

Part Four

The Enigma of Religion

Chapter 17

The Death of Mythic Space and the Redefinition of Religion

Perhaps, the most important historical development in the last 200 years was not the splitting of the atom or the invention of the internal combustion engine or the spread of the computer chip, but the advent of a new religious mode. The old religious mode used the two-story metaphor of heaven above and earth below. What many of us now see more clearly than earlier generations is that this was a metaphor not a literal truth. This metaphor became difficult for people to use. We can now see it as a temporal human invention that can be replaced; indeed, it is being replaced. But I am getting ahead of my story.

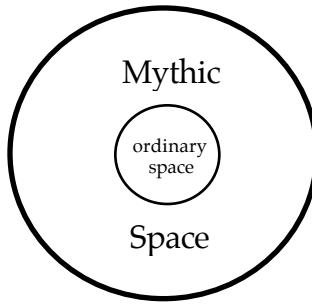
Let us be sure we are clear what this old metaphor was and how it was used in the heyday of its cultural aliveness. Let us picture in our minds what I will call "mythic space" as a top rectangle over a bottom rectangle we will call "ordinary (or sensory experienced) space."



In the top space are angels and devils, gods and goddesses, perhaps one main God or Goddess, angels, devils, fairies, gremlins, and the list goes on. This very old metaphor has died, even though millions of people still use it, take it literally or somewhat literally, use it to support their hope of everlasting life, and in the worse case use it to support their tyrannical rulership, their demeaning of women, their devastation of the Earth, their greed, and their meanness. To be charitable, some religious folk simply do not know how to talk about the profound matters of their lives without resorting to a use of this metaphor or to some subtle form of it, like dividing spirit from matter.

The current state of decay of this very old metaphor was not always the cultural situation. For thousands of years this metaphor was a taken-for-granted part of cultural life virtually everywhere. A form of this metaphor occurred even in precivilization societies in which the classical up-and-down form of this metaphor had not yet been invented. I am assuming that the dawn of civilization and the dawn of hierarchical thinking were one and the same dawning.

Let us imagine a pre-civilization society in which the male ownership of children had not yet been invented. All humans could see then was the wonder of new human life emerging from the womb of woman. Such people used this ordinary experience as a metaphor for Reality as a whole. They envisioned the story of the whole cosmos as a great womb from which all ordinary things emerged. They also viewed this same cosmic womb as a great tomb into which all things returned. Between womb and tomb we humans dwell in the arms of this cosmic Mother whose breasts feed us. We are her children. We owe everything to her. We return to her in our deaths. The myth of the Great Goddess was born. Perhaps the following chart can indicate a sense of this very ancient form of the two-realm metaphor :



Rather than being “above,” mythic space in these early societies “surrounds us.” Likely, these very old cultures did not have words for “mythic space” or even “metaphor.” They simply housed this basic image in their minds and used this image to talk about their lives. When we civilized people first encountered the Aborigines of Australia, these very interesting people, whose culture was pre-agricultural as well as precivilizational, were talking about “dreamtime and ordinary time.” They saw themselves traveling from ordinary time into a trance type reality (dreamtime) and then returning. This ordinary time/dreamtime image of Reality is a form of the two-realm metaphor.

So how old is this two-realm metaphor? There is evidence for the presence of the Great Goddess myth reaching back at least 25,000 years. Perhaps the Old Religious Mode is 100,000 years old. I am asking us to stretch our imaginations back that far in order to underline how astonishing it is for a metaphor that old to die. Most of us now live in a culture whose members no longer honestly believe in the presence of a mythic world of gods and goddesses, or Goddess or God or devils and angels or gremlins and fairies. That once taken-for-granted realm of reality is no longer taken for granted.

All gods and goddesses are GONE. Everything we have meant by religion is GONE. In that sense, religion is GONE, gone forever. Indeed, myth as we once understood myth is GONE.

But that is not the most amazing part of what has happened to us. In the midst of this down-to-Earth world, a realm of Wonder has burned through. And another religious metaphor has appeared that has taken the place of the older one. This new metaphor enables our minds to translate the religious insights of the past into meaningful articulations of that same awareness in our lives today.

The New Religious Mode

So what does this replacement for the two-story metaphor look like? Let me be clear that I am describing something that is already in history. My description of it can surely be improved. My names for it can be changed, but what I am describing is not something I am simply making up. This new metaphor is something that has been emerging in our common societies for at least 200 years. The new religious mode emerged in the wake of the scientific and Enlightenment critique of the old religious metaphor and came into full expression with such writers as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. I will not dialogue with this long history, but I want to acknowledge that I am working in its wake.

I am also working in the wake of the most illuminating person that I have known personally, my mentor for 24 years, Joseph W. Mathews. He first named the replacement for the old religious mode “**the advent of the secular religious**.” In a talk called “the secular revolution,” he spelled out how the ancient two-story metaphorical thinking is being replaced by living in one and only one realm of reality. In that talk he also noted how the imagery of angels and demons was being replaced by imagery about historically unfolding relationships. Later, Mathews claimed that we had stumbled upon an even deeper perception of the secular religious revolution. He called

this insight the discovery of "*the other world in the midst of this world.*"¹ He illustrated how in the midst of our ordinary, everyday living we were experiencing the burning through of the same profound states of being that were written about in the classical writings using the old two-story way of talking. Mathews gave the illustration of a piece of paper, representing our lives, having a lighted match beneath it. First the paper begins to brown, and then it flames. A state of profound being is like that; it browns and flames the ordinary paper of our everyday lives. This is not supernatural imagery. But even in this image, a trace of the heavenly realm remains: the burning match is being pictured as a sort of second story in this visualization. But if we tell this story right, we are admitting that we are telling a story. There is no literal match. All we experience is the burning through of the depth dimension of this one Reality. And this burning through needs no mountain top or sacred building; it burns through the ordinary, familiar aspects of our lives. A new sort of polarity is being imaged. No angels and devils are assumed. No divine person is needed. We know that those mental pictures are poetry about an experience that takes place in this one and only realm.

Yet a new sort of polarity does remain: (1) the ordinary and (2) the depth of the ordinary. But "depth" in this sentence does not mean another realm. It means an intensification of this one realm. The extraordinary is the intensification of the ordinary, and the ordinary in its deepest nature is extraordinary. Using this newer poetry we can see with our own one-story eyes what earlier humans were talking about with their two-story poetry of natural and supernatural. We can grant our ancestors the wisdom of using their poetry to talk about their depth experience. But now we have a new poetry – a new polarity of (1) the ordinary and (2) the extraordinary depth of the ordinary.

Here is another poetic image that has become part of this conversation. Transcendence (the old mode) is being replaced by transparency (the new mode). The meaning here is that our everyday lives can become transparent, "glass" to the profound dimensions of Reality. What previously was opaque becomes illuminated with light, not from some other realm but from the true nature of this one and only realm.

Translating from the Old Religious Mode to the New Religious Mode

Here is an example of how a very old text can be translated into this new religious mode. Moses, so the story goes (Exodus 3), saw an ordinary bush burn with an ethereal flame. But he did not have our secular religious metaphor to think with. His mind appropriated this experience as a Divine Being speaking to him. He attempted to find a name for this Divine Being, but all his two-story mind could fathom was that this "Divinity" had no name comprehensible to the human. Some unfathomable I AM THAT I AM was speaking to him in imperatives that his consciousness was already brooding upon. He heard speech that said "Let my people go."

Even though we cannot see ourselves talking with Divine Beings anymore (except in a poetic manner), we can grasp what Moses was talking about when he tells us about his talk with WE DON'T KNOW HIS NAME.² In our own ordinary life, among our own "bushes," we can also experience an ordinary part of our lives burning with

¹ A lecture on this topic, "The Recovery of the Other World," appears in a book of Joe Mathews' talks, *Bending History* (John Epps: editor, Resurgence Publishing: 2005) I count this talk one of the most important talks in that book.

² Please note that it does not matter that this story about Moses has been elaborated by later generations. Using mere historical empirical thinking, it is difficult to prove that Moses even existed. But in our memory the Moses figure, whether literary or empirical, still lives as a source of insight into the way WE-DON'T-KNOW-HIS-NAME interacts with humans.

surprising heat. Like Moses, we may have felt called to some atypical task of living in which we surprised ourselves with our own daring that we may have resisted, but did did the task anyway. We may still count such moments as the most important events of our lives. This important, ancient story is not diminished by stripping it of its two-story language. Indeed, its essential meaning only becomes clear to us when see it in the light of our recently dawned one-realm, transparency mode of understanding.

I will demonstrate a more involved example of metaphorical translation from the Old Religious Mode to the New Religious Mode, using this story from *Luke 9: 28-36*:

About eight days after these sayings (about the son of man coming in his glory), Jesus took Peter and James and John and went off with them to the hillside to pray. And then, while he was praying, the whole appearance of his face changed and his clothes became white and dazzling. And two men were talking with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah -- revealed in heavenly splendor, and their talk was about the way he must take and the end he must fulfill in Jerusalem. But Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, and it was as they struggled into wakefulness that they saw the glory of Jesus and the two men standing with him. Just as they were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus,

"Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

But he did not know what he was saying. While he was speaking a cloud overshadowed them and awe swept over them as it enveloped them. A voice came out of the cloud saying,

"This is my Son, my chosen! Listen to him!"

And while the voice was speaking, *they found there was no one there at all but Jesus* The disciples were reduced to silence, and in those days never breathed a word to anyone of what they had seen.

First of all, to translate this wonderful poetry we have to notice that it was written years after the crucifixion. The whole thing is fiction -- not a word of it is actual history except for the names of the people. "They never breathed a word to anyone of what they had seen" was an admission by the storyteller that he or she was making it up. The truth of this story only happened to resurrected persons after the horror of the crucifixion became a door for them into the deeps of life.

The teller of this tale knows that "there was no one there at all but Jesus." All the rest of the story is told in a sort of dream imagery. The dazzle of Jesus garments is something seen only by transformed people who see the dazzle of Jesus along with the dazzle of Moses (first author of the law) and the dazzle of Elijah (grandfather of the prophets). We can translate this dazzle as an experience of awe, a dread and fascination moment that is mysterious, that requires courage, and that in the end redirects our lives.

No tape recorder would have picked up the voice from the cloud. In fact the cloud itself is a symbol used to indicate the heavenly source of the message. And "heaven" is also a symbol for what we would call the realm of Mystery that penetrates every ordinary moment, if we have accessed our capacity to notice such things. And what did this dream-world "voice" say? It said to pay attention to Jesus, for he is revealing the nature of the Mysterious EVERY-THING-NESS/NO-THING-NESS by which Moses and Elijah were also dazzled.

The disciples were reduced to silence. There were literally no words for what they, in this story, were experiencing. They were experiencing the resurrection, that rebirth

on the other side of having all their illusions crucified in an event so shaking of the foundations of their lives that they never got over it. Only when this shaking of the foundations is complete, does the dazzle appear. Only when all our illusions are exposed for what they are and we have died to all our egoistic projections upon Reality, does the dazzle of Reality appear.

Peter's first response was to build some booths or altars at this place. In other words he wanted to invent some religion. Peter did not know what he was saying; he only knew that he was experiencing FINAL THINGS, appropriate for marking this place with some sort of humanly invented religious something. The story begins with the words "they (the disciples) were struggling into wakefulness." This is a story about what it is like for us today, here and now, to struggle into wakefulness of our true being.

Such a commentary is an example of what it means to translate an old double-deck story like this into a single-realm story that calls forth Awe from the profound depths of our own lives today.

Many people dismiss ancient stories like these because they are so imbedded in two-story language. Metaphorical translation is the answer to rediscovering the "juice" in our ancient religious texts and memories. And this metaphorical translation process applies not only to biblical stories and other Western stories and teachings but also to Hindu and Buddhist stories and teachings; to the two-realm stories from ancient Australia, Africa, and America; and indeed to the religious forms from every place and generation of those thousands of years that were culturally characterized by the two-story religious mode. Students of Christianity must do metaphorical translation in order to correctly understand a fifth century Augustine; a twelfth century Aquinas; a fifteenth century Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross; an eighteenth century Wesley and Edwards. Even recent theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H. Richard Niebuhr had one foot in the two-story metaphors of the past. Nevertheless, all these luminaries were talking about our profound humanness, doing so in the language of the Old Religious Mode. The core meaning of most of the religious expressions of humanity are hidden from us until we see that the old metaphors they used are not essential to what they were saying. We can point to the same core experiences by employing our transparency, one-realm, mode of interpretation.

The place where many people are most reluctant to give up their two-story metaphors has to do with "life after death." Reincarnation, immortality of soul, and the resurrection of the body have been the two-story metaphors most used to talk about life-after-death. For our sanity we need to be blunt with ourselves that these three stories are metaphors, not literal biological or psychological processes. But the metaphors have meaning; they point to something. They point to the realization that our essential consciousness is an enigma that does not fit into the laws of physics that we normally accept. We can actually experience ourselves watching from that deep well of consciousness the processes of our physical bodies. We know or can know that we are an "I Am" that can view this "I Am" in a calm and curious way. We quite naturally ask the question, "What then becomes of this "I Am" after the conclusion of our historical presence and the apparent eclipse of consciousness that personal death entails? The reincarnation heritages theorize that we continue our incomplete journeys toward full realization in yet another physical body. The immortality of the soul heritages theorize that we go to a nonphysical or spiritual realm for reward, continuing purification, or perhaps a punishing experience of no hope. The resurrection of the dead heritages theorize that a future life will be embodied, differently, but in a new physical creation given by the same power that created and is creating the current creation.

The literalization of these three stories renders them unbelievable to increasing numbers of us. And the use of these stories to threaten and control a population of people is now seen as insidious. Nevertheless, we are left with a witness to something profound in all three of these stories: human life is deeper and more wondrous than the ordinary eye can see. In this one life we can experience ourselves killed and resurrected many times. In this one life we can know that we are somehow related to the Eternal in the everyday processes of our lives. In this one life we can know that we are part of a “realization journey” that preceded our birth and will continue after our death.

The Redefinition of Religion

The death of the two-story or transcendence metaphor is also the death of most of our old images of what we point to with the word “religion.” If religion is not about gods and goddesses, God or Goddess, what is it about? If religion is not about preparing for life after death, what is it about?

As the etymology of the word indicates “Re-ligion” is about reconnecting. It is about reconnecting with something from which we have become disconnected, namely our essential “I Am.” Religion is about accessing an experience of our profound humanness. It is about restoring us to our true nature from the myriad of substitutes we have invented to take the place of that true nature. Religion is about Great Thinks that call forth awareness of our true nature, including Great Feels of our true nature and Great Resolves to live that true nature.

Religion is a practice. It is not something we think: it is something we do. Some thinking will be part of that doing, but religion is a doing, a practice, a practice of meditation, a practice of prayer, a practice of contemplation, a practice of ritual, a practice of service, a practice of devotional reading, a practice of dance, and so forth. I will look at these many practices in detail in Chapter 19, but for now I am dwelling on the basic definition of religion as practice and what this means.

A core truth about religious practice is revealed in the short conversation that some student had with his meditation teacher:

Student: Does meditation cause enlightenment?

Teacher: No, enlightenment is an accident: it happens or it doesn't happen.

Meditation makes you more accident prone.

This understanding applies to every sort of religions practice. Accessing our essential being, our “I Am” quality, comes to us on its own terms in its own way, and in its own good time. We do not cause it by our religious practices.

There is a wonderful story at the end of the movie “Little Big Man.” The old Indian chief takes Little Big Man with him up to the top of a hill to ritualize the old chief's death. The old chief goes through an elaborate ritual and lays down expecting to be taken up in death. The clouds merely drizzle rain on him. After a time the old chief get up and tells Little Big Man, “Sometimes the magic works, and sometimes it doesn't.” And they walk back down the hill to live a bit longer.

I have had experiences of this grand lesson while preaching sermons to a local congregation. Sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the sermon grips people, releases them, and sends them out the back door in a buzz of refreshment. And sometimes a sermon just lies there on the ground with rain drizzling on it. This could have to do with the quality of the sermon, or the quality of the delivery, or the receptivity of the hearers, but none of these considerations provide a full explanation. Enlightenment, healing, the resurgence of profound humanness is a gift, a mysterious happening that happens or it doesn't happen.

We have sometimes called religion a means of grace, but this “grace” must not be

understood as some sort of dependable magic. Religion simply makes us more accident prone to accidents of realization that we cannot control.

Another way to approach this truth is to notice in our own experience that religion is created by human beings while profound humanness is given by mysterious Reality. Our profound humanness is a gift, and only when we see this giftedness can we accept it and resolve to live it. Nevertheless, religion is an important part of human society. Religion is as important and as widely present as education, healthcare, farming, housing construction, and waste disposal. Religion, in some form or another, tends to arise in every culture. If what is commonly called "religion" is absent, something else takes its place. Members of communist societies often claim they do not need religion, but communism itself functions as a religion for many people in those cultures. And communism is not an entirely dysfunctional religion as some would claim. Quite valid is the realization within communist thought that the course of history must be understood and obeyed and that humans can take responsibility for participating in directing that history. Such themes are shared by the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. The dysfunctional aspects of the communist "religion" reside in not seeing deeply enough into the wonder of history. I will not elaborate further on this topic; I only want to point out that every society develops some sort of religion or quasi-religion – some way of connecting to the deep matters of life. If a society does not do that service, or if it makes that connection poorly, that society may become a form of madness and disintegrate.

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Here is a summary of the redefinition of religion that appears on this side of the death of mythic space: Religion is a practice, a symbol-using practice along with languages and the arts. Religion is a symbol-using practice that provides a means for us to become more accident prone to the accidents of realizing our profound humanness.