

Creativity and Religion
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
May 14, 2023 (Mother's Day)

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the word, and the word was . . . "arrrgh!" So begins the sacred scripture of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

The website for the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster says:

Religious texts tell us that humans evolved from Pirates. Consider that so-called "science experts" would have us believe humans evolved from primates, pointing towards the shared 99% shared DNA between humans and primates. But humans and Pirates share upwards of 99.9% of DNA.

We believe that Pirates were the original Pastafarians and that they were peaceful explorers. It was only due to Christian misinformation that they have an image of outcast criminals today.

No one knows what the afterlife really holds, but we are told FSM Heaven has a Beer Volcano and Stripper Factory.¹

Take a close look at the picture of four people at some sort of rally, one assumes on a college campus.

Two are there as Christians. Christians of a particularly fundamentalist stripe, there to tell "drunks, homosexuals, abortionist(s)," etc, that they are doomed to hell.



¹ <https://www.goalcast.com/flying-spaghetti-monster-pastafarian-religion-explained/>

The other two are there as Pastafarians, followers of The Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Sure, the depth of tradition—a couple thousand years worth—is on the side of the Christians, but notice that they are not smiling. They are having no fun.

The two Pastafarians, on the other hand, have smiles on their faces.

Who would *you* rather be?

“Oh,” you might be thinking, “but Christianity is . . . what? ‘true’?”

Why?

ONE: Hell or Harold? You Choose. Really

It’s a real-world question.

Since you are listening to my voice, chances are you chose something other than the fundamentalist Christian route. But, you are of course just as free to make the alternative choice any time you like.

Both are available “religious” options. And there are what—thousands? millions?—of other options in between?

Give some thought to just how complex human religions can get. What’s the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians? How many pages do the “theology” of each of those traditions—AND their many, many splinter groups—take up?

We are talking a *lot* of dead trees here!

Who keeps track of all that stuff?

All the thought; all the speculation; the accretions of revision after revision and revision of the revisions. Religious traditions are the very definition of “hidebound.”

Let’s consider for a moment one example, the five points of Calvinism, often memorized by the acronym TULIP:

T : Total Depravity
 U: Unconditional Election
 L: Limited Atonement
 I: Irresistible Grace
 P: Perseverance of the Saints

"Tulip." Sounds pretty.

Until you start considering the concepts that the acronym sums up: "total," "unconditional," "limited," "irresistible." This is a story that says most of humanity through most of human history—from the distant past into the future—billions upon billions of human beings damned to eternal torment with absolutely no choice in the matter.

Why?

"*Total depravity.*" Imagine what it does to a kid's mind to be told "you were born totally depraved."

I for one don't have to imagine. I was *told* that. The only difference between TULIP Calvinism and the Holiness Pentecostalism that I grew up with is that pentecostals are told that they have a chance to get out of hell *by choice*. Free will.

All ya gotta do is "come to Jesus."

All of these ideas—these dogmas—are products of the fertile human imagination. Stories.

Stories about what it means to be human. Stories about what we as humans *can* do or *should* do.

Think of all the human energy through the ages spent on trying to explain and document what it means to be human and how we can go about being human in the world.

Hell?

or

Harold with his purple crayon?²

We decide. Some of us are smiling. Some are not.

TWO: Write to Reunite!

Have you ever noticed that we often hear about the war between science and religion but never about the war between science and poetry?

Why don't we hear about a war between science and poetry?

Because . . . mmmmmm . . . the two occupy different categories in our minds, don't they?

Science is about experimentation to reach conclusions about a consensus reality. Poetry is about the use of language to express a subjective reality.

Here's what I want to propose for your consideration today:

Religion and poetry and the Arts with a capital A are all in the the same category. That category is works of the human imagination.

One of the interesting (and problematic) things about the word *religion* is that we don't know its etymology: We don't know where it came from and therefore we don't know the original meaning of the word.

The Roman writer Cicero, who died in 43 BCE, speculated that the Latin noun *religion* came from the Latin verb *religare*, re–again and *ligare*–to bind. L-i-g as in *ligament*.

To re-bind.

Many people through the years have accepted Cicero's surmise and so it has caught on, despite the folk nature of his assumptions. But since this meaning is the dominant view, let's go with that.

² Crockett Johnson. *Harold and the Purple Crayon (60th Anniversary)*. NY: HarperCollins, 2015.

To re-bind.

The question becomes: to re-bind to what?

The sacred?

The earth?

The primal forces or powers?

The vast cosmic consciousness?

Is the re-binding because we lost the binding that we had when we were born? Are we re-turning to something forgotten or lost?

Are we being re-patriated?

Is the re-binding like being re-arrested? Re-stored?

THREE: Play's the Thing

Dr. T. M. Luhrmann is a professor of religious anthropology at Stanford University. She grew up a Unitarian Universalist and an agnostic. She researches how people believe in gods. Her most recent book is *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*.

Dr. Luhrmann is as skeptical as any of us. However, she knows the people all over the world manifest the gods that they believe in. How do they do that?

Her answer is play.

Think for a moment about a child pretending to be a lion or a dog. Children know perfectly well that they don't actually become lions or dogs or dragons or firefighters or any number of other things they pretend to be.

By the same token, children know that if you or I pretend to be a lion or dog or whatever, that we aren't actually those things. They might scream and run away in

pretend fright or whatever, but they are not in fact confused about the difference between play and reality.

Dr. Luhrmann claims that religious belief is exactly like play: We know that what we think in religious terms is not "real" in the way that a tree we see out a window is real.

An example Luhrmann gives is a devout, sincere person praying for groceries. A person needs groceries and prays to their god for groceries. But does the person then go and look in the refrigerator for the groceries that they expect their god to deliver?

Most people don't.

Most people understand that there is a difference between "religious" reality and . . . consensus reality.

Brain imaging shows that when people pray or talk about their religious ideas, it is not the object-oriented parts of the brain that light up, but rather the imagination.

Religious thought is imaginative thought.

Religious thought is play. Religious thought is art.

Some of you joined our Archive Committee last Sunday reading and discussing a talk by former minister John Dietrich on mysticism. One of the striking things about that talk is that even though it was written in 1935, it still fairly well describes our cultural understanding of mysticism. We haven't advanced much in our understanding of the subject.

One reason for that I suspect is that we still haven't clarified what a mystical experience is or where it comes from.

Are the realizations we have during a mystical experience or a drug-induced psychic experience only our own subjective consciousness speaking, or is there truth from the larger universe?

Or, to look at the matter another way, was perhaps the psychologist Carl Jung correct that mystical and psychedelic experiences are revelatory of our subconsciousness,

which is in fact tied to a larger reality that we unwittingly block out in our day-to-day lives?

The *spiritus mundi*, the “spirit of the world,” as twentieth century mystics called it.

We know that there are human experiences that are unutterable and ineffable. Words are not adequate. But all we have is words and a few gestures.

In his talk, John Dietrich quotes from William Wordsworth’s poem with a super-long title, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798.” In the poem, Wordsworth attempts to relate a mystical experience:

For I have learned
 To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
 The still sad music of humanity,
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.³

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>

A famous poem about the ineffable. A classic reflection on the power of nature to get our minds to the place where we can hear “The still sad music of humanity” and . . .

to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.

CONCLUSION: RAMEN!

The human mind is an amazing thing. Each of us lives in the power of our imagination –sometimes the “I,” the self (whatever *that* is!) feels in charge; other times, we can feel compelled–driven–or obsessed or even *possessed*.

We hear voices in our head. Where are the voices coming from?

Where are the pictures, the images, in our minds coming from?

Why can't I quiet the chatter of my monkey mind?

How much of our own minds do we understand, are we in control of, or even know about?

Despite decades of research, we still don't have adequate language for what we often consider our religious or spiritual mind.

So, yes, Harold and his purple crayon and his amazing imagination can conjure a day of danger and fun. And religions and gods and governments and microchips and . . . Sarin gas.

All the products of the amazing human imagination.

We are amazing creatures. Amazing creatures who do not understand the power of our own minds.

But let's think back to that picture: the Pastafarians and the fundamentalists.

Who were having a good time? Who were enjoying life? Which group was spreading understanding and compassion?

That's the deep secret: *You* choose:

You choose the nature of the universe you live in. Unconsciously. Or consciously.

Choose imagination.

Pick up that purple crayon!

And all the people said, ra-men!



SOURCES

John Dietrich, "A Humanist Looks at Mysticism."

Rufus M. Jones, *The Inner Life*. (Note: a classic of Quaker spirituality and mysticism.)

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T.M. Luhrmann. *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton: Princeton UP: 2020.

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