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Faith and Modernity

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In the Western world, a strong belief in the objective truths of religion, which are viewed as incontrovertible, demonstrable facts, is regarded as essential to the life of faith. When asking if somebody is religious, people often inquire: "Does he or she believe?" as though accepting certain creedal propositions was the prime religious activity. Indeed, faith is equated with belief, but this equation is of recent provenance. Originally the meaning of the word "faith" was akin to trust, as when we say that we have faith *in* a friend or an ideal. Faith was not an intellectual position but a virtue: it was the careful cultivation, by means of the rituals and myths of religion, of the conviction that, despite all the dispiriting evidence to the contrary, life had some ultimate meaning and value. The Latin word *credo* (translated now as "I believe") seems to have derived from the phrase *cor dare*: to give one's heart. The Middle English word *beleven* meant to love. When Christians proclaimed: *credo in unum Deum*, they were not so much affirming their belief in the existence of a single deity as committing their lives to God. When St. Anselm of Canterbury prayed in the eleventh century: *credo ut intellagam* ("I have faith in order that I may understand"),[1] he was not blindly submitting to the doctrines of religion in the hope that one day these incredible assertions would make sense to him, if he abdicated his critical intelligence. His prayer should really be translated: "I commit myself in order that I may understand." The meaning of dogma would only be revealed when he lived a fully Christian life, embracing its mythology and rituals wholeheartedly. This attitude is foreign to modernity. Today people feel that before they live a religious life, they must first satisfy themselves intellectually of its metaphysical claims. This is sound scientific practice: first you must establish a principle before you can apply it. But it is not the way that religion has traditionally worked.

In the modern world, faith has come to mean an acceptance of creedal truths as objective facts. When people find that they are not

[1] Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 2.

convinced by the so-called "proofs" of God's existence, they think that they have lost their faith. Because the doctrines of religion cannot be demonstrated logically and empirically, they seem untrue. Our Western modernity has led us to an entirely different notion of truth, and, as a result, we can no longer be religious in quite the same way as our ancestors. Our scientifically oriented society has lost the sense of the symbolic, which lay at the heart of all pre-modern faith. In the perspectives of tradition, where every earthly reality was a replica of its celestial archetype, the symbol was inseparable from the transcendent reality to which it directed our attention. Likeness denoted presence, in rather the same way as the son of a deceased friend brings his father into the room with him and, at the same time, makes us newly conscious of our loss and distance from the dead and makes us yearn towards the departed. For traditional faith, Christ was present in this way in the eucharistic symbols of bread and wine. Once the Protestant reformers stated that the eucharist was *only* a symbol, and essentially separate from Christ, the modern spirit had declared itself.

In the traditional world, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called *mythos* and *logos*.[2] Both were essential to humanity; neither was considered superior but both were regarded as complimentary, each with its special area of competence. Myth related to what was thought to be timeless and constant; it looked back to the origins of life, to the beginnings of culture, and to the deepest levels of the mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. Unless we find some significance in our lives, human beings fall very easily into despair. The *mythos* of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day existence. It directed their attention to the eternal and universal. It was also rooted in what we would call the unconscious mind. The various mythological stories were not intended to be taken literally, but can perhaps be understood as a primitive form of psychology. When people told stories about heroes who descended into the underworld, struggled through labyrinths, or fought with monsters, they were bringing to light the obscure regions of the subconscious

[2] See, for example, Johannes Sloek, *Devotional Language,* trans. Henrik Mossin (Berlin and New York, 1996), pp. 53-96.

realm, which is not accessible to purely rational investigation. Because of the dearth of myth, many now resort to the techniques of psychoanalysis to help them to come to terms with their inner world.

Myth could not be demonstrated by logical proof; its insights were more intuitive and similar to those acquired by means of art. Myth only became a reality when it was embodied in cult, rituals, and ceremonies which worked upon the worshipers esthetically, evoking within them a sense of sacred significance and enabling them to apprehend the deeper currents of existence. Myth and cult were so inseparable that it is a matter of scholarly debate which came first: the mythical narrative or the cult that was attached to it. Myth was also associated with mysticism, the descent into the *psyche* by means of structured disciplines of focus and concentration which have been developed in all cultures as a means of acquiring insight that lies beyond the reach of reason. The words "myth" and "mysticism" are both related etymologically to the Greek *musteion*: to close the mouth or the eyes.[3] They are both, therefore, associated with experience that is silent, obscure, and not amenable to the clarity of truths which are self-evident or rationally demonstrable. But without a cult or mystical practice, the truths of mythology make no sense, and seem arbitrary and incredible. In rather the same way, a musical score remains opaque to most of us and needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate its beauty and intuit the "truth" that the music is trying to convey.

In the pre-modern world, people had a different view of history, which was not seen as a chronological sequence of unique events but a way of expressing truths that were timeless, constant realities. Hence history would tend to repeat itself: in the Bible, the people of Israel pass miraculously through a sea, which has opened to let them cross dry-shod, on at least two occasions. Historical narratives were composed precisely to bring out this eternal dimension, and were not designed to relate what actually happened.[4] They attempted to define the meaning of an event. Thus we do not know what really occurred when the ancient Israelites escaped from Egypt and

[3] John Macquarrie, *Thinking About God* (London, 1957), p. 34.

[4] Sloek, *Devotional Language*, pp. 73-74; Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London, 1999), pp. 15-33.

passed through the Sea of Reeds. The biblical tale has been deliberately written up as a myth, and linked with other stories about rites of passage, immersion in the deep, and gods splitting a sea in two to bring a new reality into being. Thus well-meaning, modern attempts to explain the story (by referring to the frequency of flash-flooding in the region, for example) are entirely misplaced. The myth has become central to Jewish identity by means of ritual. Every year the Passover *Seder* brings this strange story into their lives and helps them to make it their own. Indeed, the *Haggadah* reminds worshipers that every single Israelite must regard himself or herself as a member of the generation that escaped from slavery in Egypt and passed through the Sea of Reeds. One could say that unless an historical event is mythologized and ritualized in this way, it cannot be religious. The cult and the mythical narrative liberate the original incident from the confines of its historical period and make it a timeless reality in the lives of the faithful. To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical or scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is a modern attitude that mistakes the nature and purpose of this story.

In the same way, St. Paul made the historical Jesus into a myth by means of such rites as baptism and the eucharistic meal. In baptism, he explained to his Roman converts, the Christian entered into the death of the Messiah in the hope of rising again with him to new life;[5] when they broke bread and drank wine in memory of Jesus, as he had instructed his disciples, Christians "proclaimed the death of the Lord," making it ritually present again, and thus making it a redemptive factor in the lives of those present.[6] Indeed, Paul makes it clear that Christians were not concerned any longer with the historical Jesus, who lived "according to the flesh." They now know the Christ in a different, more spiritual way.[7] To this day, Catholics are taught that the Mass recreates the sacrifice of Calvary in a mystical manner, lifting this distant event from the first century and making it a living reality by means of the stylized cultic actions of the priest. In the Islamic tradition, the rites and practices

[5] Romans 6:3-11.

[6] 1 Corinthians 11:23-28.

[7] 2 Corinthians 5:16.

of the Law liberate the Prophet Muhammed from the seventh century: by imitating the way the Prophet lived, loved, prayed, washed, ate, and worshiped, Muslims hope, by cultivating his external *sunnah*, to acquire his attitude of perfect surrender (*islam*) to God; in a real but trans-rational way, the Prophet thus lives again in every devout Muslim, who has internalized Muhammed and made him part of his or her very being. Shii Muslims do the same with Imam Husain, when they reproduce the circumstances of his death in their passion plays and ritual dirges; when they march in mourning processions through the street on the fast day of *Ashura*, the anniversary of Husain's martyrdom, they promise to join his struggle against tyranny and injustice. The rites have made the historical tragedy of Husain's murder at Kerbala a potent myth, which expresses the Shii sense of an unseen but constant battle for justice that lies at the core of human existence.

But in the traditional world, *logos* was equally important. *Logos* was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function effectively in the world. Our modernity may have reduced our understanding of *mythos*, but we are very familiar with *logos*, which is the basis of our society. Unlike *mythos*, *logos* must relate accurately to the factual evidence and correspond to external mundane reality if it is to be effective. It must work efficiently in the ordinary world. We use this logical, discursive reasoning when we have to make things happen, get something done, or persuade other people to adopt a particular course of action. *Logos* is practical. Unlike myth, which looks back to the beginnings and to the foundations, *logos* forges ahead and tries to discover something new: to elaborate upon old insights, achieve a greater control over our environment, invent something novel, or find something fresh.[8]

In the pre-modern world, both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable. We have always needed science, even if only to make an arrow sharp or effective, or to find the best way of harvesting our crops.

It was the discipline of *logos* which enabled rulers to govern society efficiently, to arrive at satisfactory political decisions, and to succeed in battle. *Mythos* could do none of these things, but it was also

[8] Sloek, *Devotional Language*, pp. 50-52, 68-76.

considered essential for humanity. We are beings that fall very easily into despair. Unlike other animals, we fret about the human condition, are haunted by the fact of our mortality, and distressed beyond measure by the tragedies that flesh is heir to. As soon as men and women became recognizably human, they began to create religions, at the same time and for the same reasons as they created works of art: the myths and cults of tradition gave their lives a sense of sacred significance which made them worthwhile; they provided the context within which they could pursue their *logos*-driven activities.

But *mythos* and *logos* were essentially distinct, and it was held to be dangerous to confuse mythical and rational discourse. They had separate jobs to do. Myth was not reasonable; its narratives were not expected to be demonstrated empirically. You were not supposed to make *mythos* the basis of a pragmatic policy. If you did so, the results could be disastrous, because what worked well in the inner world of the *psyche* was not readily applicable to the affairs of the external world. When, for example, Pope Urban II summoned the First Crusade in 1095, his plan belonged to the realm of *logos*. He wanted the knights of Europe to stop fighting one another and tearing the fabric of Western Christendom apart, but instead to expend their energies instead in a war in the Middle East and so extend the power of the Roman church. But when this military expedition became entangled with folk mythology, biblical lore, and apocalyptic fantasy, the result was catastrophic, practically, militarily, and morally. Throughout the long Crusading project, it remained true that whenever *logos* was in the ascendant, the Crusaders prospered. They performed well on the battlefield, created workable colonies in the Middle East, and learned to relate more positively with the local Muslim population. But whenever the Crusaders made a mythical or mystical vision the basis of their policies, they were usually defeated and committed terrible atrocities.[9]

Yet *logos* also had its limitations. It could not assuage human pain or sorrow. Rational discourse could make no sense of tragedy. Faced with the natural catastrophes and man-made atrocities which punctuate human life, reason is silent and has nothing to say. A sci-

[9] Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and their Impact on Today's World* (London, 1988; London and New York, 1991), pp. 3-75, 147-274.

entist could make things work more efficiently and could discover astounding new facts about the physical world, but he could not explain the meaning of life. *Logos* could not answer our anguished questions about the ultimate value of human life. That was the preserve of myth or cult.[10]

In the traditional worldview, faith had a different meaning. People did not, for example, read their scriptures in a literal manner. After the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, some of the exiles found comfort in the teaching of Isaac Luria (1524-1572), who evolved a new creation myth, which bore no relation to the creation story in the Book of Genesis. But to Luria's disciples, the new myth made perfect sense. They were still reeling with the shock and trauma of exile, and Luria's version of creation resonated deeply with this experience. It began with an act of voluntary exile. In order to make room for the world, the infinite, inaccessible, and omnipresent god (which Jewish mystics call *Ein Sof*: "Without End") shrank into itself, evacuating, as it were, a region within itself in order to make a space for the physical universe. In its compassionate desire to make itself known in and by its creatures, *Ein Sof* had inflicted exile on a part of itself. Unlike the orderly creation described in Genesis, this was a violent process of primal explosions, disasters, and false starts, which seemed to the Spanish exiles a more accurate picture of the cruel world they had experienced. At an early stage, *Ein Sof* had tried to fill the vacuum it had created with light, but the "vessels" or "pipes," which were supposed to channel this divine light shattered under the strain. Sparks of heavenly light remained trapped in the world of matter; everything was now in the wrong place, and Luria's disciples imagined the *Shekhinah*, the Presence that is the closest we come to an apprehension of the divine in this life, wandering through the world, a perpetual exile, yearning to be reunited with the Godhead.[11]

If the mystics of Safed had been asked if they believed that this had really happened, they would have considered it an inept question. The primordial events described in such *mythos* were not simply incidents that had happened once in the remote past; they were also occurrences that happened all the time. They pointed to the

[10] Sloek, *Devotional Language*, p. 143.

[11] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (London, 1955), pp. 245-280.

fundamental truths and laws that underlay phenomena and historical happenings. The Spanish Jews would probably have replied that exile was a basic law of existence. All over the world, Jews were uprooted aliens; even the Gentiles experienced loss, disappointment, and a sense that they were not quite at home in the world, and Luria's creation myth revealed this in a wholly new way. The exile of the *Shekhinah* and their own lives as refugees were not two separate realities, but were one and the same, since exile was inscribed in the very Ground of being—even in God itself. Today people would be disturbed by such a flagrant departure from scripture, yet Luria's vision became a mass-movement, the only theological system to win such general acceptance among Jews all over the world at this time.[12] A literal reading of Scripture is a modern preoccupation. In the traditional world, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all relished highly allegorical, inventive, and esoteric interpretations of the sacred text. Since God's word was infinite, it was capable of multiple readings. So Jews were not distressed, as many modern people would be, by Luria's divergence from the plain meaning of the Bible. His myth spoke to them with authority because it explained their lives and provided them with meaning.

But despite the power of its symbolism, Lurianic Kabbalah would not have become so popular had it not been expressed in ritual and meditative disciplines. Jews who followed Luria's vision would make night vigils, rising at midnight, weeping, and rubbing their faces in the dust. These ritual gestures helped them to express their sense of grief and trauma, and linked them with their exiled God. They would lie awake all night, calling out to God like lovers, lamenting the pain of separation which is at the heart of the experience of exile. There were penitential disciplines—fasting, lashings, rolling in the snow—which were believed to hasten the end of this divine exile. Kabbalists would go for long hikes through the countryside, wandering like the *Shekhinah*, and acting out their sense of homelessness.[13] But Luria insisted that there was to be no

[12] Gershom Scholem, *Sabbetai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (London and Princeton, 1973), pp. 23-25; R.J. Weblowsky, "Messianism in Jewish History," in Marc J. Saperstein (ed.), *Essential Papers in Messianic Movements in Jewish History* (New York and London, 1992), p. 48.

[13] R.J. Weblowsky, "The Safed Revival and Its Aftermath," in Arthur Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality*, 2 Vols., (London, 1986, 1999), II, pp. 15-19.

unhealthy wallowing. His mystics must work through their sorrow in a disciplined stylized way, until they achieved a measure of joy. The midnight rituals always ended with a meditation on the reunion of the *Shekhinah* with *Ein Sof*, and, consequently, the end of the separation of humanity from its divine source. The mystic was told to imagine that every one of his limbs was an earthly shrine for the Divine Presence.[14] They were also taught the techniques of concentration (*kawwanot*), which helped them to become aware of the divine spark of light within their own selves and which filled them with bliss and rapture. These mystical disciplines and cultic rituals filled Jews with joy at a time when the world seemed alien and cruel.[15] Rational thought cannot assuage our sorrow. After the Spanish disaster, Jews found that the logical discipline of philosophy, which had been popular among the Spanish Jews, could not address their pain.[16] To make life bearable, the exiles turned from *logos* to *mythos*, which enabled them to make contact with the unconscious sources of their sense of loss, and anchored their lives in a vision that bought them comfort.

Without a cult, without prayer and ritual, myths and doctrines seem arbitrary and meaningless. Without the special rites he devised, Luria's creation story would have remained a senseless, bizarre fiction. Faith is only possible in such a liturgical, prayerful context. Once people were deprived of that type of spiritual activity, they would lose their faith. This is what happened to some of the Jews who elected in 1492 to stay behind in Spain and convert to Christianity. This had been the choice offered to Jews by Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs of Spain, when they signed the Edict of Expulsion. While many of these Jewish converts to Christianity became fervent and even influential Catholics, many never fully made the transition to the new faith. This was hardly surprising, since, once they had been baptized, they were scrutinized

[14] Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York, 1965), p. 150.

[15] Laurence Fine, "The Contempla5

tive Practice of Yehudim in Lurianic Kabbalah," in Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality*, II, pp. 89-90; Louis Jacobs, "The Uplifting of the Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism," in *Jewish Spirituality*, II, pp. 108-111.

[16] R.J. Weblowsky, "The Safed Revival and Its Aftermath," p. 17; Jacob Katz, "Halakah and Kabbalah as Competing Disciplines of Study," in Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality*, II, pp. 52-53.

by the Inquisition, and lived in constant fear of arrest on the flimsiest of charges. Ever watchful for any signs of a convert lapsing back into Judaism (such as refusing to eat shellfish or work on the Sabbath), this scrutiny by the Inquisition could mean imprisonment, torture, death, or, at the very least, the confiscation of the suspects' property.[17] As a result, some of the converted Jews became alienated from religion altogether. They could not identify with the Catholicism which made their lives a misery, and, since there was no practicing Jews left in the Iberian peninsula, Judaism itself became a distant, unreal memory. Even if the converts wished to practice Judaism in secret, they had no means of learning about Jewish law or ritual practice. In consequence, some were pushed into a religious limbo. Long before secularism, atheism, and religious indifference became common in the rest of Europe, we find instances of these essentially modern attitudes among the Marrano Jews of the Iberian peninsula.[18] Some of the Jewish converts did try to adhere to Judaism in secret, but because they did not know how to pray, or to perform the rites of the Law, their "Judaism" bore little relation to the reality.

Because those closet Jews did not know how to pray or how to perform the rites correctly, they fell back perforce on reason, creating a form of rational deism, not dissimilar to the philosophical religion that became popular in Europe during the eighteenth century Enlightenment.[19] In the seventeenth century, some of these secret Jews escaped from the Iberian peninsula and fled to Amsterdam, where Jews were allowed to practice their faith openly and without persecution. But when they encountered a real Jewish community, a few of them were appalled. The laws and customs of Judaism seemed senseless and barbaric. They had studied modern sciences in Iberia, such as logic, physics, mathematics, and medicine. The abstruse dietary laws and the rituals of purification seemed barbaric and meaningless to these sophisticated Jews, who found it difficult to accept the explanations of the rabbis because they had become accustomed to thinking things out rationally for

[17] Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London, 1986), pp. 225-29.

[18] Yirmanyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics, I: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 91, 93, 102.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

themselves.[20] To an outsider, many of the laws and customs of the Torah seem bizarre: they make sense only in a cultic context which had been denied to the secret Jews of Spain. Two of these Jewish refugees from the Spanish inquisition achieved notoriety in Amsterdam, because they found it quite impossible to adapt. In the early seventeenth century, one Uriel Da Costa was expelled three times from the Jewish community of Amsterdam: he had written a treatise attacking Jewish law, declaring that he believed only in human reason and the laws of nature. As an excommunicate, he lived an isolated, miserable life, jeered at by children in the street, and shunned by Jews and Christians alike. In 1640, he finally shot himself in the head.[21] In 1657, the rabbis were forced to expel Juan da Prado, who had been horrified by the Judaism he had discovered in Amsterdam. In Portugal, he had belonged to the Jewish underground, fighting for his right to think and worship as he chose, but his idea of Judaism was entirely idiosyncratic. Why did Jews think that God had chosen them alone, he demanded of the Amsterdam rabbis; was it not more logical to think of God as the First Cause rather than as a personality who had dictated a set of barbarous, absurd laws?[22] To Jews such as Prado and da Costa, the *mythos* of Judaism seemed nonsensical, because they approached it from the standpoint of reason, outside the liturgical context that alone could endow it with significance and spirituality. Many modern people have a similar problem, when they confront the mythology of religion with *logos* alone. They do not meditate, perform rituals, or take part in any ceremonial liturgy, and find that the myths of religion are senseless, barbaric, and incredible.

At the same time as da Costa and Prado were struggling with the mythology of Judaism, modernity was slowly and painfully coming to birth in Europe. It was a long and complex process, but by the eighteenth century, the people of Europe and America had achieved such astonishing success in science that they began to think that *logos* was the only path to truth and began to discount *mythos* as false and superstitious. The new world that was being created contradicted the dynamic of the old mythical spirituality. Our

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 42-51.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 57-73.

religious experience in the modern world has changed, and because an increasing number of people regard scientific rationalism alone as true, they have often tried to turn *mythos* into faith in *logos*, even though in the pre-modern world it was always considered dangerous to conflate the two.

We can see the dearth of mythical thinking in the philosophy of the French scientist René Descartes (1596-1650), who was only able to speak in *logoi*. For Descartes, the universe was a lifeless machine, the physical world inert and dead. It could yield no information about the divine: the sole living thing in the cosmos was the human mind, which could find certainty only by turning in upon itself. We could not even be sure that anything besides our own doubts and thoughts exists. Descartes was a devout Catholic, and he wanted to satisfy himself about God's existence. But he could not submit to the rhythms of *mythos*, so deeply was he involved in the disciplines of rational thought. Where myth had always looked back to the primordial beginnings, Descartes was a child of *logos*, which is always pressing forward and seeking something new. He could not therefore go back to the imaginary past of myth and cult. Nor could he rely on the insights of the old prophets and holy texts. A man of the new age, he would not accept received ideas. The scientist, he believed, must make his mind a *tabula rasa*. Truth could only be supplied by mathematics or by such self-evident propositions as "What's done cannot be undone." Since the way back was closed, Descartes could only inch his way painfully forward.

One evening, sitting besides a wood stove, Descartes evolved the maxim: *Cogito ergo sum*: "I think, therefore I am." This, he maintained, was self-evident and certain. The only thing of which we could be certain was our mind's experience of doubt. But doubt showed the imperfection of the human mind, and the very notion of "imperfection" would make no sense if we did not have a prior notion of "perfection." Since a perfection that did not exist would be a contradiction in terms, God—the Ultimate Perfection—must exist.[23] This so-called proof is unlikely to convince a modern skeptic. It shows the impotence of reason, when it is not backed up by prayer and ritual, when faced with ultimate issues. Descartes, sitting beside his stove, in his cold, empty world, locked into his own uncer-

[23] Cf. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, II.6.19.

tainty, and uttering a "proof" which is little more than a mental conundrum embodies the spiritual dilemma of modern humanity, which has lost the traditional understanding of the role and truth of *mythos*.

We can see how impossible it was for a man of reason to think mythically in the case of the British scientist Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who was perhaps the first fully to make rigorous use of the new scientific methodology of experimentation and deduction. But this total immersion in the world of *logos* made it impossible for Newton to appreciate that other, more intuitive forms of perception might also offer human beings a form of truth. He was a deeply religious man; in the course of his studies, as he contemplated what he believed to be the scientific laws that governed the universe, he used to cry aloud: "O God, I think Thy thoughts after Thee!"[24] But for Newton, mythology and mystery were primitive and barbaric: "'Tis the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion," he once wrote irritably, "ever to be fond of mysteries and for that reason to like best what they understand least."[25]

Newton became almost obsessed with the desire to purge the Christian faith of its mythical doctrines. He became convinced that the arational dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation were the result of a fourth century conspiracy. While working on his magnum opus *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia*, he was also hard at work on a treatise called *The Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology*, which argued that Noah had founded a superstition-free religion which had no revealed scriptures, no doctrines, but only a Deity which could be known through the contemplation of the natural world in a rational manner. Later generations had corrupted this pure faith, and imposed the abominable doctrines of Trinitarianism upon the Church by forging the evidence. Newton was now so thoroughly imbued with pure *logos* that he could not see that the Greek Orthodox theologians of the fourth century had devised the doctrine of the Trinity precisely as *mythos*. As Gregory of Nyssa, one of

[24] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View* (New York and London, 1991), p. 300.

[25] Richard S. Westfall, "The Rise of Science and the Decline of Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Kepler, Descartes, and Newton," in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (eds.), *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986), p. 231.

the doctrine's creators, had explained, the three hypostases of Father, Son, and Spirit were not objective facts but simply "terms that we use" to express the way in which the "unnamable and unspeakable" divine nature adapts itself to the limitations of our human minds. It made no sense outside the cultic context of prayer, contemplation, and liturgy.[26] But Newton could only see the Trinity in rational terms, had no understanding of the role of myth, and was therefore obliged to jettison the doctrine. The difficulty that many Christians today experience with trinitarian theology, which is the crux of Greek Orthodox spirituality, show that they share Newton's bias in favor of scientific rationalism.

Hitherto, in the perspectives of tradition, *mythos* and *logos* had always been seen as complimentary. Now for the first time in human history, they were beginning to be seen as incompatible. But even though *logos* can provide us with great gifts on the practical level, it is incapable of yielding a sense of sacred significance or of addressing the ultimate questions. At a time when science and unfettered rationality were forging brilliantly ahead, life was becoming meaningless for an increasing number of people, who for the first time were having to live without mythology. The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed that there was a God, but for all practical purposes, God might just as well not exist. God, Hobbes thought, had revealed himself at the beginning of history and would do so again at its End, but until that time we had to get along without him, and wait for him in the dark.[27] For the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), an intensely religious man, the emptiness and the "eternal silence" of the infinite universe opened up by modern science inspired pure terror:

> When I see the blind and wretched state of men, when I survey the whole universe in its deadness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe without knowing who put him there, what he has to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert

[26] Gregory of Nyssa, "*To Alybius: That There Are Not Three Gods.*"

[27] Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 58, 61.

> island, who wakes up quite lost with no means of escape. I marvel that so wretched a state does not drive people to despair.[28]

Reason and *logos* had never been deemed capable of assuaging such existential terror. As a result of the modern jettisoning of *mythos*, despair and alienation of the sort so eloquently described by Pascal have been a part of the modern experience.

By the end of the nineteenth century, scientific rationalism had been so astoundingly successful that an increasing number of scientists, who could command a large popular following, maintained dogmatically that reason must be the sole criterion of truth. As T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), who popularized Darwin's ideas, explained, people would have to choose between mythology and science. There could be no compromise: "one or the other would have to succumb after a struggle of unknown duration."[29] Truth was now narrowed down to what is "demonstrated and demonstrable,"[30] which, religion aside, would exclude the truths told by art or music. For a man like Huxley, there was no other path. Reason alone was truthful and the dogmas of religion were truthless, because they could not be proved logically and empirically. Once religious truth was treated as though it were rational *logos*, it became incredible. This was perceived by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared in *The Gay Science* (1882) that God was dead. He told the parable of a madman running one morning into the marketplace crying "I seek god!" When the amused bystanders asked if he imagined that God had emigrated or taken a holiday, the madman glared. "Where has God gone?" he demanded. "We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers!"[31] In an important sense, Nietzsche was right. Without myth, cult, ritual, and prayer, the sense of the sacred evoked only by these means inevitably dies. By making "God" a wholly notional truth, struggling to reach the divine by intellect alone, as some modern believers were attempting to do in the new age, modern men and women had killed it for themselves.

[28] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London, 1966), p. 209.

[29] Quoted in Peter Gay, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven and London, 1987), pp. 6-7.

[30] T.H. Huxley, *Science and Christian Tradition* (New York, 1896), p. 125.

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York, 1974), p. 181.

The whole dynamic of their future-oriented culture had made the traditional ways of apprehending the sacred psychologically impossible. Like the Iberian Jews, who had been forced to convert to Christianity and tried to hold on to their Judaism in secret, they had been thrust into a religious limbo, and many people imbued with the rational ethos of modernity experienced the truths of religion as tenuous, arbitrary, and incomprehensible.

Nietzsche's madman believed that the death of God had torn humanity from its roots, thrown the earth off course, and cast it adrift in a pathless universe. Everything that had once given human beings a sense of ultimate direction had vanished. "Is there still an above and below?" he had asked. "Do we not stray, as though through an infinite nothingness." A profound terror, a sense of meaningless rage and fear of annihilation has become a part of the modern experience. Modernity has been enthralling, empowering, and liberating for those of us who are fortunate enough to live in the privileged sectors of the world. But without a faith that life has some ultimate value, human existence becomes prey to despair. The terrible icons of our century, Auschwitz, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo, give us a chilling glimpse of a world in which all sense of sacredness has been lost. To recover our sense of the divine, however we choose to formulate it, we need somehow to recover our sense of *mythos*, reinstating it as the partner of scientific *logos*.

Faith and Modernity by Karen Armstrong

Features in

The Betrayal of Tradition:
Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity

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