



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## How to address Mystery

Clay Nelson © 9 May 2021

My first academic assignment in seminary is still very much a part of my memory. The reason is that it made me wonder if I was cut out for this new path I was taking. I was to write an essay on [Rudolph Otto's work \*The Idea of the holy\*](#). Otto, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian, argued that the holy was to be addressed with fear and trembling, which he called awe. I know I was a neophyte theologian but I did not get his conclusions. They did get clearer years later when George W Bush attacked Iraq with "Shock and Awe". That was definitely an Old Testament kind of holy. But anger, vengeance, oppression, and indiscriminate genocide do not instil me with awe. Ever since then, I have wrestled with the idea of the holy.

While at seminary we were required to attend morning worship before classes. I noticed that my faculty mentor, one of his generation's most venerated theologians, never said the prayers. I asked him once why. He said that he used that time to listen. To focus intently on all that was, is and will be. I interpreted that to mean he was in a state of awe. To me Otto's idea of mystery was awful. My mentor's idea of mystery was to be awe-filled. He showed me the way when I could no longer address the holy as a personal being prepared to act on my behalf or desires. When the holy was no longer synonymous with a god I could accept, I had to make my peace with the scientific world and religion, which was my bread and butter. My integrity required it.

In 1930 Rabbi Herbert Goldstein sent a telegram to Albert Einstein. "Do you believe in God? Answer paid. 50 Words." Einstein managed it in about 30 words. He said, "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of all that exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings."

Einstein was expressing his respect for the work of Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century Jewish philosopher. Spinoza, who was excommunicated by the rabbis of his time and place, was not famous in his own lifetime. But he is well regarded today for his courage, convictions, and ideas. Spinoza essentially identified God with Nature — everything that exists is God, and God is revealed in the infinite, natural universe.

Einstein, like Spinoza, recognized the place of mystery in human life. Before the telegram from Rabbi Goldstein, Einstein had already said that the person who has lost a sense of awe and mystery "is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle."

Spinoza and Einstein considered themselves to be religious men. Einstein could recognize both the strengths and limitations of science. Science and religion ask different kinds of questions. When speaking of "origins," for instance, the scientist asks questions of immediately preceding origins: the origins of this or that entity or form of life within the

system of nature — the planets, the earth, rocks, living things — how did each arise out of something that came before? These are scientific questions.

Religion asks questions about ultimate origins: What is the source and grounding of the entire universe? Should we regard this whole system as somehow sacred or holy, and if so what is our relationship to that sacredness? Who are we, and where are we going? In other words: What does it all mean?

Science doesn't ask what it means, only how it works. Ask a different kind of question, and you get a different kind of answer. So disagreeing about what to trust, religion or science, is a waste of time.

Myths of the origins of things — the Epic of Gilgamesh, Pandora's Box, the Garden of Eden — these stories were never intended to answer modern scientific questions. They were not written to answer the questions of "how" or "when." They were written to answer the question of "why" — what does it all mean?

When people today look for scientific answers in biblical myths and parables, they are looking in a place where scientific questions were never asked!

Even within religion, our questions have a cultural context. The Egyptians 4,000 years ago lived in one context, and asked one set of religious questions. The Egyptians of today live in a different context, and ask different religious questions from those of the ancient Egyptians. The answers are different, because the religious questions that were asked in other ages and cultures were different from our religious questions today.

Some questions, and some answers, survive the test of time better than others. But we are always asking our questions in a particular time and place and situation. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam — all are products of their time and place and cultural experiences.

In 1705 [John Toland, an Irish freethinker](#), coined the term "Pantheist" to describe Spinoza's religious beliefs. A Pantheist believes that God and nature are essentially one and the same. Pantheism sees the Cosmos as an all-encompassing unity, understands Nature to be sacred, and rejects a personal being God. Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists were essentially Pantheists. Most Unitarians still are today.

Taoism is often understood to be a type of Pantheism. The Tao te Ching never speaks of a personal creator God, but sees the Tao as "the Way of the Universe."

"The great Tao flows everywhere. All things are born from it, yet it doesn't create them. It pours itself into its work, yet it makes no claim. It nourishes infinite worlds, yet it doesn't hold onto them. Since it is merged with all things, and hidden in their hearts, it can be called humble. Since all things vanish into it, and it alone endures, it can be called great. It isn't aware of its greatness; thus it is truly great."

In other words, the Tao is so all-encompassing that every plant, creature, and human originates and lives because of it, and yet the Tao doesn't seek to dominate anyone or anything. The Tao does not require or even desire praise.

Religion often speaks of "mystery." But the Deists of the Enlightenment (1600s–1700s) saw the word "mystery" as an embarrassment. Mystery had been misused by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Any doctrine that was hard to make sense of — such as the doctrine of the Trinity, which says God is three persons who are one person, and Jesus as one person who is two persons, one entirely human and the other entirely divine — was declared to be a mystery. The churches taught that it must be true because it's incomprehensible!

Mystery had become cheapened into doctrines. Church members were expected to believe the symbols of religion literally. The Communion bread and wine stopped being symbolic, but literally the body and blood of Christ. The Bible was no longer just "inspired," but became the literal Word of God, perfect in every way, even when it is clearly wrong or self-contradicting.

It's a mystery. "Don't think for yourself. Just accept the doctrine," the church demanded. But that's not the way Albert Einstein used the word "mystery." For Einstein mystery begins with a sense of awe. When we stand in awe of the vast array of stars at night, or watch blue penguins raft into shore at night, or aphids making dinner out of our rose trellis, we ask what, if anything, it all means. We probably started asking these questions when we were children. Many who struggled with these questions eventually produced great art, architecture, poetry and music, such as the Paleolithic cave paintings, the Parthenon, Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Michelangelo's Pietà, statues of the Buddha, Tibetan mandalas, and Islamic calligraphy. To repress the spirit of creativity that is inspired by such awe and wonder would be, as Einstein said, to be nothing but a snuffed-out candle.

So where does that leave us? I stand in awe and wonder when I look at the night sky or watch the sun rise above Rangitoto from our bedroom window. And maybe, looking out at the vastness of the universe, I experience something similar to what was experienced by the first people of Aotearoa, who ventured to this land in their wakas guided by the stars. I arrived on a 747, I shared their wonder and awe and sense of mystery.

And yet I'm a modern person living in a scientific age. I assemble my religious faith and practice from various sources. This mixture is my own because my experience is unique to me, just as yours will be somewhat different because your experience is unique to you. And, yet, in common, we hope to keep learning and growing all our lives.

Even though there may be no ultimate answers that apply to all times and places and cultures, we go on wondering and asking the questions. What does it all mean? Our answers are always provisional, never perfect or complete. That is why it is "mystery."

Mature faith and religious practice never give final answers, but they lean toward the mystery. We begin with awe and wonder, and move forward with faith and practice.

**Meditation / Conversation starter:** What role does mystery play in your faith? Name one time you remember being awe-filled.