

Theological Creativity and the Powerful Persistence of Traditional Religious Symbols

Mary Farrell Bednarowski

One of those harmonic convergences has opened up for me a new—or, at least, newly framed—arena of thinking and research. Several years ago I received an invitation to deliver a convocation lecture at United Theological Seminary. The general theme was religion and culture, but the choice of subject was wide open. At that same time, I came across a poem by Muskogee Indian poet, Joy Harjo, “Perhaps the World Ends Here.” It is in most ways a very simple poem about “life,” about the history of the world, about who we are as various kinds of human beings who are capable of rendering to each other great joy and terrible destruction. For me it is also a religious poem. For one shaped by Christian/Catholic sensibilities, it is nearly impossible not see this as a poem about communion, about the church and the altar as the gathering place of the community, where most of the rituals central to our tradition take place and we live out the various passages of our lives in symbolic fashion. I have read and loved a thousand poems that have been both obviously and subtly religious, but this one struck me powerfully at a time when I was struggling to formulate some ideas about theological creativity and vitality that have been stirring but inchoate for a long time. Without ever using an obvious word, Harjo evokes the depths of tradition: the communion table where all might gather and be fed with the bread of justice—this place where we gather to sustain each other, to insist that if life can never be totally without suffering, neither should it be without hope. This is an end-of-the-world poem but not one that predicts apocalyptic catastrophe; it is rather one that says we are in this together and that together we will face whatever comes—at that most ordinary and extraordinary of altars, the kitchen table, “while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bit.”

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This article was originally printed in **arts** issue 12:2 (2000).

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PERHAPS THE WORLD ENDS HERE

The world begins at a kitchen table.
No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and
prepared, set on the table. So it
has been since creation, and it will
go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away
from it. Babies teeth at the corners.
They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given
instructions on what it means to be
human. We make men at it, we
make women.

At this table we gossip, recall
enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as
they put their arms around our
children. They laugh with us at our
poor falling-down selves and as we
put ourselves back together once
again at the table. This table has
been a house in the rain, an
umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this
table. It is a place to hide in the
shadow of terror. A place to
celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table,
and have prepared our parents for
burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with
sorrow. We pray of suffering
and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the
kitchen table, while we are laughing
and crying, eating of the last sweet
bite.¹

Harjo's poem took hold in my heart and my mind and in that often
unacknowledged critical faculty, the lump in the throat, that tells us we have

1. Joy Harjo, "Perhaps the
World End Here," in *The
Woman Who Fell from the Sky*
(New York and London: W. W.
Norton and Company, 1994)
68.

encountered a powerful call to our depths. As it did so, I discovered that more and more what I wanted to emphasize in my convocation address was the persisting strength and power of religious symbols and ideas rather than their imminent declension, disintegration, or watering-down (all longstanding themes in American religious history and culture). I suspect that this desire was so readily at hand because there has been stirring in me for a long time a resistance to the gloomy predictions about religion in our culture. I am convinced that the symbols of our various religious traditions are much more powerful in their ongoing meanings than we seem to realize—and that we do ourselves a disservice in underestimating that power. Their meanings are subject to change, of course, in form and emphasis—how could it be otherwise? - but not, in my opinion, to destruction or irrelevance. And no matter how much they have changed—and will continue to change—we can also trace their continuity through endless centuries.

I wanted my presentation to be a word of hope, although, lest anyone feel too optimistic too soon, a word of hope qualified by the modesty of its scope rather than by lack of intensity. Alas, the persisting power of religious symbols does not seem to mean the end of sin and suffering and evil in the world. Nor do I assume that the powerful persistence of traditional religious symbols is an unrelievedly good thing—it, like everything else about religion, is mixed. For me, “hope” means having the wherewithal to proceed with what needs to be done, whatever that requires in any particular circumstances—to take the next step. And hope, I’m convinced, is a communal project; we elicit it in each other, we share it with each other, and we find it in many places in the culture. It is one of the gifts of theological creativity, by which I mean the capacity, the commitment, and the desire to respond to religious symbols—to take responsibility for them in ways that are both innovative and conserving—to see what we can make of them that is new, but not so totally new that they no longer speak to the communities of people to whom they have been entrusted. We are obligated to cultivate the courage to let those symbols make their way into the world and to learn how to recognize their evocative power when we encounter them in startling new ways. The longer I study religion and theology the more I want to say that we (“we” being people who for the most part have found the church an institution with the capacity to be transforming

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and transformable) are often much too worried about the tenuousness, the precariousness, of our religious world views. We tend to expend a great deal of theological energy in guarding boundaries, setting limits, clinging too tightly to what we assume will come apart or blow away if we let go. We assume too often that they anger and doggedness that accompanies the ongoing, and necessary critique of our traditions are more dangerous than the quiet that may just as likely signal apathy as affirmation.

As I wrote this paragraph, surprised a bit by my own vehemence, I asked myself again: “Where are these strong convictions coming from, convictions that I have been moving toward for a long time, and probably even acting out of, but not really formulating or saying out loud?” They come, I suspect, from the fact that for most of my academic career the various things I have been studying—new religions, women’s theologies, literature—lie outside, although never totally, the publicly acknowledged centers of theological production and maintenance. They inhabit border regions, some might say, or even dangerous territory. But it is in these borderlands that I’ve learned about the persisting power of religious symbols.

Anyone who studies new religions at a given moment in history encounters people who ask questions, who voice their doubts and their disillusionments. They probe; they point to the inadequacies they experience in the established religious traditions and in the broader culture. Whatever the sociological complexities of new religions, one of their major aims is to join theological conversation in a given culture, to construct new world views. In doing so they often illuminate the particular religious and secular questions of an age, much like Christianity did in the early centuries of its existence. “What is the ‘really real?’,” Christian Scientists and Mormons were asking in the nineteenth century. “What is true religion?” “What must we do to be saved?” “What is the nature of community?” “How is the divine made known in the world?” “What are the make-up and the possibilities and limitations of human persons?” ask Moonies and Scientologists and Hare Krishnas and members of Eckankar and New Agers at the beginning of the twentieth-first century. These are not unfamiliar questions. They are the persistent theological questions that we in the mainline traditions ask as well, and they emerge from a variety of needs: social, spiritual, psychic, physical.

The construction of compelling responses to them requires theological creativity. It is in this aspect of new religions that I have been particularly interested: the relative power and creativity of their responses. Sometimes these groups fade away in less than a generation; sometimes they go horribly and dangerously astray. In cases like Christian Science, they persist without really flourishing. Or, like Mormonism, they persist and they flourish. Sometimes, as in the case of the New Age movement, they are much more a collection of ideas and practices than they are an organized institution.

However much these movements make use of what they often call “new revelations,” always they point both to the power and the limitations of traditional religious concepts, symbols, and rituals. Often the proliferation of new religious movements is interpreted as a sign of malaise in the culture, an indication that things are getting out of control. But it seems to me that religious innovation—which takes place, of course, both inside and outside established religious traditions—is always part of any culture. In an interestingly paradoxical way, this kind of innovation is a kind of conversation as well because it takes the questions so very seriously.

I have experienced the same kind of paradoxical, sometime volatile, combination of conservation and innovation in the theologies of women who are relatively new to the public expression of their beliefs and their experiences of the sacred. For the last several years I have been reading the theological writings of many women of different communities: liberal and conservative Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Native American, New Age, Mormon. A great deal of what I have read is, as you would imagine, filled with rigorous and far-reaching critique of religious communities for their gender exclusiveness and oppression of women. That’s what I expected to find, and I did. But to my own surprise, the more I read the writings of both radical and more moderate religious feminists the more I began to think about how very conserving the most radical of feminists theologies have been and continue to be—not conservative, but conserving. And the obvious finally dawned on me—that to take something very, very seriously, no matter how much change one advocates, is to conserve it, to “save” it, to contribute to its healing—certainly to demonstrate its power and persistence.

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Women have expended immense theological energy and creativity since the 1960s in demonstrating that their religious communities are more than capable of ignoring, silencing, and circumscribing the participation of half their members. Women have faced some hard and bitter realities about their traditions, and they have asked, “Is there anything worthwhile left,” Many, many, have answered, “Yes, there is.” But it is a “yes” that requires an acknowledgement of the worst before any authentic commitment can be made. Sheila Redmond, a counselor in Ottawa, Canada, who focuses on issues related to women and AIDS says that she has a quote attributed to Thomas Hardy on the blackboard in her office: “If a way to the better there be,/It exacts a full look at the worst.” Redmond keeps this quote always in front of her, because it undergirds her conviction that, “Whenever we fail to take a full look at the worst, whenever we deny the imperfections of our belief system, whenever we deny the evils our theologies have created and perpetuated, whenever we deny the abuse we have ourselves suffered from and caused in the name of our Christian beliefs, we risk, at the least, perpetuating the present violence and at the worst, causing even more harm however inadvertently.”² Most of the time in her work, she tells us, she feels “knee deep in crocodiles,” but part of her work is to create worship services that call for ways to make the world safer for women and children and to demonstrate that our God is a God who demands that kind of change. That is a way of attributing great power, I think, to the possibilities in creative worship.

Rachel Adler, a Jewish theologian, formerly Orthodox and new Reform, approaches the need to acknowledge the worst from a different angle. In an essay on changing her mind about whether the menstrual purity regulation in Orthodox Judaism are positive or harmful for women—she now thinks the latter—she tells us that she does not think a religious tradition has to be inerrant in order to be “infinitely dear.”³ It only has to be inexhaustible—to be somehow bottomless, I assume she means, in its depth of meaning.

It is this bottomless depth of meaning that women speak of when they offer their “yes” to their religious communities. In my readings I have not come across women who say “yes” because they think theirs is the only one true religion, superior to all others. Rather they talk about their experiences with the major symbols of their traditions. Their “yes” has to do with the feelings and

2. Sheila Redmond, “Remember the Good, Forget the Bad: Denial and Family Violence in a Christian Worship Service,” in *Women at Worship: Interpretations of North American Diversity*, ed. Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet R. Walton (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 80-81.

3. Rachel Adler, “In Your Blood, Live: Re-Visions of a Theology of Purity,” *Tikkun*, 8, no. 1 (January/February, 1993) 40.

experiences these symbols generate, the histories they evoke, the web of connections they sustain. Their “yes” comes with the insistence that critique is a way of knowing and of loving—sometimes ruefully, never without pain—but loving nonetheless. The painter Meinrad Craighead speaks of the persistently creative power of religious symbols as related to the principle of “indefinite extension,” a term she learned as an art major but has applied to the religious formation of her childhood in the Roman Catholic tradition. She has left this tradition officially but not viscerally, because the symbols of her childhood continue to shape her art. As is true for Craighead, the depth of meaning women experience in their religious traditions generates a creativity that is evident in new models of God, new rituals, new perspectives on ethics and ministry.

It is an interesting irony, I think, that the rigorous and far-reaching critique by women of their traditions has generated what amounts to a revitalization movement, a reformation. Women’s “yes” says that any authentic commitment to a religious tradition must integrate both the intellect and the affections—that there is something of the non-rational about loyalty to a religious tradition. I’m certainly not advocating the irrational here, but I am saying that any religious tradition that relies on the hyper-rational in its efforts to persuade is going to run out of steam. Much more is required.

I have also long been interested in looking at religious themes in literature. Since my early days as an English major, I have seen poetry and fiction as among the great preservers of religious language and symbols and among the most compelling sources of theological creativity. Poets and fiction writers have the freedom to be evocative rather than prescriptive in the use of religious concepts: the freedom to play on multiple meanings for religious language, in fact to count on multiple meanings. The poet creatively loosens up religious ideas rather than pines them down, intensifies religious symbols by asking questions about them. Poetry integrates intellectual and emotional responses. To “know” what a poem means requires a multiplicity of responses. Not all of those responses can be articulated verbally; some can only be “felt.” In other words, some of what a poem elicits is ineffable; it cannot be put into other words but it can offer the kind of knowledge that a lump in the throat points to—a response that comes from the depths of our beings.

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Sometimes it is only the title of a poem that alerts us to religious meaning, sometimes just one line. Another time it is an image that the poet plays with throughout. In “Annunciation,” another of her poems, Joy Harjo counts on all the historical and devotional associations most of her readers will be able to make with the title of this poem about the birth of her granddaughter. This is not a poem about the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to be the mother of Jesus. It is about a baby girl in her mother’s womb: “She is kicking, she is swimming/she is shining human laughter/as she takes a turn upstream/her mother’s dark crimson river.” This annunciation is not about an event in history considered unique by Christian tradition. “She isn’t the first red star/ in this watery universe,” writes Harjo, “nor will she be the last.”⁴ But can the reader refrain from making a connection with the old story and feeling how both stories deepen each other and tell us about the uniqueness and the ordinariness of any child’s coming into the world?

What about one of those old anthology favorites, Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” with its single line about Eden interwoven with images of “going down” in nature:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold;
Her early leaf’s a flower,
But only so an hour;
Then leaf subsides to leaf,
Thus Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.⁵

Because of the power of “Eden” in Christianity and in culture, we know that there is more depth here than the literal meanings of the words suggest. “Thus Eden sank to grief,” the poet writes, and he is counting on our making all those connections with loss and regret and diminishment that the Fall stirs in us. The poet draws life from that ancient story and gives renewed life to it. It is not possible to be creative in this way when there is no vitality left in the symbols.

Or what about a poem like Philip Dacey’s “The Feet Man,” part of a prize-winning collection, *Night Shift in the Crucifix Factory*, whose title warns us that any religious whimsy in these poem will likely have a grotesque edge to it.

4. Joy Harjo, “Annunciation,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000) 120.

5. Robert Frost, “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967) 272.

In “The Feet Man,” the narrator tells us about the worst job he ever had: “Nailing Jesus’ feet to the cross on the/assembly line at the crucifix factory.” He has never thought of himself as a religious man before, but when he figures out that he has to strike the nails more than two thousand times a day he begins to see things and develop tremors and then to flinch, “as if I were the one getting pierced.” Finally, the foreman tells him that if he can’t calm down he’s going to lose his job. He does his best, he tells us, but it isn’t easy: “Imagine Jesus after Jesus coming down/at you along that line, and you with/your hammer poised, you knowing what you have to do to make a living.”⁶ I doubt whether Dacey could have found a more gripping image of all the compromises we make, all the pain we inflict and endure, just to make our lives work. To say that he pounds his point home is understatement. He pounds it home two thousand times, and he knows that the power of his imagery will make the reader flinch along with the narrator.

It goes without saying that fiction is another art form that demonstrates the reciprocal energy between artistic and theological creativity. I am especially interested in how this dynamic works in popular fiction and the risks authors take in creating works that they hope will draw large audiences. Two recent works suggest that they will take quite a few. In *Evensong*, Gail Godwin takes religion and ministry and the relationship between theology and cultures as her subject matter. She gives us an argument between two characters, Margaret, the rector of the Episcopal church in a small city in the mountains of North Carolina, and Grace, the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher who’d “gone bad” at an earlier time in the town’s history. It is Advent, and Grace fervently wants Margaret and her congregation to join a march for Jesus’ birthday as a way to reconcile some class issues that have been troubling the town. Margaret has refused. Grace asks her, “Don’t you believe that if all of us come out in honor of His Son’s birthday, rain or shine, in the last days of the millennium, that the force of it, the sheer force of us lifting our voices in praise and offering our lives to him can bring change?”

Margaret gives a long answer—a speech, really—to this question. She begins by saying, “I believe that everything that happens brings change, Grace. As for marches, for whatever purpose, history certainly has shown that they can bring change, sometimes for the improvement of people’s lot, sometimes to

It goes without saying that fiction is another art form that demonstrates the reciprocal energy between artistic and theological creativity.

6. Philip Dacey, *Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) 49-50.

7. Gail Godwin, *Evensong* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999) 293-294.

whip people up for the worst sort of carnage of evil.” She goes on to say, “I believe we need change, but not apocalyptic change. We need the kind of change that comes out of foundation, not fireworks.” She concludes with a final zinger: “And nowhere in the Gospels do we ever hear mention of Jesus’s organizing a parade to get God’s attention.”⁷

Margaret also says some things about the need for individual, interior change and the coming of a spiritual kingdom that don’t quite cut it for me. I want more emphasis on the importance of community, and, as someone who came of age in the ’60s, I think now and then we have to march. But I am obviously drawn into the discussion. This is an argument in a book that may be a bestseller about how to show forth the truths, the vitality, of our religious traditions and how to make the world a more just place. If this is indeed the stuff of bestsellers, then we have the assurance that the power of these ideas transcends the boundaries of the institutional church.

Wally Lamb’s *I Know This Much is True* is another such popular novel, a *New York Times* best seller and an Oprah Winfrey book club pick. Lamb does not present the subject matter of his novel as obviously religious; it is about identical twin brothers, one a paranoid schizophrenic. But religious themes and questions pervade it. Throughout there is ongoing conversation about institutional religion, about religious devotion and faith, about the Bible and its uses. Dominick’s brother Thomas has cut off his hand in the public library. He has made a sacrifice, according to this understanding, to stop the war in the Persian Gulf. For this he is judged by the world as crazy. At one of the most poignant moments in the novel, Dominick is in a police car accompanying Thomas back to a psychiatric hospital. Thomas asks his brother to read from the 26th Psalm: “ ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear ? ... The Lord is my life’s refuge; of whom should I be afraid?’ The driver reached back over and turned off the radio. Even the dispatcher back at the station shut up.”⁸ Uttered even in this most bleak and chaotic of situations, the words are powerful. But not for Dominick. He continues to read, but he is having none of what he calls Bible voodoo. Thomas had also quoted scripture when he cut off his hand: “If thy right hand offend thee....” But by the end of this very long novel, Dominick has come not only to find something of value in the Bible; he can also offer a “yes” about other things. He has, he testifies,

8. Wally Lamb, *I Know This Much is True* (New York: Regan Books, 1998) 53.

found that “God exists in the roundness of things. This much, at least, I’ve figured out. This much I know is true.” I do not see the unfolding of this novel as offering a simple message through the medium of a complex plot: the triumph of religion over skepticism—cynicism, really. I see it as a demonstration of how a novelist finds immense dramatic and theological depth to draw from in the Christian tradition. He gives religion a run for its money—the worst with the best—but the final word is “yes.”

That there can be a “yes” at all at this moment in history, given how much we realize about religion’s capacity to bring about destruction as well as transformation, says to me that we can afford to have much more confidence in the power of our religious symbols than we often have and thereby generate more theological creativity of the kind that keeps our traditions alive, their symbols vital. We worry about so many things that we don’t need to worry about, in my opinion. We worry about religious pluralism, but I have no doubt that our tradition shines brightly enough and that it will endure if it is full of life. We worry that rigorous criticism of the excesses of our traditions will bring them crashing down. We especially worry about angry critiques—but at least they’re a sign of life. I am convinced that the church is safer from our anger than it is from our apathy.

We worry about syncretism—that our traditions will become such a mish-mash of influences that they will lose their distinctiveness and authenticity. But there has always been syncretism. How can there not be? Religions are dynamic entities, not static. They come in contact with all kinds of different influences in the culture, including other religious traditions. What we used to call syncretism we are coming to see as a “gift exchange.” We have gifts to offer and gifts to receive, even if discerning judgment suggests that, of course, some gifts need to be returned or never opened in the first place. We worry that we might cross boundaries that will carry us right out of our communities. To the contrary, I contend that if our traditions have vital depth to them, the boundaries will take care of themselves. They will be permeable but not full of holes. We worry that pluralism will lead to relativism—an inability or an unwillingness to value any one tradition over another—but I think we underestimate the powerful formative powers of the symbols that have shaped us—the history and depth of response we bring to them.

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The theological creativity we encounter in many parts of our culture counters the assumption that our task as members of religious communities is to conserve the vitality of our symbols by closing down on them. It is an impossible task anyway. In attempting to accomplish it we are likely to find ourselves guarding a static center with a shrinking circumference. A poem like “Perhaps the World Ends Here” helps us to know that, if we work to keep the center dynamic, symbols like the communion table will continue to be a source of depth in the broader culture. We will recognize them in new forms and rejoice over what they convey with an interpretive creativity that is its own kind of theological gift to the culture.



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ARTS is a journal of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies (SARTS) published by the Religion and Arts Program of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

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