

## Protagonist Corner

Father Brown, Transcendence, and Debunking

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I get giddy when charlatans are exposed. It made my day recently when I overheard a conversation in which two persons were questioning the mental stability of Oral Roberts in the wake of this year's death threat from God and, more recently, God's promise to Oral that he will rule as Jesus' right-hand man.

I have collected tidbits of "debunkery" over the years. I have a favorite that pulls the rug from under *Chariot of the Gods*. (James Trefil did that in the September 1984 *Smithsonian*.) These thoughts were spawned after reading a recent article by Carl Sagan called "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection." Why welcome this rigorous skepticism with such glee? Is it because I have adopted the wonderless, sterile world of materialistic secularism to be the bounds of reality?

Back in the middle seventies, Peter Berger wrote an essay on the occult with this thesis: *the current occult wave (including its devil component) is to be understood as resulting from the repression of transcendence in modern consciousness*. People who pay homage to the devil do so to thumb their noses at "mysteriousless" secularism, not at God. As Berger put it, "In order to blaspheme against the Good Lord, one must first believe in Him, otherwise there is no fun in it." ("The Devil and the Pornography of the Modern Mind," in *Facing Up to Modernity*, p. 209.)

In its denial of transcendent reality, Berger claimed, secularism displays "repressive triviality." Enter the reality police whose job is to enforce the secular *Weltanschauung* with clubs of repression and triviality, as Berger sees it.

I'll grant the trivial aspect. The debunking of *Chariot of the Gods* explains the rules of probability and logical fallacies. But to people who have been bamboozled by occultists or pentecostal leg-lengtheners (a standard trick on the faith-healing circuit), it is *liberating* to meet the "reality police." The debunkers, whose work I enjoy so much, are surely part of Berger's "secular reality police." Is this a seduction into being skeptical of *all* mystery?

G.K. Chesterton's sleuth Father Brown was asked a similar question in one tale. No literary character combines faith and skepticism as well as the English cleric-detective. We break in on a conversation . . . never mind the plot:

"But what sort of man is he?" asked Blake.

"He's a mystagogue," said Father Brown, with innocent promptitude. "There are quite a lot of them about; the sort of men about town who hint . . . that they've lifted the veil of Isis or know the secret of Stonehenge . . . they're sure to have some sort of mystical explanations."

"I should hardly have thought, sir," [Blake] said, "that you had any

quarrel with mystical explanations.”

“On the contrary,” replied Father Brown, blinking amiably at him. “That’s just why I can quarrel with ’em. Any sham lawyer could bamboozle me, but he couldn’t bamboozle you; because you’re a lawyer yourself . . . And it’s just the same with the other, don’t you see? It’s just because I have picked up a little about mystics myself that I have no use for mystagogues. Real mystics don’t hide mysteries, they reveal them. They set a thing up in broad daylight, and when you’ve seen it it’s still a mystery. But mystagogues hide a thing in darkness and secrecy, and when you find it, it’s a platitude . . .” (from “The Arrow of Heaven”)

Fraudulently produced connections with transcendence are good for no one. On that the ardent secularist and I can agree. I would like to think that my reason for loving debunking is an appreciation for the truly mysterious.

And I must also admit a great appreciation for the predictability of the profane. I’m thankful we don’t have to figure out where there is sin in the camp every time we encounter a fierce thunderstorm. The ordinary serves as a valuable counterpoint to the holy. Holiness dispersed universally may have ontic reality, but that cannot be the way we experience it; if the holy surrounds us always, it only breaks into awareness at times and seasons and without necessarily violating any of the patterns of the profane we used to call “natural law” in the days before quantum physics.

Back to a Father Brown tale: a dog stops chasing sticks on a beach and howls pitifully; moments later up the beach its master is found murdered. Was it mystic? So witnesses concluded. Not at all, Father Brown deduced, though the events were connected. The dog wailed because the “stick” sank in the water. It was the murder weapon.

“The dog could almost have told you the story, if he could talk,” said the priest. “All I complain of is that because he couldn’t talk, you made up his story for him, and made him talk with the tongues of men and angels. It’s part of something I’ve noticed more and more in the modern world, appearing in all sorts of newspaper rumours and conversational catchwords . . . People readily swallow the untested claims of this, that, or the other. It’s drowning all your old rationalism and scepticism; it’s coming in like a sea, and the name of it is superstition . . . It’s the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can’t see things as they are . . .” (“The Oracle of the Dog”)

Christianity come of age needs not fear the secular world view any more or less than any other view the Church has outlived. It is simply the stage on which we are called to illuminate the mystery of the Word made flesh. Disgustingly ordinary flesh. And still mysterious in the broad daylight.