

Prairie U-U Society, Dec. 12, 2004

What Can We Learn from the Jesus Myth?

Musical Prelude: "O Mary Don't You Weep," Prairie Choir

Welcome: Mike Briggs

Chalice Lighting

An opera based on Salman Rushdie's novel "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" opened recently in NYC, and the NY Times interviewed Rushdie for the occasion. These are a few of his words, where he makes reference to the call for his death after he published The Satanic Verses.

"What happened to 'The Satanic Verses' was that it was a battle about who gets to tell the story. I was saying that we all should be able to tell the stories of our lives and retell the great stories, such as those in religion. But there are those who say, We tell these stories, and what is more, this is what they mean. You will understand them in the following way, and if not, we will kill you."

Moment of silent meditation

Musical Interlude: "La Peregrinacion," Lee Burkholder, Ruth and George Calden, Doleta

Joys and Sorrows: Mike

What Can We Learn from the Jesus Myth?

1. Reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, ch. 16, The Prodigal Son - Al Nettleton

I have two questions to ask you about this rather nice story:

First, is it true as narrative history? That is, was there at some particular time and place this particular son?

...I would say that it doesn't matter in the least. Something like this happens all the time. Look around you and within you! Those who might be concerned about the truth of the story as narrative history have a misplaced concern.

Second, what does the story mean? In a way, the answer is obvious: repentance and forgiveness are wonderful. If you don't have a fatted calf, a meal at your favorite restaurant will do. But in another way, the story doesn't really tell us how to behave. The good son has a good point. Why shouldn't he go off to drink and carouse and frequent brothels? And be rewarded on his return? The story doesn't provide a guide to action.

I would argue that the same things apply to the larger Jesus story, that it's a mistake to be much concerned about its truth as narrative history and a mistake to think that the story has any kind of single and unambiguous meaning. In this way, the Jesus story is like myths more generally.

2. Let me say just a little bit about how we know the story. The oldest physically existing

evidence, 7 verses, and the first references in other manuscripts to the Gospels are from about 150 CE. There are many variations in existing later manuscripts, 30,000 for the Gospel of Luke alone, but the whole canon of the 4 Gospels was essentially put together by about 185 CE, after lots of editing. That is to say, there were about 150 years between the alleged events and the 4 Gospels. This means that the story was an oral tradition for some three to five generations, an oral tradition that went from Aramaic to Greek. That's time for myths to evolve.

3. Myths generally have legitimating functions, and this is true of the Nativity story. It's a charming story. Part of the charm for me is that it enables one to discuss the legitimating functions of myth to a seventh grader. Matthew opens with a genealogy, 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile, and 14 generations from the exile to Jesus. Jesus was descended from David, the hero king, and he was destined to be king, as Herod knew, leading to the slaughter of the innocents and the flight into Egypt. If you want to legitimate the new Christian communities to the Jews awaiting the Messiah, the king to be, that helps. Then you can bring the Magi in for those who were into astrology. And the birth in the stable might attract the masses who hoped for more. From the point of view of narrative history, it's a preposterous story, but I love to see and hear it retold, from the Madonnas of Raphael to Handel's Messiah to Menotti's Amahl and the Night Visitors.

4. Anthropologists and historians know that myths evolve in a process of accretion. A French anthropologist compared it with a machinist in his shop. He has lots of parts lying around and assembles what he has into something new. The French word for this is "bricolage," tinkering.

This is probably what happened in the evolving Christian communities. They took what they had available and added it to what they knew about their martyred founder.

The miracles, especially the healing miracles, might have come early, even in Jesus' lifetime. Apparent healing miracles occur today as well, every day.

The idea of the dying sacrificial and resurrected god had been around for centuries. The stories of Osiris and Mithras were well known to the early Christians. They also knew about the virgin birth of Mithras. The idea of resurrection could be extended to every believer.

The idea that the world was coming to an end, very clear in some of the sayings of Jesus and the writings of Paul, was also around. The idea made some sense, for the Graeco-Roman world really was coming to an end.

A group of disciples is common in religious myths. While it might be hard to identify with the divine figure, identifying with a flawed human being like Peter was easier. Christianity offered women the two Mary's and the larger family of Jesus - and women were probably a large part of the evolving Christian communities.

And the revolutionary ethical ideas attributed to Jesus were in the air in this period. The idea of an ethical deity was more or less absent among the Greeks and the Romans. It was there in Judaism, and some of the OT prophets were like the Greek philosophers and Buddha in advocating a more universalistic ethic.

5. The assembly of the Jesus myth didn't require too much attention to consistency, and there are lots of inconsistencies in the New Testament. Anthropologists expect this. To serve the functions of myth, inconsistencies are entailed. One anthropologist wrote that myths don't so much tell us

the answers to important questions as to show us that some questions can't be answered.

6. The Jesus story seems to differ from the myths of other civilizations in one major respect. The myths of Greece, of Hinduism, and of the Northern Europeans have many variants. In the Greek myths, the stories of Hercules or the Argonauts vary a great deal from city to city, island to island. The same is true of the myths about Odin, Thor, and company: cross a river, go over a mountain, and you get a different story. I'm sure the same is true for Hindu myths.

Christianity has been different because it evolved in an hierarchical church that was eventually part of an hierarchical empire. Most variant versions of the myth were suppressed. Almost all of the written versions of the alternatives were destroyed, and the only thing we knew about them were from the writings of their orthodox enemies. This has changed since the discovery by an Egyptian peasant in 1945 of the Nag Hammadi scrolls, which revealed the so-called Gnostic gospels of Thomas, Mary Magdalen and others. My favorite historian of early Christianity is Elaine Pagels, who was among the first to write about these newly discovered gospels for the larger public. She wrote that she got into studying early Christianity because she wanted to discover the early pure forms, uncontaminated from the state and other institutions. But the farther she went back, the more variations she found. So Christianity might not be so different from the other great bodies of myth. We have great diversity in Christianity today, some 22,000 sects and denominations. But the diversity was there at the beginning as well.

7. Elaine Pagels still goes to a Christian church. She wants and likes to be in a Christian community, and she likes the rituals. I think she should become a Unitarian-Universalist. We have more freedom in dealing with the Jesus story. Just as it was assembled bit by bit, we can disassemble it bit by bit, taking what we want. I thought for a while that there might be a core myth, that of the sacrificial god. But who am I to differ from Thomas Jefferson, who wrote a version of the story without the sacrificial god or the miracles? Or from Leo Tolstoy, who made the Sermon on the Mount the core of the story, or from Karl Kautsky, who made Jesus into something of a proto-socialist? So we are free to choose. Some choices, of course, can be disastrous. Leo Tolstoy died a tragic death, and recent Jesus children have also suffered while trying to lead simple lives. Mel Gibson has a version of the story that seems to be hateful. There are good readings and bad readings of the myth. But narrative history won't help to choose among them.

At least that's what I think. But I have found that most Prairie people have informed opinions about the Bible in general and the Jesus story in particular, and some of you are better read in this than me.

Discussion

Offering. Introduction of Guests and Visitors. Prairie Announcements.

Spiritual - "Go Tell It on the Mountain," Prairie choir and congregation

Closing Words from Walt Whitman:

"Great are the myths — I too delight in them;
Great are Adam and Eve — I too look back and accept them;
Great the risen and fallen nations, and their poets, women, sages,
inventors, rulers, warriors, and priests."

And in another place:

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself;
I am large — I contain multitudes."