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Is the Sacred Older than the Gods?

Guy Bennett-Hunter

At least since Anaximander's *apeiron*, there have been philosophical questions about what, if anything, preceded the gods.¹ But, as far as I know, the precise question that I address in this essay was first explicitly asked by Ronald W. Hepburn, in his essay 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics'.² He cites two sources for his question: Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard. While, in his 'Letter on Humanism', Heidegger does not ask the question in so many words, he does make some characteristically suggestive remarks in this direction:

In such nearness [i.e., of Being], if at all, a decision can be made as to whether and how God and the gods withhold their presence and the night remains, whether and how the day of the holy dawns, whether and how in the upsurge of the holy an epiphany of God and the gods can begin anew. But the holy, which affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth.³

Bachelard is more explicit. In his *Poetics of Space*, in the context of a discussion of a poem by Pierre-Jean Jouve, he writes: 'Pierre-Jean Jouve's "forest" is *immediately sacred*, sacred by virtue of the tradition of its nature, far from all history of men. Before the gods existed, the woods were sacred, and the gods came to dwell in these sacred woods.'⁴

1 H. B. Gottschalk, 'Anaximander's Apeiron', *Phronesis*, 10 (1965), 37–53, 50.

2 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of The Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot, 2001), 113–27.

3 Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', trans. Frank A. Capuzzi & J. Glenn Gray in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (rev. edn; London, 1993), 213–65, 242.

4 Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, 1994), 186.

In his essay, Hepburn is interested in the actual and potential relationships between religious and aesthetic uses of the concept of the sacred. Which leads him to the question: Does the concept have a valid meaning – an aesthetic meaning, say – that is logically independent of (and therefore might have preceded) the religious one, which seems most strongly associated with the metaphysical belief that God or the gods exist? In other words, is the sacred older than the gods? It is important to note that Hepburn's approach to this question is synchronic, rather than diachronic. He is not so much interested in the historical development of ideas as their logical relationships. He helpfully provides further explication of what the rather poetic affirmative answers of Heidegger and Bachelard are actually claiming, as he reads them:

In less poetic terms, it is being claimed that we can make sense of 'sacred' without having already 'grasped' deity. 'God is holy' is not an analytic truth. If it *were* analytic, believers would be unable to rejoice in his holiness, singing '*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*' with thankfulness and wonder. The logic here is parallel with the familiar analysis of 'God is good'. To be able to praise God for his goodness, or to see 'God is good' as 'news-giving', cannot be simply a linguistic matter. 'Sacred', then, will also be logically independent of the concept of deity – 'older than the gods'; and does it not follow that it is a concept we can deploy whether or not there is a God?⁵

While he does not provide a definitive answer, Hepburn adumbrates his view on whether this claim is correct. In this essay, I set out my own answer within the guidelines that Hepburn's sketch has laid out.

1 The sacred and the gods

In order to address the question, we must first ask, what does Hepburn mean by 'the sacred' in the familiar religious sense? He specifies six elements:

- (i) A cognitive disclosure of a non-temporal divine reality that pervades the universe.

⁵ Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred', 116.

- (ii) Following Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, a reference to something other than the forces of nature.
- (iii) Yields access to a sense of life as meaningful or worthwhile.
- (iv) Worthy of respect or veneration; not to be used as a means to ends.
- (v) Ineffable.
- (vi) Indispensable work done by background beliefs – e.g., refers to something actualised in God.⁶

We can see that many of these elements of the meaning of the sacred imply, if they do not actually refer to, God or the gods. They all seem, at first glance, compatible with the belief that God or the gods exist. The first, second, and fourth elements strongly imply a divine object of some sort. The ‘background beliefs’ mentioned in the sixth are metaphysical beliefs – and God is explicitly given as the exemplar of an object in which a sense of the sacred is typically actualised. Even the fifth element of ineffability (which I shall discuss in more detail), Hepburn explains in terms of an ‘ineffable intentional object’, which might well be a god. Here, he shares the perspective of many theologians, who explicate the notion of divine ineffability in the same terms. This series of strong connections between the sacred and the gods that Hepburn draws in the course of defining the former concept leads him, perhaps rather predictably, to sketch a negative answer to our central question. Referring back to belief in the existence of God or the gods, he writes, at the very end of his essay:

to hold those religious-metaphysical meanings consistently in abeyance inevitably draws off much of what attracts us to the term [‘sacred’] in the first place. Perhaps centuries of Christian theism have so impregnated ‘sacred’ with its religious relational qualities – belonging to God, emanating from God – that those strands are by now unsuppressible, cannot admit of bracketing, but reassert themselves whether we like it or not, and no matter whether the sacred was or was not older than God or the gods.⁷

We may note that Hepburn does not quite tell us whether he thinks the sacred is older than the gods – but he gives us reason to think he doubts it. He certainly ventures the thought that there may be significant difficulties

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113–14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

involved in treating the concept of the sacred as logically independent from the concept of deity, given how intimately the two concepts have been associated with one other – and for how long.

2 Why the sacred is older than the gods

My own answer tends in the opposite direction because I think quite differently about the concept of ineffability, which appears as Hepburn's fifth element of the meaning of the sacred. It is worth pointing out that his move here is not unusual – the concept of ineffability has been an integral part of almost every philosophical discussion of religious experience since the early 1900s, when William James identified ineffability as one of the five 'marks' of mystical experience.⁸ I think that together with the third (the one about yielding access to a sense of life as meaningful), this element is of greatest importance when it comes to understanding the meaning of the sacred. I am also of the opinion that, rightly interpreted, these two complementary elements are logically incompatible with all the other elements that Hepburn lays out for us.

Firstly, my reasons for attaching such importance to the notion of ineffability owe to an argument put forward by David Cooper.⁹ That argument concludes that the only way we can terminate the regression regarding meaning that results when we search for *ultimate* meaning is by appeal to the concept of ineffability. It is only by appeal to the concept of ineffability, therefore, that we can explain the meaning of Life as a whole.¹⁰ And I agree with Hepburn that, if the concept of the sacred has any meaning at all, it will be as an appropriate designation for that which supplies ultimate meaning and therefore explains the meaning of Life. If this is right, then the meaning of the concept of the sacred must be equivalent to that of ineffability. Here, the concept of ineffability is understood to refer to what *in principle* resists conceptual grasp and literal linguistic articulation. And meaning is defined as a relation of appropriateness that something has to a context broader than itself, and ultimately a relation of appropriateness to human Life. Very briefly, this is how Cooper's argument goes.

8 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1958), 292–3.

9 David E. Cooper, 'Life and Meaning', *Ratio*, 18 (2005), 125–37; idem, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery* (Oxford, 2002).

10 The capitalization, which I adopt here, is used by Cooper to evoke Wilhelm Dilthey's '*das Leben*', which rules out purely biological senses of the term.

If the meanings of things, the concepts and values with which we invest them, must be explained in terms of their contribution to human concerns, practices, and projects – and therefore ultimately in terms of their relation of appropriateness to the human perspective (the world of human Life to which those practices and concerns themselves contribute) – how can Life itself and as a whole be said to have meaning? The answer is: only by placing it in a relation of appropriateness to what is beyond itself, independent of the human contribution, and ultimately real. This ‘beyond’ cannot, without circularity, be invested with the concepts and meanings that constitute Life – which it is invoked to explain – therefore it must be ineffable.

Secondly, the problem with Hepburn’s explication of ineffability in terms of some object is incoherent because it implies a familiar self-reference antinomy. In the literature on ineffability, it has been pointed out *ad nauseam* that we must be able to say enough about a putatively ineffable object to secure reference to it, identifying it as that to which the ineffability applies. And if we can say even this much about an object (as we must of any putatively ineffable object) that object cannot be ineffable by definition. In other words, even the bare, essential claim ‘*x* is ineffable’ seems enough to violate the ineffability of *x*. Cooper’s argument implies, to similar effect, that it is impossible, without circularity, to invest the ineffable with the concepts, meanings and values, with which Life itself (and *its* constituents) are invested – whose meaning is already in question. From the phenomenological and pragmatist philosophical perspectives on which I draw, the concept of existence must be included among these. Here is Leszek Kolakowski reading the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl “‘Existence’ itself is a certain “sense” of an object. Consequently it would be absurd [...] to say that an object “exists” independently of the meaning of the word “to exist” – independently of the act of constitution performed by the consciousness.”¹¹

And finally, from a different (but complementary) philosophical angle, Silvia Jonas, in her recent study of the metaphysics of ineffability, has thoroughly dismissed ‘objects’ (alongside ‘properties’, ‘propositions’, and ‘content’) as plausible candidates for the relevant, non-trivial kind of ineffability.¹²

If my views on the importance of the concept of ineffability and the incoherence of the notion of an ineffable object are right, those ‘religious-relational

¹¹ Leszek Kolakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (London, 1975), 65.

¹² Cf. Silvia Jonas, *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy* (Basingstoke, 2016), ch. 3; Guy Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (London, 2014).

qualities', which Hepburn rightly notices have impregnated the term 'sacred' for centuries, begin to evaporate. If the sacred has to be ineffable in order to be sacred, and if the term 'ineffable' cannot by definition be coherently applied to any objects, then an experience of the sacred cannot be the experience of some object, including any gods. It follows that the concept of the sacred, not only can but *must* be regarded as logically independent from the concept of deity.

The sacred is indeed older than the gods.

Silvia Jonas suggests that we understand the metaphysics of ineffability in terms of 'Self-acquaintance', an experience in which the 'object' turns out to be nothing other than the 'subject' – our primitive point of view on the world, for which there are any objects at all. I think it is for this reason that, in the closing pages of her book, Jonas begins to use the terms 'experience of ineffability' and 'ineffable experience' interchangeably. If the 'subject' becomes the 'object' of an experience which for that reason shipwrecks the subject–object distinction, it will in that case seem quite natural to say that an 'ineffable experience' amounts to an 'experience of ineffability' and *vice versa*.¹³

From a different angle, I follow phenomenologists like Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel to argue to the same effect: that the relevant kind of experience, an experience of ineffability – which we might call 'religious experience' – shipwrecks the subject–object split. That split is best viewed, with John Dewey, as a useful distinction to be transcended rather than a dichotomy.¹⁴ Marcel distinguishes between a 'problem', which can be dissolved by rational thought, and a 'mystery', which eludes such objectification. He defines a mystery as 'a problem which encroaches upon its own data'.¹⁵ And the ineffable dimension of reality that Jaspers significantly calls 'Transcendence or God' is for him strictly interdependent with human existence. Both existence and Transcendence are modes of reality as a whole, which he calls 'the Encompassing'. While we could, for the provisional purposes of analysis, say that Transcendence lies on the objective side of the encompassing, and existence lies on the subjective side, Jaspers insists on their interdependence. There is no existence without Transcendence: human existence is only realized in the presence of Transcendence, and Transcendence is, as it were, created

13 Guy Bennett-Hunter, 'New Work on Ineffability', *Expository Times*, 128 (2016), 30–2.

14 John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston, 1949), <https://www.aicr.org/sites/default/files/otherpublications/KnowingKnown/KnowingKnownFullText.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2013.

15 Gabriel Marcel, 'On the Ontological Mystery' in idem, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harari (London, 1948), 1–31, 8.

in the same moment that it is revealed to us. Jaspers sets this out as follows: ‘The encompassing that we are confronts the encompassing that is Being itself: the one encompassing encompasses the other. The being that we are is encompassed by encompassing Being, and Being is encompassed by the encompassing that we are.’¹⁶

Not only is the sacred older than the gods, but the word ‘sacred’ cannot coherently be interpreted to refer any object at all. Twentieth-century theology has coped with this disconcerting fact by means of a post-Heideggerian move known as the critique of ontotheology (‘ontotheology’ being the jargon for a system of theology in which God is regarded as a being, especially the Supreme Being). Theologians have continued to use the traditional theistic language, while continually reminding the reader (with varying degrees of success, it has to be said) that the word ‘God’ does not refer to a being. Among others, Paul Tillich,¹⁷ Simone Weil,¹⁸ John Macquarrie,¹⁹ and Vito Mancuso²⁰ have all argued (I think rightly) that, if we are to think of God as the explanation for everything that exists, the sacred ground and source of Being itself, we cannot also think of him as one of the things that exist – a thought which would introduce circular reasoning into theological explanation. And this is, of course, a thought that has much more ancient roots in Christian Neoplatonism, as well as branches that extend far out to the fringes of orthodoxy.

We can tell from the fact that they do not completely jettison the traditional theistic language (though they radically modify theistic concepts) that these contemporary theologians have recognized something important: while the concept of the sacred may be logically independent of the concept of deity, it does not follow that the *language* of deity is completely irrelevant to the concept of the sacred. So, I now want to set out some thoughts on how the relationship between the language of deity and the concept of the sacred should be construed. This task will involve some contextualization of the metaphysical language that Hepburn observed to have dominated for ‘centuries of

16 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, trans E. B. Ashton (London, 1967), 71.

17 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, Welwyn, 1968), I, 227, 262–3, 301.

18 Cf. Rowan Williams, ‘Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-Existence of God’ in idem, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London, 2007), 203–27.

19 John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity: An Essay in Dialectical Theism (The Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St Andrews in Session 1983–4)* (London, 1984), 186.

20 Cf. Corneliu C. Simut, ‘Vito Mancuso in English: Presenting the Thought of a Contemporary Radical Catholic Theologian and Philosopher to the English-Speaking World’, *Expository Times*, 128 (2016), 20–9.

Christian theism’ – a language whose resonance he thought ‘unsuppressible’ when considering the concept of the sacred.

3 The concept of the sacred and the language of deity

So my question is: how best to resolve the tension between a concept of the sacred as ‘older than the gods’ (logically independent of that of deity) and the likely unsuppressible language of metaphysical theism? Given that the sacred is indeed ‘older than the gods’, Hepburn assumes that the familiar problems with metaphysical theism constitute a strong rational demand to jettison theistic language completely – or at least regard it as outdated and completely irrelevant to the concept of the sacred, which is best restored to its more rationally acceptable aesthetic context. But he justifiably regards this demand as unrealistic, given how deeply entrenched theistic language is in the history of Western thought. I admire Hepburn’s pragmatism, but given his inability to accept theism, he is caught in a dilemma. We cannot accept theism, given the familiar rational problems with it, but neither can we realistically jettison theistic language, given its cultural entrenchment. What, then, *do* we do? I have been arguing that the central role of ineffability precludes us from understanding the sacred in terms of objects – for example, in terms of theistic beliefs. So, if the sacred is indeed older than the gods, and theistic language is indeed unsuppressible, we need some account of how that theistic language (and other forms of religious expression) should be heard in relation to the concept of the sacred.

For our theological critics of ontotheology, this account is provided by theories of religious symbols. Such theologians maintain the identification I affirmed between the concept of the sacred and that of ineffability. This implies that it is, in the words of Tillich, ‘an insult to the divine holiness to talk about God as we do of objects whose existence or non-existence can be discussed’.²¹ But, for these religious thinkers, it does not follow from this, in turn, that religious expression should be abandoned – just reinterpreted in symbolic terms, in order that it may become an iconic form of expression, rather than a conceptually idolatrous one.

There are many reasons to be dissatisfied with a symbolic reading of religious expression, and I cannot go into detail here.²² But I want to contrast the

²¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 301.

²² For more detail, see Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience*, 67–75.

idea of symbols with what Jaspers calls ‘ciphers’, comparing the latter favourably with the former.

Briefly, the main problem is that symbols are objects which symbolically represent other objects, even if these objects are imaginary and do not exist outside the symbolic representation. To take a prosaic example, a symbol operates like a road sign indicating a nearby tourist attraction. But the concept of the sacred evokes an ineffable reality that transcends the subject–object distinction and is no representable object. It is therefore incumbent upon the defender of religious symbols to explain how a symbol (which is something within the subject–object distinction) can represent, or otherwise manifest, a transcendent reality that is unconditioned by that distinction. In my view, this is an impossible task. What we need are Jaspers’ ‘ciphers’, which are similar to symbols, but, crucially, have an ambiguous relationship to the subject–object distinction. It is by means of this cardinal ambiguity that Jaspers thinks ciphers embody ‘Transcendence or God’, which outruns that distinction, enabling us to transcend it.

Ciphers embody Transcendence, which is ineffable, in the only way that it can be embodied – they do not consist in statements about it, or otherwise represent it. Jaspers provides two metaphors to help us better understand how this happens: one of ‘language’, the other of ‘physiognomy’. Ciphers, he says, are the language of Transcendence (not Transcendence itself). This metaphor stresses the intimacy and immediacy of the relationship between ciphers and transcendence. It is not that a cipher *is* Transcendence, any more than the phonemes of a language *are* what a sentence of that language means. But Transcendence needs ciphers to be realized, just as linguistic meaning needs concrete phonemes. But unlike symbols and spoken languages, the language of a cipher is untranslatable and remains indecipherable. What a cipher embodies does not exist outside it and is not independently accessible. When T. S. Eliot says in *The Waste Land*, ‘I will show you fear in a handful of dust’, only the most pedantic reader would try to translate the poetry into prose, insisting that Eliot made a category error because a handful of dust cannot literally contain fear. When we read this phrase as a cipher of the ineffable, we see that the poetic language evokes what is already there, embodied in the sonority, the emotional and cultural resonance, of the poetry itself.

The physiognomic metaphor corrects the balance. Jaspers describes how a person’s involuntary gestures express something of his or her being. Similarly, with ciphers, Jaspers writes, ‘all things seem to express a being [...] we

experience this physiognomy of all existence'.²³ Whereas human physiognomy arguably expresses something that's accessible in other ways (through empirical psychology, say), Transcendence is accessible only in and through its cipher physiognomy. Jaspers says, "This transparent view of existence is like a physiognomic viewing – but not like the bad physiognomy aimed at a form of knowledge, with inferences drawn, from signs, on something underneath; it is like the true physiognomy whose "knowledge" is all in the viewing."²⁴

But human physiognomy is arguably just the same. Is what an angry gesture expresses located in some separate mental shrine *beyond* the angry person's body? Or is the anger inescapably bound up with, and realised through, the body and its gestures? Fellow phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer both argue, in Gadamer's words, that 'what a gesture expresses is "there" in the gesture itself [...] [it] reveals no inner meaning behind itself'.²⁵ Giving the example of a heated conversation with an angry person who is expressing his anger by gesticulating and shouting, Merleau-Ponty observes that 'I could not imagine the malice and cruelty which I discern in my opponent's looks separated from his gestures, speech and body'.²⁶ He continues, with poetic eloquence:

None of this takes place in some other-worldly realm, in some shrine located beyond the body of the angry man. It really is here, in this room and in this part of the room, that the anger breaks forth. It is in the space between him and me that it unfolds. I would accept that the sense in which the place of my opponent's anger is on his face is not the same as that in which, in a moment, tears may come to his eyes or a grimace may harden on his mouth. Yet anger inhabits him and it blossoms on the surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his bloodshot eyes and wheezing voice ... And if, for one moment, I step out of my own viewpoint as an external observer of this anger and try to remember what it is like for me when I am angry, I am forced to admit that it's no different [...] I am forced to acknowledge that this anger does not lie beyond my body,

²³ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E. B. Ashton (3 vols, Chicago, 1969), III, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 134.

²⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Image and Gesture' in Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker (Cambridge, 1986), 74–82, 79.

²⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davies (London, 2004), 83.

directing it from without, but rather that in some inexplicable sense it is bound up with my body.²⁷

Whether or not Merleau-Ponty is correct about human physiognomy, the point of Jaspers' metaphor remains: ciphers are significations without there being any object signified. As he puts it, 'Signification is itself only a metaphor for being-a-cipher'.²⁸

So ciphers are ambiguous with regard to the subject–object distinction. Like languages, they are cultural phenomena that are both created and appropriated by us. Without us, there would be no ciphers. Yet ciphers must be appropriated from cultural and intellectual traditions that are older and greater than we are. In the terms of the subject–object distinction, Jaspers says, ciphers are subjective and objective at once.²⁹ It is through this ambiguity, which symbols lack, that ciphers can embody Transcendence, which outruns the subject–object distinction, eluding our cognitive and literal linguistic grasp.

Ciphers lie not only on the border between subject and object but also between the aesthetic and the religious – a boundary that greatly interested Hepburn and even motivated the question that I have been addressing in this essay. Ciphers are what George Steiner, in an aesthetic context, called 'real presences' – the meaningful embodiments, in printed letters, brush strokes, and so forth, of an ineffable, transcendent reality that can be embodied in no other way. For Steiner, close attention to the way in which meaning is 'incarnated' in works of art – analogous to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist – raises the question of an ultimate guarantor of meaning, which we might choose to evoke using theistic language. Note that it does not provide us with a definite answer to this question, nor does it imply the existence of a being called 'God'. In his essay 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', Hepburn quotes Steiner as he raises the twofold question 'Is there or is there not God? Is there or is there not meaning to being?'.³⁰ Hepburn (and he is not alone) sees an impermissible conflation here. He asks, 'could one not affirm that meaning exists, without thereby affirming that God

²⁷ Ibid., 83–5.

²⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol: From Von der Wahrheit*, trans. J. T. Wilde, W. Kluback & W. Kimmel (London, 1959), 42.

²⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy is for Everyman: A Short Course in Philosophical Thinking*, trans. R. F. C. Hull & G. Wels (London, 1969), 93–4.

³⁰ Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 96–112, 103. Cf. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London, 1989), 220.

exists also?³¹ The same query underwrites James Wood's strident critique of Steiner's notion of Real Presences and his naïve conclusion that 'in the end all [Steiner] offers is a hedged secularism written up religiously'.³² But Steiner is not here making an attempt at *modus ponens*. The point is that *questions* in a theological register (but not answers) are prerequisite to a full understanding of the meaning of artistic creation – and, indeed, of meaning in general. The ultimate guarantor of meaning turns out to be an ineffable reality that cannot be described (religiously or otherwise), only bodied forth in ciphers: works of art, literature, pieces of religious language, and ritual performances – phenomena which evoke but do not describe.

The fact that ciphers are untranslatable into other terms brings to mind Jaspers's published debates with the New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann, who attempted to 'demythologize' religious myths, translating their meaning, which he viewed as symbolic, into the secular terms of the early Heidegger's existentialist philosophy.³³ If religious myths are best seen as untranslatable ciphers rather than symbols, then it will be impossible to demythologize them without hollowing out their religious meaning, leaving only an empty shell behind. But Bultmann's premise remains valid: that we no longer share the ancient world view out of which the New Testament texts emerged. Jaspers concurred that, in the ancient world, the cipher language was also the public language – as he put it, 'It was the air you breathed.'³⁴ Belief in spirits, for example, was taken for granted. On this, too, Hepburn is very instructive. In his essay, 'The Gospel and The Claims of Logic', he points out that the difficulty is not just that ancient beliefs are no longer 'in the air' but that beliefs are no longer warranted in the same way. 'What serves in the New Testament account as the grounding and certifying of revelation is, to us, part of the collapsed world view itself.'³⁵

The solution to this state of affairs is not to demythologize religious expression, nor abandon it entirely. (If Hepburn is right about its persistent cultural entrenchment, then abandoning it was never a realistic option.)

31 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious', 103.

32 James Wood, 'Toppling the monument', *prospectmagazine.co.uk*, 20 December 1996, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/topplingthemonument>, accessed 1 August, 2018.

33 Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth*, trans. s.n. (New York, 1958).

34 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, 104.

35 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'The Gospel and the Claims of Logic' in [Hubert Hoskins (ed.),] *Religion and Humanism* (London, 1964), 11–18, 14.

Rather, we should re-read it as a cipher of Transcendence. Jaspers strongly resisted the idea that there could ever be a definitive system of ciphers, but he allowed that a system of thought could be read as a cipher among others.³⁶ When discussing the theological implications of his theory, Jaspers described the metamorphosis that the reading of religious expression as a cipher would effect. ‘Dogmas, sacraments, rituals would be melted down, so to speak – not destroyed, but given other forms of conscious realization. [...] Not the substance, but the appearance in consciousness would change. Philosophy and theology would be on the road to reunification.’³⁷

In conclusion, we cannot know whether the language of theistic metaphysics is unsuppressible, as Hepburn supposed, but we may observe that it has so far proved remarkably resilient, even to the deconstructive spirit of demythologizing. But assuming that Hepburn was correct, the answer is not to take theistic language literally and become mired in the hackneyed rational difficulties of old-style philosophy of religion. Neither is it to reject the language as false or formally meaningless, barring all access to the sacred, understood in terms of a most likely non-existent divine object. Nor is it to demythologize the language, retaining it only for the purposes of translation into the secular terminology of aesthetics or Heideggerian philosophy. The answer is rather to read religious language (and I think religious expression more generally) as ciphers of Transcendence, which may body forth the sacred in the only way that it can be bodied forth. This ‘melting down’ of religious expression does not immediately destroy theistic language but allows it to be differently interpreted, to appear in consciousness in altered forms. Jaspers was hopeful that, carried on in relation to religion, this process of cipher-reading could clear the overgrown path between Athens and Jerusalem. Whether this reunification will eventually suppress theistic language altogether remains to be seen. In answer to the question raised by Ronald Hepburn, then, not only is the sacred older than the gods, but it may outlive them as well.

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³⁶ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, III, 131.

³⁷ Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, 340.