

Rediscovering the Sacred Myth

To de-westernize the Gospel does not mean to go “eastern” in the philosophical sense of the word, but it does mean to recover the biblical legacy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and in that sense it is going eastern and wholistic. This paradigm shift can both meet the needs of post-modernism in the West and needs to form the basis for reaching the unreached peoples of the world in our generation.

by Judy Weerstra

My experience in the “evangelical” context of Western Christianity has been one of the best things of my life and also one of the worst. On the positive side, it has helped form me theologically and missiologically. In my local context my Alma Mater (and my other mentors) can be proud of me as a leader, educator and as a spiritual advisor in the equipping and maturing of the saints. I teach, along with my husband, and every bit as much as he does, men and women of all ages. Our work is fruitful and satisfying. Yet, on the negative side, there is a nagging need which my evangelical experience does not seem to address, much less to recognize. For lack of a better word, it can best be described as the element of myth. I believe that this is a worldview vacuum in the West. I also believe that it is essentially a metaphysical problem and the two (metaphysics and myth) are intricately related. I posit the following.

Since God is the author of all reality, His truth by necessity should then be “consistent with the total breadth of human consciousness which embraces the entire rational, volitional and emotional life of a man.”¹ If that is true, which I believe it is, then it causes me to question the basic frame of reference upon which my worldview is based. My strong suspicion is that the recipients of the “mission effort” suffer from this same worldview vacuum.

I suspect that this worldview vacuum may be responsible for having birthed cultic expressions of Christianity around the world, i.e., the African Independent Churches as well as an array of new religious movements in the West. Also, if we are going to make a serious effort in long term missions in the 10/40 Window, I believe we need to deal aggressively with these issues of metaphysics and myth.

METAPHYSICS AND MISSIONS

Metaphysics is essentially the science of the whole—categorized in two fields, one called ontology (the science of being) and the other called epistemology (the science of knowing).² Metaphysics is not supernaturalism. It deals with the issues of ultimate reality. It asks questions like, Is there anything permanent as the basis of changing phenomena? In other words, are there any absolutes? I think that when we ask the question in missions, “Is there a ‘center’ in missions anymore?” we are really asking a metaphysical question not just a question about praxis. We are really asking whether there is anything permanent (a standard) as the basis for what appears to be a new developing mission pluralism? (A sort of “anything-goes” and a “everything is valid” mission theology.) I think that when Dr. Heibert asks the question, is there one “Theology” that ties in all the little “theologies,” he is really asking is there a “supra-theology?”³ This is

a metaphysical issue. These kinds of questions are only asked in a context where everything is up for grabs. Welcome to post-modernism.

Metaphysics also asks the question, Is there only one reality or several? How many things are ultimately real? I think that when Dr. Winter asks the question, as he recently did in *Mission Frontiers*, (Vol 20 Sept-Dec., 1999) “When are we going to seriously contemplate the future form of what we call the Christian faith?”⁴ I believe Winter is asking, in light of cultural relativity, do we have a right to expect missions to look a certain way, i.e., “Western?” I think he is really asking, or perhaps stating, that there are multiple realities, and one reality cannot definitively speak into the life of another, at least with any degree of certitude, much less be responsible for it. This borders on ontological pluralism. Is there one reality or multiple realities in the ultimate sense? Winter seems to give the impression that there is more than one reality, *ontologically*, not just multiple expressions of culture. In light of the fact that there is only one eternal reality called Heaven and another eternal reality called Hell, we had better find out.

If we are going to make sense of ourselves and our commission, we must address them clearly. We must not address missions, at this point, from an anthropological frame of reference, but primarily from a philosophical or metaphysical one.

THE USE OF MYTH

The word myth, by and large, has a negative connotation in Western usage. We have long outgrown the need for myth. In fact, our entire system is organized to loosen its grip on us. As modern man empiricism is our elixir. For us in the West, myth has the meaning of fable, legend, or fairy tale. These are pejorative terms and tools we use by which we dismiss worldview elements we no longer find valid. Indeed in some parts of the world, we can hardly take a people's myth seriously because of such outlandish tales. Nonetheless, a scholarly approach to the problem of myth serves to help us understand its significance in human history. Myth, correctly perceived, is a positive word, it is a people's collection of stories that embody the lessons they have learned. The myth or the story serves as containers for these lessons.⁵ It speaks about their values, their beliefs and what they believe to be ultimately true and real. It is what gives their lives continuity and meaning and is for them a living reality.

THE DISTANT PAST

From earliest times we know that people have been religious. People are still religious. But the difference between today and the "distant past" (prior to 650 BC) is that they used a mythological approach in the development of their worldview. In other words, in the past, issues of ultimate reality were explained in terms of the motion and activity of the "gods."

Wherever people roamed, after the dispersion of Noah's family, there dwelt among them the family altar, the sacred fire and the household gods.⁶ Religion dominated the lives of the peoples in all civilizations in ancient times. From stem to stern the prevailing mental perspective and the core worldview assumptions rested on what can be called a mythological construct.

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stories that included the supernatural and invisible realm which formed an integral part of their reality. The gods were at home in the families of mankind. Life was *organized* around the sacred, which I think is the significant key for our understanding of "myth." Life was pervaded with the gods and spirits and every action was done to assure that they were properly served. We often call that primitive life. Dualism for them was a non-reality. They lived a unified life, what we would call today a "wholistic"—all of life centered around the sacred. It was this unified theory of life that would eventually cause the Hebrews to describe man as an "animated body"⁷ there being no split between the soul and body as we see it today. There was also no dichotomy between heaven and earth which is probably why the Hebrew worldview never birthed a transcendent and theological language.

We can say with confidence that all peoples believed without exception in the power and reality of a supernatural world (life force) that somehow interconnected with mankind's daily existence on earth. But within this world-wide mythic structure came the *sacred* and divine myth of Yahweh. With a still small voice Yahweh called Abraham and quietly prepared for Himself a people. In time Yahweh appeared like a whirlwind on the stage of human history—and had His first encounter with the mythic pagan structures of reality.

ISRAEL'S RESPONSE

We are all familiar with the phenomenal success in the story of the Exodus. The co-partnership of Moses and his God birthed the nation of Israel. This should have had a happy ending, but unfortunately, Israel failed to understand her role in human history. She was to be a "nation of priests" to the world. She was to bring the revelation of the true God to her neighbors. This was to be attested to with signs and wonders. Furthermore, she was to live out her "sacred myth" in the eyes

of the world. She was given the "land flowing with milk and honey" in order to perform her priestly duties "in their face" so to speak. Furthermore, the Lord had not brought her out of Egypt to abandon her to her own ideas of what it meant to be "a people." The question, "how then shall we live?" was answered by three institutions that were the perfect prescription for the "ultimate" religious life: the moral, the ceremonial, and the civil law. Israel was also given the tabernacle and then the temple as a visible sign to the world, in the center of the world, testifying to the supremacy of the Most High God and His Court in Heaven. Israel was designed to make the nations jealous—desiring the blessing of God's people. This is clearly proven by the somewhat problematic use of the reflexive verb in the Genesis 12:1-3 covenant passage, which says that in you and your descendants "all the families of the earth *shall bless themselves*"—they shall bless themselves in the sense that they will desire for themselves the blessing.

The surrounding cultures were open to being evangelized for they had similar worldview structures, they shared a basic mythological unity of life. Israel was designed to be the apostolic (priestly) messenger from God to both correct and fulfill what they had already perceived to be real and true. She was to birth mission as all true apostolic work does. But instead Israel failed. She failed both in her relationship to God as well in her relationship to man.

As a result the world languished in animism and polytheism for a thousand years. In the interim, the pagan dieties degenerated to the point, that caused people to groan and say that their own morals were better than their gods. The failure of the pagan gods to provide valid moral guidelines and their inability to provide a framework for intellectual and social development culminated in a complete overthrow of the mythological world. Mythology suffered a colossal collapse. In 650 BC, we have the first global worldview

shift in history.⁸ Worldwide, we see the rise of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism as formal religions. I think we could rightfully lay this worldview collapse at the feet of Israel due to her apostolic failure to bless the families of the earth. As a result, the mythological construct was rejected *en toto* and “forbidden” to raise its head for hundreds of years thereafter. The final death blows were struck a thousand years later by Locke, Hume and Spinoza.

THE BIRTH of Philosophy

It was 650 BC and for the first time, serious questions were being asked about the nature of ultimate reality in a non-mythical sense by the Ionian philosophers.⁹ For the first time, they asked *what*, not *who*. Thales was the first philosopher who attempted to describe life in terms of its elemental principles. He thought water was the primary unit of life. Anaximenes thought it was air. There was evidence that both water and air could change their forms and they reasoned that this could account for everything that was visible. As of yet, there had been no real differentiation between the mental and the material. After the Persian conquest, Pythagoras tried to combine religion (the who) with philosophy (the what), however, the will to regain and involve the “supernatural” was not there. Pythagoras eventually discarded this and focused on numbers. He felt that the universe was really all about geometry. His theories would eventually influence Plato and Aristotle.

Philosophy, however had a problem, it had to explain the problem of the one and the many. In order to explain the one, it could not venture into the realm of the “gods and the goddesses.” The problem was circumvented by Plato’s use of the “form” or the “idea” and the “ideal” which would become the absolute, the standard by which the variables could be grouped and explained. The “form” would become equal to the “transcendent” while the world of the “sensible” would become the lower reality of the experienced. In essence, the cosmos was disrupted, and so was the unity of man.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Unfortunately, the Church fell into this same view of reality quite naturally. Augustine’s view of reality reflected the dualism or what is known as the “two types of reality.” One being the “intelligible world” (the ideas and forms) which is apprehended by intuition, and the second the “sensible world” (matter), which is apprehended by the senses. In spite of the fact that Augustine taught that the soul

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was derived from God, that man was a miraculous union of spirit and clay, a compound being, yet he did not challenge the authenticity of the dualistic construct!¹⁰ Aquinas and the Scholastic Movement perpetuated the dualism between form and matter in their theologues.

It was only a matter of time before in general philosophy that Locke, Hume and Spinoza would totally eliminate the need for the “transcendent” and call all of reality materialistic (atomic), thereby signaling the final close of the mythic age. In the intellectual arena, this also closed the myth of Yahweh, inclusive of devils and demons and angels and all sorts of phenomena that belonged to the realm of the prior and primitive age. By now the word “myth” had become synonymous with fable, legend and fairy tale rather than a structure to incorporate oral traditions and integrate life.

MODERNISM

In the 1900s there had been considerable pressure on the Church to accept the modern theories of evolution in science and the historical-critical method of research.

Now the question remained—without converting Christianity into a relevant and acceptable model, would she be relegated to the sphere of superstition? How could a person retain his intellectual integrity and still be a Christian? Modernism’s answer to this problem was a resounding Yes! Their solution to this problem was an attempt to synthesize the core elements of the Christian faith with the core elements of modernism. The core elements of modernism then, as it is now, “is based upon evolution in science and the critical method of history.”¹¹ Their argument was as follows, “This does not mean that the great truths of the Christian faith have to be given up, but that they should be considered afresh as a new synthesis in light of the growing knowledge and discoveries in the sciences, etc., and thus restated in a way suitable to the intellectual conditions of the age.”¹² Thus there was a marriage in the intellectual sphere of the Church with the World, but it was not a marriage made in heaven.

All of this of course is greatly oversimplified. Nevertheless, this does give us a general view of the effects of philosophy as it has shaped us (primarily by means of the two tiered reality) and its granddaughters, naturalism, empiricism, materialism and all the other “isms” that have appeared on the face of Western humanity like a bad case of acne.

THE PROBLEM

Technically, what are the effects of Greek philosophy in these basic levels of being and knowing? Dualism Proper postulates the eternal coexistence of mind and matter.¹³ In issues of morality and religion it postulates 1) the separate existence between good and evil. In Christianity, its effect would make Satan coeval in origin over whose activity God has no

absolute control, 2) a separate existence between metaphysics and ethics, 3) the sensuous experience of the body as distinct from the mind, 4) a separate existence of the “transcendent and the sensible.”

Aristotle did not much like what he called the “disruption of the universe.” He favored one whole picture with greater or lesser amounts of Being. (I think he was really following in the steps of the Ionian philosophers who believed that Being was not incorporeal or spirit, but rather just a higher and thinner materiality.) In this construct “God” had the greatest amount of being, angels next, saints, men and finally women followed, just above animal life. Many of us still believe this today. Apparently St. Aquinas also liked this hierarchy of “being.” We can see evidences of it in the Catholic doctrines of original righteousness and justification by works (like merit must be earned to increase “being”).

So what then did the Platonic view of reality birth? It birthed an odd way of looking at life for one. There was to be two realities, initially, a transcendent reality and a sensible one. I suppose you have to bring one down. Perhaps this is what Paul referred to when He said, “God is not far away that you have to go get him from “upstairs” but He is right here, as close to you as your breath.”(paraphrase mine) Throughout time and until the present, dualism has resulted in a general chasm between the spiritual and the physical world. Newbigin and others have identified the basic features (see Figure 1).¹⁴ I believe that if we are going to recover from the affects of dualism we must deal with these dichotomies seriously and evaluate their impact in missions.

Because we have lost the intrinsic component to Christianity, the unified theory of life—the sacred myth—the Pearl of Great Price has been shelved somewhere between Sunday and Wednesday. We have become bored with our faith, and just as Israel, we have looked toward other “gods” for self fulfillment. Indeed, we have lost our “reflexive” power with

the result that the nations do not desire to “bless themselves” as a result of our witness. And frankly, unless we are more zealous than Muslims, more devout than Hin-

Spiritual	—	Physical
Revelation	—	Observation
Religion	—	Science
Faith	—	Reason
Private	—	Public
Values	—	Facts
Church	—	State
Evangelism	—	Social Action
Gospel as Word	—	Gospel as Deeds
Beliefs	—	Conduct

Figure 1

dus, more integrated than the Pueblo Indians, (to whom thousands flock annually to see their dances) more ethically disciplined than the Buddhists, we will not see the desire of our hearts come to pass. We will not be actualized as a church, we will not see the convergence of power on the world stage of history in our lifetime.

This is the time for a counter cultural movement. This is the time to post the 95 theses on the wall of the Emperor’s palace as well as on the door of the Church. This is the time to reclaim our rightful heritage as children of Abraham, not children of Democritus and Anaximander. This is the time to quicken once again the cult of Yahweh, and let her sacred priests dance once more upon the priestly fire of love! This is the time to live our sacred myth!

LIVING THE MYTH: PART I

A myth is a story, a worldview which gives birth to language, symbol and action. It defines who we are and what we are about. It gives us history, content and understanding about ourselves and the world. Our myth is the historical story Jesus Christ. We are his priests. He calls us to “organize” our life around Him. Furthermore, the call, the story, is to be lived out

in community and before the nations. It is to be lived out in history. But how do you do that?

Fundamental to any movement must be a complete and adequate theology. It begins with the concept of “truth” as described by the Hebrews—not as the Greeks understood it. Truth in the Hebrew sense has a three fold character:

1. Truth *emet* (Hebrew) principally carries the idea of the future and is a statement which invites trust in its future verification. It implies that in Hebrew thought the opposite to truth is not untruth but disappointment and disillusionment. “The Greek notion of truth does not manifest this orientation—but rests in what are known as ‘timeless facts.’ Human reason reflects the timeless structure of reality, which is envisaged by the Platonic ideals. When truth becomes purely a matter of intellectual knowledge, i.e. propositional, technological facts, the element of trust does not enter in anymore.”¹⁵

If we adhere to the Greek notion of truth then I believe it is only logical that we end up with Reason as the ultimate guide for life, and truly man then would become the measure of all things.

With the Hebrew understanding, the idea of truth takes on the fundamental characteristic of trust in a Person. We trust and follow and watch God’s Truth come to pass in history. This is precisely the moral to the Exodus story. Our story is one in which we follow this God and watch His Truth come to pass.

2) Secondly, we must understand that truth is relational as well as empirical. It is not a case of “seeing through a glass darkly.” Truth is available because of the relational aspect of “sonship.” The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth and causes us to correctly understand the “transcendent” truths as applied in our “immanent” context. For why else does the apostle say that we have the mind of Christ? For what purpose then are the gifts of wisdom and knowledge and patience and longsuffering if not to accurately judge the world?

3) Thirdly, truth is not only the accumulation of facts, but the knowledge of good and evil (Hebrews 5:14) indicating that truth is a “way of seeing” into the spiritual invisible world of power and principalities. We learn to recognize the enemy, both in ourselves and in the created realm.

LIVING THE MYTH: PART II

We must form a biblical worldview. How is this formed? Very simply, by revelation. Revelation is more than Bible study as commonly understood. It is the illumination of God’s truth in our mind and heart that is inescapable and irresistible. When God reveals His will and truth to us concerning the ultimate issues of life, a biblical worldview is formed. This then births an array of paradigm shifts in other areas of life which issues forth a comprehensive change in the life of a disciple.

The Psalmist says, “your law is written in my inward parts and I delight to do your will.” Like any worldview, God’s revelation (illumination) must be written in our inward parts. This essentially means that the Word of God must be born in our hearts, and as it were be “incarnated” in us. Compared to the Greek worldview, observation replaced revelation as a viable means of obtaining truth (epistemology.) In that construct Christians by and large became “observers” of the religious life instead of incarnate participants of it—instead of living and doing it.

LIVING THE MYTH: PART III

We must come to terms with our priestly identity. This requires symbol and action. God, I believe knew this when he instituted the three basic laws: the moral, ceremonial and the civil law. We need to see these prescriptions as a basic frame of reference which speaks of our identity in and role to the world.

The Moral Law

The moral law is the universal law, it is for all men everywhere and must be obeyed by all, Christians and non-Christians alike. It is codified in the Ten Commandments, and essentially is the law of love. It is the quintessential definition of maturity and perfection, “love the Lord with all your heart, body and soul and love your neighbor as yourself.” It is the bedrock of all life.

The Ceremonial Law

The ceremonial law refers to our religious life as lived out in the world. It is the expression of our relationship to God in the public sphere i.e., before the nations. It forms what Jesus called “the city on the hill.” Augustine called it “the city of God.” The sacrifice having been fulfilled, we now need to contemporarize and express our gratitude and faith through outward and public display of our worship, in our ceremonies. These expressions should be contextualized according to cultural understandings, but the essence of obedience to our ceremonial law would be to reveal in sound, color, texture, artifacts, symbols and ritual the mysteries of God—what God has done for us. And if we do not live out our lives, “in their faces,” so to speak, we have no right of any verbal witness to anybody, let alone to the unreached world most of whom maintain and live a myth. Our ceremonial witness is the basis for our verbal witness. The seeing is part of the desiring. The whole idea of “let my people go, so that they may worship Me” still stands today. In some parts of the world, witnessing and evangelism is forbidden. Surely this is the quintessential example how a people’s life who are living out their myth can best be displayed and lived among the unreached world.

The Civil Law

The civil law is the ethical dimension of our faith in God and as a loving community lived in the world. Obedience should be the hallmark of a Christian. The O-word is not blasphemy. We should

delight to “obey”, we should be marked by this attribute above all others. We should clearly see that God has no salvation but for those who obey Him.¹⁷

LIVING THE MYTH: PART IV

What is the role of the priest God’s people? One thing is sure, he needs to know that there is only one ontological reality.

A Priestly Perspective

The priest of God must know that when he ministers before the Lord he is ministering before the Heavenly Sanctuary while his feet are on earth. He must have a clear example of how the Kingdom of God interfaces with mankind on earth. When Jesus said “Earth is my footstool” He meant that His presence occupies both heaven and earth—simultaneously. The earth is His tabernacle, just like our bodies are His temple. This is a far cry from the Platonic conception of the impersonal realm of ideas, of a two tiered reality. Furthermore, we do not have to become Hindus in order to hold two “opposing tensions” in our minds, or to reconcile opposites by the Eastern idea of the ying/yang principle. For the indoctrinated (discipled Christian), God is with us! What a phenomenal reality!

Secondly, a priestly perspective includes the reality that the soul is what animates the body and is the pole of his tent (body, house). This means that it is the soul life (the breath of God) which causes the body to move and since all parts move, it means that it is diffused throughout the body. Hence when the Holy Spirit indwells a believer, He does not reside in the “stomach, heart, liver,” but is everywhere the soul is. This means that the knobby finger of the prophet is just as “anointed” as the “feet” of them that bring Good News. In traversing the globe the priest (believer) must know that every place the believer walks is essentially holy ground, fulfilling Jesus’

promise, "lo I am with you always, even until the end of the age."

A Priestly Prayer Life

We know that to worship God in spirit and in truth includes the work of the Holy Spirit. But in addition, I believe God also wants us to speak His truth back to Him. He wants us to speak the Torah to Him, or speak the truth of the Bible back to him. He wants the words of His Son and His Spirit sent back to Him, from our lips to His ears, into His heart. In this way, truth truly permeates us, it enters our souls, and our lives are changed. Who can pray with the Psalmist Ps. 148 back to God and not be changed? It would be impossible not to see the earth, the sun and the stars bowing to the Omnipotent One. In this sense the Scriptures become like an animated video of scriptural reality in which the eye of the soul is opened. This is prayer! This is us talking to God and He talking back to us. If you feel that this is too mystical, I challenge you to find one Hindu who has not had a mystical experience of a different kind! We must bring the manifested reality of our faith to the peoples of the world and do it in practical and obvious ways. They have already been opened to this dimension. Sad to say Western Christianity in a sense only brings them "down." But priestly prayer is meant to bring them "up" into the very presence of the true and living God.

A Priestly Language

Out of our rich experience in prayer should flow new biblical language to replace the language of a modern mechanistic worldview. The language of the soul is the language of the Psalmist. Our lives, the tone and texture of our verbal contributions to society should not only reflect the praises of our Lord, but be full of the revealed mysteries of His Kingdom. This is the priesthood to the nations in all of its glory! Our rich Hebrew background is an invaluable source for symbols and meaning. Certainly the Hebrew people knew how to dance and celebrate and pray with

fervor as evidenced in the Psalmist. This is the language of the soul, and it is the language the peoples of the world need to hear.

A Priestly Lifestyle

Structures are built as a response to good theology. To say that fasting and simplicity is the antidote to materialism is to be simple and naive. What is the Gospel's definition of simplicity? I know for one it must be defined somewhere as simple faith and trust in Christ and living in humility. But simplicity might also mean fewer expectations, and a life of gratitude. And certainly we need a good theology of food. Especially to those of us who are going to India. The idea of clean and unclean in the Old Testament has a direct correspondence to sin, evil and righteousness. The priesthood must be for the nations. We are commissioned ministers, who have an obligation to fulfill. It is to deliver a message and to pray that it be received with glad hearts.

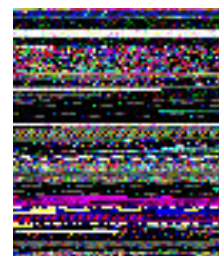
Conclusion

If modern man has a myth it is essentially Pekin Man and the Lucy myth. This does not exactly make me proud to be a human being. But I do not reject it for that reason. I reject it because it is essentially a myth of non-being, of non-humanness. I am a true humanist, a sacred biblical humanist, believing in the truth that we were made in God's spectacular image! In comparison, modernism and post-modernism is essentially a culture of non-being, moving away from the foundation of life, into nihilism and death. I believe we need a counter-cultural movement, away from these forces and powers that rob us of true vitality and life. Frankly, this is what is missing in our mission presentation to the peoples of the West and to the world. We should be seen in the West as people who live unfragmented lives, full of joy and fearless in all our ways. To the unreached who still live by the mythic structure, we need to tell the story once again and much

better. Every Hindu I know is a wonderful story teller and their myths are full of morality, promise and hope—but how much greater is ours!

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Judy Weerstra co-directs the Southwest Center for World Missions, along with her husband Hans Weerstra. She has been a missionary for 20 years equipping missionaries. Her field experience was working with various indigenous peoples in Mexico. She has a Bachelors degree in World History and a Masters Degree from Fuller School of World Mission.