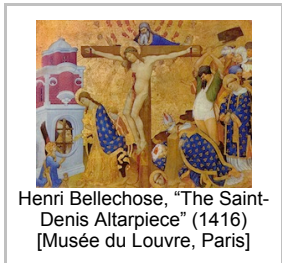


Religious Reformation

Mythos and Logos

Symbolism came more naturally to people in the premodern world than it does to us today. In medieval Europe, for example, Christians were taught to see the Mass as a symbolic reenactment of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. The fact that they could not follow the Latin added to its mystique. Much of the Mass was recited by the priest in an undertone, and the solemn silence and liturgical drama, with its music and stylized gestures, put the congregation into a mental "space" that was separate from ordinary life. Today many are able to own a copy of the Bible or the Qur'an and have the literacy to read them, but in the past most people had an entirely different relationship with their scriptures. They listened to them, recited piecemeal, often in a foreign language and always in a heightened liturgical context. Preachers instructed them not to understand these texts in a purely literal way and suggested figurative interpretations. In the [xi] "mystery plays" performed annually on the feast of Corpus Christi, medievals felt free to change the biblical stories, add new characters, and transpose them into a modern setting. These stories were not historical in our sense, because they were *more* than history.



In most premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary. Each had its own sphere of competence, and it was considered unwise to mix the two. *Logos* ("reason") was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. It had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. People have always needed *logos* to make an efficient weapon, organize their societies, or plan an expedition. *Logos* was forward-

looking, continually on the lookout for new ways of controlling the environment, improving old insights, or inventing something fresh. *Logos* was essential to the survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that people turned to *mythos* or "myth."

Today we live in a society of scientific *logos*, and myth has fallen into disrepute. In popular parlance, a "myth" is something that is not true. But in the past, myth was not self-indulgent fantasy; rather, like *logos*, it helped people to live effectively in our confusing world, though in a different way. Myths may have told stories about the gods, but they were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. Myth has been called a primitive form of psychology. When a myth described heroes threading their way through labyrinths, descending into the underworld, or fighting monsters, these were not understood as primarily factual stories. They were designed to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche, which are difficult to access but which profoundly influence our thought and behavior. People had to enter the warren of their own minds and fight their personal demons. When Freud and Jung began to chart their scientific search for the soul, they instinctively turned to these ancient myths. A myth was never intended as an accurate account of a historical event; it was *something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time*. [xii]



But a myth would not be effective if people simply "believed" in it. It was essentially a program of action. It could put you in the correct spiritual or psychological posture, but it was up to you to take the next step and make the "truth" of the myth a reality in your own life. The only way to assess the value and truth of any myth was to act upon it. The myth of the hero, for example, which takes the same form in nearly all cultural traditions, taught people how to unlock their own heroic potential. Later the stories of historical figures such as the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad were made to conform to this paradigm so that their followers could imitate them in the same way. Put into practice, a myth could tell us something



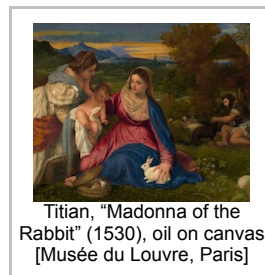
Alessio Baldovinetti,
"Madonna and Child"
(c.1460-65)
[Musée du Louvre, Paris]

profoundly true about our humanity. It showed us how to live more richly and intensely, how to cope with our mortality, and how creatively to endure the suffering that flesh is heir to. But if we failed to apply it to our situation, a myth would remain abstract and incredible. From a very early date, people reenacted their myths in stylized ceremonies that worked aesthetically upon participants and, like any work of art, introduced them to a deeper dimension of existence. Myth and ritual were thus inseparable, so much so that it is often a matter of scholarly debate which came first: the mythical story or the rites attached to it. Without ritual, myths made no sense and would remain as opaque as a musical score, which is impenetrable to most of us until interpreted instrumentally.

— From the Preface to: Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. x-xii.

The Theological Origins of Modernity

It is a mistake to imagine that modernity is in its origins and at its core atheistic, antireligious, or even agnostic. Indeed ... from the very beginning modernity sought not to eliminate religion but to support and develop a new view of religion and its place in human life, and that it did so not out of hostility to religion but in order to sustain certain religious beliefs. [...] Modernity is better understood as an attempt to find a new metaphysical/ theological answer to the question of the nature and relation of God, man, and the natural world that arose in the late medieval world as a result of a titanic struggle between contradictory elements within Christianity itself. Modernity, as we understand and experience it, came to be as a series of attempts to constitute a new and coherent metaphysics/theology. [...] While this metaphysical/theological core of the modern project was concealed over time by the very sciences it produced, it was never far from the surface, and it continues to guide our thinking and action, often in ways we do not perceive or understand. [...] The attempt to read the questions of theology and metaphysics out of modernity has in fact blinded us to the continuing importance of theological issues in modern thought in ways that make it very difficult to come to terms with our current situation. Unless and until we understand the metaphysical/theological core of modernity, we will remain unable to understand religiously motivated antimodernism and our response to it. The current confrontation thus demands of us a greater understanding of our own religious and theological beginnings, not because ours is the only way, but in order to help us understand the concealed wellsprings of our own passions as well as the possibilities and dangers that confront us.

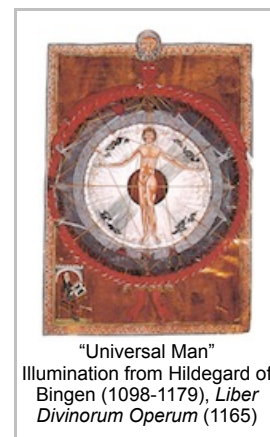


Titian, "Madonna of the Rabbit" (1530), oil on canvas
[Musée du Louvre, Paris]

— From the Preface to Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. xii

Mysticism and the Reformation

Mysticism, always present within the Church from Paul himself, grew stronger in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a natural reaction to the rationalism of the scholastics and the increasing mechanical formalism of the ecclesiastical system. The great German mystics, Master Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, and the author of the *Theologia Germanica* that so powerfully influenced Luther, emphasized personal salvation to the exclusion of everything else. This they sought to effect by a direct union [146] with the Divine Being, which was brought about by meditation and prayer without the intermediary of any priest or sacrament. While they did not deny the traditional doctrines, they relegated them to the background as unimportant, and hence proved a disintegrating force. In the words of the *Theologia Germanica*, "Now mark what may help or further us towards union with God. Behold, neither exercises, nor words, nor works, nor any creature, nor creature's work, can do this. In this wise, therefore, must we renounce and forsake all things, that we must not imagine or suppose that



"Universal Man"
Illumination from Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), *Liber Divinorum Operum* (1165)

any words, works, or exercises, any skill, or cunning, or any created thing can help or serve us thereto. Therefore we must suffer these things to be what they are, and enter into the union with God.” In the fourteenth century a simple and devout piety of this sort was widespread in Germany.

— John Herman Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind: a survey of the intellectual background of the present age* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), pp. 145-46.

God the Clockmaker



Robert Boyle
(1627-1691)
oil on canvas, c.1689-90
[National Portrait Gallery,
London]

Reason and *Nature* were inseparable concepts during the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Important scientific advances impressed upon that age just how rational — that is, how understandable — nature really was. What before had struck humans as unfathomable mystery or confusion was slowly yielding to scientific explanation. Nor did this unlocking of nature’s mysteries lead scientists away from religion; rather, most scientists viewed it as lending support to the notion that God must have created this world — for how better could we explain the rational ordering found in nature? Only a rational mind could bring about such a rational world. The very fact that nature was understandable was strong evidence that it came from God,

the very source of reason. **John Locke** wrote that “the works of Nature everywhere sufficiently evidence a Deity,” and his chemist friend at Oxford, **Robert Boyle**, claimed that “there is incomparably more art expressed in the structure of a dog’s foot than in that of the famous clock at Strasbourg.”

Boyle’s point is clear: the clock in the Strasbourg Cathedral was the most complicated piece of machinery of its day, with people traveling from all over Europe just to wonder at it — and yet this greatest of human inventions paled in comparison with the meanest of natural structures, such as a dog’s foot. Just as the human mind is the source of the rational ordering found in a clock, the divine mind must be the source of the rational ordering found in nature, whether it be the foot of a dog, the motion of the planets, or human beings themselves and their powerful minds.

So it was the rise of modern science that eclipsed earlier arguments for God’s existence, and moved to center stage a new proof: the argument from design. This proof argues from the design or order of the universe to the need for a rational creator. Given the *apparent* design in the world (how everything seems to fit together, like an intricate machine), it would seem that the world was *in fact* designed. Such order could not have come about simply by chance. And given the *complexity* of the design, only God could have been the designer. Or so it seemed at the time.



Carillon Clock
(Isaac Habrecht, 1589, based
on the Cathedral Clock in
Strasbourg)
[British Museum, London]

From Church to Tavern



Jan Steen
In a Tavern (1660)

The parish church was an obvious public space, although it would have been under the control and oversight of the ecclesiastical authorities (at least nominally, but perhaps most often in a very real and tangible sense). The nature of this public space would have shifted with the reformation, as the profane activities allowed in the pre-reformation church were banned, causing them not to disappear, but to shift location, and this was primarily to pubs and taverns, transforming these into the de facto centers of public life.

— From Thomas Brennan, *Public Drinking in the Early Modern World: Voices from the Tavern, 1500-1800*, 4 vols. (2011).