

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MYTH?

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THE CHRISTMAS MYTH - TWO UU VIEWS

From Stan Sears, Ithaca, NY

The Christmas Eve service had ended. The staff was collecting the programs and bagging the candles and I was finally making my way to the office to slip out of my pulpit robe.

A young man approached me. He appeared to be a student, dressed in a fashionable parka on a cold night. I had never seen him before, but I have grown accustomed to the unknown faces that show up for the Christmas Eve Service... In any case, the local paper listed the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ithaca as a "top pick," right along with that hot band that was coming to one of our downtown clubs.

The young man's eyes seemed to be holding back tears, and he approached me almost timidly, and with great respect. "Minister, can I speak with you?" "Certainly," I responded.

After all the compliments I had received for both the homily and the service, I could see a different response coming. "Minister," he continued, "you didn't tell the congregation that it really happened. There could have been people here tonight who came looking for Jesus, and you spoke as if it didn't really happen the way the Bible says."

My homily had, in fact, explained the vast differences between the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke...and how the story didn't need to be taken literally. Nevertheless, I said, even an apostate Jew such as myself could read those accounts and be moved to sing the carols and buy Christmas gifts for his children.

But the young man wasn't buying any of that. He wanted the story to be really true. I took a stab at humor and suggested that until someone invented a time machine that could take us back to that stable, we're not going to have the full story.

At that, his eyes grew wide. I could see the tears welling up as he said, "It's true! I know it's true!" He then proceeded to explain how our skepticism prevented us from accepting the reality of the story. Somehow, he had

experienced Jesus as God incarnate so powerfully that he knew that it had all taken place.

Had it not been Christmas Eve, I might have pulled out my rationalist firepower and debated him. Instead, I realized that I had already put enough bad taste into his Christmas pudding. So, rather than argue further, I thanked him for coming forward to share his experience and wished him well...

The rest of the staff has ready to lock up the church. We wished one another a merry Christmas and walked out into the snowy evening. Later that night, my wife asked me about the young man and what he wanted to speak about for so long. I told her that he had probably come to the wrong church that evening.

He had come seeking to hear the truth as he understood it, and I had preached the truth as I understood it. We had different understandings of the story, but ultimately I think both of us were pointing to a similar truth: that hope comes into the world mysteriously, and in ways that we don't necessarily understand. However, if we are able to see and accept this gift, take it into our hearts, it can sustain us through all of our despair, our doubting and our cynicism.

From Philip Hewitt, Vancouver, B.C.

I well remember the first Christmas after I became a Unitarian.... It was a time of strangely conflicting feelings. On the one hand, here was a time of festivity, well-neigh universal festivity. One could hardly take kindly to assuming the role of Scrooge and declaring all of this to be humbug. One wanted to join in, to be caught up in the spirit of the season.

And yet at the same time there were the demands of intellectual integrity to be met. The conventional celebrations of Christmas were bound up with the theological schemes and pseudo-historical events to which I could no longer give assent.... How could one avoid being a hypocrite without being a spoil-sport?

And so I was a little unhappy and bewildered, perhaps also a little cynical. I made uneasy compromises and got through the season as best I could. I was not very impressed by the efforts of some Unitarians I had met to make the observance a satisfactory one...by altering few words in the traditional songs and affirmations.

As for myself, it was more than one or two particular words that I took issue with. It was the whole pattern of thought they expressed. To the question asked by friends and relatives, "How can Unitarians celebrate Christmas?" I could find no satisfactory answer...

But all that now seems long ago. I can honestly say that at this point in my life each passing Christmas means more to me than the one before. In fact, I am quite sure that they have meant more than they ever would have had I remained within the church of my upbringing. It may seem strange to claim that Christmas can mean more to someone not bound to an exclusive dependence upon the Christian tradition. Yet this is precisely what I do claim.

Why? Because the response of a Unitarian Universalist to the season can include the whole range of its meaning, not confining itself to the one narrow emphasis to be found in traditional churches. A religious festival such as this one ought to be made appealing to anyone who wants to be more inclusive in outlook and broader in their sympathies.

A THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

From Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*

Christianity has always retained the hope that the Kingdom of God will come in the immediate future, but it has always waited in vain...This hope has not been fulfilled. The same world still exists and history continues.

The course of history has refuted mythology. For the conception of the Kingdom of God is mythological...just as is the theory that the world, although created by God, is ruled by the devil, by Satan... Indeed, the whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the New Testament is mythological, i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events; the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits...

This conception of the world we call mythological because it is different from the conception of the world that has been formed and developed by science...and which has been accepted by all modern men.

And so the question inevitably arises: is it possible that...the preaching of the New Testament still has any importance for modern men? For us, the mythological

conception of the world...is over and done with. So shall we make a sacrifice of understanding...in order to accept what we cannot sincerely accept as true - merely because such conceptions are suggested by the Bible? Or should we retain the ethical teaching of Jesus and abandon the rest?

Or is there yet a third possibility? Perhaps the mythological material as a whole contains a still deeper meaning...that we might want to retain. Mythology expresses a certain understanding of human existence. It believes that the world and human life have their ground and their limits in a power which is beyond all that we can calculate or control...

Thus, when mythological thinking forms the conception of hell, it expresses the idea of evil as a tremendous power which again and again afflicts humankind. Such language is metaphorical...expressing the insight that the evil for which every man and woman is responsible individually has nevertheless become a power which mysteriously enslaves every member of the human race.

Thus, myths express the knowledge that we are not ultimately masters of our world and our lives; that the world within which we live is full of riddles and mysteries and our lives, too, are replete with riddles and mysteries.

** REFLECTIONS **

The Christmas season, we are regularly reminded, is meant to be time of magic and mistletoe, for suspending disbelief in order to engage emotionally with ancient myths. It is not a time for quibbling and questioning, disputing and doubting. Fact-checkers, take a holiday; scholarly skeptics, lighten up. Just go with the flow, allow the mind to mellow and greet with greater gusto the singing of those herald angels.

But I guess I'm just the sort of person who wants to have his cake and eat it too. Like **Philip Hewitt**, there is a piece of me that loves the winter holidays - Solstice, Hanukkah, Saturnalia and Christmas all confused and conflated, but precious nevertheless. As I grow older, the gay parties and obligatory gift exchanges have receded in importance while the ancient, underlying messages achieve deeper resonance.

Perhaps it is the persistent tension between Israelis and Arabs in Palestine that makes the Hanukkah story so moving and immediate. Perhaps it is the spectacle of grinding poverty and gross economic inequality that makes the story of **Jesus'** humble beginnings so much more

poignant. Whatever one might believe about his divinity, as a human being, **Jesus** definitely belonged to the exploited working class.

And in considering the solstice from the vantage point of someone rapidly approaching the winter of his years, I see the need in my own life for both more contemplation and more celebration. Life is too short to fritter it away on trivial pursuits. My ambition these days is for more light, more love, more joy.

In other words, the stories and traditions associated with the winter holidays help to shift my focus from more mundane and transient preoccupations to issues of abiding importance. They "prompt" me to pay attention to what really matters. Do I need for the season's grand myths to be factually accurate in order for this to happen? Not at all. I concur with the view of a young boy who once was asked by his teacher to define a myth.

"A myth," he replied, "is something that is true on the inside, but not true on the outside."

Indeed, it is the inside truth that moves us, that unites us, that inspires us. It is when we try to treat myth as history that things begin to get gnarly.

Most people, I'm afraid, don't really understand what mythology is about and what purpose it serves. Part of the problem is that, in contemporary parlance, the word has become degraded. Indeed, it is often used as a synonym for lies and deceit. Just about any anecdote, argument or story that lacks a factual foundation is declared a "myth."

Thus, journalists and politicians often refer to the "myth" of Iraqi WMD's or "weapons of mass destruction." Despite any demonstrable evidence of their existence, the Bush Administration strenuously insisted that such weapons were present in Iraq and posed a grave and imminent threat to America. This was, as we know, the basis on which the vast majority of U.S. citizens supported the invasion of that country.

The claim, of course, was spurious. The U.N. inspectors who scoured the country before our invasion were right; Saddam Hussein was weak and posed no real threat to our national interests. Nor was he in league with America's sworn enemy, **Al Qaeda**. That was a second lie the administration perpetrated when the first was no longer credible. **Saddam and Bin Laden** as blood brothers - that constituted, in journalistic opinion, yet another "myth."

But this is not what the term is meant to convey. Mythic accounts may not be factual, but they are never

meant to be deliberately dishonest; their intent is not purposefully to deceive or manipulate.

Genuine myths serve as inspirational teaching tools. They make the cosmos more coherent and help us find our bearings in the scheme of things. With the aid of these great tales, we are better able to discriminate between and to choose the essential over the incidental. According to the Jungian philosopher **Robert Johnson**,

Every great myth is a symbolic record of...a major stage of growth in the life of a people. This explains why these powerful stories capture us so completely and go so deep in our feelings... Myths are like dreams, messengers of the unconscious mind, but here they are the collective dreams of an entire people...a dream that then bursts forth through its poetry, songs and stories.

Myths emerge from and appeal to what's "inside" us. They are manifestations of the creative, collective imagination, and give expression to a people's deepest longings and highest aspirations. What they do not do is provide an accurate picture of what lies outside, in the physical universe. Nor do they paint a detailed picture of what has actually occurred in the long course of human events. Myth qualifies neither as science or history. Even ancient Greeks like **Aristotle, Democritus and Lucretius** knew as much.

However, the vast majority of people still find it hard to draw this distinction. They yearn for their myths to be factual, for there to be the closest possible correspondence between their inner and outer realities. **Rudolph Bultmann** wrote the words I quoted earlier over fifty years ago. He believed at the time that humankind was now mature enough to replace the authority of myth with that of science. "For us," he said, "the mythological conception of the world is over and done with."

But today, a half-century later, myth still informs otherwise intelligent men's and women's view of the universe and their consideration of where humankind has been and where we are headed. That teary-eyed young man who complained that on Christmas Eve my colleague had failed to "tell the congregation that the Incarnation really happened" is hardly exceptional. If opinion polls are any indication, most Americans continue to believe just what the Gospels claim: that Jesus was miraculously conceived and delivered; that Satan is a real presence in

the universe; that heaven and hell are real places; that history is unfolding according to a divinely predetermined plan.

No matter what scientists and historians might contribute to the discussion, most people stubbornly refuse to treat their most cherished mythologies as anything less than fact. Given a choice between reason and revelation, fact or fairy tale, they uncritically opt for the latter. Myth as metaphor may work for a few people, but obviously not for most. We still need our supernatural saviors and our Santa Clauses to be real rather than figurative.

So what's wrong with this? If by treating myths as literally true, people feel comforted and reassured, what right have we to be critical? Why puncture those illusions? One reason is that we don't want people to indulge in self-deceit. As **Philip Hewitt** said, it's a matter of personal integrity. Moreover, an inability to distinguish between fact and fable, or an over-eagerness to suspend judgment, can be dangerous. In doing so we leave ourselves wide open to all kinds of manipulation by clever story-tellers.

Embracing the inner truth of those timeless mythic accounts shouldn't cause us to lose our critical edge. We mustn't allow the literalists to tell us that we in order to be a real Christian, it's necessary to believe that when Jesus was born angels really sang, a star really stopped in the heavens and that the baby's mother was really a virgin. Or, that to be a real patriot, we have to agree unreservedly with the government's press releases.

It might help to know that ancient writers like **Luke and Matthew** created imaginative scenarios in order to convey more convincingly Jesus' importance, his uniqueness: their sense that he was not an ordinary man; that he was a messianic figure; that he was in some sense a successor to the great King David. As New Testament authority **Bart Ehrman** remarks, these writers were not writing conventional history and had no desire to impart "precise history lessons." Theirs was not meant to be a scholar's version of the story, but one that emphasized the sublime sentiments of faith, hope and love. Why can it not be the same for us?

The habit of taking myths too literally can have other undesirable consequences. In so doing, we often reduce universal truths to parochial interests and produce thereby a more polarized world.

Take the official story of the origins of Hanukkah that I shared earlier with the children. It's by no means the

most important myth in the Jewish tradition, but it is told every year and has long served as a source of sectarian pride to the Jewish community. A classic black-and-white tale of the oppressed taking on and defeating a much stronger opponent, it has reinforced the ancient belief in "chosenness" - that God protects his people and will perform astounding miracles on their behalf.

This story does have a factual foundation, but it remains more myth than history because of its supernatural elements and its failure to present a more complete and accurate picture of what occurred.

There was a revolt in the second century B.C. by Jewish fundamentalists against a ruler and a culture of which they strongly disapproved - a culture that was becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and rational in its outlook. The villain of this piece, King Antiochus Epiphanes, was probably not the cruel monster the Bible depicts him to be. He was more of an enabler, helping educated, upper-class Jews transform their religion into one that was less provincial and, in their estimation, less primitive. "Savvy Jews of the time," historian **Jennifer Hecht** writes,

...preferred the advantages of secular Hellenistic Society to what they perceived as a narrow, hidebound Judaism... They claimed that the resources of the Jewish people were better spent on the pageant of culture and the needs of modern life than consumed in sacrifices to God.

This initiative was fiercely opposed by Jewish traditionalists who had nothing but contempt for their progressive co-religionists. When Antiochus tried to convert the great temple of Jerusalem - the vital center of traditional Jewish faith and practice -- into a universal ecumenical center, violence broke out, followed by open revolt.

What followed was both tragic and deplorable. Jews on both sides committed atrocities. Ultimately, Antiochus' forces were defeated and the traditionalists, under a guerilla leader named Judas Maccabeus, prevailed. Once he had assumed control, Judas ordered the summary execution of his enemies -- those fellow Jews who had adopted Hellenic ways. As for Jewish women who had experienced greater freedom and autonomy in Hellenic culture - they were forced back into their former, subservient roles.

My intent in relating the foregoing is not to demean Hanukkah or diminish its symbolic power. Its stirring

accounts of popular resistance, personal bravery, of exceptional piety are still valid, and its emphasis on the right of a people to self-determination continues to strike a universal chord. That's what myths are supposed to do.

But when we know the "rest of the story" we begin to appreciate the more tragic side of Hanukkah (and all wars, ultimately, are tragic). Judaism in the second century was undergoing profound cultural conflict, not unlike the one that has polarized our own country in recent decades. Ireland, India and much of the Middle East have suffered similar disturbances. Hanukkah's presentation of the issue is deliberately one-sided, and as such it flatters the victors and tends to promote nationalism and sectarian pride.

The historical record reveals that the issues these ancient people faced were very complex, and that we need to be careful about making snap moral judgments. History serves as an antidote to self-righteousness and encourages us to be more universal in our sympathies. Myths are typically pretty black-and-white, lacking in nuance. History's palette contains many more shades of gray. One is not a substitute for the other. For moral and emotional balance, we need both.

Many of the formative myths of human civilization convey incredibly powerful messages that can serve as an ongoing source of inspiration. The theme of heroic sacrifice is a common one. **Prometheus**, feeling compassion, befriends the weak and vulnerable human race. He teaches humans survival skills and bestows upon them the divine gift of fire. But in so doing, he incurs the wrath of the other gods and is made to suffer horribly. It's a great story of human empowerment and of ultimate sacrifice.

And there is **Hiawatha**, the legendary Onondaga warrior who endured many difficult trials and experienced heavy personal losses in order to convince the warring tribes of Ontario and Western New York to join together in a peaceful confederacy. So many of the West's great myths feature conflict and violence, but this one celebrates the peaceful warrior and makes universal cooperation seem possible.

So is it really necessary for stories like these to have a factual basis in order to be transformative? Fact or fable, they do help us transcend our fears, awaken to our untapped potential and clue us in to the kind of behavior that produces a more meaningful life. I'm all for myths, and all for the facts. This holiday season, I'm happy to have a healthy helping of both.