

Spiritual Bedrock

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May 3, 2003

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Most average folk, in whose ranks I proudly count myself, are bored at best by theology

Most folk get headaches from the rarefied air surrounding theological discussion. Perhaps a summary of basic concepts from a regular guy who had to drain part of theology's swamp would help others who have religious "issues".

Joseph Campbell, the great comparative mythologist, said that mythology is other people's religious beliefs. He defined mythology's primary function to be answering our existential questions in a way that makes sense in light of our perception of reality. The existential questions relate to issues like: Where did we come from? Why do we suffer? And what happens after death? He says that to work well mythology does not have to be true – it has to be "comfortable", meaning that it must provide plausible answers within its place and time. Mythologies are full of dogmas – ideas that are difficult or impossible to disprove – such as that Christ was born of a virgin. Enlightening metaphoric truth often lies hidden beneath dogmatic literalism.

Campbell's theories are based on patterns of individual and group behaviour he and others observed during their study of how many mythologies, including mainstream religions, originate, develop and function. Most of us experience religious belief within much more narrow confines. In ignorance of any religious tradition other than our own, we are told that if we do x (pray to god about something) and feel y (peace, joy, etc.), then z must be assumed to be "true". We then do x, experience y as predicted, and hence feel justified in believing z. Campbell's studies show that from culture to culture what is done (x) to feel the same thing (y) is similar, but the conclusions (z) that are assumed true are contradictory. These dogmatic conclusions are accepted by believers as immutable truth and hence govern much of human life.

Religious beliefs are among the most difficult to change. Recent scientific studies show that spiritual experience is "real" in the sense that while a person perceives herself to be having a spiritual experience the brain does things that are consistent with what neurologists would expect to produce profoundly moving mental states. For example, when we are faced with a situation like the death of a loved one that causes intense, existential anxiety and are provided with relief in the form of a religious insight, the parts of our nervous system that are responsible for arousal and relaxation are sometimes simultaneously activated in a way similar to that associated with sexual climax. As a result, we experience

an intense, rare, mental state. Not surprisingly, the ideas that appear to have triggered that wonder are not easily abandoned.

So, the picture that comes into focus is that of religion being created and maintained by extraordinary experiences received by people as they wrestle with life's great problems and mysteries. These experiences provide authority for dogmatic ideas that are usually plausible given the ideology of the time and place in which they come into being. For example, the idea of a worldwide flood made sense several millennia BCE when the notion of the world was vastly different than it is today.

Once a dogma is accepted as "truth", any investigation that questions it is worse than pointless. It is evil since it casts doubt on dogma's source – god himself. However, as science advances dogma gradually comes within its reach. Scientific information is produced that conflicts with dogma, cognitive dissonance for dogmatic believers results, and dogma slowly moves aside to accommodate science. Think of Galileo and how he was pilloried by his society, arraigned before a Catholic Inquisition, and recanted under threat of death his heretical views that the earth revolved around the sun.

The more authoritarian a religious group, the more resistant are its dogmas to scientific advance, and hence the more slowly science's knowledge blesses its adherents. But science is not enough. It tells us the "hows" but cannot address the "whys". The great "whys" will always be in mythology's realm. We need belief systems whose "whys" accommodate scientific change, and hence the best "hows".

An understanding of the above principles can become our refiner's fire, burn away dogmatic dross, and sanctify us as we confront the inadequacy of spiritual ideas that hold us in unholy conflict with other religious traditions. We will find deeper and more satisfying joy as this understanding causes us to reach into the depths of our souls toward the spiritual bedrock that underlies all human groping toward god. And, I believe, all this can be done within any religious tradition undogmatic enough to permit such a fire to burn in its followers lives.