

Why I am a Christian:

in a scientific, humanistic and atheistic world

Part V: The Human Need for Mythology

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.” Joseph Campbell, **The Power of Myth**

WARNING, WARNING. Danger, Will Robinson!!! If you do not pay attention to the rest of the lesson, **READ THIS**. By labeling our faith a *mythology*, I am NOT claiming that it is false or embellished. In a similar fashion, George Washington is THE quintessential American *mythology*. By saying that George is a *mythology*, I am not saying that he is a story of make-believe. I do not believe that Christianity is a story of fantasy, either. I am using the word *mythology* in a scholarly sense to indicate the important role that Christianity provides to our culture and to our understanding of life. You can now go back to your regularly scheduled nap. *Thank you.*

A. What is Mythology?

1. We often associate the word *myth* with that which is **false**, **fabricated**, or **embellished**
 - e.g.—the TV show, *Mythbusters*; or, when we use the phrase “*That’s just a myth.*”
 - I used the word *myth* in this manner in **Part III**: *God created science* (see, “Myth Alert!”)
 - However, this is NOT the appropriate scholarly use of the word *myth*
2. Mythology is a story about an event or person to which we attach a **meaning**
 - This meaning may have the power to **transform** our lives
 - Or, this meaning can be a simple warning or a **morality** tale
 - The mythology of the Bible can be of either form
3. What does myth do?
 - a. The story of the myth communicates our **values**
 - The story becomes a shorthanded way of communicating these values with others and passing them on to our children.
 - Story is one of the most effective means of communication because it is **memorable**.
 - Stories told well preserve the message: the message and story become **inseparable**.
 - This is why Jesus spoke in parables, which is one of the reasons that they have been remembered for thousands of years: the stories effectively communicated the message of God.
 - (**Fill in the blank:** Adam & ..., Noah and the ..., David &, Daniel and the..., the Good—What did they each mean? We remember the story, and with it, what we are supposed to learn)
 - b. Stories show us how to **respond** to the challenges and joys of life
 - Myth is a celebration of **humanity**
 - Myth is the **dream** of the world: they are archetypes that deal with humanity’s greatest problems

“The myth tells me about it, how to respond to certain crises of disappointment or delight or failure or success. The myths tell me where I am.” Joseph Campbell, **The Power of Myth**

c. Myth creates **community**

- When we share stories, we listen to each other, and **listening** is the beginning of community
- We will not often read or listen to those who lecture on values or beliefs that differ from our own, but we will listen to their story
- In story, we share our values and beliefs, and it is upon this that community is **realized**

“You see, stories help people to commune with one another in surprising ways. By sharing stories we are better able to express and appreciate our differences. The social network of stories becomes the fabric for meaning to emerge. Think of stories as complex self-organizing systems. Our differentiated sets of experiences are integrated and tied together by the rich, fluid nature of stories. In this medium of stories, we create the foundation for building a true community of learners. This meaning creates community: those who embrace the values share the stories in common, so the stories unite us.” Terrence Gargiulo, **Once Upon a Time**

B. Do we need myths today? Absolutely. Yes.

1. Mythology is **paramount** to the human experience

- We create myths regularly, and they come in many forms.
- Humanity has not changed since the days of the **oral** traditions.
- Story is still the most effective means of creating community and sharing values

2. A list of contemporary mythologies

- **JFK** (What part of JFK speaks to you? “*Ask not what your country can do for you...*”, **space program**—“*We choose to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade... we choose to do the hard things..*”; **Camelot**—a myth within a myth; **Assassination Conspiracies**—indicates a loss of trust in government institutions)
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**
- **911**
- **Watergate** (**My memory:** Ticked me off because it pre-empted *Star Trek*)
- Space Shuttle **Challenger**
- **Star Wars**
- **Che**
- Mean Joe Green & the **Steel Curtain**
- Ronald **Reagan**
- Lord **of the Rings**
- Captain America (Comic Books)
- Harry **Potter**
- Who Shot **JR**?

Did you notice that some of the myths are based on real people and events and others are make-believe? They all have power, however, to transform us, and in that sense, they are ALL true.

3. Different myths speak to different people

- a. We all have stories that resonate and speak to our journey: some are **personal** myths, others are shared

- b. We don't always agree on what the shared mythologies **mean**
- Some may **dismiss** the mythology that speaks to us
 - We may find others with whom it **resonates**

(**Story:** My love of Star Trek, TOS. It is one of my 5 favorite TV shows of all time. People argue that it was a flawed, awful show. However, it is one of 2 powerful mythologies that carry the memory of my father. I understand if people say they don't like it. That doesn't bother me. I take it VERY personally when people mock it and think of me as foolish for liking it. My passion for the show has very little to do with the show itself. My passion about the show has to do with the meaning attached to the show.)

- c. We can (and should) **challenge** each other's myths:
- Does the meaning match the story, and is the myth still relevant?
 - Is the meaning we attach to a myth justified considering the facts (when it is a myth based on true events or people)?

(**E.g.**—Che Guevara. For some, he is just a cool tee, but for others he is a means of self-expression: “*I’m radical and dangerous;*” or, “*I don’t like our form of government.*” I get that sentiment. However, the facts of Che’s life do not justify that meaning. In my opinion, he was murderous, cowardly thug, who yearned to be the man with the power in his hands, not a revolutionary who cared about the people.)

- Even this challenge can create a deeper understanding of ourselves and others and lead to community: in other words disagreement can be a **good thing**

C. Culture is a product of our mythology

1. Most countries share a common mythology
 - Countries that do not share a common mythology have a difficult and even violent history that often leads to its **dissolution**.
 - Can you name countries that did not share a mythology? **Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan.**
2. Countries demonstrate their heritage through their **art, music, architecture** and **stories**: it creates a sense of belonging and cohesiveness, a common myth.

(**Story:** Do you want to know what culture would be like when we do not share a common mythology? Go to downtown Monroeville. Every contemporary suburban community looks exactly the same: Faux European housing, that has no meaning or connection with what is around it, looks odd, out of place; Starbucks every mile; 20 car parts stores; Home Depot; Hooters; 2 McD's; Wendy's; Burger King; Panera's Bread...Every place looks the same, there is no unique qualities that make it stand out. Being in Monroeville, I could just as well be in Herndon, VA, or Cincinnati, OH, or any suburban community in country.)

3. Mythology is the **song** of life: if we kill the song, we kill the person

Joseph Campbell was asked why it is important to keep myth alive in a contemporary world, and he responded with the story of a little boy who found beauty in the music of a song-bird. “*He asks his father to bring food for the bird, and the father doesn’t want to feed a mere bird, so he kills it. And, the legend says the man killed the bird, and with the bird he killed the song, and with the song, himself. He dropped dead, completely dead, and was dead forever.*” Joseph Campbell, ***The Power of Myth***

D. Why Christian mythology?

1. The **Bible** operates like any good mythology:
 - a. It is a collection of stories to which we attach meaning.
 - b. Religion has been the most **effective** means of creating community. EVER.
 - We share a common story.
 - We share a common purpose that transcends the **selfish** desires.
 - It gives us a common **heritage**: we ALL belong to God
 - We are **connected** to something larger than ourselves.
 - It shows us how to live life well based upon the lessons learned and transferred to us through history.
2. It has stood the test of **time**
 - No contemporary mythology has the **breadth** of human experience of the Bible
 - The ritual, myth, and story of faith are lessons learned over thousands of years.
 - *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*; Hebrews 13:8.
 - Our **technology** changes, but the joys, pressures, pains, and sorrows of life do not change.
 - The Bible stories and rituals give us an **illustration** as to how others have faced these challenges, and unite us with humanity in a common purpose and cause.

“In today’s world, it is increasingly common to find people who say they are “spiritual” but not religious. Many of these people have a thirst in their soul for the transcendent but have been injured or put off by the church. Because they have a distorted view of the God of the Bible, they look for a god they can live with. ...The creative use of story may be a good way to communicate with some of our spiritually hungry friends and neighbors who have distorted ideas about God. And the good news is that in today’s confused, postmodern world people (especially those under 40) are actually quite open to being approached in this way.” The C.S. Lewis Institute

“Religion is a journey of many generations that provides us with a starting point to dig down and find the depth of our soul. Religious traditions—with their accumulated wisdom, practices and an extensive chart of wrong paths taken in the past—can help us stay “with it” until we touch the bottom. Religion is here to stay, simply because human beings will always put their efforts together in making good—or evil—happen. But it is in a religious community that a robust personal spirituality can develop where it matters most. In community, our personal spiritualities cross pollinate with one another, and interact with the wisdom and strength handed down to us from our religious tradition. In turn, our present contribution can be shared with others in such a community and passed into the future. To live is to be spiritual. To live well is to be religious.” Samir Selmanovic, author of **Its Really All About God: Reflections of a Muslim Atheist Jewish Christian**.