

The Evolution of Myth
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss
February 19, 2006

As Unitarian Universalists, who draw from many sources including “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit,” we tend to be somewhat suspicious of myths, particularly those which religious overtones. We are suspicious for good reason. When taken literally, various myths have formed the basis for the type of loyalty oaths that exclude from a given community any who don’t share the interpretation of the myth peculiar to that particular group. I would hazard a guess that most of us in this room have felt the pain of the ostracism that accompanies such an exclusion at some point or other in our lives. When children are told on the school playground that “Our parents don’t want us to play with you because you don’t go to a ‘Christian’ church” it’s a painful human interaction, especially for the child who feels nurtured by the religious tradition to which their families belong.

And yet as Karen Armstrong asserts in her book, *A Short History of Myth*, human beings have always been mythmakers. Archaeologists have unearthed Neanderthal graves containing weapons, tools and bones of a sacrificed animal, all of which suggest some kind of belief in a future world that was similar to their own. While there is no way to know what stories they told one another about the afterlife that awaited their dearly departed, there seems to be little doubt that there must have been some commonly held belief system that was passed on among the people, for otherwise it would have made no sense to waste perfectly good weapons, tools, and food that could have otherwise been used by those remaining. Underlying such early burial rituals one would have to imagine that there was a belief that the visible, material world was not the only reality.

Because we are subject to despair and depression in the face of loss and the sometimes-chaotic nature of life, humans in all cultures have used their imagination to invent and/or pass on stories that enable us to place our lives in a larger setting and give life meaning and value. While mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute in the modern world, often dismissed as being irrational and self indulgent, myth making is another use of the same powers of imagination that have enabled the human mind to make scientific and technological advances. Increasingly, we are becoming aware that technological advances do not necessarily improve the lot of humankind if they are divorced from a commonly held sense of meaning that invites us to live with compassion for one another.

Armstrong contends that there are five important things about most myths all of which can be seen in the graves of the Neanderthals. First is the fact that our most powerful myths are nearly always rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction. Second is that myth usually involves some form of sacrifice and a sense of ritual. Third is that myths are often about extremity; they force us to go beyond our own experience and to confront the unknown. Fourth, myth is not just a story told for its own sake, but almost always has implications for how we should behave. And finally, mythology usually speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it.

Armstrong says that, “Belief in this invisible but more powerful reality, sometimes called the world of the gods, is a basic theme of mythology. It has been called

the 'perennial philosophy' because it informed the mythology, ritual and social organization of all societies before the advent of our scientific modernity, and continues to influence more traditional societies today. According to the perennial philosophy, everything that happens in this world, everything that we can hear and see here below has its counterpart in the divine realm, which is richer, stronger and more enduring than our own."

It is important to realize that in earlier times, myth was people's primary way of relating to the transcendent dimension within human experience. There was not the ontological gulf between the world of the gods and that of human experience that we know today. When people spoke of the divine, they were usually talking about an aspect of the mundane. The realm of the gods melded with that of the storm or river, or powerful human emotion that seemed momentarily to lift men and women onto a different plane of existence so they could see the world with new eyes. Myths were seen as true to the extent that they were effective in promoting a sense of meaning, not because they were thought to convey factual information. And as the history of myth evolved in different cultures, it evolved most often because folks were no longer satisfied with the meaning they were deriving from the prevailing myths within their culture.

Armstrong starts tracing the evolution of myth with the Paleolithic Period, (c. 20,000-8,000 BCE) during which time she believes the predominant mythology was related to the intimate relationship between the transcendent and ordinary levels of existence which can still be perceived in the lives of those like the Australian aboriginals who like the people of the Paleolithic age, lived in hunting societies that had not undergone an agricultural revolution. The ability of shamans and hunters to enter into direct relationship with the ancestors in order to experience guidance and direction for their lives during dreamtime formed a lived mythology indistinguishable in many ways from what we would call their ordinary existence.

During the Neolithic Period, (c. 8000 – 4000 BCE) myth evolved to try and make sense of and perhaps exercise influence over the dynamics associated with an agricultural life that was increasingly dependent on the pattern of the seasons and the timing of annual rains, floods, etc. The experience of the sacred in relationship to the fecundity of the earth generated various stories in different cultures, but was a common theme throughout this period. In most cultures the sacred was maternal and sexuality was a significant feature in many of the rituals honoring her.

During the period of the early civilizations (c. 4000 – 800 BCE) myth took on new dimensions as it grew to make sense of and try to control the dynamics associated with the advent of city life which for the first time allowed people to be somewhat removed from nature's cycles in their daily lives. The civilization associated with cities was fragile as a given city would shoot up, flourish, often preying upon its rivals at its height, and then all too quickly decline. The myths of this period often featured heroes and heroines who inspired heroic deeds of battle that could be put to use by the rulers of any given city-state in its attempt to preserve itself, but after a while, such myths ceased to nourish the common man, and created the kind of spiritual vacuum that led to another great transformation.

German Philosopher Karl Jaspers calls the next period (c. 800 – 200 BCE) the Axial Age because it proved to be pivotal in the spiritual development of humanity - giving rise to insights that have continued to nourish men and women to the present day.

One could say that it marks the beginning of religion as we know it, as people became conscious of their nature, their situation, and their limitations in new ways. New religious and philosophical systems emerged; Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in India; ethical monotheism in the Middle East and Greek rationalism in Europe.

Armstrong points out that, “There is much about the Axial Age that remains mysterious. We do not know why it involved only the Chinese, Indians, Greeks and Jews, and why nothing comparable developed in Mesopotamia or Egypt. It is certainly true that the Axial regions were all caught up in political, social and economic upheaval. There were wars, deportations, massacres and destruction of cities. A new market economy was also developing; power was passing from priests and kings to merchants, and this disturbed the old hierarchies. All these new faiths developed not in remote deserts or mountain hermitages, but in an environment of capitalism and high finance. ...

“All the Axial movements had essential ingredients in common. They were acutely conscious of the suffering that seemed an inescapable part of the human condition, and all stressed the need for a more spiritualized religion that was not so heavily dependent upon external rituals and practice. They had a new concern about the individual conscience and morality. Henceforth it would not be sufficient to perform the conventional rites meticulously; worshippers must also treat their fellow creatures with respect. All the sages recoiled from the violence of their time, and preached an ethic of compassion and justice. They taught their disciples to look within themselves for truth and not to rely on the teachings of priests and other religious experts. Nothing should be taken on trust, everything should be questioned, and old values, hitherto taken for granted, must be subjected to critical scrutiny. One of the areas that required re-evaluation was of course, mythology.”

An example of what happened with the mythology of the former age can be seen in the Greek philosophical movement to “put the Gods on trial” which was done both through the writings of Plato and in Greek theater. A new myth emerged – that of logos – that only logical and rational discourse could bring about the type of understanding that would truly benefit humankind. And yet even these Greek philosophers agreed that there were some things that were beyond the scope of rational deduction. Thus while many of the myths concerning the gods fell by the wayside, the practice of Greek religion remained relatively unchanged until it was suppressed by the Emperor Justinian, and replaced by the mythos of Christianity.

In the post-axial period, (c. 200 BCE to 1500 CE) Armstrong sees an interesting thing happening with myth. What is particularly interesting is the development of myth within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because all three monotheistic religions see God as active in history and thus experience an inherent tension between the mythical and the historical nature of the stories upon which their religious rituals are based.

With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish religious practice changed. In Judaism for instance, the Passover ritual began to be told in such a way as to invite each participant into the experience of having been enslaved in Egypt and delivered by the hand of God with the moral lesson being to treasure freedom and neither be enslaved or willing to oppress others. If you have celebrated a Seder, you know that the story has a mythical quality in that you are invited into the reenactment of the meaning of the story rather than focusing on its historical accuracy. By ritual practice and

ethical response, the story has ceased to be an event in the distant past, and has become a living reality.

Armstrong sees St. Paul as doing a very similar thing with Jesus. Paul was not much interested in Jesus' teachings or the events of his earthly life. 'Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh,' he wrote to his Corinthian converts, 'that is not how we know him now.' According to Paul, what is important now is the mystery of his death and resurrection, through which he ascended to a higher mode of being. Equally important is that through the initiation of baptism and through participation in the Eucharist, any believer can enter into Jesus' death and share in his new exalted life. What gives this story mythical dimensions is not the historical fact that "it happened once to Jesus," but the fact that it happens over and over again to all who participate in the rituals associated with the selfless life Jesus modeled through his death on the cross and who then experience being raised up from the drudgery of their former lives.

Armstrong traces a very similar trajectory with the development of Islam, where again, people are invited to enter into the power of myth by the regular practice of the rituals of a holy life which bring the patterns of the stories into being as an everyday experience rather than something that happened once a long time ago.

And then an interesting thing happened. In a period beginning around the 1500s, with the invention of the printing press and the beginnings of the industrial revolution, western societies' relationship with myth shifted yet again. In Britain, Frances Bacon in his book the *Advancement of Learning* made a declaration of independence to emancipate science from the shackles of mythology. If science were to fulfill its promise of putting an end to human suffering, all superstitions that did not stand up to logical scrutiny would have to be cast aside. This led folks like Sir Isaac Newton both to unprecedented scientific insight, and to begin the process of purging religion of such doctrines as the trinity, which defied the laws of logic. Unable to appreciate the value of the more intuitive forms of perception, many modern thinkers have followed Newton in rejecting anything that cannot be logically deduced.

Such thinking has left us in an interesting position. Modern mythology gains its power as it always has from the experience of entering into a ritual that brings the myth to life in a meaningful way in the lives of the participants in the ritual. Do we dismiss the insights of the shaman who gained them on a mystical journey because we can see that his body never left the room? Or do we appreciate that the stories underlying our most powerful myths were never meant to be taken literally.

When we read of Jesus ascending to heaven, we are not meant to imagine his body whirling through the stratosphere somewhere between here and the nearest star, but to understand that he has done what he said we could all do – join with the spirit of the divine. When the prophet Muhammad flies from Mecca to Jerusalem and then climbs up a ladder to the Divine throne, we are invited to understand that he has broken through to a new level of spiritual attainment, a journey on which every faithful Muslim is invited to go with him.

One possibility is to reject the invitation to the spiritual journey inherent in any religious tradition, because we can find fault with a literal interpretation of the mythical dimension of the story on which it is based. And yet another possibility lies before us. If we find the journey's end attractive, we can suspend our disbelief and enter into the ritual

– not so much because we regard it as literally true, but because we have come to appreciate the power of myth and ritual to transform our ordinary experience into one which uplifts and sustains us. When we can do this, we experience the truth of myth, and we can dismiss our concerns about any given myth's historical accuracy.