



After Disbelief: Remythologising and Spiritual Renewal

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**In order to find God,
you first have to lose him.**

Meister Eckhart

1. Introduction

To gain a deeper understanding of God and to recover our spiritual wellbeing and connectedness, the modern mind needs to perform two related tasks. The first is *demythologising*, which sets us apart from traditional religion and establishes us as ‘modern’, and the second is *remythologising*, where we return to the religious viewpoint of the past, but from an entirely different perspective. Remythologising follows demythologising, and cannot be conducted without it, but the second task is not a straightforward product of the first.

Remythologising involves a leap of imagination and a recovery of faith in the invisible world, which demythologising does not always encourage. The majority of secular people in the modern West are in the demythologising mode, whether they realise it or not. I would argue that demythologising is a transitional state for humankind, and as such the secular modern West is itself a transitory phenomenon. I do not expect it to have enduring value. A mind or culture preoccupied with demythologising cannot last long, because it is divorced from the wellsprings of energy that give it life and purpose.

2. Unravelling Old Myths, Stories, Traditions

Demythologising is useful, but mainly at certain points in history, where religion requires a radical shake-up, and when the official spirituality of culture has become weak and ineffectual. At such times, the objects of belief have to be swept away, and we have to reconnect again with the primal spiritual impulse from which all belief systems originate. When this radical activity is carried out effectively, it can lead to a remythologising process and to the recovery of a new and profound kind of faith.

In the demythologising mode, the mind asks critical questions about traditional conceptions of God, religion and spirituality, and finds the old answers to be unconvincing and inadequate. It experiences religion as a series of stories or ‘myths’ which have to be unravelled, interrogated, reduced to allegories and perhaps abandoned. The myths are viewed as obscure, fantastic and ‘untrue’ in terms of the modern understanding of truth. Demythologising arises as a natural expression of the growth of reason, and from the mind’s increasing scepticism toward metaphysics and the invisible world. It is an inevitable outcome of the rise of education and the development of the scientific attitude, which asks for proof of the existence of a deity or metaphysical order.

The theological response that religious truth has been gifted to us by revelation, and should be gratefully received in faith, is unacceptable to the modern scientific mind. As such, unreconstructed theology cannot resolve the modern problem, because the mind’s refusal to believe is pre-theological, existential, and cannot be resolved in the traditional manner.

Finding no proof of the existence of God, secular reason concludes that God does not and never did exist, and the material world is the only form of reality. This leads to atheism and materialism, and from there it is often a short step to nihilism, despair and depression. Modern philosophers sometimes argue that since there is no inherent meaning in the universe, we have to create our own meaning, and thus existentialism is born. Humanism asserts, along with existentialism, that we must make man and woman the measure of all things, since the divine measure is missing, and we have to fill the vacuum of meaning with human constructs. In response to this crisis, the religions plead with us to 'return' to the faith of the past, to brush our questions and doubts aside, and re-embrace the traditional God in which we will find solace and meaning.

But the modern crisis cannot be resolved so easily. Our questions are not answered by a simple return to the past. If we go back to earlier attitudes, modernity is annulled, and the challenges inherent in the modern phase are squashed or ignored, in favour of bolstering the old religious order.

The old order is collapsing for a variety of good reasons, and not merely because we have become 'wayward' or have diverted from the path of righteousness. The deep historical splits in the religious mentality between spirit and nature, spirit and body, the sacred and the sexual, heaven and earth, are causing the old religious mentality to split up and disintegrate. Repressed nature, body, eros, and sexuality are hitting back in our civilisation, and with a considerable vengeance, with the result that the religious morality that encouraged these repressions is widely discredited and reviled. The old religious ideal of perfection is viewed as neurotic and anti-life. Humanity has outgrown the old ethical order, and it is demanding a new ethical vision that religion, as yet, has been unable to deliver.

But at the same time, the credibility of religious ideas and assumptions has been shattered. The notion that one religion can claim absolute truth for itself, and treat other religions with disdain or disrespect, no longer has validity in our complex, pluralistic world. The notion that God privileges one tradition above others, is today viewed as a category error and has to be abandoned. Moreover, the fact that religious language has been read literally by faith institutions is a travesty of the spirit and a misrepresentation of its meaning. The time has come for a new vision that enhances life, that brings the whole of life into relationship with itself, and that recovers the integrity and diversity of spiritual truth.

We are on a path to a new understanding of religious truth, and although this path may eventually reinvigorate the faith institutions, a renewal cannot take place until the old forms, values, and habits of thought have been unravelled. As we return to a spiritual standpoint, we cannot afford to return to the religious forms of the past. We have to *dream onward* our understandings of God, so that as we return to the idea of transcendence, we need not fall back on outdated and inadequate answers to the eternal questions. 'Eternal truth demands a language that changes with the spirit of the time'.

3. Back to Beyond: the Return of Transcendence

In an optimistic mood, I envisage us returning to the idea of transcendence, but in an entirely new way, and with the help of new understandings of myth, symbol and language. These new understandings will be gleaned from depth psychology, philosophy, scriptural studies and the history of ideas. As we recover transcendence, and retrieve the ancient perception of God and spirit, we must move forward and accept the historical complexity of our situation. The spirit of progress compels us onward, even if there is something weary in our souls, which would like nothing more than to forget the present confusion, rest in the bosom of tradition and assert its unconditional truth.

But we cannot go back, prior to atheism and existentialism, prior to the experiment of the modern period. Our way is through and beyond the wasteland of atheism and the desert of

rationality. I believe that historically we have already reached the edge of the wasteland, and I see signs of this everywhere. But the signs are small and scattered; in a dozen or more highly specialised disciplines, we see the return of the sacred in our modern world.

This renewal of spirit has not yet been institutionalised, although it will undoubtedly occur in the future. Meanwhile, to find this renewal today one has to read the spirit of the time correctly, by observing the creative developments in such diverse areas as physics, biology, postmodern philosophy, depth psychology, the arts, music, cinema, and so on. There is a new sense of openness to the sacred in many of the sciences and in various streams of philosophy. It seems that the two major forces that shook up and discredited the old religious order, namely, science and philosophy, are the forces that will bear witness to the return of the sacred. There is internal logic in this: the knowledges that chased the sacred away and declared the world to be disenchanted, are the very knowledges which will lead the movement toward a re-enchanted universe.

Ironically, the new spiritual momentum in culture may not appear in religion itself, or not at first. Sometimes, as I will argue, the new spirit appears in religion in distorted or negative form, as resurgent fundamentalism. This is mainly because religion is not open to the new spirit and is still trying to assert the validity of the old metaphysical order and to prop up collapsing structures. The creative spirit may be discerned more clearly – somewhat ironically – in secular and nonreligious areas of enquiry, such as the arts and sciences. This predicament will change in due course, once religion has understood the direction and meaning of the spirit. But for the time being, the new spirit and religious institutions seem to inhabit different worlds. New spirit is rising in the secular domain, and old spirit is collapsing in the religious domain. The present time is paradoxical and suggests an old formula: he who has his faith shall lose it, and he who loses his faith for the sake of the new will find it.

But there has to be risk and adventure, before the new faith can be found, before the new God can be encountered. We need to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, through the desert of rationality to find the new experience of the transcendent. If we remain ensconced within the traditional worldview, the next phase of our religious understanding will most likely not be revealed to us. To be truly religious, we have to become heretical; and to be truly spiritual, we have to question everything that has gone before. To renew the religious traditions, the traditions need to be betrayed, so that we can move beyond established conventions and see what the spirit is asking us to do. The time commands us to heresy and creativity, because spirit is trapped and stifled by old religious forms that no longer serve its purpose.

We experience God today not through knowing, but through *not knowing*. The present is a time of ‘negative theology’, in which the divine is affirmed not through revelation or rituals, but through openness, rupture, woundedness, exposure, alienation. To encounter God in a destitute time, we have to brace ourselves for many blows and disappointments, and open up to reality with honesty and integrity. God today demands radical measures and radical commitment. The journey is not for the faint-hearted but only for those who are prepared to take risks and move ahead without prior assurances, and without pats on the back from authority figures. In times of radical transition, ‘authority’ is often wrong, while creativity and rebellion have the support of the spirit.

4. Remythologising as an Historical Necessity

After demythologising comes *remythologising*, in which the possibility of transcendence reasserts itself, but in a way that does not collide with science or philosophy. In fact, as I have intimated, science and philosophy are among the primary places where remythologising occurs, as the pendulum swings from atheism toward mysticism, from nihilism toward the recovery of the transcendent. The pendulum moves for a variety of reasons, but one is that God is too strong and prevalent in human nature to allow us to be devoid of divine presence for long. We are *homo*

religiosus, wrote Mircea Eliade, and the repressed spirit returns as soon as the prevailing wisdom declares the world to be disenchanting, religion nonsensical, and God dead. Suddenly, God is alive and magic is afoot – and the danger is, if we do not bring reason and education to this process, it will occur spontaneously, that is, irrationally, and threaten to engulf the fragile edifice of reason that civilisation has constructed.

High culture must cooperate with the process of re-enchantment, otherwise low culture will invent a ‘new age’ of the spirit in which every occult and dark practice imaginable will be resurrected and marketed to the starving masses. Then we do not have a spiritual renaissance, but merely a black tide of the occult and a regression to magical and superstitious thinking. If high culture refuses to move in the direction of re-mythologising, the consequences for civilisation are dire. On the one hand, we will witness a proliferation of irrational spiritualities and superstitious practices, and on the other, the stern voice of religious fundamentalism will gain authority from the suppressed spirit aching to reassert itself. If, at the time of re-mythologising, culture refuses the call, the process can backfire, spirit adopts ‘primitive’ or atavistic forms, and reason would then be less willing than ever to embrace spirit in its ungainly or destructive aspect.

Re-mythologising goes wrong if it assumes that the religion to be revitalised is literally true, or that its dogmatic statements are historically accurate. Then we do not have re-mythologising but a new outburst of irrational belief and resurgent fundamentalism. This is why it is important, indeed critical, to engage the re-mythologising impulse in consciousness, with the support of education, reason and knowledge. Re-mythologising without education and knowledge will lead to barbarism, and the cultures of the world will tear each other apart in a struggle to assert absolute power and dictatorial rule. Without education, re-mythologising leads to outbursts of creationism, racism, moralism, absolutism and dogmatism. Therefore, the knowledge of *how* to re-mythologise is of utmost political and social interest, and is not merely an intellectual problem. Our ability to re-mythologise may have a huge impact on the future course of civilisation, and play an enormous role in the perennial hope for world peace.

The modern world has got stuck in the process of demythologising, and we urgently need to move on from it. It is a transitional state, and it is not a resting place or a final destination for consciousness or culture. It is transitional for the individual as well as for the nation, since the human being cannot live properly without ultimate meaning, and needs spiritual sustenance to mature and individuate as a whole person. The modern condition is merely a ‘holding pattern’, and many are aware that something must come *after* it. The fashionable notion of a ‘post-modern’ condition is one expression of this need to arrive at a new place, individually and collectively. However, the term ‘post-modern’ means many different things to different people and no single meaning can be discerned. What is of particular interest to us is the possibility of a *post-secular* condition, a state or consciousness that comes after the disillusionment of the modern, and its characteristic attack on religious traditions.

When culture gets stuck in demythologising, it resists the new spirit of the time, the positive dynamism that tries to push forward to a revitalisation of society. Part of the symptomatology of being stuck is to be sceptical, bored, unimpressed by the awakening of spirit, and to consider oneself too sophisticated to participate in a spiritual revival. In this mood, one says that God is dead, and we are better off without him. A related symptom is to argue that spiritual renewal is politically dangerous and to be avoided at all costs. It is true that spiritual renewal is sometimes exploited by political interests to bring about uprisings of fascism, nationalism or militarism, but we cannot afford to judge the re-mythologising impulse by the negative expressions that have attended it in twentieth-century Germany, Italy or Spain. We have to remain hopeful, and the more conscious we can become of this process, the less likely it will be sabotaged by extremist points of view.

5. Remythologising as a Rediscovery of Symbol, Myth and Inspiration

Remythologising involves a simultaneous reanimation of self, world and culture. It recognises intuitively that we are not alone in the universe and we do not inhabit a reality that is wholly of our own construction. There is something else that has been here before us; there is something else which is here with us now. The myths of religion may be created by culture, as the modern mind asserts, but our myths respond to a reality which is prior to culture. This takes us beyond humanism and materialism, and we are on a new path toward mystical awareness. We cannot return to old religion, because its claims and its doctrines are no longer true. The spirit urges us to a new kind of creativity, and a new perception of the sacred in ordinary life and in the arts, literature, and myth.

We spurn the idolatry of religion, and yet myths, symbols and icons are all we have. They are limited, and only of relative value, but they are our primary means of connecting with absolute reality. The Wholly Other cannot be known directly, but only indirectly through symbolism and myth. Something about the sacred inspires us to invent myths, and this makes us interested again in the myth-making process. We read scripture, poetry and myth with renewed interest, placing more value on their revelatory significance, their potential to reveal the holy in the constructs of time. This aspect of creativity is granted a new holiness, a new reverence, and the fact that myths might be invented does not detract from their ability to disclose the sacred.

The objects of religion are true again, but their new truth resides in *mythos*, symbol, metaphor, and not in *logos*, history, or fact. Religions are not treated literally, as in the old reading, but are read as symbolic systems, according to a mythopoetics of the sacred. *Mythos* is rediscovered as a language that expresses truth in an indirect or metaphorical way. We read the statements of religion not as descriptions of external reality, but as interpretations of the inner meaning of events. There is more to reality than can be recorded by the senses, or tested by the methods of empiricism. There is a large part of the real – its deeper aspect – that can only be accessed by myth and symbol, and understood through picture-language.

In remythologising, we set forth on a *symbolic life*, but our comprehension of the symbolic shifts as we awaken to the divine in all things. We have to pay particular attention to symbolism in the process of remythologising, because the demythologisers spoke of ‘symbols’ too. They were in the habit of reading the miracles and wonders of scripture as ‘symbols’ of purity, innocence, grace, holiness, forgiveness, and so on. But they were reading sacred images as signs rather than as symbols. A sign is an allegory; it is something we humans ‘make’ which ‘stands for’ something. It is a product of conscious or deliberate intention, without anything mystical about it. It is an act of human will, and as such it could never be referred to as the Word of God. Signs or allegories about spiritual life are viewed by many demythologisers as illusions of the mind, as it invents ‘things’ that do not exist.

However, a living symbol is not something we invent but something that happens to us. It arises from the deepest regions of the mind, from those areas of semi-darkness in which spirit and soul reside. The symbol is the stuff of dreams and visions, and in depth psychology it is the product of the unconscious life that we do not control. In ancient times, the inspired person would have said ‘God spoke to me’, or the poet might have claimed that he or she was taking divine dictation from an unseen power. Our civilisation gradually lost the sense of what this could mean, of what is *gifted* by a mysterious source, and as such it lost its receptivity to the operations of God in the human soul. In our humanist emphasis, we said that the writers of scripture must be ‘making up’ these stories, ‘inventing’ allegories, or ‘constructing’ narratives.

But these authors were compelled to write what they wrote by a power they called God, and that we call the unconscious, and that should be called ‘God’ again. The unconscious is an ungainly term, and designates our unknowing. It posits an emptiness or lack of consciousness, and yet it is possible that in this empty space the mystery of the All is to be found. With

imagination and courage, we can return God to our discourse and our knowledge. This new God, however, is different from the old. This God is not experienced primarily as a 'being' in a faraway or distant metaphysical heaven, but as the depth or core dimension of our own being. It is harder to hide from this God, when he is so terrifyingly present, so much a part of who we are. God is a transcendence which is located in the immanent sphere, and this God has been there all along, but we are only waking up to this fact now.

In the remythologising mode, sacred narratives may be seen to contain elements of history and to be based upon real figures, but woven around historical elements are various layers of myth, legend and symbolism. It is not that the ancient scribes were deliberately telling lies, or falsifying or distorting the facts. Rather, they were telling the truth as they saw it by drawing on the time-honoured resources of symbolic imagination and poetic methods, with use of cross-references to more ancient texts. They were not primarily interested in what was happening in fact or in real time. Mythos is concerned with the disclosure of the *meaning* of what happens, and not with the surface narration. Mythos is an interpretation of events, according to the resources of intuition and imagination. The 'word of God' is written when the deeper meaning is revealed, and not when we describe what happens at the surface.

6. Truth and Power: the Institutional Construction of Truth

The retrieval of mythos as an organ of spiritual truth calls for a profound shift in our thinking and values, because 'myth' has, under the reign of logos, become synonymous with something false or untrue. To engage in remythologising we have to think like the ancients – and like the unconscious still 'thinks' in dreams and fantasies.

The fact that the institutions of faith read these mythic statements literally, as statements of history rather than of imagination, indicates the lack of spiritual understanding in these institutions. It expresses their power impulse, their desire to bolster sacred narratives by presenting them as if they were historically true. 'It really happened', they instruct us; 'it really happened as the scriptures say.' The books of scripture are misread as testaments to day-world truth, rather than as testaments to the spirit. In this way, the religions bolster their numbers among the impressionable, the vulnerable, and the uneducated, for many are swayed by the supernatural discourse and the claims of divine or absolute intervention.

When sacred writings tell stories of a god-man, of how his body was born in a miraculous manner, and died in an equally miraculous manner, it is clear to the poetic imagination that the object of concern is not the physical body, as the institutions assert, but something else. The object of focus is the spiritual or subtle body – namely, the soul. It is the soul that is not corporeal, not dependent on sexual intercourse for its engendering, and not subject to the laws of physics or biology at its birth. This subtle body can defy the biological laws of life at the moment of death, contradict the laws of gravity, and return to its divine maker in eternal life. This is the story of the passion of the holy spirit, its incarnational attempt to enter human reality, and its transcendence of the human condition. To tell this story properly, one has to tell it convincingly, and use as many metaphors and symbols as possible from the poetic imagination. We have no evidence for the miraculous life-cycle of the mystical body; it is a statement of faith, and not of history.

To confuse the sacred narrative of the mystical body with factual reality is not a work of divine inspiration, but a work of cultural distortion and manipulation. It is a product of the institutional urge, that is, the desire to found a sacred community upon solid foundations and reliable history. Sometimes this institutional urge finds its way into the scriptures themselves, in scenes that are designed to bolster the literal level of the narrative, for instance, the 'doubting Thomas' scene in the resurrection narrative. Scriptures are not entirely works of poetic imagination, but are amalgamations of historical episodes, myth, legend, inspired narration, and ideological formations.

It is the institutional urge that desires to be *certain*, to promote something that is ‘really true’, and that threatens those who do not subscribe to its stories with punishment and eternal damnation. The institutional urge seeks to inform all outsiders, including those of other religions and other lands, that their sacred icons are fanciful or merely illusory, whereas its own religion is historical and based on solid fact. In a sense, we might say that one’s own religion is the mythological system one believes in; whereas other people’s religions are dismissed as ‘mythologies’.

Truth and power are different things, and at a time of remythologising we are called upon to deconstruct the power impulses in religion and see through its literalising fantasies. In other words, we have to put religiosity and hierarchy aside, and access the spiritual truth in the prophetic tradition. Demythologising helps us to unravel the power structures and the hierarchical codes and pretences, and prepares the ground, as it were, for something new. Remythologising reveals the prophetic content of the scriptures, and opens its riches to us, unlocking the spiritual truth that was disguised by the institutional emphasis on history and external fact. In times of remythologising, popular books or writings may even claim that conspiracies have operated at the highest level, because it feels to the spirit as if truth has been deliberately suppressed by the discourses of power. Truth has been ‘covered up’ by habitual literalising and there may be numerous attempts to reveal what has been hidden. While some cry ‘conspiracy’, sensing a deeper spiritual truth at work, others, sensing no truth at all, accuse the faith institutions of fraud and systematic deception.

Religious hierarchies cling tenaciously to their literalism, in the belief that this is integral to the strength of the tradition, but the literalism is what eventually collapses the tradition, since it turns into a dead weight of assertion. Institutions of faith have a naïve and materialistic understanding of religion, and in urging belief in paranormal events or miracles, they promote a materialism of the spirit. True faith does not require miracles or wonders, and does not ask for physical proofs of the existence of the spirit.

7. Demythologised Religion and the Need for Mystical Renewal

With specific reference to the Christian tradition, demythologising has made little headway in the Catholic church, where it is still regarded as unthinkable heresy, but in the Protestant church demythologising has taken hold in the so-called liberal or progressive wing of religious thought. Here, the demythologising mode exists in an uneasy relation with ‘low church’ evangelical traditions. It is inevitable that the more ‘modern’ wing of the Christian religion would seek to update its thinking, and move in accord with the demythologising temper. But as soon as demythologising strikes root in a tradition that has been ‘mythological’ from the outset, it is hard to protect faith against the intellectual onslaught that seems bent on destroying it.

This is why the Roman tradition will have no truck with demythologising – and its more centralised systems of authority ensures that demythologising does not get an official foothold in its religious culture. There is no sense in which an unravelling of myths would lead to a quickening or revitalisation of religious life. Rather, with the Roman tradition’s extraordinary attachment to iconography, myth, and symbol, any attempt to break this hold is seen as hostile and not as liberating. There is no sense in which the ‘essence’ of religion is viewed apart from its formal and conventional attributes.

The early nineteenth-century advocates of demythologising, such as Hegel, Feuerbach and Strauss, insisted that demythologising is not synonymous with debunking. They believed we can demythologise and that religious objects such as Jesus or God can still be left standing. The myths can be exploded, but something essential survives. The twentieth-century supporters of demythologising, including Rudolph Bultman and Paul Tillich, also maintained that God survives the demythologising process. They argued that moving beyond the myths brings us closer to the

reality of God by freeing us from the trappings of legend and metaphor. But one can see why the Roman tradition has remained steadfastly opposed to this trend. Demythologising sets in train a questioning and doubting process that does not stop short of the existence of God itself. Despite the reassurances that demythologising is not debunking, in reality we often find that God is 'exploded' as just another 'myth' on the way to a more enlightened grasp of reality.

The problem is one of language, among other things. If by 'God' we associate the old mythological figure in the sky that is widely held by popular belief to equate with the idea of God, then demythologising does away with our sentimental attachments to this figure. But if we assume that what survives demythologising, the mystery and ultimate reality that is beyond all images – if we assume that this is still 'God', and in fact has always been the true 'God', then we have negotiated this treacherous path and emerged with our faith intact. But it has to be recognised that for countless people it is impossible to imagine a God beyond the discredited clichés of God-mythology. The word 'God' has become for them a part of what has been discredited. If anything remains, they choose to use different terms for it, such as Spirit, or Cosmos, or Energy, or whatever it is. 'God' has a stain attached to it, a blemished word that is as unredeemable as the antiquated mythology to which it has been attached.

The biggest challenge for those who get stuck in demythologising and cannot move beyond it, is to exercise their imagination and creativity. They must take a leap in the dark, or a plunge into the unknown. They have to be prepared to look into the abyss, and to experience, either in their physical body or in their intuitive imagination, a sense of presence beyond the emptiness. This is not easy to achieve. But I believe some kind of leap is required to get us out of the demythologising mode, which is comforting for the enquiring mind, and can be quite addictive and self-sustaining unless this mode is challenged by a new spirit.

It is important for us to suspend our subjectivity and our mental chatter so that we allow something objective and other to speak to us, to approach us from the other side. If we learn how to listen, how to be attentive, we will transcend our limitations and allow God to speak to us. But this requires patience, humility and endurance, traits that are not encouraged by society. When we suspend our personal noise, even for a brief moment, we enable ourselves to be spoken to, to be guided by an other. Then, once we have glimpsed this objective presence, we are on the way to remythologising, because the spirit seeks outward and symbolic expression of its interior life. The sacred calls us out of scepticism and into the creation and recreation of symbolic forms. It calls us into the divine drama of imagination, intuition and myth-making.

How can religion encourage and prepare the ground for this breakthrough to divine presence? The conventional forms of worship are not enough, try as the institutions might to make them more meaningful or engaging. At this point, the recovery of mysticism, meditation, contemplation and prophetic listening are needed, to teach us the art of deep receptivity and the science of spiritual discernment. The breakthrough is not about acquiring more information or becoming better educated, but about shedding our armoury and allowing the ground of being to be heard. For this achievement, religious 'instruction' must give way to spirituality, and knowledge give way to wisdom. The time calls us to be prophetic, and to engage in the deep listening that leads to personal experience of the sacred.

8. Reactionary Formations in the Wake of a Refusal to Remythologise

The challenge for the traditions at this point is to encourage an authentic engagement with the sacred, without which no revitalisation of self or society can occur. If authentic engagements do not take place, we can expect society to be plagued by reactionary religious formations, charismatic cults and resurgent fundamentalisms. This is because the passion and power of the spirit demands an outlet, and if it cannot find an outlet in progressive religious expressions, it will find other, less savoury outlets to express itself in society.

Here we find the dangerous limitations of the progressive religious 'left', and the consequences of its getting stuck in demythologising and intellectualism. The progressive left has squandered its ability to carry the passion of the spirit, by focusing instead on intellectual problems, social justice and political causes. These expressions are valuable and useful in themselves, but they do not engage the passion of the spirit, nor do they inspire in people a deep sense of conviction in the reality of the transcendent. The progressives have 'watered down' religion, and given a purely rational explanation for God based on a demythologised critique.

In reaction to this rational and tepid form of religiosity, we witness the rise of the religious right, which is almost like the return of the repressed. Namely, the spiritual fire that is absent in the liberal movement returns, with renewed force and vigour, in a right-wing rigidification and stiffening of resolve. Instead of capitulating to the modern demand for demythologisation and reasoned debate, a significant wing of the religions has hardened its heart against the modern attitude and asserts the absolute validity of scripture and the literal truth of its pronouncements. To some extent, this neo-conservative movement is taking over the religious institutions and forcing liberals out of office and control.

This right-wing development is full of a religious conviction that the liberals seem to have lost, since they have caved in too readily to the modern attitude and to the critical point of view. The backlash against modernisation is inevitable, and contains a great deal of truth, if only we could read it correctly. The message to be read is that demythologising is a merely temporary position, and cannot be adopted as a permanent attitude. It satisfies the mind but not the spirit, and if the spirit is not given new channels in which to flow, and new myths in which to belong, the spirit will revert back to earlier times, when passionate belief was possible. Remythologising is essential to the spirit, and if the progressive forces of society cannot remythologise, the regressive forces will return to ancient mythological forms that precede modernity and the intellectual enlightenment. The spirit will then stand against the progressive cultural attitude, and reveal itself as its opponent and antagonist.

This crisis, ultimately, is not a problem of the spirit itself, but a problem of human consciousness. It indicates that we have been unable to contain or assimilate the living spirit, and as a result it becomes wrathful and full of revenge. Its autonomy is experienced negatively, that is, as a defiance of logic and as an attack on reason. The spirit demands to be heard in its own right, and it will not succumb to being reduced by the modern outlook to a product of human culture. If the modern outlook cannot deal with its autonomy and power in a creative way, the spirit will be forced to move counter to reason and overthrow our logic. What is desired, of course, is a new rational understanding of the nonrational forces, and that is what myths and symbols are: they provide a rational and narrative containment for the sacred forces. If we do not contain these forces properly, they break out wildly, and the nonrational becomes irrational.

In this way, secular modern societies, and secularising forces within the churches, have set the scene for the destructive outbreak of religious violence, rising fundamentalism, factionalism, irrationality, evangelical passion, apocalyptic fervour, and various kinds of extreme behaviour, insofar as living spirit has not been taken into account, but has been reduced to a human artefact and a ghost of the past. The spirit will not tolerate being rationalised in this way, not even by the most sophisticated and enlightened minds in the church or the state. As we read in a contemporary novel, 'The spirit does not die, you know, it turns into a monster'. We do well to treat the spirit with utmost respect, and to return to the ancient perception that God made man, rather than accept the modern precept that man made God. We still have to make peace with the Almighty, and, as in times past, when we lose faith in this reality, it can bare its teeth at us and reveal the dark side of its nature.

It is not enough for us to demythologise the scriptures and humanise religion unless we find other ways to acknowledge the autonomy of spirit and the otherness of God. Any move toward rationality must be matched by a compensatory move toward mystery, reverence and devotion. Otherwise, man becomes superior to God, and this inflation of our value will invoke a counter-response from the cosmic forces, which may right the imbalance in violent or destructive

ways. The return of spirit often expresses itself as an outbreak of literalism, or a backlash to unsophisticated responses to scripture, or in 'charismatic' churches that celebrate the autonomy of spirit in such irrational forms as 'speaking in tongues', 'slayings' in the spirit, and so on.

The challenge of our culture is to acknowledge the authority of spirit without reverting to autocratic, authoritarian, literalistic and absolutist expressions. We have to give more room to spirit, allow it more imagination and depth, more colour and vigour, and avoid the typical pitfalls and failings of spiritual passion. Passion and education need to be brought together, and reason and spirit must work with each other in an act of revitalisation which is positive for society. Our learning and culture can only be protected from violence and inundation if we open our society more to the otherness of the sacred and the power of the divine, and this means using myths and symbols as containers of the energies that might otherwise overwhelm us.

This is where remythologising plays such a vital role in society, in the health of the mind, and the moderation of religious desire. In remythologising, we open ourselves again to the autonomy of God, but we refuse to allow this power to destroy our reason, to cramp our imagination or to attack our science and education. We are able to say that the statements of scripture are true, but they are not literally true. By using an educated approach to language and myth, we are able to appreciate the power of the religious symbol to designate a spiritual reality that must not be confused with literal fact. All true symbols are able to carry religious meaning, but they are relative and not absolute. They are our best possible expressions of a spiritual reality that remains apart from, or greater than, our ability to know or comprehend that reality.

Remythologising and resurgent fundamentalism are both inspired by the revitalising impulse to reassert the power of spirit in the face of a disbelieving world. Remythologising, however, accepts the findings of science and the doubts and questions of education. It accepts the need, expressed in the demythologising process, to destroy the literalisms of the past and unsettle the security of idolatry and traditional creeds. It understands that when God becomes too known or familiar, we need to unravel the forms of religion and return to an awareness that God is above our finite knowing, and above all religion and culture. Remythologising sides with God against religion, but it realises, at the same time, that religious images are all we have, and they have to be rediscovered for what they can tell us about the nature and character of the Unknown God.

David Tacey 2006