

Theological and Pedagogical Implications of the Nature of Religious Story: A Mythical Realist Orientation for Religious Education

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Introduction

In this paper I propose a “mythical realist” approach to religious belief as a helpful way of understanding religion and orienting religious education. Religion is a complex (and in some ways perplexing) phenomenon that is widespread throughout human cultures and throughout human history. This paper focuses primarily on beliefs as a central aspect of religion and is informed by recent cognitive studies in religion. While I do not intend to leave aside other important aspects of religion such as ritual, ethics, or communal dimensions of religion, they are not my focus here.

The intention of the paper is to begin to articulate a case for the enhancement of “mythical realist” religious understanding as a fundamental goal of religious education. Goals are not the only things that matter in education, but goals do matter and in some sense define and guide educational practices. I take the general goal of Christian religious education to be that of nurturing strong and healthy Christian faith.¹ I argue that this must include the ability to perceive/experience/understand the world in (Christian) “mythical” and “realistic” terms simultaneously. The paper in its present form does not move much beyond an initial attempt to establish this goal.

In overview: I begin with two personal stories of conversionary experiences to show that mythic stories are what moves us and orients us in the world. From this proceeds a discussion of

¹ I presume that religious education within other faith traditions similarly seek to nurture faith in those traditions. I note that religious education in schools in the UK and many other European countries presents a different kind of context and necessitates different kinds of goals.

scientific and religious knowing as (respectively) intuitive and counterintuitive understandings of the world as we experience it. Following this is a brief discussion of religious belief as “mythical realist.” Finally, I offer a clarifying statement of what I mean by a mythical realist approach to religious education and what such an approach may imply (with a list of implications not yet played out).

Stories of Conversions into Larger Stories

At age twelve I went forward on Wednesday evening to dedicate my life to Christ at the end of an evangelistic musical service at my family’s church. It was a moment of high emotions and great release for me, and a notable turning point in my life. From a critical distance (and after some advanced study in sociology of religion) I can see that pressure had been mounting for me to perform this act to meet the social expectations and hopes held by my parents and my church that I would join the ranks of the “saved.” It was also a time of early adolescent angst as I struggled to sort of my personal identity in relation to some larger understanding of my world. Perhaps in part that evening I was fulfilling a social expectation to join the church and become a believing, decision making Christian. Perhaps I also sought to resolve or relieve a related psychological crisis by shoring up an identity aligned with my family and my faith community and the whole of creation. No doubt the emotional fervor of the music aided in the decision making process. But I also really meant it (as I think is well evidenced by the fact that I later went to seminary and now teach in a theology school).

When I went forward that evening I was not merely dedicating my life to a social institution, or merely to a set of theological ideas or some metaphysical theory. Rather, I had rather clearly in mind images of Christ in heaven and present in that sanctuary, images of Satan the tormenting Temptor in hell and on earth, and images of myself being eternally embraced and

protected by the God of all creation. In other words, it was for me a scene of mythic proportions in which I was acknowledging and committing to a cosmic story featuring the triune Christian God and Satan, with their respective minions, as well as (among many others) Moses and Abraham and Sarah, and Paul and the disciples and my ancestors and parents and grandparents, and me, all with their/our respective and related chapters or sub-stories. I was, as I see it now (after some advanced study in psychology and theories of myth) connecting and committing myself to a comprehensive story of the world, which offered a way of understanding my personal life story as meaningful in relation to the overarching story. Connecting and committing my self to this comprehensive “mythic” story also provided a way of integrating the mythic/metaphysical and the historic/physical dimensions of the world as I experienced it, perceived it, and was coming to understand it.

I experienced another conversion at age twenty in a college biology course in my sophomore year. This time the story to which I aligned my self was the grand story of evolution. Surely, I had had some brief exposure to evolutionary theory in high school biology, but the overwhelming social support in my family and church and rural community for a literalist belief in the biblical accounts of creation and against evolutionary theory as atheistic ensured that such exposure did not sway my beliefs in the least. During my college freshman year I had been exposed to and even intrigued by some sociological theories of religion that caused me to ponder the claim that “man created God in his own image.” But I stopped short of accepting this Durkheimian view. I had also listened for an entire semester to my anthropology professor regularly rail against the obvious foolishness of religion and especially creationist views of human origins. This had caused me to think about anthropological versus theological accounts of

religion and human origins, but direct frontal attacks are strikingly easy to defend. The professor was obviously an angry atheist.

My biology professor was winningly friendly and a skillful teacher. He liked to wander out among students during a lecture and sit down and look at what he'd written on the board to think it through with us. One day in a section on adaptation and change he told the story of how the dominant color of birds in London changed over a relatively short period of time in response to the rapid onset of air pollution during the booming industrial revolution. As the bark on the trees became blacker and blacker, lighter colored birds that used to be camouflaged by the lighter colored bark became easy prey to predators. Meanwhile darker colored birds that used to fall easy prey to predators because of their distinctive color now increasingly blended in and survived at higher rates. Light color genes were being deselected. Dark color genes were being selected for their adaptive advantage. This was a rare and dramatically visible instance, he told us, of the evolution of a species in adaptive response to environmental change.

I did not go forward that afternoon, and there was nothing analogous to an alter call. But I did experience at that time a decisive and distinctive shift in my view of the cosmos. My world view changed. And once again it was not just that I was giving intellectual assent to a certain theory or set of ideas. Rather, my imagination had been captured and I suddenly saw the "whole story" of evolving birds, and fish, and mammals, and plants, and planets. It was again a story of mythic proportions. It included what could at least at times be seen here and now (as in the case of the London birds during the Industrial Revolution) as well as mysterious un-seeable forces and processes that millions of years ago shaped our current existence. It connected me beyond my historic ancestors to the whole pre-human evolution of life on earth, and the whole interconnected cosmic ecology of life in the present.

The “mythic” story of evolution was evoked for me recently in a single image on the cover of a summer 2006 Special Edition of *Scientific American*. The cover features a prehistoric man carrying a bone and walking partly erect up over a knoll with the rising sun in the background, and a small tree and some grass at the top of the knoll. The image simultaneously humanizes and mythologizes a story of evolution: the emergence of a life-giving solar system, a greening planet, and the dawn of Homo sapiens (distinguished by bipedality and tool use) as a crowning achievement. The issue is titled: “Becoming Human: Evolution and the Rise of Intelligence.”

In calling the story of evolution “mythic” I do not mean to cast doubt on the truth value of evolutionary theory. I believe there is ample scientific evidence to support the basic story of evolution. There is also evidence of the creative presence of God in the world. This presence is widely experienced and witnessed to across the world and across human history. The point is not that evolution or divine creativity are untrue or true. The point is that comprehensive, comic stories are important to human understanding and are the framework in which we think and live. We yearn for, and we need, and have for millennia relied upon such understanding.

My intent is not to rationalize, validate, or harmonize religious and scientific views. My intent is merely to point to three facts: 1) Myths, as grand stories featuring metaphysical or non-physical characters (gods, ghosts, demons, etc.) and non-historical events (events understood as occurring before or outside of human history), are a time-honored and adaptively successful way of understanding the world; 2) Science, as accumulating empirically verifiable facts and theories about the world, is unarguably highly successful as a strategy of human understanding; and 3) humans routinely engage in scientific and mythic understanding simultaneously. I suggest that doing so well may be an important and appropriate basic goal of religious education.

Scientific Knowing as Intuitive and Religious Knowing as Counterintuitive Understanding

Scientific knowing is rooted in what contemporary cognitive science (studies of how the mind works) terms “intuitive understanding.” For example, we intuitively know that if we knock a book off a desk it will fall to the floor. This is intuitive because unsupported objects consistently fall to the ground or floor in the world of our experiences and, importantly, in the world of our ancestors’ experiences for millennia past. Scientific theories of gravity are merely careful explanations of how and why things “fall.”

Contrarily, in terms of cognitive science, mythic thinking is seen as “counterintuitive” and “counterfactual.” For example, in the New Testament Jesus reappears in bodily form after his death and then floats up from the earth into heaven. This is counter to our common intuition and the well established fact that persons cannot float upwards unsupported, and counter to the intuitive fact that bodies do not regain life and reappear after death.

Facts are observable and verifiable events and phenomena in everyday life (e.g., it is a fact that persons die and their bodies naturally disintegrate thereafter). Counterfactual beliefs are counter to such facts (e.g., the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body). Intuitions are evolved common sensibilities about the world around us (e.g., all agents—things to which we ascribe thought and will—have bodies). Counterintuitive beliefs run counter to such intuitions (e.g., some agents—for example angels and God in contemporary popular belief—have no physical body).

The adaptive advantages of mythic understanding as embodied in religious belief systems presents a baffling problem for understanding human thought and society from an evolutionary perspective. As Scott Atran puts it, all religions include “costly and hard-to-fake commitment to

a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents who master people's existential anxieties, such as death and deception" (2002, 4).

Evolutionary theories of mind insist that (as also with the rest of the body) traits survive and flourish only if, and because, they have notable adaptive advantages—they promote in some way the survival and flourishing of organisms with that trait. The advantages of believing in and committing one's life to "a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents" are not at all clear. Yet religions and religious beliefs are ubiquitous throughout all human societies past and present. In fact, as Atran puts it "the psychology that leads to such beliefs is common to us all" (8).

In cognitive science theories of religion the most prominent current way of understanding this perplexing human propensity to hold ardently to counterintuitive beliefs is to understand religion as a by-product of traits initially evolved for other purposes (known as "exaptation"). For example, humans evolved hyper-active agency detection, causing us to see agents and ascribe agency when no agent is there—such as seeing faces in clouds, or mistaking a tree stump for a bear—because there is survival advantage in over-detecting, and survival disadvantage in under-detecting agents around us. This "explains" the ubiquitous human perception of, and belief in supernatural agents (cf. Boyer 2001). But, as Atran points out, such theories fail to adequately explain the extraordinary motivation and commitment entailed in religious belief (for example, why is belief in Santa Claus held differently for most people from belief in God?).

Other attempts to understand and explain the benefits of religion from an evolutionary perspective include commitment theories, experiential theories, and performance theories. *Commitment theories* of religion focus on ways institutions and cultures rely on religious belief systems in order to sustain and enforce rules and norms. But these theories tend not to attend

well to ways cognitive structures and patterns shape belief. And they do not really explain why religious beliefs tend to garner more steadfast and enduring commitment than do most politically, economically, or scientifically persuasive accounts of the way things are or should be.

Experiential theories of religion attempt to “explain” religion in terms of neuro-physiological processes traceable to religious experiences of trance, meditation, revelation and so forth. But these have no real explanatory power at all—the fact that a certain area the brain is associated with a certain religious experience such as meditation provides no insight into what or why religion is.

Performance theories attend to the psychodynamics of liturgy and ritual practice, focusing on normative functions of ceremonial practices but neglecting “cognitive processes of categorization, reasoning, and decision making that underlie all religious beliefs and commitments and that make such beliefs and commitments comprehensible” (Atran 14).

The point here is that much effort has gone into explaining religion, and it remains difficult to explain, and in fact remains an embarrassment. As Atran puts it, the psychology that causes such beliefs is “common to us all.” Cognitive scientists widely agree that religious perceptions of the world occur commonly to believers and unbelievers alike. In fact it requires dedicated effort and a tightly controlled system of formal education and social support to sustain a commitment to a non-theistic scientific viewpoint (cf. Barrett 2004). It is an embarrassment for many scientific thinkers that we humans (all) have an overwhelming propensity to believe in and ardently commit ourselves to counterfactual and counterintuitive understandings of the world.

Many theologians face the same problem. How does one explain that God is well understood as a divine loving and good parent, while some 30,000 children starve to death each day? Or that God is omnipresent and never seen, or three persons in one? Etc. Or, perhaps even

more difficult, what does a highly educated theologian make of the fact that the vast majority of Christians around the world and in the U.S. are in large degree biblical literalists requiring and enjoying such explanations as how the seven “days” of creation might be understood as seven “periods of indeterminate time,” or how scientific research on natural cycles of locust gestation and infestation along the Nile might reinforce a literal understanding of the plague of locusts described in Exodus 10?

Religious Belief as Mythical Realist

I suggest that it is helpful to understand religious beliefs as primarily mythic (while remaining respectful of intuitive realities to which they may run counter), and mythic beliefs as ironic, paradoxical, and mystical. That is, we both do and do not believe the counterfactual and counterintuitive claims of the myths to which we commit ourselves; or, perhaps better said, we believe both the fact and the counterfact to be true (paradox). Put another way, when we hold a mythic belief we believe that it both means and does not mean what it says (irony). One more way of putting it: we usually understand (often unconsciously) that we both know and do not know what our mythic beliefs mean (mystical). For example, while a young child may believe “literally” that angels fly down from heaven to serve as protectors and messengers, he or she also knows very well (and quite intuitively) that, aside from invisible angels, persons (anything to which human like personality traits may be ascribed) do not fly and are not invisible. The child may also have learned in Sunday school or at home that since we cannot see angels no one really knows what they look like or how they behave. This suggests that we hold counterintuitive beliefs as special limited and unverifiable violations of otherwise universal and enduring intuitive truths (cf. Boyer 2001).

Some studies show that intuitive beliefs commonly override counterintuitive beliefs in moments of crisis or even when reflecting on moments of crisis. For example, when faced with a hypothetical scenario of being stranded on a deserted island with a broken life raft, persons who profess belief that God is all-powerful and not limited by ordinary laws of physics will nonetheless report that they would be more likely to pray that someone on a distant passing boat would see them than that God would repair the life raft. This is because it is intuitively more likely that a person's attention might be turned in a certain direction than it is that physical matter (the life raft) might be redirected (cf. Sloane 2004, cited in Brelsford 2005). Intuitive beliefs tend to trump the counterintuitive in a crisis (whether or not they should do so is not the point here). The phenomenon known as “no atheists in fox holes” may seem to suggest the opposite—that we turn to counterintuitive metaphysical beliefs in moments of crisis. However, the non-atheist praying in the fox hole is *in the fox hole*, and is no doubt covering his/her head and trying to physically avoid fire. A truer counter phenomenon would be “believers placidly kneeling in prayer in the midst of gun fire on the battle field.” In most healthy minds counterintuitive beliefs supplement but do not over-assert themselves or override intuitive beliefs.

On the other hand, if counterintuitive beliefs do not significantly inform and influence a person's actions then it seems functionally inaccurate or meaningless to call them beliefs. There are times when counterintuitive beliefs really should trump the intuitive. For example, when I encounter a person who looks very different from me I am reflexively cautious due to the intuitive sense that persons who are not recognizable members of “my kind” may be members of an “enemy kind” and/or I may experience a dangerous inability to read the meanings and motives in their actions. Long practice in “loving my neighbors as my self” and loving even “my

enemies” may enable me to quickly override by intuitive reflex with my counterintuitive commitment to love of strangers. Yet this does not mean that I want my seventeen year old daughter to encounter and respond to hooded figures on a dark street the same way should would encounter and respond to friends in the school parking lot.

Healthy religious thinking and believing entails the ability to perceive, commit to and live by counterintuitive and intuitive understandings of the world simultaneously. This is a complex and highly sophisticated form of thinking.

Religious heroes may be understood as persons who do this extraordinarily well. For example, Thomas Merton, with his deep love and appreciation for nature and science and philosophy, and his deep investment in a contemplative life lived and understood in explicitly Christian terms.

In other words, healthy religious belief entails deep appreciation for and commitment to both mythic (counterintuitive) and scientific (intuitive) understanding. Excessive and exclusive commitment to counterintuitive sensibilities about the (metaphysical) world, which override intuitive sensibilities, can lead to dangerous fanaticism and lunacy (e.g., religiously motivated suicides or murder, or declination of life saving medical intervention, or failure to care for one’s own body). Commitment to intuitive understanding of the world to the exclusion and dismissal of the counterintuitive can lead to an artless dispirited existence.

Mythical Realist Religious Education

I suggest that a fundamental goal of Christian religious education ought to be that of promoting and nurturing capacities to 1) perceive and appreciate the mythical depth dimensions of reality-as-experienced-in-the-world in specifically Christian terms, 2) in ways that complement, enrich, and enhance experiences of intuitive realities, and 3) live faithfully

according to such understandings. This may be called a “mythical realist” approach to religious education. By holding together “mythical” and “realism” I do not intend to claim that myths in general or Christian myths in particular are true accounts of reality (which some attempt via critical realism). Neither do I intend to claim that all accounts of reality are mythical (which some postmodernists claim). Rather, by linking these two terms I intend to point to a way of thinking and understanding which holds together simultaneous commitments to intuitive and counterintuitive understanding of the same (complex and multidimensional) reality.

Such mythical realist thinking is profoundly commonplace. It is prominently and dominantly present in all human cultures past and present in varying forms of religious beliefs. I am merely suggesting that we should work at thinking well in mythical realist terms. I am suggesting that a fundamental goal of religious education is to help persons and communities and cultures do this. Put another way, persons are naturally religious; religious education has to do with educating that religiousness in order to promote doing it well rather than poorly.

A Few Implications and Observations for Further Development

- Persons engage in poor religious thinking when intuitive notions of reality are ignored or demeaned (as in the case of religious fundamentalism), and when counterintuitive (mythic) thinking is demeaned (as in the case of scientific reductionism).
- Attempts to rigorously guide all actions according to established and accepted theological beliefs are misguided, and attempts to rigorously guide all actions according to established and accepted scientific beliefs are misguided.
- Stories (narrative forms) are useful ways to engage and inspire holistic intuitive and counterintuitive understanding and promote healthy understanding of self and

world (cf. Brueggemann's argument for primary "Torah" education; Wimberly's "story linking" strategies; Groome's focus on "Christian faith story;" and others).

- Pedagogies that inspire "wonder" or awe may help develop mythical appreciation of the world (cf. Proffitt).
- Pedagogies that value and nurture imagination may encourage respect for mythic perception and sensibility (cf. Harris).
- Notions of "wisdom" may be understood in terms of mature/skillful intuitive-counterintuitive thinking (cf. Melchert).
- Theological attempts to systematically clarify beliefs and explain the meaning of faith may diminish capacities for and appreciation of mythic thinking, and should not be used to guide religious education.
- The "Mythic-literal" faith of children may be celebrated and enriched toward a mythical realist orientation (cf. Fowler). Mythical realism may or may not be similar to Fowler's "conjunctive faith."

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