

Living Next Door to Heaven

Why the Divine is Here to Stay

Chris Spark

“When we lose our myths, we lose our place in the universe.”

Madeleine L'Engle

If there's one constant in human cultures, it's the experience of existing in a mystery. What's out there beyond the circumference of our vision? What's across that ocean or beyond the edge of the universe? Where did I come from? What am I supposed to be doing? What happened in that blankness before I was born? What will happen in that blankness after I die?

If there's another constant in human cultures, it's the attempt to reconcile ourselves to that mystery. How to answer those burning questions? Or how to somehow live with them? In Western culture, religion has been the officially recognized way of attempting this reconciliation.¹

A religion presents certain symbols, stories, and ritual acts to its followers. These

signs constitute that religion's mythology. A mythology is like an interface between that ultimate mystery of existence and the human brain. Mythologies operate on that border between what can be rationally comprehended and what cannot, between what cultures often call the world of humans and the realm of the divine.

Where Realms Meet

As borderland phenomena, mythologies have elements of both the human and the divine, both what can be rationally comprehended and what cannot. Yes, mythologies are composed of signs: words, images, and acts that we use in the human realm. But these signs are not meant to be taken in the



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *Adam and Eve*

image info

everyday human way. They are not literal or concrete. They can't be literal if they are also to represent the divine realm, that mystery beyond all human concepts. They can't be concrete if they're referring to that "something" that cannot, by definition, be reduced to or contained within any sign.

In the human realm, a pen is a pen—a utilitarian object. It's not a symbol for anything else. And when I ask you to "hand me the pen," I am narrowing your focus. My words are stopping points. I don't want the pencil or the paper or the chair or your grandmother. I want the pen. Period. We operate this way when we want to accomplish something concrete, when we are in a no-nonsense frame of mind.

Mythologies, on the other hand, often seem like nonsense. This is because mythologies use signs in nothing like the ways we use them in our everyday human realm. Mythologies have to use signs; how else could they be intelligible to our brains? Signs are how communication takes place in the human realm. But to also be part of the divine, mythological realm, signs must be the opposite of stopping points. They are meant not to narrow options, but to open us to moreness and mystery.

Though it appears specific, a mythological symbol, story, or ritual act can never be defined, analyzed, or reduced to constituent parts. To approach mythology in this way is like trying to shake someone's hand with your fist. It is not how you greet the mystery of existence. Rather than solid, defined things—like pencils and cars—mythological signs are sparks meant to start creative fires, songs meant to harmonize with the deep chords of

the heart, stained glass meant to allow divine light. Mythological signs ignite, resonate, and radiate.

This is immensely satisfying to the human heart. A functioning mythology somehow answers our deepest aspirations and simultaneously calls us onward to moreness. It's as though the two were the same thing, as though the answer to our aspirations is the calling onward to more and larger versions of them. A functioning mythology allows the waters of life to flow and gardens to bloom and fruit. The right myth turns chaos into cosmos. When we are held in myth, life feels creative, rich, and satisfying.

The Wasteland

We tend to imagine that divine truths, being eternal, find the right story and stick with it. If, for example, Adam and Eve plunged us into sin by eating the forbidden apple, then, well, that's how it was... and always will be. God doesn't change his story. He's not some Hollywood moviemaker trying to appeal to the times. This is the foundational attitude of all organized religions: "We've got the right myth now. It's all been figured out. And here's your instruction manual."

That manual, though, is really a recipe for a dead mythology. Mythologies, it turns out, are like operating systems; they need to be periodically updated. As mythologist Joseph Campbell pointed out, a properly functioning mythology must be in accord with our current intellectual understanding of ourselves and the universe. Our brains must allow a mythology to pass into our



John Martin, *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host*, 1836

hearts. Without the brain's acceptance, the mythology is just what it logically seems—nonsense.

This is the bind many intelligent people in the West are in when it comes to believing in something beyond the human realm. Christianity, it seems, has become nonsense. Science proves it. The cosmos was not created in seven days by a dude floating above it in a robe but fourteen billion years ago by a massively big bang that spewed forth the ninety-two natural elements of the periodic table. We are not descended from Adam, who was fashioned by God four thousand years ago but from bacteria that were fashioned by mechanical laws out of a chemical soup four billion years ago.

But if science has discredited the Christian mythology, it has not offered an adequate replacement. In fact, we think of science as the slayer of all mythologies. We believe we are now face-to-face with reality. We don't need an interface. We're good. Thanks.

Only we're not.

Science has been a tremendous blessing to humankind. And yet, in the most technologically advanced and materially abundant countries the earth has ever known, people feel worried, weary, depressed, and hollow. Many of us are trembling in the chill of a spiritual wasteland.

Our pervasive modern angst arises from the fundamental misconception that we don't need a mythology because science

has disproved the existence of God. No divine realm, no interface needed. Nothing out there, nothing to translate. But science only disproved a certain version of God: the one that carries the baggage of an obsolete mythology; the one of a man wearing flowing robes and in need of a haircut. God 1.0.

In its nakedness—disrobed of whatever a particular culture dresses it in—the word God simply stands for what we don't understand. It is the mystery around and within us, the mystery beyond the next galaxy or buried in our souls. It's what we're exploring, moving into, on the edge of. It's what unfolds, erupts, appears, and beckons.



Brahma, c. 1700. Opaque watercolor on paper.

Has science killed that? Quite the contrary. To follow science is to follow a never-ending tale—the story of the human brain entering new realms. From the first proto-scientists of ancient Greece through Galileo and Newton, those seeking logical explanations for the universe have been characters in a novel of never-ending plot twists. By about 1900, most scientists thought they were nearing the end of the novel. They had, they believed, the universe pretty well figured out with only a few minor details to settle. It was all so rational. And we had the inventions and machines to prove it. Then came Einstein and quantum physics.

Starting around 1900, physicists began stumbling on the strangest things—things now accepted as scientific gospel. Matter, it turns out, is actually energy in a different form. Time and space warp at extremes of gravity and speed. Objects only appear to exist when we look at them; when we're not looking, they are somehow waves of probability that can spread across the entire universe. That universe, with its billions of galaxies filled with billions of stars orbited by billions of planets, exploded out from a speck smaller than a grain of sand. Atoms contain protons. Protons contain quarks. Quarks may contain vibrating strings. And the vibrating strings? No one's asking that. Yet.²

Every question scientists answer is followed by another question. There will always be a “something beyond.” The notion that the human brain will find a rational stopping place is itself nonsense—a kind of existential denial. The human brain is part of the totality it seeks to understand.



Syrio, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 2021.

To put it another way, humans will always need a mythology. We will always be walking into darkness. The only question is the form the mythology takes. Will it be a form that works? Will it bring water to the wasteland?

New Mythologies

What are our options for a new mythology? One, I think, is to rediscover the founder of our old one.

A modicum of digging reveals just how much Christianity has obscured our vision

of Christ. It was Christians not Christ, for example, who used the words sin and church. Christ used neither word in the gospels. Sin is a mistranslation of the original Greek word *hamartia*, which means “to miss the mark” or “make a mistake.” Church is a mistranslation of *ekklesia*, which refers to a “gathering of people.” Christ's words were less loaded and more open before Christians dressed them up in Puritan clothes and pinned them to the pages of a somber tome. Jesus wasn't concerned about judgment and dogma; he was concerned with how to meet that realm beyond judgment and dogma.

But if the Christian lens has distorted



Noah's Ark, from *The Jami' al-Tawarikh* of Rashid al-Din, 1314–15. Ink, translucent and opaque watercolor, gold and silver on paper

Christ, so has the scientific lens. Reseeing Christ doesn't necessarily mean reducing him to the simple moral teacher that secular humanists feel comfortable with. According to publicchristianity.org, "Virtually all experts on the history of Jesus—whether Jewish, agnostic, or Christian—agree that the man from Nazareth performed deeds which his contemporaries interpreted as miraculous. That he enjoyed the reputation as a healer is beyond dispute." This

becomes less weird when a little more investigation reveals that spontaneous healing—sometimes through faith-healers, sometimes through placebos, and sometimes through watching Marx Brothers' movies³—is a well-documented, worldwide modern phenomenon. Not all of Christ's miracles were invented by the church, just as not all modern-day miracles have been explained by science.

More context and information about

Instead of being presented with certain signs that are meant to evoke significant experiences, artists have significant experiences and then present certain signs to convey them. Artists, in other words, are prophets.

Christ can help us to hear the Gospels with fresh ears. When we do, the stories and parables flare with Christ's vitality, irreverence, fierceness, and tenderness. All the stories told by and about him celebrate the spontaneous and the life-giving over the dusty and the dogmatic. He drinks wine and feasts with sinners, overturns moneylenders' tables, slyly defends an adulteress, curses a fig tree, and embraces children.

Another option for a functioning mythology—not incompatible with a fresh vision of Jesus—is one suggested by our friend Joseph Campbell. In *Creative Mythology*, Campbell proposes that like religious followers, artists also commune with the ultimate mystery of existence. But artists do it in reverse. Instead of being presented with certain signs that are meant to evoke significant experiences, artists have significant experiences and then present certain signs to convey them.

Artists, in other words, are prophets.

This idea may at first be hard to swallow. Conventionally, our culture sees art as secular. Artists are often seen as the very opposite of reverent. Art crosses boundaries and offends the pious. But crossing boundaries is exactly what mythologies do. And offending the pious is exactly what Christ did.

Above all, artists—like prophets—receive inspiration from outside our everyday

thinking. To create art is to catch a spark. Art glows with the light of something beyond. That glow we sense in any great artwork—whether a song, painting, poem, or novel—cannot be manufactured, predicted, planned, or in any way produced by the efforts of our rational mind. No computer could ever generate it. It comes from a place beyond the brain.

Art is the divine realm interfacing with the human mind, which is to say, art is mythology. And inspiration is revelation. A guitar player like Jimi Hendrix is channeling when they play. A guitar player's practice is their prayer, and prayers are answered by



Paseas, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, 520–10 BCE. Attic red-figured plate.

image info



Prince Siddharta Gautama shaves his head as the sign to decline his status as *ksatriya* (warrior class) and becomes an ascetic hermit. His servants hold his sword, crown, and princely jewelry while his horse Kanthaka stands on the right. Bas-relief panel at Borobudur, Java, Indonesia.

the revelation of playing. The guitar player reveals “something beyond” to us even as it’s being revealed to them.

But despite the wishes of some of their acolytes, artists are not full-time prophets. When an artist like Hendrix has to put down his guitar and navigate the “real world” of their time and place—the nonsense, literal world where everything is an ending point, where the divine realm is denied—they get thrown. It’s too much of a contrast. Channeling the divine feels, well, divine. You could see it on Hendrix’s face. By comparison, other things feel mundane, disappointing, and dead. Add to this the worshipful expectations of fans, and it’s no wonder so many artists turn to drink, drugs, and debauchery.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied the channeling of the divine,

revelation, and prophesying. As a respectable scientist, though, he can’t use those words. To be taken seriously, he has to dress spiritual communion in contemporary, secular clothing by calling it a “state of flow” or “optimal experience.” This is wonderful if it invites more people to go there. But the matter-of-fact language is symptomatic of the modern, scientific notion that divinity is old-fashioned, that magic isn’t real, that mythology is unnecessary, that the human brain is almighty.

This is a strange delusion that is nowhere substantiated by human experience. The human brain is everywhere confronted by its inadequacy; whether we’re talking about dreams, the weather, the election of a president, the success of a marriage, a life of meaning, the weird things uncovered by modern physics, or the thousands of

compelling experiences in all cultures that we dismiss as “paranormal” or “supernatural,” our brains keep insisting that a humanly understandable truth lies just around the next corner, and we’re ever so close to getting to the bottom of it all.

It might help us all to remember that the bliss is real.

It’s a funny kind of spell—one that denies the possibility of spells—because it denies the possibility of magic.⁴ Call it the spell of the drab: reality is reducible, rational, and mundane; reality is gears engaging gears, chemicals switching on neurons, fluorescent lights, lunch breaks, and traffic jams.

It might help artists to realize that this way of seeing is as much a spell as the one Hendrix entered when he played. It might help anyone who has allowed a blissful experience to ripple through their being and then come “back to reality” to feel that peculiarly modern pressure to discount their enchantment. It might help us all to remember that the bliss is real. And necessary. ❖

Notes

1. Philosophy has also been a way of reconciling ourselves to the mystery, but it’s an approach favored by a small group of people who are generally more intellectual than average. And when philosophy ventures into the big questions, it may as well be religion anyway. No matter how rational a philosophy may seem, like religion it must always walk on some kind of faith that

some people find compelling and some people don’t.

2. The utter strangeness of the world as now understood by physicists is more astonishing than any myth dreamed up by the Greeks, the Navajo, or the Catholic church. For more about that strangeness, see the essay “What You See Is What You See” in my essay collection, [The Science Spell](#) (Vol. 1 of the *Making Belief* series).

3. Norman Cousins—journalist, author, professor, and world peace advocate—laughed his way to recovery from a life-threatening illness in part by watching Marx Brothers’ movies. He described the experience in his 1979 book [Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient](#).

4. For more on spells, see the essay, “The Science Spell” in my essay collection, [The Science Spell](#) (Vol. 1 of the *Making Belief* series).

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