

# Post-modern spirituality: Experience, rather than explain

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Cassirer, Jung and Bultmann share at least one principle, namely their appreciation of the role played by myth in experiencing the language of faith. All three of the theorists advocate the reading of mythological texts against the backdrop of a mythological world view. By accentuating the existential and transformational value of myth, they underline the importance of myth for religion. However, they do not promote a positivistic interpretation of myth, which might lead to the rebirth of biblical fundamentalism. This article advanced the perspective that biblical texts, when read as myth, could open up spiritual experiences, even to post-modern readers.

## Introduction

The entire Bible was written against the backdrop of a mythical world view, in which everything that a modern-day person might regard as supernatural would, most likely, have been considered perfectly normal. In terms of such a world view, the environment was understood to consist of a three-storey universe of gods and goddesses, which included a heaven, an earth, on which humans were directly addressed by God and an underworld. Such a world view is considered by the current author to be a perfect setting for myth in the form of language, though not for myth in the sense either of a primitive, unsophisticated story, or of a fabricated fable. The language of myth allows for divine and human actors to interact and sets the world as a stage, upon which the encounter with God, nature and human kind is reflected (see Loader 2003:316).

Under the mentorship of Andries van Aarde, I learned to understand the value of myth. I also learned that one does not need a mythological world view to be able to use, to understand and to appreciate myth. The value of myth can also be appreciated even in a post-modern world. Therefore, I have come to evaluate myths positively. However, I do judge a positivistic interpretation of myths negatively, especially when my contemporaries cling to a mythical world view of biblical fundamentalism.

The text of the New Testament recounts the experiences of faith of certain people, groups and congregations. The narratives, prayers, hymns, confessions and teachings in terms of which such experiences are recounted reveal how the believers concerned experienced their faith in particular situations, as well as how they expressed such experiences. In reading such accounts, we, as post-modern readers and believers, share the religious experiences of the believers concerned by approaching myth hermeneutically, in a non-positivist way. By seeing myth as a form of language, the former can be used as a valuable exegetical tool and paradigm for the reading of ancient spiritual texts. The aim of the current article is to promote the perspective that biblical texts, when read as myth, can open up spiritual experiences, even to post-modern readers.

## Cassirer and the interpretation of myth

As the text of the New Testament is religious, it can be seen as a spiritual text. The text witnesses to what the authors believed the Word of God meant for them. The text itself, however, does not consist of words from, or of, God, but, instead, of accounts of experiences. In such a context, myth was simply a form of language in which an experience with God was expressed. For this reason, Cassirer suggests that the myth of the New Testament should be interpreted in a *tautegorical*, rather than in an *allegorical*, way (Van Aarde 2003:17), as I shall explain.

Apart from the psychological and theological views on myth, which will be explored later on in the current article, philosophical attempts have also been made to interpret myth. The most elaborate of such attempts can be seen in the works of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), to whom I referred above. Cassirer sees myth as one of the stages in the process of 'humanization', which was a necessary step in making humans what they are today (Schultz 2000:14). According to him, mythology is of less importance than philosophy or science, though the stage of 'mythical thinking' has, in itself, the kernels of the stages which were yet to come. Although a relatively low and primitive stage of



human development, such a stage was a necessary precursor to more advanced stages. Cassirer defines six major cultural activities of humankind, namely art, science, language, history, myth and religion. Such activities can be regarded as 'methods', which were discovered by people in their efforts to adapt themselves to their environment. In addition to the receptor and effector systems, which are to be found in all animals, there is a third link in human beings which may be described as the symbolic system. Such a system is the dimension of reality within which mythic thinking was born. Human beings cannot avoid taking responsibility for their own achievements. They have come to live in a symbolic universe, in which language, myth, art and religion play a part (Bidney 1953:315). Human beings have so enveloped themselves in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols and in religious rites, that they can no longer see or know anything except through such an artificial medium. In accordance with Cassirer's thinking, myth possesses an inner logic or form (Schultz 2000:38). The prevailing ideology in mythical societies exhibits specific interrelationship patterns.

Mythological symbols have no referents, or corresponding things in the real world. Regarding such mythological symbols as part of physical reality can be regarded as a form of primeval stupidity, which consists of the inability to clearly and sharply distinguish between the symbol (present in our symbolic reality) and the thing (present in physical reality) it represents (Mann 2002:2).

In Cassirer's first critique of myth, published in 1922, he recognised the importance of myth, as well as the connection between language and myth and the importance of language in human understanding. Cassirer sees myths as early patterns of thought, providing proof that man was, from relatively early times, capable of perceiving the world in symbolic forms. Science was only one such symbolic form, amongst many others (Bidney 1953:315).

In terms of such a perspective, myths could be seen as the products of some sort of aberrant language, which originated in the human inability to express emotions in relation to nature within the limits of the language which had been used up until then. In terms of such thinking, human beings had to resort to using metaphor as the only way in which they could reconcile their emotions with mythical expression and representation. Accordingly, the role of metaphor is key to the discussion of myth. Clearly, metaphor is one of the foundations of all our mental activity, consisting of the basis upon which the logic of rational inquiry rests. A fitting metaphor in such a context might be that metaphor is the soil in which myths grow.

Not only myth, but also our everyday language, is permeated with metaphor. Cassirer (cited in Schultz 2000:43) remarks that the same form of mental conception is operative in both myth and language. Metaphor is the single door which opens onto both everything and nothing. Its function relies on the essential equivocation in the past between what was and what was not. Whilst concepts assign form and perceptual activity sense, to phenomena, metaphor is the wellspring of meaning.

For such a reason, Cassirer suggests that we should interpret myth in a *tautegorical*, rather than in an *allegorical*, way. Schultz (2000) assists in clarifying the same vision in his claim that:

a(n) allegorical interpretation of myth would apply standards of truth or meaning not part of the worldview [in which the myth as speech act is embedded]. A tautegorical interpretation defines meaning and judges its truth according to standards that are part of the worldview.

(Schultz 2000:162)

The term 'tautegorical' is derived from the Greek words *tauta* and *goreó*, with the word 'allegorical' being derived from the words *allos* and *goreó*. Etymologically, 'tautegorical' means 'conveying the same things', whereas, hermeneutically, it refers to an understanding of language as consisting of symbols of communication within the framework of the world view from which it emanated and for which it is meant. 'Allegorical' means 'conveying differently' and refers to the interpretation of language as a symbolic system of communication in terms of a different world view. The dialectical-hermeneutical approach attempts to 'interpret' the earlier communication of an ancient world view in a non-allegorical and non-positivistic manner, in order to allow such communication to relate existentially within a later context. In terms of such thinking, allegorical interpretation pertains to positivism and tautegorical interpretation to abductive reasoning, which has replaced a deductive and inductive epistemology (Van Aarde 2003:245). In accordance with such conceptualisation, to understand myth and to revive it as an entry point to an experience with God, one should read myths tautegorically.

## Jung and the interpretation of myth

Carl Gustav Jung (1885–1961) viewed myths as revelations of humankind's tendency to draw on a collective universal store of what he called archetypes (Van Niekerk 1996:88). The subject matter is, according to Jung, not literal but symbolic, consisting, as it does, not of elements of the external world, but of elements of the human mind. The latter tends to express symbolically that which is poorly understood intellectually. Accordingly, myth springs from and functions to satisfy, the psychological need for contact with the unconscious. Harris and Platzner (1995) assert that:

after studying thousands of myths from cultures all over the globe, Jung was struck by their similarity to dreams in which the same major figures kept reappearing. It did not matter whether the myth – or dreamer – was Italian, Japanese, African, American, or Indonesian; figures of the great mother, stern paternal judge, threatening stranger, clever trickster, or benign guide were consistently present.

(Harris & Platzner 1995:37)

Jung found that not only such basic human emotions as fear, desire and greed dominate both dreams and myths, but so do particular situations and actions, such as journeys, encounters with frightening monsters and struggles with unidentified assailants, all of which phenomena are universal.

Just like dreams, myths function to reveal the existence of the unconscious and to open up access to it. Myth is not only



the best medium for conveying the unconscious, but can also be used to establish how the collective unconscious is constituted. All societies, as well as all individuals, inherit myths, which Segal (1999:75) sees as being indicative of an inherent disposition to produce parallel thoughts. The myth of Odysseus, for example, according to Segal (1998:17), 'is passed on from generation to generation by acculturation, but the hero archetype that it expresses is passed on by heredity'. However, the number of archetypal motifs, or primordial images, which appear in myths and dreams is limited.

Myths can also be described as identical psychic structures, which are common to all human beings. Jung called such structures *archetypes* of the collective unconscious. According to Harris and Platzner (1995:37), 'for Jung, these archetypes spring from the collective unconscious of the entire human race, inspiring dreams, religious visions, and mythologies'. Such archetypes are like templates for organising the universal themes which recur in human experience. In different cultures and at different times, an archetypal concept might be symbolically expressed in somewhat different ways, though such a concept will still reflect the basic human experience underlying it (Van Aarde 2000:180). So, even though we are living in the twenty-first century, we can still relate to myths of birth, testing, conflict, death and rebirth, which originated thousands of years ago, because we have inherited such mythical archetypes from our remotest ancestors. We are born with myths.

In order to reach their intended audience, myths must be translatable into a language which the audience knows (Segal 1998:11). Just as archetypes must be translated into myths, so must myths be translated into the language of those to whom they belong. Just as archetypes are dependent on myths to convey their meaning, so are myths dependent on interpretation to make them meaningful.

Myths primarily have a psychological function, namely to reveal the unconscious and to help one to *experience* it. As Jung (1984:248) puts it: 'Primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them.' The discussion of such experience of myths provides the best entry point to experiencing of God (Jung, as cited in Segal 1999:91; cf. Tigue 1994:3).

For Jung, the life of Christ was part of Christian mythology. The statement that he rose from the dead is not to be understood literally, but symbolically. Christ's life is a symbol of the archetypal journey of the hero from a state of primordial unconsciousness (birth) to a state of ego consciousness (adulthood), to a return to the state of unconsciousness (the Crucifixion) to a re-emergence from the unconscious, in order to form the self (the Resurrection). The figure of Christ manifests many dimensions of the archetype of the self: Christ is the light of the world, the fullness of humanity, the spotless lamb, the perfection of manhood and the hero of the struggle with death and evil (Megal 1979:211). Another important mythological symbol is the archetypal child (Jung 1984:251). One of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity: the child is potential future. Therefore, it

is not surprising that so many of the mythological saviours are child gods.

For Jung, the figure of Christ symbolises the elements of psychological maturity, psychic integration and wholeness (Megal 1979:211). Jesus of Nazareth could never have made the impression which he did on his followers if he had not expressed something that was alive and at work in their unconscious. Christianity could never have spread throughout the pagan world with such astonishing rapidity, according to Jung, had its ideas not found an analogous psychic readiness to receive them. The Christian Gospel contains many, if not all, of the archetypal motifs which are to be found in the myths of primitive religions (Eliade, as cited in Megal 1979:217).

Myth and religion have traditionally worked in tandem:

Religion has preserved myth, and myth has sustained religion. The heart of religion for Jung is neither belief nor practice but experience, and myth provides the best entrée to the experience of God, which means to the unconscious.

(Segal 1998:35)

Jung praises early Christianity for both adopting and adapting various pre-Christian myths. To him, this proves not only the vitality of myth, but also the vitality of Christianity, which is able to interpret and assimilate so many myths. A religion which fails to interpret its myths is dead. The spiritual vitality of a religion depends on the continuity of myth, which can be preserved only if each age translates such myth into its own language, making it an essential component of its world view.

Modern Christianity, according to Jung, has failed to update its myths. It has also erred in its attempt to update itself by eliminating myth. Myth is indispensable to experience, which makes it indispensable to religion. The elimination of myth has resulted in the elimination of experience as well (Segal 1998:7). Myth should not be eliminated, but should be reinterpreted. To make it acceptable for modern-day man, it must be interpreted symbolically, or, as Cassirer suggested, *tautegorically*.

## Bultmann and the interpretation of myth

According to Bultmann (as cited in Pelser 1987:169), the message of the Gospel must be sought not via a radical elimination of myth, but, rather, through existential interpretation. The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but is, rather, to express the human understanding of self in the real world. Therefore, myth should not be interpreted cosmologically, but anthropologically, or, better still, existentially (Hasel 1982:144).

According to Bultmann (as cited in Pelser 1987), myth should not be eliminated from the New Testament. Instead, it should be reinterpreted symbolically, in order to make it

acceptable to contemporary society. The concept of myth itself will not help us to decide whether there is a transcendent reality which lies beyond the scope of the world in which we live, or whether it is possible to discuss such a reality. The proclamation of the message of the Gospel, rather than myth, is likely to determine our attitude towards such a reality. For Bultmann to say that such a proclamation offers human beings the genuine possibility of human existence in the world is tantamount to turning the statement that Jesus has risen into a proclamation (*kerygma*).

The Gospel, therefore, cannot be rescued by means of undergoing a process of elimination and deflection. The mythical world view has to be accepted or rejected *in toto* and to modern, rational human beings the first such alternative is simply impossible. Bultmann (as cited in Patterson 1998:28) explains that the Bible expresses in celestial terms what it has to say about both human beings and the condition of human life. Bultmann, then, exhibits an enlightened, though critical, approach to myth, in terms of which he shows a strong appreciation of the values which such myths have for contemporary society.

As an example of how Bultmann interprets myth, it can be said that, for him, the *parousia* (presence or arrival) idea of the return of Jesus as judge of the world, is as dependent on a view of heaven as being spatially 'above' the earth as is the myth of the Resurrection and the Ascension. However, the appreciation of the return of Jesus in such a role can also be understood as a way of dealing with the futurity of human existence in the world. In short, to speak of the *parousia* of the Son of Man is to speak of the futurity of human existence in the world. For Bultmann, the historical nature of Jesus is irrelevant when he is seen against a mythological background.

Although the message which is conveyed by myth may be indispensable, the role of myth in conveying such a message may well be (Bultmann, cited in Segal 1999:25). Once myth is demythologised, it ceases to be an explanation and becomes, instead, an expression of the human experience of the world. Once demythologised, myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It then ceases to be false and becomes true. Demythologised, God still exists, but Satan does not. Sin becomes one's own doing and Satan symbolises only one's own evil inclinations. Damnation is not a future place, but is one's state of mind as long as one rejects God. Hell symbolises the despair experienced in the absence of God and heaven the joy which is felt in the presence of God. Eschatology does not refer to the approaching end of the physical world, but, rather, to the personal acceptance, or rejection, of God in one's daily life. At the end of the day, the Cross and the Resurrection are firmly confined to the world of time and space in the form of traditions which are associated with God's act in Christ, which are intended to convert us to faith and by means of which we are able to come to a realisation of the authentic nature of our existence (Rogerson 1984:70).

In order to gain an understanding of Bultmann, one has to distinguish between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. '*Historie*

designates what actually happened,' explains Ashcraft (1972:35), 'it points to those events which take place in the cause-effect of events and which can be studied by historians employing scientific methods.' By contrast, *Geschichte* designates an historic event, which continues to have an influence on, or meaning for, later persons and events. According to Ashcraft (1972:36), 'it deals with the encounter of persons, and its emphasis is on the personal meaning of events, or existential history.'

Bultmann rejects *Historie* as the basis for faith and contends that Christian faith is grounded in the *geschichtliche* event of Christ. The only source that we have for studying the history of Jesus is the Gospel and in such a source Christ is presented as the one in whom the disciples believed. He was Lord and Saviour. The disciples were not interested in the scientific *Historie*, but rather in the great events which are described in the Gospel as an event of *Geschichte*, which had profound meaning for their lives.

The basic reason why Bultmann rejects *Historie* as the basis of faith is that he believes that God spoke and still speaks, to humankind through the proclamation (*kerygma*) of the Christ event. In Bultmann's understanding of the historical Jesus, two theological factors are of great significance. The first is that Bultmann (as cited in Ashcraft 1972:46) expresses a belief in the relevance of the theology of the New Testament for dealing with the Christ of the proclamation, rather than with the historical Jesus.

In the second place, Bultmann is of the opinion that the nature of faith makes the historical Jesus irrelevant. He explains that the theology of the New Testament, especially in terms of the writings of Paul and John, deals with the Christ of the proclamation and not with the historical Jesus. Paul, for example, was not, either directly or indirectly, influenced by the historical Jesus. Paul based his claim to apostolic authority (Gl 1:12-17) not on his own knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the historical Jesus, but on an appearance of the risen Lord (Van Stempvoort 1972:23). In all of Paul's writings, he asserts the authority of Jesus' teachings in only two instances (1 Cor 7:10ff.; 1 Cor 9:14), neither of which instances is crucial to possession of faith (Ashcraft 1972:46).

Paul preached that Jesus had come to earth, had died and had been raised from the dead. Having heard such a proclamation, he felt compelled to decide whether he would acknowledge that God had acted redemptively in the resurrection. When he decided to acknowledge the redemptive reality of Christ, he proclaimed what he had heard, which was neither Jesus' own teaching, nor information about him, but rather that the event *had* happened and that it was God's saving act. Jesus was not a teacher with a new concept of God, neither a hero nor an example. According to Bultmann, the Cross was not a symbol, but a pure historic fact, which proved that God's judgment and salvation had come to man.

In a like manner, Christ confronts the human race only in the proclamation of the Gospel. The proclamation marks



the beginning of the Christian faith and of New Testament theology. Therefore, according to Bultmann (see Ashcraft 1972:47), the teachings of Jesus are a part of Judaism and not of Christianity. In other words, neither the proclamation, nor the occasion of faith, comprises the complete historical knowledge of Jesus' teachings and deeds. Jesus' message, therefore, presupposes New Testament theology. Christian faith becomes possible only in the light of the Christian proclamation proclaiming that the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were the events of salvation. Such a proclamation is the necessary criterion for evaluating the authenticity of existence and is accessible only in terms of the faith of the believing community.

God's redemption of the sinner is made possible through the death of Christ. Such redemption is effected in the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The significance of Jesus' life is located neither in his teaching, nor in his personality, but only in his death, as Bultmann states. The Resurrection is part of the same Christ event. God's judgment of those who live in the world, for which he made Christ die on the Cross, is, simultaneously, an offer of forgiveness. The Cross represents the end of self-justification, but the Resurrection implies forgiveness and freedom for those who take up the Cross in faith. The Cross and the Resurrection must, therefore, be understood together and in the light of each other.

Whereas Jesus had proclaimed the Kingdom of God as a future event (and as a potential alternative to life in this world), Paul proclaimed the kingdom as a past event, being the event of Christ (implying that those who believe in the Cross and the Resurrection are already part of the Kingdom of God). In like manner, the Christian proclamation was not a systematic exposition of Jesus' teachings or concepts, but rather a proclamation *that* God had acted redemptively in him. According to Bultmann (as cited in Fergusson 1992:74), the Christian proclamation deals with the *that* of the Cross, rather than with the *what* and the *how* of the circumstances preceding it.

Faith is never validated by historical research, but is always a contemporary existential encounter, in terms of which the individual, who is confronted by the claim of God in the proclaimed Word, decides to acknowledge Christ. Faith is a spiritual experience.

For Bultmann, God's saving act in the historical Jesus is an historic event. Human beings come to know God through faith and, by believers proclaiming their awareness of God's saving act, others come to know God and to convert to faith. Therefore, proclamation of the event is a continuation of and, consequently, a part of, the event.

Bultmann argues that to Paul, as well as to him, the important factor is that the Cross and the Resurrection *are* the saving event. Such a realisation leads to the proclamation, which is all-important to Bultmann. In this way, the proclamation of both the Cross and the Resurrection becomes the saving act of God.

Although Bultmann considers the Cross and the Resurrection to be a single event, comprising an event of redemption, it should be remembered that he regards the Resurrection as neither historical, nor physical (Painter 1997:169). Such a view does not mean that Bultmann rejects the significance of the Resurrection. Bultmann holds that Jesus rose from the dead and that the disciples did encounter him, though not as an objective event, but in another way, namely the disciples were convinced that he rose from the dead, because their way of believing in him transformed their lives, with such belief comprising a mythological existential experience. The belief that Jesus rose from the dead can, therefore, not be regarded as believing in an illusion. Instead, it is a truth which is only obtainable through faith. Jesus can be seen to have risen in terms of the Christian proclamation. Christ's encountering of us in the preaching of the Cross and the Resurrection can only mean that the proclamation is a part, or continuation, of the saving act of God. Salvation 'happens' only in the proclaiming of and by listening to, the proclamation of Christ (Johnson 1987:239). Therefore, preaching entails witnessing to God's saving act and not merely communicating information about past events which, regardless of faith, may or may not, be historically verified. Preaching amounts to witnessing to God's eschatological event of salvation.

The proclamation of salvation happens in the preaching of the Gospel. According to Bultmann (1964:370), the Christ who is preached is not the historical Jesus, but is the Christ of the faith and the cult. Hence, in the foreground of preaching about Christ stand the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the saving act which becomes known through faith. Such an act becomes effective for the believer by means of baptism and sharing in the Lord's Supper – events that form part of the cultic life and gatherings of a congregation.

## The Resurrection of Christ as a spiritual experience

Cassirer, Jung and Bultmann all share an appreciation of the role that myth plays in experiencing the language of faith. They advocate the reading of mythological texts against the backdrop of a mythological world view. They stress the existential and transformational value that the reading of myth has. Although they underline the importance of myth for religion, they do not encourage a positivistic interpretation of myth, fearing that such an interpretation might lead to the rebirth of biblical fundamentalism.

For me, as a modern-day reader of the mythological text about the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus as the Christ, I have to confess that the result of my reading leads me to the following spiritual experience: believing in the Resurrection does not imply believing that the dead will literally rise from the grave. Instead, such belief is a metaphor for the passage from the death of self-absorption to a life of unselfish love. Such a belief means freedom from the slavery of the world to the liberty of eternity. The truth of the Resurrection poses a challenge to believe that history is not all there is to human



existence. Such a challenge lies in the call for us to believe that we live in the presence of God, whose gracious and loving character shines forth in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Resurrection concerns a theological awareness and not the resuscitation of a corpse. It is about the resuscitation of hope, against all odds, that there is, indeed, a God who loves us. Such a God is the one whom Christians claim to have met in the life and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

For me, such a realisation entails appreciating the fact that I am free both to hope and to love. And, when I sometimes fail to show love, I can stop being selfish (end such a failing) and start loving again (begin anew). In short, part, at least, of me can die and be resurrected.

A parable in the Gospel of Luke relates how the younger of two brothers took his share of his father's estate, which he summarily squandered. When he sinks to the level of hungering after swine feed, he realises what he has done and returns home, thereby ending his destructive way of living and starting afresh. He *dies* to his old way of living and stands up (*resurrects*) to assume a new lifestyle. He has experienced both death and resurrection. He returns to his father, to his parents' open arms and to the gift of a new robe, sandals and a ring. This welcome includes the slaughtering of a fattened calf, which is associated with feasting and celebrating. The Christian proclamation alludes to such redemption as a form of resurrection, with the metaphor of the parable being used to explain the love of God. Every time that I begin anew, or make a fresh start, I experience it as the death of the old (an ending) and a resurrection to the new (a new beginning). I do believe in the importance of resurrections!

The narrative of the Resurrection is, therefore, a myth by which we should live. When we sit down to break our bread, we can experience such a proclamation. The proclamation happens when the myth of the dying martyr opens up. And, when we take a sip of wine, we are revived again. In such a way, endings and new beginnings, life and death, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth and Christ of the proclamation, can become a living reality in our lives.

To believe in the death and in the Resurrection of Christ is to experience life as a passage from the death of selfish individualism to a life of unselfish love. Such a belief means to live a life of bread and wine and of endings and new beginnings.

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