

Religious Myth Conceptions

Given 2/10/08
by Robin Mitchell

My life has become a lot more interesting, and a lot more complicated, since I started practicing all of my multiple religions. For one thing, it leads to some very odd conversations when I let it slip somehow. Usually, people's first reaction is to half-jokingly say something like "Wow, you must really want to be a good person!", and I usually reply "Well, you never know who's religion is right – I'd hate to go to Hell because I chose the wrong one, so I just decided to follow all of them." But if they're half joking, the other half seems to be some kind of unease, and sometimes they'll look at me a little oddly and ask a halting question that usually boils down to "Can you do that?" It's like I told them I had three husbands; there's got to be some reason why religious polygamy has to be wrong.

And to be honest, I have some of that unease myself. When I gave my first sermon on this topic here a few years ago, I said "it's a true delight to lead a Buddhist meditation group on Saturday and then help serve Communion at the Methodist church on Sunday." That statement was true then and it still is now, but it's bothered me ever since I wrote it. It sounds almost disrespectful, like a sort of shallow "if it's Tuesday this must be Buddhism" skimming the surface of deep traditions. In my heart that's not what it feels like, but why not? How is it possible to truly engage in so many very different religions? And why would anyone want to?

I first faced this question about ten years ago when, as an upstanding rational agnostic, I found myself falling in love with Christianity. I told that whole story in my other sermon, but the bottom line is that I felt its challenge and its promise to transform my life in ways that, even by my own standards, would open it up and make it better. But as much as I wanted to give myself to that challenge, there was the whole problem of belief - Christianity is not as doctrinaire as some people think it is, but it's still based on a set of core beliefs that just aren't rational and certainly aren't provable, and no rational agnostic is going to accept it on those terms.

So I had to ask myself exactly what was drawing me to it, and the answer was the transformative call I felt in it. The doctrines themselves – God the Father and the holy Trinity; the Incarnation and the Resurrection – weren't the point. They were a way to tell a deeper story about the nature and meaning of our lives and the world, a story that had immediate and powerful implications for my life. If I chose to live my life as if they were true I would be led to the faith that we are indeed created in God's image and that the whole of the Law is to love that God with every fiber of my being and to love my neighbors likewise. And by doing this I would become closer to God, whatever exactly that word means, and more loving to myself and my neighbors. That process would not be betrayed even if the details of the story turned out to be poetic license.

My next insight came years later after I'd started going to my Fellowship's Buddhist meditation groups and feeling a similar pull towards Buddhism. At first it seemed to involve less dogma than Christianity - there's even a book called "Buddhism Without Beliefs" - but eventually I started to get serious about Tibetan Buddhism and I ran into notions like karma and reincarnation. I had the same problem with them that I

had with Christian dogma, and so I did the same trick of living as though they were true without really signing on to them.

But I came to see that there was more to it than that; that even if I didn't believe them literally, I was in fact using them to make decisions as if I did believe them absolutely. It wasn't a conditional acceptance; I was trusting them absolutely, making decisions ranging from how I handled my suicidal thoughts to what bumperstickers I put on my car based on how they would affect my karma and my spiritual state in this and future incarnations. (And, increasingly, what they would do for the people behind me on the freeway!)

While I was talking to one of my Fellowship friends about this absolute-but-not-absolute kind of belief, I realized that what I was doing was taking the Buddhist concepts as a metaphor for the truth. I'm still agnostic about karma and reincarnation as literal facts, but I have faith that they are accurate ways to grasp one aspect of ungraspable truth, that by behaving as though they were true I'll never be led to make a badly wrong, or even ignoble, decision.

I really like this notion of a metaphor for two reasons. One is how well it captures the respect I have for all the great religions. To say that they're metaphors for the deep, indescribable truth of existence is to say that they truly capture some of that essence and bring it into the more limited scope of human understanding in a way that retains both its beauty and its compelling call.

And the other thing I like about metaphors is their non-exclusivity. I can say that my true love's cheek is as red as a rose and as soft and downy as a peach without starting a religious war between Rosarians and Peachitarians. In truth, my true love's cheek is indescribable; like anything in the universe it has to be experienced to be truly known. Short of that actual experience, evocative metaphors are the best I can do to convey it to someone who has never met her.

I was very happy with this metaphor metaphor, and I might have left it there if I hadn't read an interview with Karen Armstrong several years ago where she talked about religion in a similar light, but instead of talking about religions as metaphors she described them as myths.

Now I've heard a lot of UU's call them that too, but she was saying it in a very different tone of voice. To her, myths are essential vehicles for conveying deep human truths, and it's not their fault that we've mostly lost the ability to think mythically in our modern age.

In the ancient world, mythical thinking was held to be just as valuable as rational thinking - mythos and logos, Plato called them. Logos is a powerfully capable vehicle, but it can't take us everywhere we want to go. It can take us to the outskirts of deep mysteries - it can describe the color components of my true love's cheek, or its surface roughness and moisture content - but eventually we have to get off the vehicle and proceed on foot.

And that's where we encounter mythos. Myths, in their grandest incarnations, can take us into the heart of things, they can call forth the numinous, the intense feeling of intuitively knowing that there is something which cannot be seen that I have felt at the heart of the religious impulse. Logos leads us to explanations; mythos leads us to meaning.

Unlike a witness statement or a scientific paper, a myth is a story whose value has nothing to do with its factual accuracy. The value of a myth comes from the truth it enfolds and how compellingly it makes that truth available to its audience. To me, religious myths are perhaps the greatest myths ever created - they speak to our deepest questions and longings, and they present them in a way that invites us to take action in our lives to move closer to the answers.

According to Armstrong, this invitation to action is very important. She says that the great myths aren't just stories, but plans of action. The myth of the hero isn't just something to crib from when you need a quick screenplay for a Western or a science-fiction film; instead it's a plan of action for becoming a hero. The myth tells you how to develop the heroic potential within you by undertaking a quest and overcoming dangers with a pure heart, and unless you act on it you won't see its truth. And Armstrong says the religions are like that; as she says, "[they] are programs for action, and you recognize their truth for humanity when you put these precepts into action in your own life and discover that they work; that they give you an enhanced spirituality."

I think this is a great point - the only way to determine the truth of a religious myth is to put it into practice in your life and observe the results, not to discuss and analyze and speculate about it. The great religious leaders all taught this either by example or by words: Jesus didn't waste his time talking about the Trinity or the Incarnation or whether we're saved by faith or by works; he mostly went around showing people how to be compassionate. Muhammad actively discouraged metaphysical speculation in the Qur'an; he said it made people quarrelsome and sectarian. And the Buddha always told his followers to meditate more and speculate less. Healthy religion is more about *orthopraxy* - right action - than about *orthodoxy* - right belief.

So Christianity can be approached not so much as a set of doctrines about heaven and hell, but as a plan of action that leads to reconciliation with God. The key to Buddhism isn't reincarnation or karma or worshipping four-armed deities, it's a plan of action that leads to enlightenment. And UU-ism isn't centered on the Seven Principles or even on having long congregational meetings; it's an active faith that draws us into open-minded questioning in our own lives and compassionate work in our communities. We are, as Reverend Tom Owen-Tole has said, freethinking mystics with hands.

But the really wonderful thing about myths is that they're creative enterprises; they're an art form. Like any art form, storytelling requires creativity in both the teller and the listener. A painting hanging in an empty gallery has no meaning; meaning is a joint creation of the artist and the viewer, and it's never the same for any two viewers. And it's the same with religion - we have these wonderful myths handed down to us through the creativity of generations of mystics, prophets and storytellers, but they have no meaning until we respond to them with our own creativity. There's no such thing as a generic Christian, or Buddhist, or UU; there's just Robin and Karl and Lynne performing their own creative versions of the religions they practice.

And this, I think, is why I love religion so much and why I feel so drawn to participate in so many of its forms. Everyone has some form of art that especially touches their heart, that they love to appreciate. For some people it's music, for

others it's visual arts, or theater, or dance. For me it's religion - I love taking in all the creative ways mankind has devised to approach the divine, and I love participating in communities of people who are creatively interpreting the stories to make sense in their own lives and times. I don't feel like I'm being condescending or disrespectful when I help serve Communion - even though I follow the Buddhist myth in my life now, I have come to a deep appreciation of theirs in the only way possible, by earnestly practicing it for many years, and I feel honored to be in communion with people who share my love for the art of religion and who do the hard work of creatively bringing it forth in their lives.

Now whenever I start talking like this someone always asks me if I think that's really how all those religious people see it - do they really see themselves as creatively interpreting a myth? And of course the answer is no, although I do think some of them come close to it - when my Methodist minister told me that the Trinity was just a word we use to describe a mystery beyond words, I think he was at least sneaking up on the idea. But I'm sure most people would say they're trying to apply God's word as given in their scriptures and traditions to the circumstances of their lives. Some of them do it recognizing that finding meaning in scripture requires reading it creatively, and others just assume that scripture can be read literally, completely missing the creativity embodied in the scripture stories. But anyone who seriously tries to apply religion to the messy circumstances of their lives will find themselves creatively interpreting their myth whether they know it or not.

I also suspect this notion of religion as art may explain why there's so much bad religion in the world. Creating art is hard work, and it's much easier to do it badly than to do it well. Just think of how much more bad poetry, music and sex there is in the world than inspired poetry, music or sex. The science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon got tired of people complaining that ninety percent of science fiction was crud, so he coined what came to be known as Sturgeon's Law: ninety percent of everything is crud! It sounds kind of cynical, but I think it's actually an affirming statement: the ninety percent of crud doesn't invalidate the other ten percent; great art is still possible even in a field dominated by hacks.

A lot of religion today is stifling and uninspired, and at its worst it has led to horrible crimes. I acknowledge that, and I try to prevent and heal the damage in whatever ways I can. But I spend my real energy on that other ten percent that, like any great art, challenges my complacencies and evokes meaning in a world that often seems meaningless. That art is one of the things that keeps me alive, and I feel so blessed to have so many forms of it to experience and so many audiences to share it with.

And finally, we UU's have a special opportunity to be creative in the pursuit of our religion. In most faiths, revelation is closed - the Torah and the Bible and the Qur'an have all been written, and not one word can be added or taken away. We can add our own interpretation to their legacy, but the story itself is cast in stone. But in our UU faith, the stories handed down to us are still works in progress. As a character in the TV show 'Allie McBeal' once said when she heard a juicy piece of gossip, "Oh, what a great story! I can't wait to embellish it!" As UU's, we have inherited a great story - how will each of us embellish it?