

# RECLAIMING MYTHOS IN A LOGOS WORLD

A Sermon by Barbara Wells, co-minister, with Christina Doherty, Worship Associate  
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**CALL TO WORSHIP:** Today we gather to worship as people of many different beliefs and backgrounds. Some of us feel comfortable with religious words like sermon, church and God, while others prefer talk, congregation and Spirit (or nothing at all). Some people here call themselves Christians, others atheists. A lot of us consider ourselves humanists, even those of us who believe in God.

And even as we hold these different beliefs, we are welcome to call ourselves Unitarian Universalists, as our faith is creedless. For while beliefs are important to us as individuals, what binds us together is a commitment to work toward a better world guided by Love and Unity.

**SERMON:** (All quotes are from *The Battle for God* by Karen Armstrong. 2000 Knopf/HarperCollins)

I became a fan of religious historian Karen Armstrong early in my ministry. She is, as far as I can tell, the best religious thinker of our age, at least in the breadth of her knowledge. I had the privilege of meeting her a couple of years ago here on Bainbridge Island and it was just a treat to discover that she is humble as well as brilliant.

Armstrong has a great grasp of the history of fundamentalism and its effect on our world today. She has studied every major world religion (and written books on most of them) and she knows their histories perhaps better than anyone alive today. Yet, she is more than an historian. She is also a student of human nature, a worldly woman who was once a cloistered nun, and a scholar who describes herself as a “freelance monotheist,” for whom studying ancient texts is a sacred practice that fills her with awe.

Today, I want to take us into the mind of this amazing scholar as she addresses something that most of us struggle with in this day and age: fundamentalism.

In the prologue to *The Battle for God* (my favorite of her books), Armstrong suggests that the primary challenge facing the world today is that we have “confused mythos with logos.” Her earlier writings had talked about the primary role rationalism and mysticism played in the development of the great monotheistic religions. Her thinking in *The Battle for God* revolves around the even broader concepts of “Mythos and Logos.”

Now, what in the heck does she mean by those two words? Listen to these words from her book that should help you understand:

*In the pre-modern world, people had a different view of history. They were less interested than we are in what actually happened, but more concerned with the meaning of an event. Historical incidents were not seen as unique occurrences, set in a far off time, but were thought to be external manifestations of constant, timeless realities. Hence history would tend to repeat itself, because there was nothing new under the sun.*

*Historical narratives tried to bring out this eternal dimension. Thus, we do not know what really occurred when the ancient Israelites escaped from Egypt and passed through the Sea of Reeds. The story has been deliberately written as a myth, and linked with other stories about rites of passage, immersion in the deep, and gods splitting in two to create a new*

*reality. Jews experience this myth every year in the rituals of the Passover Seder, which brings this strange story into their own lives and helps them to make it their own.*

*To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical and scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is to mistake the nature and purpose of this story. It is to confuse mythos with logos.*

Confusing mythos with logos is what I want to talk about today. Karen Armstrong knows that before the advent of modernity, people's lives were very different from our own. She writes that pre-modern humans "*evolved two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called mythos and logos. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth.*"

Mythos was, in those days (before the scientific method took over) considered more important than logos, for the myths people told helped to give their lives meaning and purpose. Myths (now mostly seen in ancient texts or in folk tales) were a pre-modern form of psychology, since they helped people to understand their place in the world and why it mattered if they lived or died.

Armstrong believes that these stories were never meant to be taken literally and usually weren't by the ones telling them. They were understood to be, well, mythical, but that did not lessen their import. Myths, like the story of the Exodus, may have had some basis in history. But their historical veracity was not terribly important. What was more important was how mythical stories—in every culture and tribe across the globe—were used to help these evolving humans understand what their life meant. Myths were timeless, and their timelessness allowed people to find themselves in them again and again.

Logos, on the other hand, was "*the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled [people] to function well in the world.*" Logos is very much concerned with how things work, with taking things apart, with the practical. Logos sees things as they are and does not attempt to find meaning in them.

Armstrong argues that in the pre-modern world these two ways of understanding life were naturally separated. People understood that both were important but they generally did not confuse one with the other. That began to change, however, as science and technology began to be more and more important, particularly in the West. New insights into the way things worked led human beings to rely more and more on "logos."

While religion was still extremely important in people's lives, the extraordinary discoveries of Galileo, for example, challenged the way people understood the prominent religious myths of the day. In the Middle Ages, people were comfortable with the idea that the earth was at the center of the universe, which we now know is not factual. However believing in an earth-centered universe did not much influence the technological act of building cathedrals. God was in heaven, people were down here on earth, and life went on.

But when, through scientific exploration (such as that of Galileo) the earth was moved out of the center, it put the church on the defensive. Religious leaders who may have never needed to understand their myths literally began to think that maybe they should. And this religious "digging in of heels" seemed to lessen religion's credibility in some eyes.

Gradually, many in the West started understanding the world entirely through the lens of reason, rationality, and logic. And rather than seeing religion and myth as a way of making meaning in the world, people began to think that religion should *also* be logical. And that's when the trouble started.

Why is looking at religion logically likely to cause trouble? Because myth was never meant to be understood as fact. Yet the rise of the logos mind over mythos has led to just this phenomenon. Today, extremely rational people who are generally liberal in their approach to religion do not believe spiritual "truths" because they cannot be proved. And extremely rational people who are generally conservative in their approach to religion do believe these spiritual "truths" and are quite ready to show you just how factual they really are.

Now wait a minute! –you might be saying. What do you mean about religious conservatives being rational? Isn't their fundamentalist faith all about mythos? Isn't it completely irrational? Not in the least. Karen Armstrong and others who have studied fundamentalism claim (and rightly, I believe) that modern fundamentalism is extremely logical and rational. It is why fundamentalists must insist that the Bible is word-for-word true. It isn't myth or poetry or even psychology. It is fact pure and simple, every single word. The western overemphasis on logic above all has had this strange and unexpected outcome: fundamentalism.

I am sure you are ready for a story to help understand all this. When I was studying for the ministry in 1983 I had to serve as a chaplain in a hospital for three months. While there, I developed a rapport with a young woman who worked as an aide. She and I would often talk about a variety of things. She was very interested to hear that I was studying to be a minister, but was appalled when I told her I wasn't a Christian. One evening when we were both working late, we took a short break in one of the empty waiting rooms. "Barbara," she said to me, "I need to show you what's coming if you don't accept Jesus as your savior."

She pulled out a book filled with horrible pictures of what looked to me to be monsters. She told me they were pictures of what is described in the Book of Revelations as a great beast with "seven heads and ten horns that looked like a leopard but had paws like a bear and a mouth like a lion." (This is a direct quote from the scripture.) She truly believed in these monsters, they were not myth they were fact.

I *didn't* believe in them. To me they were lies told to scare little children. Had we been able to remove the lens of logos that says that things must be factual in order to be true, we both might have been able to understand these monsters as powerful myths that speak to our human fears. But neither of us was able to do that and we were stuck in a place we couldn't get out of.

Fundamentalism is one result of this overemphasis of logos over mythos. The other is existentialism and nihilism. Science and technology have led to incredible gains in our knowledge. But they don't generally help us understand what life *means*. When we prove that God as described in the Bible cannot be literally true, then for many the idea that anything is sacred gets lost forever. When nothing is sacred, then nothing has value beyond what it can do or make. Humans are reduced to cogs in a factory and the earth is valuable only for what we can take from it.

This has led to extraordinary degradation of the natural world and, as Karen Armstrong says, to the most frightening elements of our modern world. To quote her directly, *“Despite the cult of rationality, modern history has been punctuated by witch hunts and world wars which have been explosions of un-reason.”* She goes on to say that *“without the ability to approach the deeper regions of the psyche, which the old myths...once provided, it seemed that reason sometimes lost its mind in our brave new world.”*

From the trenches of World War I and the concentration camps of World War II to the gulags of Stalin and the atom bomb and even to the awful lies certain politicians keep insisting are true—it is clear that non-religious rationality isn’t doing any better at making this world a better place. Perhaps it’s time to do something different. Perhaps it’s time to look again at mythos, in new and different ways.

This is a challenging task for Unitarian Universalists. Bringing reason into religion is a very important aspect of our religious tradition. But rationalism has its limits. While it challenged our forebears to use their reason as they worshipped, rationalism has a tendency to neglect the inner heart of the human spirit. So even in our very logos-centered faith tradition there have been those who’ve called out for another way of understanding life and creation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most famous Unitarian of the 19th century, rejected what he called the “corpse cold” religion of his orthodox Unitarian colleagues and longed for a more personal approach to the spirit. He found it through nature, primarily, and his writings were to change the face of our religious heritage forever.

Other Unitarians of that era, such as Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, wrote of the deep spiritual connection between human beings and the earth. These people were mystics, for they believed in trusting their hearts as they sought to understand the holy. They did not feel a need to “prove” that God existed in any rational way. It was enough to feel the spirit’s presence in their hearts and in the soul of nature. But these thinkers, as famous as they might be, were always the exception in our religious tradition, not the rule.

Today, over a century and a half since Emerson first challenged the rational orthodoxy of our faith, there are many in our congregations and in the world around us who are also longing for a way to make sense of life and death and creation and who find that reason and logic can only go so far. People who come to UU churches are not lacking in “logos.” Most of us are extremely rational and reasonable. Most of us are glad to be in a church that honors our mind and doesn’t ask us to see myths as factual truths. But facts and figures and logic cannot answer the hardest questions: Why am I here? What does my life mean? For that we must turn to mythos, which is often a very difficult turn for UUs to take.

Since I entered the ministry over thirty years ago, people in our congregations have been grappling with this inquiry. Some move closer to reason and rationality, and find it is enough. But there are others desiring more in a world where reason and logic are paramount, who may yet feel foolish in asking for something different.

Here is where I find Karen Armstrong’s thesis so compelling. If we are looking at “mythos,” at those stories and words and ideas that were created by our ancestors to help us

understand ourselves; if we are looking at this through the lens of logos then it will *never* make sense. But if we take off the lens of logos, and seek to understand the mythos of life differently, then perhaps we can reclaim a powerful religious way of being in the world.

The removal of this lens is already happening. Many people, particularly folks who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” are trying to bring their hearts, souls and minds to the table, in order to make sense of life and to make this world a better place. If we look at some of what is going on, particularly among younger people who may not think that coming to church makes sense, we may see how mythos is impacting those who might love our church if we would be open to their way of being spiritual.

Music and movement, the study of ancient scriptures, meditation and the use of prayer in worship are powerfully appealing to people who want more than their minds to be touched when they come to church. They are longing to explore their spirits without feeling criticized for “not being rational enough”—something that has dogged me my entire career. It is a fundamentalism of the left, when the logos mind insists that we can’t “feel the spirit” when some of us clearly do.

I would invite us to consider taking off the lens of logos, at least sometimes. When we take off that lens, we might realize that most of us who feel this spiritual longing are not expecting or even wanting it to be factual, but rather find in such spiritual practices a feeling of truthfulness that goes beyond fact.

This spiritual movement is still evolving. And the conversation about it has been going on in our religion since I was a child and continues today. Here in our congregation we sometimes struggle to accept and respect the many ways of being religious, or being spiritual, of understanding what is right and true. And let me be clear that I do not want to lose the logos mind that has allowed us to broaden and deepen our knowledge of our planet and the extraordinary technologies that allow us to live in such comfort. Nor would I want to return to a time when religion was entirely separate from reason.

But in our world, when there is so much strife and so much confusion, I would suggest that the human longing for meaning has not been fulfilled through logos alone. We need something more. And that something more, I believe, is found in the heart of mythos, where our souls dwell. It can’t be easily explained but it can be felt. We can’t weigh it; we can’t measure it. But on a very deep level, we *can* know it.

The words used to describe it are always inadequate so sometimes it is best just to sing. Think of how you feel when singing *Spirit of Life*. This next song, invoking a longing for connection to something more, is a song that is best sung *without* our logos lens on. So, take them off dear ones, and let your heart and soul sing.

***The Lone Wild Bird*** (words by H.R. MacFayden 1877-1964)

*The lone, wild bird in lofty flight is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight.*

*And I am thine! I rest in thee. Great spirit come and rest in me.*

*The ends of earth are in thy hand, the sea’s dark deep and far-off land.*

*And I am thine! I rest in thee. Great spirit come and rest in me.*

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