Pre-Historic, Historic, and Post-Historic Fabulation Narratives in Religious/Spiritual Traditions and their Implication for Religious Education

–a draft–

by Peter Gilmour

Sacred texts and stories from religious/spiritual traditions are myriad. Some are canonical, others are extra-canonical, and still others are hagiographical. Scholars continually research these stories, from the Bible to the *Quran*, from the *Vedas* to the Book of Mormon, from the *Gathas* to Science and Health, from midrash to hadith, from the life of Christ to the life of Mohammed, from the life of the Buddha to the life of Joseph Smith,[1] from the life of Zorsaster[2] to the life of

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[1] See for example Richard Lyman Bushman, Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: a cultural biography of Mormonism's founder (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

[2] See for example Mary Boyce, Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

Mary Baker Eddy,[3] to determine whether or not specific stories are literal or imaginative, historical or fictive, or a combination of genres.

Religious Educators, faithful to their particular religious/spiritual traditions, present canonical narratives as the bedrock of specific traditions. They also know the traditional power and persuasive nature extra-canonical narratives possess for the lives of the faithful, and frequently employ such stories alongside of or in addition to the canonical narratives. Likewise, they know the power and persuasive nature of faithful lives, and often employ biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs of saintly people in their religious education programs.

Today, the authority of all texts is far more questionable than in previous epochs. Likewise, the authority of all religious/spiritual texts, whether canonical, extra-canonical, or hagiographical, is far more questionable than in previous epochs. Post-modern cultural consciousness has, for some, upended the central importance, perennial relevance, and practical necessity to know a body of texts

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[3] See for example Mary Baker Eddy, Mary Baker Eddy, Speaking for Herself (Boston: The Writings of Mary Baker Eddy, 2002).

that undergirded, communicated, and inspired belief for countless generations of people.

Truths, once thought to be imbedded within privileged texts, have transmigrated to the readers' search for meanings. Personal meanings rather than objective truths are emphasized, and such meanings reside in the readers' consciousness and/or in the relationships established between readers and texts. Truth has been supplanted by at least relational meaning or at most fanciful relationality. Hence, the way is cleared for a multiplicity of interpretations of a single text, and as many meanings as readers. Religious educators who embrace this shift away from truth in texts towards relational meanings, approach the process of Religious Education by recognizing their students as depositories of truths and/or major stake holders in establishing meaning.

This growing consciousness and practice, often called Reader Response Theory, i.e., the reader as at least a vital and constitutive participant in establishing meaning in texts, or, at most, the exclusive arbiter of textual meanings, applies to religious/sacred narratives, whether they be canonical, extra-canonical, or hagiographical. Various "readings" both of classic and contemporary texts eschew a single textual meaning and embrace multiplicities of meanings. Feminist, gay/lesbian, and various cultural "readings" of texts, to name just a few, have

become well respected methodologies of interpretation in many circles of literary criticism.

Ours is a culture where textual distinctions between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, history and myth have become at least blurred and at most irrelevant in this developing post-modern paradigm. When Truman Capote introduced the "non-fiction novel" with the 1965 publication of In Cold Blood,[4] he combined (or blurred) what were at one time two distinct genres A generation later, contemporary memoir further contributes to the meltdown of genres. Where does fact stop and fiction begin in some of these books? The recent flap over the memoir, A Million Little Pieces[5] called into question not just the accuracy of repressed memories, but also the very authenticity of them.[6] Several years ago a

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[4]Truman Capote, In Cold Blood (NY: Random House, 1965).

[5]James Frey, A Million Little Pieces (NY: Doubleday, 2003)

[6]See for example, Peter Gilmour's sections, "Repressed and Phantom Memories" (p. 22) and "Fiction" (pp. 33-34) in The Wisdom of Memoir: Reading and Writing Life's Sacred Texts

book, <u>The Education of Little Tree</u>,[7] which many a religious educator used with

students, was discovered to be totally fictitious. Likewise, what is more artificial

today than the carefully contrived "reality" television shows?

(MN: St. Mary's Press, 1997).

      [7]Forrest Carter, <u>The Education of Little Tree</u> (NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

Whose telling of history, for example is accurate? Is Mel Gibson's, <u>The Passion of the Christ</u> film, as the late Pope John Paul II was to have said, "It is as it was" more mythic than historical? Did the pope articulate this response, or was this sound byte only attributed to him? How advanced or primal were Native American cultures in 1492 when Columbus made his first voyage to what became known as America? A new book by Charles C. Mann, based on archeological evidence, presents the population of the Americas exceeding that of Europe, and some American cities of that time period larger than the largest cities in Europe.[8] And even though Dan Brown begins his novel, <u>The Da Vinci Code</u>[9] with this disclaimer, "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental,"[10] why do so many people want to see it as accurate history?

In addition to these genre-breaking texts, the contemporary world, unlike pre-literate cultures, experiences a proliferation of narrativities. Blogs, online

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[8]Charles C. Mann, <u>1491: new revelations of the Americas before Columbus </u>(NY: Knopf, 2005).

[9]Dan Brown, <u>The Da Vinci Code </u>(NY Doubleday, 2003).

[10]<u>Ibid</u>., copyright page.

writing both by recognized expert commentators and also by unknown people, greatly increase the quantity of narrative activity. The relative instantaneous nature of blogs, in stark contrast to the time lag involved in traditional newspaper journalism (at least overnight) and in magazine publishing (often a week or more) and in book publishing (often months/years), creates narratives that are much more reactionary than reflective. Yet the growing power of bloggers to create and influence public opinion, most notably elections, is apparent.

This incredible array of contemporary narrativity stands in stark contrast to the classic reading and educational use of texts of the historic modern age which puts priority upon viewing specific texts within a given genre with its own norms, and learning a single, correct interpretation of each text. Certainly there were various schools of interpretation, e.g., the historical/critical which contextualized a text within its specific time frame and authorship, and the New Criticism which put great emphasis on approaching the text as a work of art with its own integrity independent of history and authorship. Yet, even within these schools of interpretation, emphasis on a single correct interpretation of a text prevailed.

Likewise, pre-modern texts stand in stark contrast both to modern and post-modern texts in two distinct ways. First, our knowledge of how texts functioned in a pre-modern culture where most people were illiterate and groups lacked the

technology to duplicate copies easily, is quite limited. The orality of narratives in pre-modern cultures coupled with the lack of technology to preserve most all narratives, no doubt led to loss. Perhaps the vast majority of narratives of this era have been lost. Only the most significant, or the most powerful, were remembered and eventually committed to writing which gave them the possibility, but not the guarantee that they would survive into the future.

This all to brief foray into how texts functioned in modern and pre-modern ages offers a striking contrast with the place of texts within post-modern culture. Might we be in the midst of evolving new definitions, understandings, and practices of narrative? Some post-modernists would argue that the very idea of new definitions is anti post-modern, and no updated or new definitions of anything are accurate, appropriate, or useful in a post-modern context. In short, there is no still point to the turning world. So, one way to advance the narrative argument within this paper and be somewhat faithful to the post-modern paradigm, is to focus on understandings of narrativity based on practices rather than establishing new categories and/or definitions of narrative.

Given the above narrative phenomena developed in the past generation, which I have termed "Fabulation" within this particular paper, can the generic category of "narrative" be used with integrity in the post-modern age in which we

live, move and have our existence? What is the effect of Fabulation, i.e., the

developing post-modern narrative phenomena, upon the content and process of

contemporary religious education?

The overarching characteristic of the developing post-modern style of

narrative, i.e., Fabulation, is what I term, multistoried. By this I mean that there is

a both a narrative and additional narratives on the progenitoring narrative present

and available that ultimately collect into a corporate narrativity for readers. A

specific example might help here. A DVD of a particular film contains the text of

that film. But most DVDs now include more than the text of the given film.

Viewers often can watch additional narrations, e.g., interviews with the director,

lead actors/actresses, documentary style narratives on the making of the film, and,

at times, scenes that have been cut from the final version of the film. It's all there

in one thin DVD available to viewers at the press of a button. For post-modern

viewers, the narrative is not just the film, but also the "additional" narratives

included on the DVD. Each narrative contributes to a multistoried narrative.

Another example of multistoried narrative is the hypertext phenomenon

within computers. Readers of computer texts come to a word or phrase which is

highlighted, and the reader has the option to click or not to click the links

embedded into the text. Hyperlinks facilitate the creation of multistoried narratives

much the same way that DVD's do. Some print texts now emulate the technology

of computer hyperlinks on printed pages by using text boxes, sidebars, and other

layouts within the printed page to elaborate on, jump off from, or criticize the main

text.[11]

When is Fabulation complete or finished? Fabulation, different from a

single, stand alone narrative, has the possibility of being self-consciously never

ending. As each person encounters a narrative and/or a multi-storied narrative,

many of which have been interpreted beforehand, at times with complementary

meanings, other times with contradictory meanings, he/she adds particular

insights/meanings to the ever ongoing collectivity of interpretations which

contributes to Fabulation. Members of future generations have as much right and

responsibility to interpret narratives for themselves as do present and previous

generations.

Fabulation does not only exist in DVD's or on computers, although these

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[11] See for example Rick Levine, et al, <u>The Cluetrain Manifesto</u>: <u>the end of business as usual</u> (MA: Perseus Publishing, 2001).

are, hopefully dear readers, useful and pertinent technological examples.

Fabulation is the cultural post-modern coin of the realm today. It often is not so

cleanly delivered in a single package as the above examples are, but the vast and

immediate availability of various narratives that constitute Fabulation are legion.

The Internet, now a common household item, is a technology that contributes to

Fabulation. So too do commentaries on narratives, at times available before the

original text itself is released.

Fabulation also has influenced more traditional narratives, e.g., written texts.

 I have already made reference to books that are designed more like computer

hyperlinks/hypertexts, but there are other contemporary written texts that more

subtlety embody Fabulation. Two excellent examples of this type of genre are

James Carroll's recent books, <u>Constantine's Sword</u>[12] and <u>House of War</u>. [13] Carroll

narrates history, theology, and his own personal and professional experiences

within these books creating multistoried narratives. Some reviewers, critical of

Carroll's approaches and methodologies, have missed the post-modern multistoried

reality present in these books.

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[12]James Carroll, <u>Constantine's Sword: the church and the Jews: a history</u> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001).

[13]James Carroll, <u>House of War; the Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power</u> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006)

The classic narratives of religious/spiritual traditions increasingly become part of post-modern Fabulation. Today people not only encounter multiple interpretations of a single sacred narrative, but also developing narratives, one strand of which is the normative sacred narrative from a given religious/spiritual tradition. The sacred narrative does not exercise priority nor function as *the* source of authority for Fabulation within the post-modern context. Rather, sacred stories take their non-prioritized, interrelated place among other narratives on the sacred narrative which contributes to, but does not control Fabulation. Perhaps one could call this phenomenon of Fabulation a type of religious rhetorical pluralism.

Kieran Egan sums up this whole phenomenon quite colorfully by reporting on a St. Patrick's Day parade by Hawaii's famed Waikiki Beach:

> What sense do we make of this cultural event? Well, there are many senses, many perspectives, many meanings possible, many discourses into which it could fit. The Irish claim they gave the bagpipes to the Scots as a joke, and the Scots haven't seen the joke yet, but the Irish organizers of this parade clearly wanted the bagpipes for the drama and the note of exaltation they can provide. What sense would the ancestor who wrote "The 79th's Farewell to Gibraltar" make of it? It seems unlikely that he could have imagined the circumstances of this performance. (My colleague has since suggested he would have been utterly astonished, not least by witnessing women playing the pipes) What did it mean to the honeymooning couples who took photographs of the event? What would it mean to their friends who looked at the photographs later in Kyoto? And what did it mean to the native Hawaiians watching this

bunch of "haolis" and listening to the skirl of the alien pipes?[14]

Egan's questions, though they are not answered directly, point to the many and varied meanings this single event might generate for those who somehow participate in this parade, either actively or passively. He goes on to use this singular event as iconic to the post-modern paradigm:

[14]Kiernan Egan, The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools shape Our Understanding (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 152.

This event exemplifies an increasingly common experience in the Western world. No cultural metanarrative governs its interpretation; rather, it is left open to the multiple perspectives of its witnesses. It may variously invoke a profound connection with a cultural tradition forged long ago and far away in Scotland for some if its participants, recreational fun for others, a momentary amusing diversion, or perhaps even an ugly distraction. This makes for a mix 'n' match cultural construction, in which no one perspective has privileged status – though some might feel that the natives' view has a substance of dislocation, loss, and dispossession that accords it moral privilege. But the event has no *true* meaning apart from the meanings constructed by the witnesses or by those who heard or you who read about it.[15]

Substituting the canonical, extra-canonical, and hagiographical texts used in Religious Education for the "text" of the St. Patrick's Day parade, one wonders if the multiplicity of meanings any text engenders today at least diminishes or at most neuters the intentionality of the religious educator and/or the religious body. Fabulation, has the ability both to negate and/or to posit any classical narrative.

Even though on the surface it looks as though Fabulation removes sacredness from traditional religious/spiritual stories, the question arises: can there be an ultimately more profound and deeper sacrality to Fabulation than solely the traditional religious/spiritual narrative? Needless to say, this question receives a resounding NO from dwellers within certain fundamentalist/evangelical religious

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[15]<u>Ibid</u>.

bodies since nothing can replace or substitute for the explicitly determined sacred text.

But for searchers who imagine that the Divine is revealed through more complex and intricate ways and means, the answer is more complex than either a direct NO or YES. The authority of texts does not flow from official pronouncement nor from tradition. Rather, textual authority emanates from authenticity which flows from personal and communal relationships with texts. These relationships are always intimate and are always contextualized specifically and locally rather than generally and universally.[16]

Religious educators, whether they be conservative or liberal, fundamentalist or pluralistic, will teach students who are already or will be someday exposed to a multiplicity of interpretations about almost all reality. The pre-modern African proverb, "If something stands, something else will come and stand alongside it" is an apt adage for religious educators to reflect on in a post-modern culture. The Religious Educator represents neither the sole voice nor the single voice of authority for their students. The interpretations of narratives Religious Educators choose to communicate are but some of the many interpretations which students

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[16]I am grateful to William A. Clark, S.J. whose book, A Voice of Their Own: The Authority of the Local Parish (MN: Liturgical Press, 2005) presents an ecclesiology of the local faith community where the dynamic of authority flowing from authenticity and intimacy within

will encounter or create. Fabulation is or will become part of everyone's life.

Religious Educators who choose to embrace narrative as the darling of their discipline might well be in for a good dose of reality therapy when competing narratives deemed authoritative by their students enter the picture. Canonical, extra-canonical, and hagiographical texts of various religious/spiritual traditions are but one voice among many narratives. And the composite of all related narratives around a given event or person, Fabulation, the lingua franca of the day, gives new meaning, and, for some, disturbing meaning to narrative in Religious Education.

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itself is intregal to church.