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Religion and Poetry From Matthew to Matthew

LILLIAN SIGAL

In “The Study of Poetry,” Matthew Arnold makes the following enigmatic prophecy regarding the religion of the future: “[M]ost of what passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (CPW, IX, 161-62). In this paper I will argue that Arnold’s puzzling prognosis foretold that later generations, due to the growing impact of the scientific zeitgeist, would adopt a radical revision of religion which would affirm it as humankind's poetic response to the sacred dimension of existence.

Upon examining the influence of Arnold’s religious ideas on the generations that followed him, we discover that they were strong in the five decades after the publication of his first major religious work, St. Paul and Protestantism, in 1870. Beyond 1930, however, he is hardly mentioned (Livingston 178). Although recently there have been indications that his religious ideas are receiving recognition once more, according to James C. Livingston’s 1986 book entitled Arnold and Christianity, “little that is helpful has been written” regarding his place in the religious thought of our period (xi). This essay will attempt to help fill that gap in Arnoldian research by focusing on four religious thinkers, who do not identify themselves as Arnold’s spiritual heirs but whose views regarding the significance of the poetic mode in religion were anticipated by Arnold’s forecast of the future state of religion. These four figures are the psychologist C. G. Jung, the mythologist Joseph Campbell, the feminist theologian Sally McFague, and the Dominican priest Matthew Fox.

Matthew Arnold may be regarded as C. G. Jung’s paradigmatic “modern man in search of his soul”—but not only his own soul. For Arnold was intent upon reassuring “those who feel attachment to Christianity, to the Bible, but who recognize the growing discredit befalling miracles and the supernatural” that they could maintain their intellectual integrity and still preserve their faith (CPW, VI, 142-43). C. G. Jung, like Arnold, was disturbed about the schism in the Christian community in his day and attributed it to “a loss of spiritual authority which… is due to the inability of the churches to come to terms adequately with the scientific spirit” (Letters 347). Both men concluded that the weakened foundations of Christianity could be shored up by grounding them in the poetic imagination.

that was divorced from dogma and from what he called aberglaube, extra-belief. The Christianity that he preferred as balm for the religious malaise of his time was rooted in the idea that religious symbols play a supremely important role in the psychological health and moral conduct of human beings. Jung’s approach to religion, like Arnold’s, eschewed its link to creed or dogma. Jung was concerned with the original religious experience apart from what creeds have made it. Religion, according to Jung,* is a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly termed the numinosum, that is, a dynamic existence or effect which seizes and controls the human subject ... causing a peculiar alteration of consciousness” (Psychology and Religion 7). According to Jung, religious archetypal images radiate the power of the numinosum and hint at an unseen presence which fills the person who encounters them with a feeling of deep meaning. From the Jungian perspective, the central aim of all religions is to keep the individual related to a transpersonal force manifested in the archetype of the Self. Jung explains the Self as “an imago-Dei in man” which is embodied in numerous representations such as Zeus, Jahweh, Jesus, Allah, Shiva, etc., that possess the attributes of almightiness, omniscience and eternity (Psychology 190).

Since the notion of the Self and God is essentially ineffable, Jung maintains, our language is inadequate to truly express it. Our manner of articulating it is therefore symbolic. “The word 'God,'” says Jung, is a mere statement, or at most an archetypal motif ...” (Psychology 303). In Jung’s view, “God,” “Christ,” the “Holy Ghost,” and other such religious terms are verbal images which point to their transcendent referent but should not be confused with it. For Christians, Christ is the supreme symbol of the Self and concretizes an indescribable feeling of wholeness and perfection for which the human yearns.

Both Jung and Arnold believed that the language of poetry most effectively quenches the human thirst for the sacred. Fundamental to Arnold’s rehabilitation of traditional Christianity is his notion that the language of religion “is fluid, passing and literary, not rigid, fixed and scientific” (CPW, VI, 152). Thus, the miracles of the Bible must be regarded “as an immense poetry ...” (CPW, VII, 370). A term that is vital to the language of religion, in Arnold’s view, is the word "God," a poetic and literary term for an inexpressible idea (CPW, VI, 171).

Arnold’s notion that humans attempt to express the mystery of God via poetic language corresponds to Jung’s theory of the archetypes. The archetypes are a “tool of thought” for formulating an “exceedingly difficult and elusive subject matter” which we commonly call God (Progoff 286). Because of its elusiveness, therefore, the experience of God, according to Jung, is an “endless approximation” (Jaffe 120).

“The strongest part of ... religion,” Arnold stresses, “is its unconscious poetry” (CPW, IX, 161). Although unaware of the unconscious in religious experience, as Jung understood it, and the mediating function of archetypal symbols, Arnold sensed that humans have an undeniable religious impulse which seeks reification through the imagination in tangible forms. The unconscious poetry of religion which Arnold
identifies is comparable to the archetypal predispositions described by Jung.

Arnold believed that Jesus had a spell-binding effect upon his followers. He regarded his influence as one "which we feel we know not how, and which subdues us we know not when" and as an element of awe "which fills religion with emotion" (CPW, VI, 310). In these words we hear echoes of Jung's appropriation of Rudolf Otto's characterization of religion as an awesome encounter with a mysterious numinous reality. Both the Victorian sage and the Swiss psychologist were enthralled by religious experience, and both, having been reared in the Christian tradition, found the numinous symbols that objectified their thralldom in Christianity. Although Arnold's and Jung's views of religion do not match on all points, both recognized symbols as applications of religious feeling, and both stressed the common element in religion and poetry.

Joseph Campbell writes, "Mythologies . . . and religions are great poems . . ." (Myths to Live By, 266). Both Arnold and Campbell emphasize that the correct way to read the Bible, the way that avoids the inescapable assaults of the higher criticism, is to read it not literally but figuratively. Arnolddeclaims repeatedly in his religious writings that the Bible is literature, not dogma. The language of the Bible, Arnold insists, has been misinterpreted by most theologians as "scientific theology." Arnold asserts, however, that properly understood scriptural language is the language of poetry. Therefore, unlike the language of science, it is emotive, provisional and tentative rather than objective and factual. Both Arnold and Campbell deplore literal-mindedness. Arnold writes that St. Paul used poetic terms like "grace" and "justification" aware that they are ideas that the mind cannot grasp exactly or adequately. But "such terms people have blunderingly taken in a fixed and rigid manner, as if they were symbols with as definite and fully grasped a meaning as the names line or angle . . ." (CPW, VI, 170).

Campbell likewise illustrates his own frustration with literal-minded people in the following amusing anecdote which he recounts in one of his conversations with Bill Moyers in the television series The Power of Myth. Campbell tells how he was sent by his publisher on a publicity tour. Toward the end of this tour, in a city somewhere in America, he was to do a radio interview. The interviewer, a rather pugnacious fellow, warned Campbell that he strongly believed that a myth is a lie.

"No," replied Campbell, "we must speak, not of a myth, but of a mythology, a whole mythology. A mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives metaphorical of the possibilities of human spiritual experience and fulfillment in the context of a given culture at a given time."

"It's a lie," insisted the interviewer.

"It's a metaphor," retorted Campbell.

This exchange dragged on until suddenly Campbell realized that the man interviewing him didn't know what a metaphor was.

"Give me an example of a metaphor," said Campbell to his challenger.

The man looked around, rocked and squirmed. At last he said desperately, "John runs very fast . . ."
runs very fast. People say he runs like a deer. There's a metaphor."

"No," said Campbell, "that's not the metaphor. The metaphor is: John is a deer."

"Why that's a lie; obviously John isn't a deer," retorted the interviewer.

People with the mindset of the interviewer in this story misread sacred narratives because, according to Campbell, they take "denotation for connotation, the messenger for the message" (Inner 58).

Campbell submits that myths are symbolic stories, and that "It is by symbolism that man enters affectively and consciously into contact with his own deepest self... and with God" (Myths to Live By 265). Symbols, he maintains, point to objects and summon us to deeper awareness beyond the level of subject and object.

Both Arnold and Campbell decry religious orthodoxies and their misreading of biblical texts. Both interpret the stories about Jesus as metaphors of the religious quest for inwardness. The story of Jesus' ascension into heaven, for example, Campbell suggests "is metaphorical of something... What it's saying is he didn't go out there, he went in here... and to ascend to heaven [means going] through the inward space to that source from which you and all life came" (Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth, 11). Although Arnold's understanding of the symbolic meaning of the Jesus narratives is not equivalent to Campbell's, he too sees the uniqueness of Jesus as not being that of a "non-natural man" but as evocative of the inner life of human beings. When Paul spoke of the death and resurrection of Jesus, Arnold states, he did not mean it literally. "In Paul's ideas the expression has no essential connexion with physical death" (CPW, VI, 52). When Paul spoke of Christ's rebirth, writes Arnold, it is "in a sense of a rising to a new life before the physical death of the body, and not after it." (CPW, V, 183). Paul's central doctrine is "to die with Christ to the law of the flesh, to live with Christ to the law of the mind" (CPW, VI, 47). The law of the flesh, according to Arnold, pertains to the human weaknesses which cause us to succumb to moral corruption, whereas the law of the mind refers to the higher self, the "best self," personified by Jesus.

"The word religion," says Campbell, "means religo, linking back, linking back the phenomenal person to a source... and this becomes symbolized in the images of religion, which represent that connecting link" (The Power of Myth, VI). Arnold and Campbell argue that through its metaphors and symbols religion summons us to deeper awareness of our inner selves and our religo—our connectedness—to the divine.

Responding to the time-spirit of our age, which she calls the "post-modern sensibility," Sally McFague, like her Victorian counterpart, "seeks a way of believing in a non-believing time" (viii). She therefore advocates a metaphorical theology that is open and tentative, recognizing that the "truth" of the Bible is not absolute but rather expressed in metaphorical approximations. "We feel more than we can express," says McFague, "we know more than we can interpret" (36). Like Arnold, McFague rejects a literal reading of the christology. Instead, she proposes a "parabolic" christology (viii), seeing parables as extended metaphors and Jesus as a parable of God who...
makes the unknowable God more knowable.

In McFague’s assertion that Scripture is “a great poetic text” (60) which through its images links us to the divine, we hear resonances of Arnold, Jung and Campbell. McFague, additionally emphasizes that a theology of the Bible must have ethics at its heart (52). In Jung’s and Campbell’s readings of Biblical myth, moral messages are treated as marginal to objectification of numinous experience. For Arnold, however, righteousness is at the very core of the religious response to life and inherent in the very nature of God whom he defines as “the Eternal, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness” (CPW, VI, 32). Arnold posits a moral universal order that is co-identical with God, and he defines religion as “that which binds us to the practice of righteousness” (CPW, VI, 33). By this definition, however, he does not mean to imply that religion is merely a system of virtuous practices, for he also characterizes religion as “morality touched by emotion” (Letters 143). Arnold understands the story of the passion of Jesus as poetic and evocative of what Jung would call archetypal feelings that reenforce the moral teachings of Jesus. The mass of people, Arnold believed, cannot live by abstract exhortations to piety alone. They therefore need the metaphors of biblical language which light up morality with “the glow of a divine warmth” (CPW, III, 135).

McFague interprets ‘Jesus as parable’ in terms of his relational mode of being in the world. For McFague, Jesus’s characteristic address to God as ‘father’ does not denote a physical relationship between two males, nor does it provide a patriarchal model for God. Rather it connotes an intimate and personal relationship. “Thus, a theology dependent on Jesus as parable will focus on the quality of relationships among different kinds of persons” (52). Accordingly, McFague underscores the importance of Jesus’s concern for the suffering of the underclass of his day: the poor, women, outcasts and foreigners.

As a feminist theologian, McFague parts ways with Arnold. The Victorian age clearly was not hospitable to feminism; and Matthew Arnold, unlike his contemporary John Stuart Mill, did not break out of his culture’s patriarchal mold. The issue of women’s dissatisfaction with male religious dominance was not generally perceived as a crucial matter in Arnold’s day—Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Women’s Bible notwithstanding. Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, as I argue in my dissertation on Arnold, archetypal feminine images that pervade Arnold’s poetry reflect his ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion toward them. Moreover, when he forsook writing poetry for prose, Arnold replaced the numinous matriarchal images of his poetry with masculine ones.

McFague makes us aware of the power that the patriarchal metaphors of Christianity (such as father, lord, and king) have had in shaping the consciousness of Western civilization to the detriment of women. She points out that the androcentric worldview of the Christian faith presents a hierarchical model in which men are subservient to God and women are subservient to men.

Religious metaphors, McFague argues, are very powerful because they are grounded in metaphors like groundhog day, and any attempt to substitute new paradigms to completely replace the old is likely to fail. McFague prefers a paradigmatic approach which recognizes the need for resistance and adaptation. For Fox, the transcendent wholeness of God is not something beyond the world, but is present in the world, including in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This approach is seen as a way of maintaining the truth of Christianity while acknowledging the historical and cultural context in which it was developed.

In his late works, such as the “letter to the Secular Jesus”, Arnold acknowledges the need for a new kind of religious experience that is not driven by intellectualism and dogmatism. He sees the need for a more organic and intimate relationship with the divine, which he identifies with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This perspective is seen as a way of bridging the gap between religion and science, and of providing a more holistic view of the human experience. For Fox, the possibility of healing and wholeness in the world is seen as the poetic application of the Christian faith.
grounded in ultimate reality and set in a cosmic framework. People who take these metaphors literally make an idolatry of them and fail to realize that they are human constructs. "By reifying our constructions into objective realities, however, we make them resistant to change and we become prisoners of our own creations" (150).

McFague presents various proposals of feminists for changing the old models and paradigms to overcome the traditional male bias in Christianity, distinguishing between revolutionary and reformist feminist theologians. Revolutionaries advocate dispensing with the old patriarchal metaphors derived from male experience and substituting feminine ones informed by women's experience of the divine and adopting a matriarchal goddess-oriented model outside of the Christian tradition.

McFague aligns herself with reformists rather than revolutionary feminist theologians. Like Arnold, McFague seeks to preserve the Christian tradition rather than totally reject it. She tries to deal with its bias towards masculine images of the divine by identifying its root model as being not patriarchy but human liberation of anyone oppressed for sexual, economic, political or other reasons. One model she identifies in Christianity and stresses as vital for our age is that of God as friend. She sees the metaphor of friendship as expressive of the ideal relationship among people of all ages, both sexes, and whatever color or religion and incorporating the values of "mutuality, maturity, cooperation, responsibility, or reciprocity" (179).

In his latest book, The Coming of the Cosmic Christ (1988), the maverick Roman Catholic priest Matthew Fox (condemned in 1989 by Pope John Paul II to a year of silence) calls for a paradigm shift in Christian thought from the quest for the historical Jesus to the quest for what he terms the "Cosmic Christ." Fox's notion of the "Cosmic Christ" is that of a symbolic image, an understanding of the numinous as a "pattern," or, in Jungian terms, as an archetype of wholeness. Fox argues for a holistic religious view that is grounded in both right-brain feeling and compassion and left-brain rationalism. He rejects the Newtonian mechanistic worldview and advocates a rapprochement between science and religion.

Arnold's understanding of religion also seeks to synthesize the dualities of head and heart; indeed, his search for wholeness pervades his entire oeuvre, his poetry as well as his prose. Lionel Trilling notes that Arnold's "conception of religion is in the line of Kant . . . ; [furthermore] it is no less in the line of Schleiermacher and based in emotional subjectivism" (352).

For Fox, the Cosmic Christ is symbolic of the interconnectivity of all things, organic and inorganic life. He appropriates the crucifixion of Christ as a metaphor for the crucifixion of the earth through its exploitation and poisoning by industry and technology. Christ's resurrection, on the other hand, symbolically suggests the possibility of healing and repairing the damage done to our earthly environment. Fox's poetic application of the New Testament Passion events to contemporary concerns
hermeneutically matches Arnold's metaphoric approach to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Fox talks of God, as "a great underground river" and stresses our need to make contact with that depth (161). A central theme in Arnold's poetry is his quest for "a buried life" which is a nameless "something" in his breast that he objectifies in the image of a subterranean river that flows deeply within him. This image of a depth level of reality with which he seeks reconnection suggests his desire for unity with, in the terminology of Paul Tillich, "the ground of our being" or the "depth dimension"—metaphors that point to the sacred source of all existence commonly named "God."

Through the voice of Empedocles, who seeks to be "one with which we are one with the world" (Empedocles on Etna, II, 370-73), Arnold expresses his own desire to unite with all the world on some mystical level. Evelyn Underhill characterizes mystical personalities as those who pursue a "spiritual and intangible quest: the finding of a 'way out' or a 'way back' to some desirable state in which they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth" (4). Further, the mystic apprehends a deeper self "below the threshold" of his consciousness ... [a] 'subliminal life.' This hidden self is the primary agent of mysticism, and lives a 'substantial' life in touch with the real and transcendental world" (67).

While Fox does not deny supernaturalism as does Arnold, his religious view is preeminently this worldly. Indeed, in a recent article in The Christian Century, Wayne G. Boulton faults Fox with being silent about traditional Christian themes in the New Testament such as heaven and the afterlife (431). In contradistinction to Fox, who overtly and passionately calls for reinvigoration of religion with mystical ecstasy, Arnold rejects faith in anything that cannot be empirically proven and therefore is offensive to the rational sensibility. Yet Arnold, although he vigorously opposes the dogma of Roman Catholicism, repeatedly extols "its charm for the imagination" (CPW, VIII, 334) and predicts that its worship was "likely, however modified, to survive as the general worship of Christians, because it is the worship which ... unites the most of the elements of poetry" (CPW, VII, 396). Underlying Arnold's effort to present a modern approach to Christianity consonant with the growing scientific tenor of his day is, I believe, a distinct mystical tendency or what Livingston calls his "covert metaphysics" (17). This tendency is evident in Arnold's search for a buried life in his poetry, and in his insistence on the credibility of rooting his notion of God and a universal order in religious feeling and experience (CPW, VI, 31).

The advent of scientific empiricism, Darwinism, and historicism in the West created an epistemological shift towards a cold, mechanical, and unfeeling worldview—one that divorced reason from emotion. Matthew Arnold endeavored to correct the unbalanced one-sidedness of this view that created a crisis of faith in his era and has continued to plague our own. In the preface to his Last Essays on Church and Religion, Arnold maintains that the forms of Christianity, threatened with extinction by the intellectual forces of modernism, would not perish but would
and resurrection. 

Arnold endeavored to make an impassioned quest for "a religion which satisfies in the experience of a depth of unity with, and makes a distinction to the height of a depth dimension, only named

"survive as poetry" (Poetry and Criticism 510).

In the latter half of the twentieth century (the survival of religious fundamentalism notwithstanding), especially in the religious thought of C. G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, Sally McFague and Matthew Fox, Arnold's prediction of the future condition of religion seems to have been at least partially fulfilled. All of these thinkers recognize, as did Arnold, the emotional connotations of religious language and the power of its symbols to provide spiritual gratification and vehicles to communicate an intuition of the highest reality. Of the above cited four scholars, McFague and Fox particularly, like Arnold, attempt to serve as spiritual guides for their age by integrating the religious sensibility with ethics and by reinterpreting Christian symbols so that they might image ideals to which reality should conform. Thus, as this paper has shown, from Matthew Arnold to Matthew Fox one can trace a line of thinking that offers a religious alternative to orthodox literalism and provides an answer to the spiritual needs of modern society by acknowledging the poetic power of religious symbols to awaken awe and moral passion.

Works Cited


Sons, 1971.


The future dramatization is being to live without even leisure, and cultural selves. Put brief Monologue. The globe, and campus which businesses, are about our myriad countries owe rooms myriad. We can no them, look at perhaps even har and death. Fe Harbor in 199 economic thr atomic bomb: two brief ins Today nuc down the pa monologic m