

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 227 + February 2019
Copyright: © 2019 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of < www.worship.ca > as the source.



Metaphors, Myths -- and The Mass and the Molecules

1 Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the atheists and the secularists are right. I'm thinking Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

2 Suppose, for the sake of argument, that all religious traditions – that the entire corpus of Christian Traditions – are nothing more than an accumulation of human myths and metaphors. That Christian rituals – like the Mass, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper – are an entirely human invention, alongside such religious practices as animal sacrifices and the turning of prayer wheels.

3 Is all religion therefore – and the Christian Tradition specifically – an “opium of the people”?

4 I believe the Christian faith is more than this, but I'm willing to acknowledge that much of our Christian Tradition is at least a matter of metaphor and myth. By “the Christian Tradition” I mean to include what I have called the Four Cs of religion: Creed, Code, Cult, and Constitution. See Essay 195 above.

5 I argued in Essay 195, “Idol Factories”, that everyone is religious, everyone has a “religion”. Atheists and secularists to the contrary notwithstanding. And I argued in that Essay that the Christian Tradition – its Creeds and values, its ethical Codes, its Cultic rituals, and its Constitutions and political orderings – stands up pretty well against all those other “idols” out there that humans sometimes worship: Sports, science, sex, technology, nationalism, money, celebrity.

6 I'd even argue that the Christian Tradition, with its Four Cs, stands up pretty well against other major religions of our day – such as Islam, and Buddhism, and various Indigenous Spiritualities, to name three currently popular alternatives – with their Four Cs. I provoked something of an outcry with this aspect of my argument in a subsequent Essay, 197 “Love me, Love My Religion?”

7 So, faithful reader, think of this Essay as a kind of continuation of that one, Essay 197. I like to believe that I am continuing an apologetic dialogue. That I am trying to make a case for that aspect of the Christian faith that is un-apologetically evangelistic. For that aspect of my faith that aims to “make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19). Less grandly, that I am trying to “give an account of the hope that is in me” (1 Peter 3:15).

8 Once again, as in previous Essays, I will qualify my own enthusiasm for my Lutheran Christian faith by an appeal to Two Important Principles.

9 The First Important Principle I take from Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, our era’s premier Christian apologeticist. Christians have no business, Baum asserts, trying to convert anyone happy, or content, in their own religion. That seems to me like an eminently generous Principle.

10 The Second Important Principle, which I cite here to soften my perhaps sectarian enthusiasms, is what I call the Paul Bosch Principle – although others might claim it as well. It states: “Every individual, every religion, every culture has something to teach me.” I regard this Principle, also, as eminently generous and open-hearted.

11 Let’s return, for a moment, to my acknowledgment in 4 above that might have shocked you. Yes, I am willing to grant that there are plenty of myths and metaphors in the Christian Tradition. And none of them threaten or imperil my faith. On the contrary. They enlarge and enrich it.

12 Let’s take the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth. In my understanding of contemporary Biblical studies, Jesus is born and reared in Nazareth. The Biblical stories of the trip to Bethlehem, the “virgin” birth, the visits of the shepherds and of the Wise Men, King Herod’s murderous response: All these are merely charming myths, elaborate metaphors.

13 But a myth or metaphor is not something untrue, “something that never happened.” A myth, as a learned friend defines it, is “something that always happens.” A good myth or metaphor tells us something about a deeper reality. (My own definition of a fundamentalist or Biblical literalist is someone who cannot handle metaphor.)

14 Hence the myths and metaphors of “the Christmas Story” speak of some marvelous realities we might otherwise overlook. The great historian of religion Huston Smith has defined the universal human religious impulse as “a loyalty to the Intangibles”.

15 So the Christmas stories – myths, if you prefer – suggest that, for example, the Ultimate and the Infinite – God, if you prefer – often comes among us in the Proximate and the Finite (the human baby in a manger). That both poverty and ingenuousness (the shepherds) as well as superstition and learning (the Wise Men) can acknowledge this truth long before power and wealth (King Herod) are able to. And that power and wealth often conspire against what is true and good.

16 So you could argue a similar case with almost every Biblical narrative. Jesus' Resurrection? Jesus rises from the dead, metaphorically, in his followers, in the community we call church. ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" asks the Voice at Paul's conversion, as Saul / Paul is on his way to Damascus to persecute...the church, the infant Jesus Movement.)

17 Martin Luther reminds us that we are to be "Christ to our neighbour". Not "Little Christ", as often mis-quoted, a diminutive that is also a put-down. Luther's original does not have the diminutive. It is simply "Christ". We share in Christ's vocation. A high honour indeed.

18 I'd personally want to profess that these narratives are more than simply myths or metaphors. But even if that's all they are – a la Dawkins and Hitchens and others – they are still compelling to me. Authoritative, even!

19 In that spirit, I'll advance below three arguments why my Lutheran Christian faith, with all its myths and metaphors – plus whatever else is there – remains for me a compelling and authoritative religious witness. You'll tell me about yours? Of course the best and most persuasive witness will always be the living of your life, rather than pronouncements about your beliefs.

20 FIRST: My own Lutheran Christian Tradition seems to me more rationally persuasive, more inclusive, and simply more humane, than any of the afore mentioned alternatives. It does not require of me or of my co-religionists that we – males or females – dress in distinctive or exotic clothing. It does not require of us that we eat only specific foods in our daily diets. Its Mass – its Holy Communion, its Eucharist, its Lord's Supper – does not require of any of us – male or female co-religionists – distinctive or demeaning postures or bodily positions.

21 SECOND: My Lutheran Christian Tradition is eminently adult. It allows for, even celebrates, contemporary advances in scholarship and human knowledge, including Biblical scholarship. Its Mass – its Holy Communion, etc. – is for Grown-Ups; It is a public ritual that will not infantilize. It seeks to draw out and to celebrate what is highest and best in a person's experience and in a given culture's contributions. At the same time its rituals resist and protest anything in personal experience or in popular culture that is anti-humane or less than ennobling.

22 Its theological and intellectual tradition is among the most impressive in the world, from Luther himself, to Tillich and Bonhoeffer in our day. Its clergy have been among the world's best educated.

23 THIRD and finally: My Lutheran Christian Tradition "honours the molecules" in ways that other traditions do not. Particularly in its Mass – its Holy Communion, etc. – my Tradition is steadfastly and un-apologetically Incarnational and Sacramental. It gathers the world of nature – the physical, the material, the palpable, the corporeal – into its embrace.

24 Far from rejecting or attempting to flee from this world of solid materiality, my tradition teaches respect and honour to this world and its molecules. Its chief cultic rite, the Mass – the Holy Communion, etc. – is simply impossible to imagine without the molecules: of Bread, of Wine, of Water. My Christian Tradition is altogether alone in this respect.

25 That's an important ecological and environmental witness, in any age. It's particularly, crucially, essentially significant in our own age.

+ + +