

Book Review.

More than Allegory – on religious myth, truth and belief

By Bernardo Kastrup,

iff books, Laurel House, Station Approach, Alresford, Hants, SO24 9JH, UK, 2016.

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Let me say at the outset; I am no philosopher and this book is written by a top computer scientist who researches philosophy of mind and metaphysics. It has three parts to it titled Myth, Truth and Belief. In the first part Bernardo Kastrup puts forward the notion that religious myths are actually true, and not just allegorically so. For this understanding he credits both his mother and girlfriend. The second part argues that our own inner storytelling plays a surprising role in creating the seeming concreteness of things and the tangibility of history. These two sections take up sixty percent of the text and is highly analytical and logically argued. I can honestly say it did my head in. Which is not to say that I can't appreciate the contents. Kastrup argues that an exploration into the meaning of life and metaphysics will quickly show that what we ordinarily call 'reality' is in fact dreamed up. Thankfully, the arguments are often summarised and highlighted in boxes, for example, "a religious myth can bring transcendence into daily life in an abiding manner. It can infuse ordinary aspects of life with enchantment. And timeless significance (p.24)".

He writes of the role and importance of religious myth, the rich colours of mythical life and the truth of religious myths. 'The proven effectiveness of the images of consensus reality in evoking transcendent meta-images is non-trivial (p.58).' This leads him to see 'consensus reality as a symbolic language pointing to transcendent truths.' I am prepared to believe him, but I am also sure that it could be said in plainer, simpler words so that more folk could follow the thinking. Throughout the course of this book, I was finding parallels with his argument from the writings of such as Thomas Keating, J.R.R. Tolkein, C. S. Lewis, St Francis de Sales, Kenneth McAll, Roger Grainger, Martin Israel and John Foley. Kastrup points out that taking religious myths as intellectually true leads to fundamentalism. The chapter on myth and no myth ends in his description of an epiphany he experienced when gazing at a cross in Cologne cathedral.

In section two truth is quested for, deconstructed and compared to myth and world. Truth may be explanatory, perceptual or predictive; referring to past, present and future. And, on p. 105 we learn that 'All three culturally sanctioned concepts of truth thus rest on intellectual projections. The very foundations of truth are inherently subjective.' 'The universe consists solely of ideas in consciousness (p.110). The psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim in his book 'The Uses of Enchantment' covers the same ground in what is to me a more palatable fashion. 'Experience is the only reality we can ever know, and it is integral to who or what we are.'

He quotes J. Campbell "There never was a creation. Rather, there is a continuous creating going on.'

The Christian myth, for example, is alluding to an unceasing process of growing in increasing awareness through suffering and love. Otherwise called spirituality. His use of 'mind-at-large' parallels Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere or psychic interconnectness. Here one may learn more from Ilea Delio, a Franciscan nun and American scientist.

Part three, on the meaning and role of belief, is a trans-allegorical narrative – a story using modern scientific images to explore the areas that mystics and contemplatives have been describing for many a century.

As Deepak Chopra wrote, “This is extraordinary storytelling for our times’. This myth is designed to show how deeply ingrained belief systems create the world we live in. Page 168 has ‘One’s instinctive “I” feeling is mind-at-large.’ ‘Ordinary reality is seen as a kind of dream (p.176)’, which Australian Aborigines have been saying since time immemorial. If you have enjoyed reading ‘The Lord of the Rings’ by J R R Tolkein you may well appreciate this 94-page story; certainly, I found it easier to follow than the earlier part of the book.

‘A living being is a dense, tight cluster of mostly internally associated sensations, feelings and insights in mind-at-large (p.197).’ One was strongly reminded of the tales of Carlos Castaneda.

To sum up, this has to be a Marmite book; one either loves it or hates it. If what you’ve read so far floats your boat, I strongly recommend it. Is this perhaps one for members of the Scientific and Medical network? If not, how about getting a just published copy of, say, the Revised New Jerusalem Bible. Personally, I find it communicates superbly.