

# State of the Art

Given 12/29/13 by Robin Mitchell

I've noticed that many of the great characters in literature are defined by an obsessive pursuit of some ideal or of another person – Captain Ahab had his white whale; Inspector Javert had his Jean Valjean. And if you've heard any of my other sermons you know the thing that I can't get out of my mind, the thing I keep returning to over and over, is this business of all the different religions in the world and how we should relate to them.

And while I'm name-checking literary figures, I also need to mention Jonah Lehrer, who recently got busted for plagiarizing himself in *The New Yorker*. Like him, I'm recycling some material, in my case from a sermon I gave here six years ago about religion as myth. I was moved to revisit it because I think it's a good counterpart to a sermon I recently gave called "All in the Family", where I wondered about the respect we're supposed to have for other religions. Our hymnals, I said, have songs from other faith traditions; our ministers stand with clergy from other religions at demonstrations and protests; in his sermons Rev. David quotes from the Torah and from Christian theologians; the UUA's statement of our sources includes "wisdom from the world's religions" and specifically "Jewish and Christian teachings", and so I asked the question, why? How is it that we accord other religions this kind of respect and authority when we don't accept their core beliefs? How can we do this and still be true both to our own faith and to our understanding of theirs?

In that sermon, I said we valued other religions because we were all members of the same family with common values like forgiveness, generosity, radical love and acceptance, and non-violence. And I thought it was a pretty good sermon as far as it went, but it ducked a big question – if we think their beliefs are factually wrong, how can we trust and honor the values they derive from them?

This is a strange situation – if we had different groups of scientists around the world who all had very different ideas about the laws of nature, two things would obviously be true. The first is that most one of them could be right, and the second is that you wouldn't need to be a scientific expert yourself to figure out which it was. Over time, you'd see that only one of them would be able to build airplanes that actually flew, and bridges that didn't collapse, and nuclear reactors that only occasionally melted down.

But religion is clearly playing by a different set of rules. One thing I've seen by practicing three of them and studying most of the rest is that when they're done well, they really do all promote the same values and they all do it about as well. It's only when they go wrong that their specific beliefs seem to affect just how they do it. Tolstoy said that happy families are all alike but that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, and something like that seems to be true for religions.

So if religion isn't playing by the same rules as science, what is it doing? What other kinds of human endeavor is it like?

It helps to look at what kinds of questions religion is trying to answer. If science asks "how", religion asks "why", and probably most importantly, "what does it mean"? What does it mean when bad things happen to good people? What does it

mean that we and everything we love will die one day? What does it mean that we find ourselves loving others more dearly than our own lives, or when we have moments of transcendent awe at the beauty of the world?

These aren't questions with logical answers. I don't think any grieving widow was ever soothed with a syllogism, or that any exultant new parent ever expressed the joy of new life in an equation. Confronted with the raw emotions or existential questions of life, people have always turned to art to find the meaning in the seeming chaos of existence.

What does it mean to be a composer who is going deaf, who can no longer hear the music that was his life's work but still feels its deep joy? Beethoven didn't answer that question with logic or psychology; he answered it, for himself and the rest of us, by writing the Ninth Symphony. What does it mean to be madly in love with the world? Rumi and E. E. Cummings could only answer with ecstatic poetry; no other language could convey it.

And like any art, religion is a creative process that engages us through our senses as much as through our reason. With music, with incense, with images, and most of all with stories. Joan Didion said that we tell ourselves stories in order to live, and that's at the heart of most religions.

And what stories they are! An Indian prince whose father sheltered him from all suffering until he was a grown man, who one day snuck out of the palace and saw sickness, old age, and death for the first time, and resolved to seek enlightenment so that he could free all beings from them. A son born of a virgin with shepherds and angels and wise men attending; God incarnate who suffered death in order to reconcile us to Him and then rose triumphantly in the end.

These aren't just stories; they're the stuff of myth. And while I've certainly heard that said about religion, meaning that it's all just a pack of lies, that's not what myths really are. 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.

Joseph Campbell says that myths capture what cannot be directly expressed in words – they are metaphors that point outside themselves and into transcendent reality. To say that religions are 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.

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 human truth it enfolds and how compellingly it makes that truth available to its audience. To me, religious myths are some of 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 Karen 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 upon 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, saying 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 the end of suffering.

They're expressed as myths because they take a heroic effort to follow - the great religions all teach that the way to wholeness is to remove yourself from the center of the universe and open to unconditional love for all beings, to truly love your neighbor as yourself. This requires such a noble effort from us that most people need an equally noble story to encourage them and make them see the importance and worth of what they're trying to do.

We know this because we've seen these same moral principles arise outside of religion, and they tend not to have the same effect. The philosopher Immanuel Kant came up with what's called the categorical imperative - that you should always act in a way that, if everyone else behaved the same way, you would call their actions good. If you think about it, that's about as good as anything the world's religions have come up with, and yet you don't see it changing people's lives the way religion does; you don't see people coming together every Sunday to rededicate themselves to it. People need the stories, the rituals, the sense of being part of a grand production, that the art of religion provides.

There are two things that I find especially wonderful about this idea of religion as performance art. The first is that the truths of art aren't exclusive - the Beatles don't have to be bad in order for Beethoven to be good. If following the Christian myth really can bring you to reconciliation with everything good in the universe, that doesn't mean that the Buddhist path can't bring you to the enlightenment free of all suffering. Different people will respond to different stories, just as they do in all other forms of art. In my own experience, which path you choose is much less important than how completely you can give your heart to your own chosen path.

So when I look at other religions, I don't judge them by whether their stories are literally true, because that's not really the point. I judge them by how beautiful and how compelling their stories are - how well do they embody the values of love and compassion, and how well do they make people yearn to live those values?

And the other wonderful thing about myths is that they're creative enterprises, like any other art form. And like any art, 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.

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 at my Methodist church - 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.

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 painting there is in the world than inspired poetry, music or painting. 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 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 know 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 there's no better time to share the art of religion than this holiday season. I think it's no coincidence that the religions of the Northern Hemisphere have some of their biggest holidays at the darkest moment of winter, when we are most in need of hopeful stories. The earth has not lost her fertility, say the Pagans at Yule; light has been born in the midst of our darkness, say the Christians at Christmas; the light of goodness will not fail, say the Jews at Hanukkah. And even though we UU's have largely let go of myth, we still have our own story to tell the world: that we can be each other's light, that love will guide us through the hard night. May we embody that story of love as we participate in all the stories of this season.