence of myth. A case in point is George Caird, who was professor of exegesis of holy scripture at the University of Oxford. In *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* he said the metaphorical element does not invalidate the church’s claim that scripture is a narrative of historical events.<sup>5</sup> Caird claims that “the New Testament lays great emphasis on the actuality of the events it records.”<sup>6</sup> He then contradicts this by saying “at certain points the gospel tradition has been embellished with new detail and even new events.”<sup>7</sup> But at what points are the tradition embellished? He does not say. He admits that “bare facts are never significant in themselves, but only when brought into relation with a tradition and seen in a framework of interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> He places us in a whirlpool of competing claims. Frye is correct when he says fact is subordinate to myth in the Bible, and I suspect Caird agrees but is afraid to say so. As a conservative, Caird hedges around this fact, as he wants to toe the line and not create ecclesiastical disturbance. It is all very well for him to say that real events are “elevated” above the ordinary by literary devices, but only if the reader/believer is made aware that the Bible’s miraculous moments are to be read in the light of history-told-as-myth.

If we say scripture represents sacred history, emphasis has to be placed on “sacred” rather than “history.” Caird is regarded as a pioneer of the metaphorical approach, but his conservatism destroys his courage and necessitates the rise of strong voices like Armstrong, Crossan, Frye,



and Spong after him. His findings are muffled in a highly scholastic style, almost as if he did not want to be understood by the average reader or by those sitting in the pews. His exegesis of scripture made it apparent that the conventional readings of biblical language have been naïve in the extreme, but he has an uncanny ability to fudge this point and end up saying little that is memorable. He was sitting on dynamite but did not want to bear witness to any explosions. He wanted to come back to church next Sunday and not change a word of any of the claims made by creeds, dogmas, and liturgies.

The history of Christianity is a history of errors. It has mistaken belief for faith, mythology for theology, and poetry for doctrine. The result is that a good religion has been ruined by its advocates, who got so caught up in literalism that its essence was lost. Its essence is more humble, yet more profound, than most believers have been able to realize. If we strip away the literalism, a real religion is left for us to appreciate—perhaps for the first time. But as this religion has presented itself to the world, it has adopted a fake appearance that most educated people have been unable to accept. When we reject this façade, we think we have rejected religion *per se*, but not so. We have only rejected the packaging of unimaginative churchmen. Baptist minister Harvey Cox tells of his crisis when he saw through the charade of his tradition. He almost lost everything, until it dawned on him that to confuse “belief with faith is simply a mistake”: “We have been misled for many centuries by the theologians who taught that ‘faith’ consisted in dutifully believing the articles listed in one of the countless creeds they have spun out.”<sup>9</sup> His healthy skepticism is what saved his faith.

When religion adopted a literalist frame it set itself against reason and allowed itself to be taken down by scholars. As Eugen Drewermann writes:

We won't give religion a solid foundation by seeking the truth of mythical texts in a place where it can't be found: in the external world. Anyone who insists on this sort of logical confusion as an article of faith will involuntarily play into the hands of atheism and irreligion, instead of getting closer to the real point of the mythical traditions.<sup>10</sup>

A new tradition of celebrity atheists responds to the mysteries of the Bible with contempt, dismissing them as lies. Most atheists consider themselves more intelligent than believers because they have seen through the deception. This comes across in the interview style of



Richard Dawkins and others, who talk to religious people as if they are morons. But the celebrity atheists rarely stop to wonder if what they are rejecting is the essence of religion. Indeed, one could say that what atheists are rejecting—literalism and idolatry—*must* be rejected by intelligent persons. Atheism has an important role to play, not only in society but in the formation of faith. I commend atheism insofar as it strips back religion and rejects the ways in which it has been misrepresented in the past.

The crisis of atheism is that it not only strips back the false overlay, but it goes further and denies there is anything of value in religion. We need to question the dogmatic claims, but not destroy the interior life of religion, which contains the best of what it means to be human. There is too much unraveling, an orgy of destruction, without attention to preserving what is worthwhile. In this regard, we have only just begun the great adventure of our time: sifting the chaff from the wheat, and preserving what is life giving and precious. Insensitive deconstruction can be seen as an early stage of faith, the stage in which faith tries to shrug off the burden of literalism.

We are faced with a conundrum in which those who believe in the Bible, and those who attack it, are caught by the notion that it is a historical document. Believers read scripture as good history, a depiction of things that happened, while unbelievers see it as bad history, a cooked-up version of events. Both are making errors and failing to ask the right questions. The Bible is an amalgam of myth and history. Some of what we read has historical credibility but the wonders and miracles are mythical images.

### **The Miracles of Jesus**

The miracles of Jesus can be read as metaphors of the significance astir in the events of his ministry. I don't believe there were any supernatural miracles performed by Jesus, as claimed by tradition. To assume there were such miracles is a misunderstanding of the mythic mode in which the texts were operating. It is, rather, a case that the apprehension of what happened to people in their responses to Jesus was such that writers—and oral traditions—were inspired to proclaim that “miracles” had occurred. It was “as if” he cured people of their maladies and sicknesses, “as if” he brought the dead back to life. Spiritual vision overrules ordinary perception; or as we might say today, poetry is more profound than prose. Yet we live in a world of prose, where poetry is discounted or misinterpreted.

Jesus gave inspiring talks to thousands of people, and large crowds were nourished by his teachings. Perhaps this “spiritual nourishment” was expressed, two thousand years ago, as a wonderful event in which people *seemed* to receive supernatural blessings. There are two miraculous feeding stories in Mark and Matthew. In Mark, a crowd of four thousand gathered on the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus took “seven loaves” and “a few small fish,” and distributed them to the starving masses, who had been with him “three days” with “nothing to eat.”<sup>11</sup> At the end of the feast, there was so much food left over that his disciples gathered “seven baskets full.”<sup>12</sup> Matthew records this same event in similar terms,<sup>13</sup> but introduces a second miraculous event on the Jewish side of the lake. In this case there were five thousand people who were fed with “five loaves of bread and two fish.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus blessed the food and distributed it to the five thousand, after which “the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.”<sup>15</sup> The rational response to this is: “This cannot have happened as reported; it is a lie.” The believer says: “This did happen, it is a miracle, and praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ!”

I cannot agree with the believer or unbeliever, because these are literary interpretations of real events. The miracles have nothing to do with belief as such, but are literary appreciations of the significance of the gatherings beside the lake. You either appreciate the poem, or you do not. We are in the realm of mythos,<sup>16</sup> which in this case is based on history, but not reducible to it. The stories are parables, and the miraculous feedings must be seen as interpretive signs, not facts. It was “as if” Jesus had fed the crowds with bread and fish, “as if” they went away satisfied and full. Everything here is metaphorical: their “hunger” signifies their need for spiritual sustenance, and the three days without food signifies a phase without the blessings of God. The words of Jesus were received like loaves and fishes to those who were starving. Everyone went away renewed in their faith. If cameras had recorded these events, there would have been no miraculous feeding in any literal sense, but cameras could hardly record the fulfillment of a satiated spirit. The believer and unbeliever are right and wrong: there was no such thing through the eyes of common sight, but there was such a thing, if viewed through insight. Myth opens us to this uncertain, risky place in which we either see the point or we don’t. But the point can’t be verified, only conceded.

What the literal reading of these tales ignores is that the miraculous feedings are examples of the Jewish tradition of midrash. Or to be more

precise, they are examples of Haggadic midrash. Haggadah, one of the three major forms of midrash, refers to the interpretation of a story or an event by relating it to another story in sacred history. This is what literary studies calls “intertextuality,” and this was hardly invented yesterday. Midrash is an ancient Jewish practice that says everything to be venerated in the present must be connected with a sacred moment in the past. Since the writers of scripture want to show that Jesus is as great as Moses, or greater than him insofar as Jesus completes the reconciliation of humanity and God, they proclaim Jesus performs acts similar to those of Moses. The children of Israel were starving as they escaped from Egypt and wandered through the wilderness. Moses asked God to rain an unlimited quantity of bread upon them so their well-being and confidence could be restored. They gathered this bread or manna dew into countless baskets.<sup>17</sup>

The miraculous feeding stories of the gospels follow this pattern and express a line of continuity between Moses the liberator and Jesus the redeemer. These stories preserve cultural memory in the present and point to the holiness of Jesus by a method of literary affiliation with the past. The prophets Elijah and Elisha were also said to have had the power to produce a food supply that was bountiful.<sup>18</sup> Just as the great Jewish leaders fed the starving people and catered to their needs, so the new leader, Jesus, is able to perform these acts in the imaginations of first-century Jewish writers and oral traditions. But what is “performed” operates primarily in the literary imagination, as that is the place where religious memory is preserved in these “religions of the book.” An interesting detail is that Moses caused birds of the air and swamps (quail and poultry) to satiate the children of Israel,<sup>19</sup> whereas Jesus commanded fish to be distributed to his people. This suggested that the new era of Jesus would be symbolized by the sign of the fish, indicating that this was not a repetition of the past but a departure from it.

In his ministry Jesus was said to heal the sick, make the blind see and the deaf hear. He cured lepers and cast out demons from those who were epileptic or mentally ill. Two thousand years ago, might not these have been metaphors as well? The metaphors are no longer appropriate for our time, because we no longer see epilepsy and mental illness in terms of possession by evil spirits. But in Jesus’ time, this is how mental illness was perceived, and thus the metaphors used to express his healing powers are in accord with the attitudes of his time. Today we might say: he made me feel complete or a better person, or my psyche feels renewed. Whatever the expressions of today, we would no longer

say that he cast out demons or exorcised spirits. But the effectiveness of a charismatic healer is often in the eyes of the beholder, not in the objective witness of what has taken place.

With regard to our spiritual well-being, we often require skilled teachers to make us see the spiritual significance of our lives. It is typical for us to be *blind* to the spirit, to fail to *hear* its sound, not to be open to its call. We are not whole in body, mind, and spirit, but live partial lives that require healing. When someone gifted is able to make us aware of what is not perceived, might not this be characterized as a gift of sight, sound, or health? Similarly, in terms of the Lazarus story, if one is “dead” to the spirit and unable to perceive its call, might not the new awareness of the presence of spirit be depicted as a “return to life,” a coming back into the world after one has been shut inside a mental tomb? The Lazarus story can be read as a parable about bringing a person back to spiritual life, after a period of spiritual death.<sup>20</sup> Again, believers will affirm that Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and brought him back to the living, and skeptics will say it could not have happened. Both are missing the point, which is made possible through myth.

### Metaphor and Its Hazards

But it was not just the thirty or forty miracles performed *by* Jesus that could be seen this way. The miracles performed *on* Jesus by the Spirit, the wonders of the virgin birth and physical resurrection, could be viewed in this same light. In fact, the sequence of events in the gospel stories could be read as a string of metaphors that most have not understood as metaphors. These ideas gestated in me over years, and eventually I began to see there were other ways of approaching scripture. One did not have to believe these things and be burdened by convictions that ran against the grain of intelligence. Nor did one have to take a stand against them and deprive oneself and others of a spiritual life. One could receive these stories in a new way, as we might poems or mystical writings. Perhaps this is what the “words of God” ask of us, not the literal acceptance of these words, but that the inspiration behind the words are of the spirit. The Bible was written in a code language that few had cracked, a symbolic register that was systematically misinterpreted.

Over decades, I read a number of theologians in the hope of finding out something about the metaphorical—which ends up being mystical—approach to scripture. To my amazement, most sidestepped

this issue and existed in a kind of bubble of their own making, full of comforting clichés about religion but overlooking the fact that the modern mind finds these statements implausible. Some theologians have faced the mythic nature of biblical language. These would include Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann on the Protestant side, and Dominic Crossan and my near-namesake David Tracy on the Catholic side. But such theologians are rare. It seems that most are caught in a spell cast by the church and its authority. They are certain that the miracles are “true.” This did not impress me, because it showed tradition was trapped in an ideology, which might be called historical positivism. Theologians spoke in reverent tones about the “revelation” of God’s work in the life of Jesus, and central to this was his ability to perform miracles and have miraculous acts performed on him.

In recent years I have brushed up against a new tradition referred to as “progressive Christian thinkers.” This tradition includes such radical figures as Donald Cupitt of Cambridge, Lloyd Geering of New Zealand, Francis Macnab of Australia, and Gretta Vosper of Canada. They appear to be saying what I am saying, that the miracles are metaphors. They see through the charade of historicity to the metaphorical, but this does not go hand in hand with increased respect for the metaphorical. To this group, inspired by Bultmann, the existentialist, miracles are “just metaphors,” and can be discounted as literary decoration, having no intrinsic value in themselves. Quickly I discerned my difference from this tradition, and why I could not join them: I had respect for the miracles, and they did not. The miracles are not empty, but full of significance if we can turn to them with the right attitude. The metaphors stand for something and point to something. Perhaps my literary background and training in symbolic thinking predisposed me to a respect that these theologians could not muster. No one asks if a poem by William Blake is based on a true event, if his “Sick Rose” is based on a real rose, or if the “worm” inside the rose is factual. Who cares about this? The fact is that his “Sick Rose” is a great poem, and that is all we need know.

The lack of historical foundation in the Jesus miracles does not destroy their significance, if we are viewing them through the eyes of mythos. But for “progressive Christians,” once the game of history is over, the magic ends. Metaphors for them are mere allegories, not full of suggestive power. They are viewing them through logos, not mythos. For me, the magic begins once we rediscover the miracles as metaphorical. This is because I could never “believe” them as purported facts in the

first place, and as such they were far-fetched and easily dismissed. But once I adjusted my perception, and understood them through the mythos mode, they came to life and made new claims on my imagination. Progressives lack an appreciation of poetry, and their problem is not one of faith so much as illiteracy. They are tone-deaf to the literary quality of scripture and cannot perceive the spiritual life of metaphors. They cannot perform midrash, if by this term we mean the rescuing of spiritual significance of old sacred stories that no longer speak to the modern world.

### Preserving the Spiritual Meaning

By far the best of the progressive thinkers is Bishop John Shelby Spong, who seems like the others but is not one of them. Spong is an intellectual who is skeptical of the claims of religious tradition. He could not “believe” in the miracles as presented by church piety. He states his position boldly:

I do not believe that miracles, understood as the supernatural setting aside of natural causes, ever happen. I do not believe that the miracles described in the New Testament literally occurred in the life of Jesus of Nazareth or that of his disciples.<sup>21</sup>

Like Spong, I cannot abide a religion based on supernaturalism and the whole concept of literal miracles is repellent to me. With relief I discovered that Spong is not progressive in the sense of wiping away the supernatural so that nothing is left. He is not like Bultmann or Cupitt, who explode the myths and get rid of everything. He is a modern thinker, but trying to reclaim what is essential. He strives not only to debunk, but to reimagine the miracles as metaphors.

What stirs my imagination is Spong’s quest to find alternative ways to read the miracles:

Must we today be committed to the historicity of these first-century miracle stories? Or is there another way that these dramatic acts can be understood in our day? Was there perhaps another way to understand them even when they were originally written?<sup>22</sup>

This question is what interests me. Are miracles to be read as real events, or as symbols of a level of significance astir in these events? Are they metaphors, no longer perceived as such, that seek to highlight the spiritual significance of what took place? Are they poetry and wisdom, rather than incursions of a supernatural kind? Spong argues that they

were not eyewitness accounts of what happened, but were “added later as part of the interpretive debate that swirled around Jesus.” He doubts that they were viewed at their origins as events that occurred in history:

Were these miracles even then recognized as prophetic interpretive signs designed to address questions of meaning? Is it possible that what first-century people thought of as a miracle would be to us today not a supernatural invasion at all, but an internal process of spirit?<sup>23</sup>

If this is true, we don’t have to reject these statements, but need to understand them in their first-century context. The miracle is a literary device<sup>24</sup> used by first-century writers to talk about significance, but they did not see these miracles as “supernatural invasions,” or as “the supernatural setting aside of natural causes.” If this is true, we can find a connection between how we think today and the religion of the past, without having to reject early wisdom as out of date and unbelievable. Our incomprehension of religion has nothing to do with faith as such, but is a problem to do with literary style and conventions.

Spong gives us hints as to how we might close the gap between our minds and those of the past. He says scripture writers employed supernatural language to describe the movements of spirit because this language had been used in the Jewish writings and was seen as “good enough” to use in the descriptive accounts of Jesus:

The problem faced by the disciples was: how were they going to talk about their experience of Jesus? They solved the problem by searching the Hebrew scriptures for God language, and when they found it they wrapped it around Jesus—not because these words described things that actually happened, but because they were the only words big enough to make sense out of their experience. So the disciples used the narratives of miracles to demonstrate the presence of God in Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

Scripture writers were inventing miracles to describe what they felt about Jesus and his authority. As Spong put it, “miracles represented the only way first-century Jewish people could stretch human language sufficiently to allow them to communicate what they believed they had encountered in Jesus.” But for us this convention has backfired:

Today that first-century supernatural language not only blinds us to the meaning of Jesus, but actually distorts Jesus for us.<sup>26</sup>



We are repelled by the literary devices that early writers used to endear readers and the faithful to Jesus. That is why we have to do something about it, and confess that the old-time religion needs to be revised, according to modern understandings of truth and representation. If we don't rescue the spirit of Jesus from the old forms, his spirit will be lost. Already Jesus has become "little more than a fading memory, the symbol of an age that is no more and a nostalgic reminder of our believing past."<sup>27</sup> Rescuing his spirit from the burden of cliché and platitude is the task I have set myself, along with others who feel called to this work of reparation.

In my opinion, if we don't change religion, it will implode. Thus to what extent are the "conservatives" conserving anything? They are overseeing the demise of a tradition. They would rather risk the death of the tradition than find the courage to change. The churches cling to what they call their "revealed and unchanging truth," yet without change there can be no future. Despite the actions of some religious leaders, most traditional forms of religion are destined to collapse in the near future. What will happen after this collapse? Spong is convinced that we are already "living at the end of the Christian era." We face "the death of Christianity as it has been historically understood."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless he has "a lively hope that a new Christianity can grow out of the death of the old supernatural forms of yesterday's Christianity."<sup>29</sup> To achieve this we need "to get beyond the literalism of a premodern world," and reshape religion so we can be "both believers and citizens of the twenty-first century."<sup>30</sup>

Spong often uses this term "believer," but I am unhappy with it. I don't like belief, but I respect faith. In fact, most of what Christians "believe" Spong has jettisoned anyway, so I am uncertain why he persists with the term. I think the less we believe the better, but faith is a different matter. The point of faith is that one is filled with a sense of the sacred that does not require evidence. If faith requires proof it isn't faith, but *belief in impossible events*, such as a virgin birth or a physical resurrection. Faith is the heartfelt reception of spiritual realities, and an acceptance that the expression of those realities require symbols. Such symbols hint at transcendent realities of spirit, and faith intuitively grasps the realities to which the symbols point. Every religious tradition, in its own way, gropes toward the mystery of God. Overwhelmingly, faith has been fused with belief and misinterpreted by institutions that seem to want to keep people in a state of spiritual sleep.

Peter Todd suggests that those who read scriptures literally "lack an evolved symbolic function," and this "lack," which is not just a



personal but a cultural lacuna, has to be addressed.<sup>31</sup> Children read scriptures as fairy stories, but adults ought not. There are adults who prolong their childhood beyond the required period and deceive their intelligence by taking stories literally. There are a growing number of adults who reject the stories as lies and see them as delusional. The challenge facing religions is to overcome naïve belief while not falling into a slump of despair once we realize that what have been taught as facts are metaphors. I will have more to say later about the dangers of falling into the gap between beliefs we can no longer sustain and a faith to which we might aspire.

### Notes

1. Karl Jaspers, "Myth and Religion" (1953), in Joseph Hoffmann, ed. and Norbert Guterman, trans., Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth* (1954, New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), p. 32.
2. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" (1942), in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 222.
3. Northrop Frye, "History and Myth in the Bible" (1975), in Alvin A. Lee and Jean O'Grady, eds., *Northrop Frye on Religion, Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, Vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 13.
4. Frye, "History and Myth," pp. 14; 17.
5. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 201.
6. Caird, p. 215.
7. Caird, p. 214.
8. Caird, p. 202.
9. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 18.
10. Eugen Drewermann, *Discovering the God Child Within: A Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 24.
11. Mark 8:2.
12. Mark 8:3–9.
13. Matthew 15:29–38.
14. Matthew 14:17.
15. Matthew 14:17–20.
16. *Mythos* (sometimes *muthos*), Greek for sacred story or tale, will be further discussed in future chapters.
17. Exodus 16:1–8.
18. 1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4.
19. Exodus 16:13.
20. John 11:1–57.
21. John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 54.
22. *Ibid*, p. 54.
23. *Ibid*, pp. 67–68.
24. *Ibid*, p. 94.
25. *Ibid*, p. 69.

26. Ibid, p. 95.
27. Ibid, p. 9.
28. Ibid, p. 7.
29. Ibid, p. xiv.
30. Ibid, p. 55; p. 54.
31. Peter Todd, *The Individuation of God: Integrating Science and Religion* (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 2012), p. 102.

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