



# Navigating Through Time

## A Short History of Myth

Karen Armstrong

Canongate

This modest-sized book traces the history of myth down through the ages from the Palaeolithic period (20000-8000 BCE) to the modern era. It argues persuasively that because mythology has fallen into disrepute - a myth is now commonly understood as a falsehood - our sense of the sacred has become blunted and our very humanity threatened. In the final chapter Armstrong suggests, perhaps somewhat tentatively, how this situation might be remedied.

Myths, according to another writer, "are maps by which cultures navigate through time". They tell us, says Armstrong, how to behave. They are true, not because they are factual, but because they give us insight into the deeper meanings of life. They demand action. In the ancient world myths were indispensable, they were therapeutic and still speak to our inmost fears and desires.

Mythology also reflects the way we think about God and humanity. Armstrong shows how people change their ideas about God and the human condition whenever they move into a new historical era. For example, in today's global world, where the technological geniuses have replaced the spiritual ones, the Creator God worshipped by Christians, Jews and Muslims has largely disappeared, especially in the West.

In a chapter on the Christian myth Armstrong shows how Jesus and the first disciples were rooted in Jewish spirituality, as was St. Paul. Paul, who was not much interested in Jesus' teachings, transformed Jesus into the timeless mythical hero who dies and is raised to life. The early Christians knew that this myth was true, not factually and historically, but because they had experienced transformation. Unless, says Armstrong, an historical event is mythologised it cannot become a source of inspiration.

In the final chapter Armstrong refers to the dramatic ways in which life has changed with the advent of modernity. As the scientific spirit took hold with its quest for efficiency (logos) the death of mythology has proved potentially disastrous. Human beings lost their sense of the sacred, World War I, Auschwitz, the Gulag and Bosnia spelled out what could happen when the sacred goes. Unless our technological genius is matched by some kind of spiritual revolution the future for our planet is bleak.

Armstrong discusses some secular novelists who have turned to mythology and who have tried to restore the balance. She concludes with a sobering note: "If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight to our lost and damaged world."

This is a book that had to be written, it deserves a wide readership.

*Alan Goss, Napier*