

Leonard Arrington on Myth and Symbolism

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Leonard Arrington was (and still to some extent is) one of my heroes. He pushed the envelop within the LDS historians community, and was permitted by the Church to publish some of the first semi-respectable (from an academic point of view) accounts of certain aspects of Church history. The more time passes and the more information comes out, the more sugar coated these appear to be, but when they were published and initially given a soft endorsement by the Church, they delivered masses of new and useful information to Church members.

I recently had occasion to re-read a couple of Arrington's influential essays. Here is an excerpt from one of them respecting the role of myth in religious understanding, followed by a few of my thoughts.

What of the prophet's account of his own experiences: the first vision? the visit of the angel Moroni to tell him about the golden plates of the Book of Mormon? the return of John the Baptist to confer the Aaronic Priesthood, and of Peter, James, and John to confer the Melchizedek? Can one accept all of the miraculous events that surrounded the restoration of the gospel? I was fortunate to have read Santayana's "Reason in Religion" before confronting these historical problems. I do not say that I fully understood it or that I agreed with his basis premise, that the book gave me a concept that has been helpful ever since – that truth may be expressed not only through science and abstract reason but also through stories, testimonies and narratives of personal experience; not only through erudite scholarship but also through poetry, drama, and historical novels. Santayana used the term "myth" – a term well understood in recent religious literature – to refer to the expression of religious and moral truths in symbolic language.

The word "myth" has some pejorative connotations in modern English. It can mean a story or belief asserted to be true but without any basis in fact. It can be an invented explanation of some natural or historical phenomenon or a wholly fictitious supposition or belief. However, this is not what Santayana had in mind. What he called myth was a traditional account of events and happenings that have religious significance. To say that something is a myth is not to say that it was deliberately fabricated but to identify it as an account that may or may not have a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation. The truth of a myth is beyond empirical or historical accessibility. Examples are the Christian story of the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, and the creation of the world as described in the Book of Genesis. These are ways of explaining events or truths having religious significance that may be either symbolical or historical.

To go one step further, even in the Shakespearean tragedy where, unlike episodes of Mormon and Christian history the characters and events are wholly fictional, one can find philosophical and religious truth. Examples of novels disclosing religious truths that I had read during the formative stages of my religious beliefs include: Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth", Knut Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil", William Henry Hudson's "Green Mansions", Fyodor Dostoyevsky's

"Brothers Karamazov" and "Crime and Punishment", and Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" and "War and Peace". And, for that matter, the philosophical drama in the Old Testament's Book of Job.

Because of my introduction to the concept of symbolism as a means of expressing religious truth, I was never preoccupied with the question of the historicity of the First Vision – though the evidence is overwhelming that it did occur – or of the many reported epiphanies in Mormon, Christian or Hebrew history. I am prepared to accept them as historical or as metaphysical, as symbolical or as precisely what happened. That they convey religious truth is the essential issue, and of this I have never had any doubt. Ineffable experiences, messages, and value affirmations do not always lend themselves to scientific or literal or precise articulation. It does not bother me at all that, in describing a religious experience that transcends his ability to express it, a narrator, a testimony-giver, often resorts to traditional phrases in presenting it. Indeed, I do it myself, as those who have heard me speak in testimony meeting can vouch. The Italians have a useful expression for this sort of thing: "Se non e vero, e ben trovato," which means, roughly, "Whether it is literally true or not, it's still true". ("Myth, Symbol and Truth", published in "Faithful History", p.p. 306, 307; see also "Why I am a Believer", published in "A Thoughtful Faith – Essays in Belief by Mormon Scholars", p. 230)

I agree with most of what Arrington says. He has a flexible view of what might be truth and is prepared to find truth wherever it may exist. I differ from him respecting the following:

1. He seems to assume that information from certain authorized sources must be truth, and it is only a question of understanding how it is true. I do not agree with this approach. It handcuffs us to the manifestly silly ideas, designed mostly to control us, that emanate from religious leaders of all stripes. But I am not sure if that is what he believed. My conversations with a member of his staff who worked with him for about 20 years as a historian (both as a member of the BYU church history department and as a professor at BYU) indicate to me that he had more concerns than he was prepared to publicly express. He published a private history that he gave only to his family that I would love to get my hands on. And in a recent Sunstone Magazine article, Lavina Fielding Anderson noted that Arrington was the first person to rush to her and shake her hand in congratulation after she delivered a landmark talk at a Sunstone Conference about ten years ago chronicling the authoritarian, manipulative, philosopher king nature of the Church's contemporary leadership. She was later excommunicated for this talk and related matters.

I note that this same individual referred to above who worked with Arrington told me that the primary goal of the Arrington group within the Church history department and later at BYU was to finally tell Mormonism's "real" story. They all knew it, and thought that the Church was mature enough to hear it. During the course of 20 years of working together, they tried a little at a time to get more of the story out to the Church's members. They were in a constant battle with the conservative GAs on this front. Even the more

scholarly of the GAs eventually began to fight them. Here is a quote from Dallin Oaks that illustrates the point. He was writing with respect to the LDS Church discipline that was imposed on Linda King Newell for her authorship of the book "Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith":

My duty as a member of the Council of the Twelve is to protect what is most unique about the LDS church, namely the authority of priesthood, testimony regarding the restoration of the gospel, and the divine mission of the Saviour. Everything else may be sacrificed in order to maintain the integrity of those essential facts. Thus, if Mormon Enigma reveals information that is detrimental to the reputation of Joseph Smith, then it is necessary to try to limit its influence and that of its authors." ("Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon", Introduction, fn 28)

According to the historian referenced above, this attitude surfaced as a result of the Arrington group "pushing too hard" to get the real story out. Whenever Arrington or the rest of their group wrote or spoke in public, they were walking a fine line. "How much do we dare say without raising to an unacceptable level the risk that the GAs will shut us down?", was the question constantly on their minds.

With an understanding of that process, I question whether what Arrington has left us respecting his views of what was right and what was not about the Church is an accurate reflection of his beliefs. It is clear that he felt that Joseph Smith was inspired to an extent and that the body of mythology Smith produced was of great value. How he felt about the negative aspects of Smith's legacy is unclear. It may well be that he had strong feelings about those things, but did not dare share them publicly because it would jeopardize his ability to perform what he perceived to be his calling – to bring the common membership of the LDS Church into contact with the reality of their faith's origins, and help that faith to mature. Hence, he never to my knowledge publicly questioned the authority of the GAs or dealt with questions related to the roots of LDS authority, or the reliability of Smith and the Church's other early leaders.

2. One of the problems I have with some of the philosophers I have read lately (Heidegger and Wittgenstein, for example) is that they use the difficulty of determining what is real and what is not to justify most points of view. While it is good to understand the uncertainty we face, and hence shy away from those who purport to offer certainty, if this approach dominates us it will lead to either a paralysis, or the reign of the status quo. I have sensed the tendency in some of what Arrington writes to simply defer to the status quo and find ways to justify as much of it as possible. This is classic deductive reasoning that tends to shut down our examination of any data but that which will support the theories we believe are true. This is precisely the reasoning that supports most organized religions, and keeps them healthy while in complete contradiction to each other in terms of their basic truth claims. I am much more attracted to the philosophers of the Peirce, Dewey, Popper line who recognize that we have to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty, and explore how we can best collect evidence, weigh probabilities, and make the decisions we need to make.

In conclusion, while I respect Arrington's ability as a historian, and appreciate much of what he has to say about the role of myth in interpreting religious texts and culture, I have concluded that either he did not dare to state publicly what he believed, or that I disagree with his beliefs respecting the way in which we are best advised to use religious authority figures and the information they produce.

Reliance on religious authority as the unquestionable root of truth is one of the most ancient ways to eliminate the basic uncertainty of life. We only have two real choices in terms of how we deal with existential uncertainty and the angst it produces. First, we can find an unquestionable source of authority and start to reason from there. This is what religion does. Early understandings of science were sometimes used for that purpose, and people who misunderstand science still so use it. And some do this with the teachings of the great sages, such as Socrates. Much of modern philosophy has been occupied with the task of showing the folly of this approach. Each of the supposed unquestionable sources can be shown to be fallible. Every branch of science and logic, as well as religion, can be shown to be inherently uncertain. Even math cannot prove with certainty its own basic theorems, as Kurt Godel showed. The only other approach is to acknowledge the basic uncertainty of existence, and humbly make our way forward as best we can using our judgement to discern the probability that we are headed in the right direction on the basis of the evidence we have at our disposal.

Countless conflicting theories have been used over the millennia by different groups to attempt to ground religious authority in such apparent certainty that the people will accept and follow it. That so many have been successful is testimony, primarily, to the reluctance of human beings to address their existential uncertainty. I acknowledge that reluctance in myself. This makes us each vulnerable to the claims of religious hucksters, or even worse, those who really believe that god has appointed them to guide or control their fellow men. Someone once said that man never so cheerfully and effectively does evil than when he believes it to be his religious duty.

Am I to believe that mine happens to be the only religious tradition that god founded as its leaders tell me he did, particularly given what I know about those leaders, the egregious errors they made respecting other supposedly sacred and "true" things, and how they have deceived me and many others with respect to those things? I am much more comfortable grappling with uncertainty, refining my perception of right and wrong etc. as I move through life, and making decisions on that basis.

When religious authorities provide information that passes the critical tests to which I subject all information, I will gratefully receive their counsel and accord it the same respect I do all wisdom that passes my tests. They will earn their influence over my life as do all other potential sources of influence. And any wisdom so accepted from religious authority figures will be subject to the continual critical scrutiny that is required to improve my worldview as new information and perceptive capacities become available to me. That is, I will allow ideas that seem better from time to time than religiously based concepts I have accepted to push those concepts aside.

Since I can't distinguish what is absolutely and eternally true from what seems for the moment to make the most sense, I feel that I can no longer afford to accept that there is such a thing as an "eternal truth", even through such a thing may well exist. In fact, I hope that it does. If I accept that any particular idea is absolutely true, I will likely be

unable to learn anything more about it. I would have, in essence, damned myself respecting that concept and anything else that depends upon it.