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“CONTRAILS OF UNCERTAINTY”: 50 Years of Reading the Bible And the Bible Reading Me

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Today

“It is the nature of self-conscious human life to be insecure. Religion, when it seeks security or peace of mind, is actually violating our humanity.” – John Spong

I’ll flatter myself by calling this piece a Montaigne-like essay “where my pen and my mind both go a-roaming.” It’s an attempt at “A Genealogy of Thought,” a tracking of my shifting relationships with the Bible and biblical interpretation, first written for a discussion with three friends also interested in the evolution of ideas.

Awhile back, James Wood reviewed Terry Eagleton’s *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*¹ in *The New Yorker*. Eagleton is best known as a Marxist literary critic; but he is also a Roman Catholic, and his latest book defends God against the new breed of atheists—Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris—who have dominated the press for several years.

There were many excerpts in the review that I agreed with—until I stumbled on this quote: “If Jesus’ body is mingled with the dust of Palestine, Christian faith is in vain.”

Eagleton apparently makes this claim to refute what he calls “poetic or subjective truths.” Apparently, “poetic truth” pales in his mind in relation to “what really happened.”

And apparently, physical resuscitation (and I would assume subsequent literal Ascension?) is the only way to interpret resurrection? Apparently an archeological dig would negate the mythic power of the narrative?

¹ References are listed at the end of this narrative of a spiritual journey

I was equally intrigued, however, by a question posed by a reviewer of Cambridge scholar's, Don Cupitt's, book, *The Meaning of the West* when he asks, "Can we truly live by a story that we know to be fiction?"

Yesterday: The Quest of De-Mythologizing

"That which is impossible and probable is better than that which is possible and improbable"
-- Aristotle

Flashback 50 years: I'm standing outside the Baptist Church in my hometown in Virginia one Sunday morning when, waiting impatiently for my parents to stop "visiting," I overhear a college student home for a visit say: "My New Testament professor says that you don't have to take the Bible literally; there are other ways of interpreting it."

This was "good news" to my young ears. Even though I had excelled at Sunday evening Baptist Training Union (BTU) "Sword Drills," I had a growing awareness of a larger world than one that recognized the Bible primarily as a weapon against sin and the ills of society. I must confess, however, that to this day, I'm glad I know where the Books that comprise the Bible are located and can look them up, usually without consulting the Table of Contents which would be a kind of "embarrassment" to anyone who has ever participated in a Baptist "Sword Drill."

It just so happened that I was headed to the same university and probably studied with the same professor: Dr. William Rhodenhiser, whom I want to acknowledge as the mentor who planted the initial seeds of this particular intellectual quest which has lasted a life-time.

Dr. Rhodenhiser's method was to give close readings of biblical texts. I remember, as a freshman, the excitement with which I had learning that there was not one, but two Creation Stories in Genesis. I remember the excitement over learning about the "de-mythologizing" project of the German critic Rudolf Bultmann, and I remember, in particular, the delight in comparative readings of New Testament texts.

I discovered a slender, unpretentious volume, *Gospel Parallels*, which does exactly what its title implies: "parallels" passages from the first three New Testament Gospels so one can clearly see the overlaps and the differences and contradictions in the texts.

This un-assuming little book, which I still have on my bookshelf, was "the text" that launched my love affair with close explication and critical reading. It is the book, perhaps, most responsible for my disagreement with Mr. Eagleton and others who seek the verification of truth through historical or archeological fact rather than through myth. (I use the word "myth" in its scholarly sense, as would Joseph Campbell, not its popular sense of fairytale, though Bruno Bettelheim has opened for us the underlying meaning in fairy tales as well).

Of course, unbeknownst to me as an undergraduate, I had taken a step—some would say a fall—into the dangerous world of critical thinking and interpretation: "dangerous" because "interpretation" implies uncertainty and the possibility of further, evolving change.

Back to the Future: Graduate Studies and Mythos

*“Once you’ve climbed the ladder, push it away”
– paraphrase of Wittgenstein*

In Graduate School in English Literature, I adopted my advisor’s, critic and writer Guy Davenport’s, straight-forward definition of myth: “stories people live by.” And, his concomitant definition of scripture: “frozen myth.” I understand that mythic stories may or may not be based in total or in part on “facts,” but whether or not there are verifiable facts is beside the point: mythic stories may still bear “truth.”

I also relished in the variety of literary criticisms: especially the French “*explication de texte*,” Stanley Fish’s reader response criticism, feminist criticism, as well as archetypal and psychological criticism. And the earliest stages of deconstruction. William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and C.S. Lewis’s *Experiment in Criticism* became my critical companions.

A few years later in Divinity School, another mentor along the way, himself almost a mythic hero, Amos Wilder, New Testament scholar and brother of Thornton Wilder, wrote in his little power-packed book *Theo-Poetic*: “Myths and categories of transcendence can still be eloquent ... if we awaken to the power that shaped them.” That, of course, is the task of anyone who teaches literature or who outlines life lessons based on texts, sacred or secular: to “awaken to the power that shaped them.”

Amos Wilder’s awakened state is not unlike hermeneutical scholar Paul Ricoeur’s “second naiveté,” the stage reached after the “first naiveté,” followed by “critical distance,” arriving at a place of tension between the “first naiveté” and the “critical plane.” We are “awakened to the power” of the original myths but through the filters of criticism. Thus living in the tension – between enmeshment and remove -- of a re-mythologized world with eyes wide open. At that time I did not know of Paul Ricoeur’s “second naivete,” (see Appendix II), but I now realize that is what I was approaching.

A year of study at the University of Durham in England linked me with a wonderful human being, a great scholar with a great sense of humor -- John Fenton, author of the *Pelican Commentary on Matthew*, in which he advanced the thesis that much of Matthew -- indeed much of the New Testament as a whole -- is the teaching of the Early Church put into the mouth of Jesus, not the actual words or a literal life story of Jesus.

The New Testament began to take on a decidedly human face from a critical and scholarly point of view. These mid-century scholars were already laying the ground work for the “Jesus Seminar” and the focus on “What Jesus might have said and taught,” and the ways the Early Church interpreted him.

The Recent Past: Teaching and Learning

“The answer is not separate from the problem” -- Wittgenstein

So . . . in the early 1980s, in my one and only experience teaching New Testament, I took a deep breath and used a pamphlet (actually a chapter from *Elements of Fiction*) by the literary critic Robert Scholes, in which Scholes writes: “A fiction is a made-up

story. This definition covers ... great visionary works like ... the Bible itself. . . The Bible is fiction because it is a made-up story.” I need not go into how this went over with some of my more conservative students.

A brief diversion for an important and sub-text: At this same time, I was attending a series of workshops and lectures presented by the Jung Center of Chicago through continuing education programs at Seabury Western Theological Seminary, and Loyola University, soaking up the interior and psychological meaning of ancient mythic texts – especially in stories “handed down” to us. I also audited a seminar with Mircea Eliade “Sacrifice and Kingship” at the University of Chicago. These experiences began to awaken me, as Amos Wilder had put it in Divinity School, to the power that originally shaped the stories we live by.

The quote from Carl Jung that both clarifies and complicates the context of critical reading and de-mythologizing is this: “There is a spiritual realm (in dream, literature, vision) which is larger, more expansive, than the waking world.” We tap into this mystical world through metaphor and archetypes which are our links to what Jung called the “collective unconscious” of a larger world – transcendent or sub-conscious.

Clearly the archetypal patterns (Guy Davenport again: “imprints on the human psyche”) of the quest, with its ordeals and betrayals, the archetype of the unlikely hero, also the myth of the eternal return -- all place the Christian myth in a broader, more universal context. At one and the same time removing the narrative from “history” but affirming the universal truth, if you will, of the story.

Obviously, at this stage in my life I had entered that nebulous arena that does not equate “fact” with “truth”: When the handsome Prince (in fairy tales) is rejected by his Fair Lady and becomes a toad, we “suspend our disbelief” and “get it” on an affective level. Likewise, when the Princess of Fairy Tales kisses the frog, and the frog turns back into a Handsome Prince, we understand the “truth” of the narratives: Rejection belittles us. Love transforms us.

A Future Present: Modernism

“That which cannot be spoken of must not be spoken of” – Wittgenstein

Like most students of my college generation, I had kept a copy of Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* in my hip pocket. (And as a graduate student of Renaissance Literature I kept a copy of Castiglione’s *The Courtier* in the other pocket.) Tillich’s “Ground of Being” still serves as a conceptual metaphor which satisfies the philosophical side of my brain.

Here’s an updated version of Tillich’s metaphor for the Ultimate Reality from Mark Johnson in his new book, *Saving God*: “The Outpouring of Existence Itself . . . for the sake of self-disclosure of Existence Itself.” In some ways this strikes me as a baroque way of saying “Ground of Being,” but I confess I’m attracted to it because it parallels one of my “working experiences” (certainly not a definition!) of God as “Consciousness of consciousness,” which parallels my “working understanding” of “grace” as “clarity,” or as the Friends (Quakers) would say: “clearness.”

My penchant for close critical reading continued to be piqued throughout the 1990s by and into the 21st century by the work of the Jesus Seminar and biblical scholars such

as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who carefully separate the pre-resurrection **person Jesus** from the **post-resurrection Christ** created by the Church (see *The First Christmas, The Last Week*) and who have likewise arduously separated the authentic Paul from the neo-con Paul created by factions of the early Church (*The First Paul*). And the books of Bart Ehrman such as *Lost Christianities, Lost Scriptures*, and *Jesus Interrupted*, and the books by John Spong, especially *The Sins of Scripture* and *Reading Scripture with Jewish Eyes*.

A Possible Tomorrow: Post-Modernism/Beyond Theism

“You must be yourself the new-born bard of the Holy Spirit.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson to students at Harvard Divinity School

According to Quantum Scientists there is no more “up,” no more “down” – only “out.” Along with matter are “anti-matter” and “black holes.” According to deconstructionists there is no unifying “essence”; there is no “human nature.” In fact, there is no “place”; according to the “string theory,” there are dual realities. And we are told that the universe is expanding at rates so rapid we cannot comprehend them.

Some minds are expanding too and perhaps taking us “beyond comprehension” in a different way: Canadian theologian and founder of Star, David Galston has published an article called “Postmodernism, the Historical Jesus, and the Church,” is premised on the postmodern creed, referencing Nietzsche: “Nothing has substance.” The old relationship between the signifier (name) and the signified (that which the name points to) has been broken.

Post-modernism posits that all systems of thought, beliefs, or concepts “defy mastery.” Foucault’s claim is that we are “sets of experiences...inter-related and coordinated by a mind in a moment of “being present” (Interestingly, a tenet of classic Buddhism also.) “Experiences are meaningful only in the manner that we remember them and live by them.”

Could we not, I wonder, substitute “mythic narrative” for “experiences” in the above quotation: “Mythic narratives are meaningful only in the manner that we remember them and live by them”? There is no one narrative, only narratives of ever-changing “present moments.” As Emerson said, we must be the new-born bards of the Holy Spirit in our own generation, our own place and time.

An Interlude:

A Post-Modern reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Moreover, for David Galston, the fictional characters who represent or signify God in Jesus’ Parables are singularly engaging and even playful when released from the heavy overlay of meaning:

He reads Jesus’ parables as exercises “about nothing” in particular, but rather experiences of “opening a space,” creating an adventure to “enter” the Kingdom of God and to empty God of habitual meaning or “world habit.”

The Prodigal Son returns home; his father robes him and gives a feast, but also makes it clear that all he has belongs to his Older Son. The Prodigal Son, then, ends up with nothing, his fate in the hands of his Older Brother who looks on from the distance at the revelries. The Father, instead of being a restorer is the facilitator of the experiential game of life.

For me, the story's the thing wherein we'll catch the conscience of the king to paraphrase what Hamlet says about his father-in-law. Stories read us, they pull from us what we see as essential, necessary for life within ourselves and among each other, and potentially inspire us to live life as John Spong says "with reckless love" and be all that we can be. As the term "just friends" is offensive to me, so are the phrases "just a story" or "that's only fiction." As does the conflation of "fact" and "truth."

It is the story, the myth – especially those "handed down" and "received" (the very meaning of "tradition" from the Latin "*tradere*": to hand over or pass along -- that provides what Jaroslav Pelikan calls the "staying power" in our consciousness.

Novelist Madeleine L'Engle asks, "How could it have happened that even in the church *story* has been lost as a vehicle of truth? Early in our corruption we are taught that fiction is not true." (*Walking on Water*)

Another Interlude: Can there be a Fictional Saint?

Several years ago, when I was asked to give a program on saints, I used as my main example, Phoenix Jackson, the elderly Black woman who painfully walks the Natchez Trace several times a year into town to get medicine from the public health office for her grandson who is dying.

This is not a story from "real life," but from Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path," a seminal text for me, for the understanding of the Christian myth of "lived truth," if you will, and for inspiration toward "virtuous action" in my own life.

When I realized that fictional characters are often "the saints" in my life, I recognized at the same time the "tone deaf" quality of the Church in pulling St. Christopher off the liturgical calendar because "he hadn't really lived." (Did St. George go as well?)

Phoenix for me is the quintessential Christian saint: Her story takes place at Christmas, putting us in mind of the Christ Child who pulls forth affection and adoration. When old Phoenix arrives at the public health office, the nurse marks her casebook with a big "Charity" stamp. The "Charity" stamp is pure irony indeed because Phoenix on her short journey, like Christ, has pulled forth charity from those who would otherwise not have extended it, while on a mission of charity herself for her grandson. Interestingly, one of the questions critics raise about the story is whether Phoenix's grandson is real or imaginary? In other words, is she living in her own mythic world? To which question, I and others, answer: It doesn't matter, her mission of charity is a mission of charity no matter. Echoing in my mind is a quote from Amos Wilder: "Literary characters give signals that {can} awake a deep resonance in the hearts of men." (*Theo-Poetic*)

Post-Script: Who knows where, what or when?

“ Because I do not hope to turn again . . . Because I know I shall not know/The one veritable transitory power...Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something/Upon which to rejoice”

– T. S. Eliot

There’s a motif in Asian art and poetry, called the parable of “The Hidden Teacher,” which goes something like this: The novice reaches the foot of the mountain on which the Master lives; the servant meets the pupil at the gate. The novice asks, “Where is the Master?” The servant replies: The Master is gone in order that you may learn.

This past summer in a conversation with a friend on these topics, I heard myself say, I believe in a lot less than I once did, but what I do believe in has an importance, a strength, that it didn’t in the past: once again, enmeshment and remove. It is as if the unknowable has constellated itself, but as in a poem by metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, that is, in a mist or cloud which veils reality but at the same time allows “a peep” into eternity.

In one sense, thanks to biblical criticism, Jesus has become for me in a new way what Terry Eagleton calls the “stark signifier of the human condition...one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for his pains” (Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*).

The Next 50 Years: Future Generations of the Genealogy?

Who knows how the Bible will read me in the future, or even how many futures will emerge because of expanding knowledge and new explorations of the Bible? Two challenges emerge for the present-future:

How to create my own “something upon which to rejoice.”

Karen Armstrong in an NPR interview called for like-minded moderates among Judaism, Islam, and Christianity to “develop a counter-narrative that emphasizes the benign features of the sacred Scriptures of the three mono-theistic traditions,” in order to create an “ethical alchemy” of living compassionately.

We all know the odds of creating a “new Scripture,” or of editing the old Scriptures as Thomas Jefferson did; but this is the right direction to think in, if we are to guard against using Sacred Scriptures to develop an “evil orthodoxy” used to further divide the human race. I think of a Lutheran pastor friend who often recites, “If what you think is right further divides the human race, then what you think is right must be wrong.”

How to acknowledge the Bible’s enormous impact on Western civilization but also to acknowledge that the signifier no longer quite effectively points to the signified.

For most people in Western society, the “signification”-- and we might say “significance” -- is forgotten or broken. Have we, as Don Cupitt (professor emeritus of philosophy of religion at Cambridge University) asks, outgrown “the repressive boarding-school culture of the Church”?

But, “the ancient biblical dream of a blessed future world... is alive and well in the West. Secular peace and prosperity for ordinary folk... derived from a Christian theology of history.” (Don Cupitt, *The Meaning of the West*) The ethical, humanitarian bent of our culture – caring for the weak, sheltering the abused, working for minority rights – derives from the ethics of the Jesus of Scripture and the traces of Christendom. Cupitt says the “only” trace.

Many of the new secularists focus us, as our Buddhist friends do, on the present moment, on the spirituality of the ordinary, for example, the spiritual quality of helping your child with homework. (James Wood... *The New Yorker*, August, 2011)

For the time being.

I sit seriously with Karen Armstrong’s thesis and with Don Cupitt’s questions, perhaps most especially with his question, Can we truly live by a story we know to be fiction? I’ll forgive Cupitt’s downgrading the word “fiction”; perhaps he forgets that even factual histories are themselves fiction in the sense that they are created, “made up” narratives. It is, though, a question I ask myself because there does seem to be a palpable “surplus of the inexpressible” when we know an event or person, especially a mythic hero, is someone who has lived in our skin in our world.

Just as I live in Paul Ricoeur’s “second naivete,” (see Appendix II below), inside the mythic system but at a critical distance, so I also live with and among these futures and try to remain open to “future futures” which are as yet unknown. While I relish more than ever engagement with the ancient received texts of my Christian and Western tradition, I become more and more convinced that they read me more than I can possibly read them.

Appendix I How to Conduct a Bible Sword Drill

A proper sword drill has two teams. The teams line up facing each other, everyone holding his or her own Bible. When the Group Leader says “Attention” (preferably in several syllables) you become very erect “at attention” with your Bible in your left hand, the spine in the palm of the hand, at your left side against your left leg. The Group Leader says, Draw Swords (again in a very military voice), and you then bring your Bible (your sword) a little above waist height, front side down with your right hand flat against the back of the Bible. I do not think you were allowed to let the thumb of your right hand find its way over to the edges of the paper, but I’m sure I, and some others, thought about trying it to get a little edge even if we didn’t actually do it! The Group Leader next calls out the Book, Chapter, and Verse of the passage everyone is to look up as quickly as possible. There’s a pregnant pause as before a race. Then in a fulsome, loud voice the Leader says, “Charge” and everyone frantically looks up the verse.

Of course, Bibles with “tabs” or indentations with Book names are strictly forbidden. One would be embarrassed anyway to use such cribs! The first to find the exact Chapter and Verse steps forward and reads the verse out loud. This pattern continues until a certain number of points are tallied and the winning team is declared the victor.

Appendix II

Paul Ricoeur’s First and Second Naiveté

In an article on Rollo May and Paul Ricoeur, Bradley Morrison outlines succinctly Ricoeur’s hermeneutical program: “first naiveté” signifies the human subject’s enmeshment with the symbolic/mythic foundations of the surrounding culture. “Critical distance” signifies the human subject’s use of interpretive structures to create distance from mythic symbol systems. “Second naiveté” signifies the human subject’s interpretive stance, informed by the use of critical models, open to the depth of symbolic meaning. Second naiveté is the tension sustained between first naiveté and critical distance.

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