

## A Sermon before the Congregational Church of Salisbury, CT

Bruce McEver – August 14, 2011

### Poetry: A Bridge to the Sacred

Good morning! It's good to be back among you and see so many familiar faces in the congregation. I am both honored and humbled to be speaking this morning. I finally earned my degree from Divinity School, a pilgrimage initiated here by Dick Taber over 5 years ago. I know many of you would rather have an economic report from my trip to Europe or commentary on the recent market collapse than a sermon today. However, I've decided things are so bad, it's best to pray and talk about poetry. I will say the markets are sensing the economic consequences of the lack of leadership on both sides of the Atlantic that has the courage to call for the shared sacrifice it will take to get us out of this.

Poetry surrounds worship, because I think it is a bridge to the sacred. Be *Though my Vision* is based on an ancient Celtic poem *The Psalms* and the *Song of Solomon* are books of poems in the Hebrew bible, but poetry is interspersed throughout its pages, such as *the Song of Debora*, thought to be from the earliest stratum of biblical history<sup>1</sup>. Contrary to popular opinion, the warrior, poet-king

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Palms*, pg.xxi.

David, did not write the Psalms<sup>2</sup>, but the poem Michael Gottlieb read for our first scripture reading is thought to be authentically by David. It is a brilliant eulogy for Saul and his son, Jonathan—really a lament for his dear friend Jonathan, who was to give up his throne for David. It is typical of Hebraic verse with the images paired. David subtly puts down Saul and rises up Jonathan, mentioning his name more. Robert Pinsky, our poet-laureate, wrote a book on David praising this poem and skills as both a warlord and poet. Thank you for that reading, Michael; he has written 15 books of poetry himself and will be reading his own work, “Dust”, in a memorial to 9/11, on September 12<sup>th</sup> at St. Marks Church in NYC.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, that Christina read, does an outstanding job and I think one of the best poems ever meditating on love. It is a complete sermon in thirteen verses. This is how Paul managed his franchise churches with letters like this. Luckily, they have been preserved, when the world at that time was oral and wisdom was verbally exchanged. He is addressing a controversy within his church, and its taking of conflicting spiritual gifts and brotherly love, using the Greek word *agape* rather than *eros* (romantic love). It has been mistaken that he speaks of marriage, and hence its popularity at

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pg. xv.

weddings, but it is indeed a masterful piece of verse; a divinely inspired work if there ever was one.

In the New Testament, we don't have much poetry. Jesus was a storyteller and spoke in parables. If our gospel reading is any clue, he certainly spoke poetically—"you are the salt of the earth" and the light of it as well.

Unfortunately, no one recorded his actual words and he doesn't address poetry as a subject, good, bad, or indifferent.

However, God's revelation to Mohammed, the Quran (to recite), is in fact a great poem itself. It was revealed over 23 years by the angel Gabriel to Mohammed, meditating in caves around Mecca, between 610-632. What is even more remarkable is that the Prophet was an illiterate man; it is considered his miracle. It was said to be able to convert a person on the spot and recitation is still an art form in the Islamic world. Because it was such a powerful verse, it may have accounted for the early rapid spread of Islam.

While our Bible has been the source of inspiration for so much Western art and poetry, the Qurán as an unaltered sacred utterance is at the absolute core of all Islamic art: architecture, calligraphy, music, and poetry. The poetry of the Sufi mystics, as we shall see, is a direct reverberation.

Octavio Paz, a writer, poet, and Mexican diplomat, was the 1990 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He says in his book, The Bow and the Lyre, echoing the implements of David, “Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandonment. An operation capable of changing the world, poetic activity is revolutionary by nature; a spiritual exercise; it is a means of interior liberation. Poetry reveals this world; it creates another.”<sup>3</sup> He goes further with this notion, looking at the mechanics of the art form:

A man reveals himself in rhythm, the emblem of his temporality: rhythm, in turn, declares itself in the image...by means of rhythm, creative repetition, the image—a bundle of meanings that rebel at explanation—is open to participation. The recitation of poetry is a festival; a communion. And what is shared and re-created in it is the image. The poem is realized in participation...the recreation of the original instant.<sup>4</sup>

We see that and much more in William Blake’s famous poem:

**Read selected verses from William Blake: *Auquiries of Innocence*”**

Paz continues: “I believe that poetry and religion spring from the same source and that it is not possible to dissociate the poem from its pretensions to change man without the risk of turning the poem into an offensive form of literature.”<sup>5</sup> Further he says:

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<sup>3</sup> Octavio Paz, The Bow and the Lyre, pg. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 102.

The first to perceive that love, religion, and poetry have a common origin were the poets. Modern thinking has appropriated this discovery for its own purposes. For contemporary nihilism, poetry and religion are merely forms of sexuality; religion is a neurosis, poetry sublimation.”<sup>6</sup>

He explains:

The truth is that in experience of the supernatural as in that of love and in that of poetry, man feels uprooted for separated from himself...when we try to lay hold upon it, we find that it has its origin in something preexistent, something that is confused with our being. The same is true of love and poetry. The three experiences are manifestations of something that is the very root of man.

But he finds something very interesting:

Latent in all three is the nostalgia for a former state. And that state of primordial unity....we scarcely know what it is that calls us from the depth of our being... In the amorous encounter, in the poetic image, and in the theophany, thirst and satisfaction are joined together; we are at once fruit and mouth, in indivisible unity.<sup>7</sup>

### **Read Patrick Kavanagh: *Canal Bank Walk***

Paz says the poetic experience, like the religious one, is a mortal leap: “a change of nature that is also a return to our original nature. Hidden by a profane or prosaic life, our being suddenly remembers its lost identity; and then that ‘other’ that we are appears, emerges. Poetry and religion are a revelation. But the poetic word dispenses with divine authority. The image is sustained by itself...”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 118-20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pg. 121.

## Read R.S. Thomas: *In Church*

Rudolf Otto, a German Lutheran theologian scholar of comparative religion and author of “The Idea of the Holy”, proposes the sacred is an *a priori* category; some elements are rational, others irrational:

The divine, the holy, the sacred is the expression of a divinizing disposition, innate in man a kind of “religious instinct” that tends to have consciousness of itself, but is obscure irrational because it cannot be reduced to reason or concepts. When we wish to express it we have no choice but to resort to images and paradox. The Nirvana of Buddhism and the Nothing of the Christian mystic are negative and positive notions at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

The numinous ideograms of the Other are the basis of mystic theology for Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

For them, the experience of the sacred is not so much the revelation of an object external to us—god demon, alien presence, as an opening of our hearts or our entrails so that hidden ‘other’ may emerge. Revelation in the sense of a gift or grace that comes from without is transformed into an opening of man to himself.

Norvalis, a writer, poet, and engineer—also a friend of Goethe and Fichte spent his life reconciling religion and poetry. He discovered: “When the heart listens to itself and is free of every particular and real object, it becomes its own real object, then religion is born.” A man is not “suspended by the hand of God,” but rather God lies hidden in the heart of man. This has profound implications,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 123-124.

and for the poet most importantly: “When the heart listens to itself...then poetry is born.”<sup>10</sup>

Listen to one of Rilke’s last poems:

**Read Rilke; *Just as the Winged Energy of Delight***

The experience of the sacred and love is similar: every love is a revelation, a jolt that causes the very foundations of the ego to tremble and utter words not very different from the mystic. In poetic creation, something similar happens: absence and presence, silence and words, emptiness and plenitude are poetic states as well as religious and amorous ones—in each of them the rational elements are given at the same time as the irrational.

The equation of the amorous encounter with the spiritual runs throughout the *Songs of Solomon* as you can read in your pew bibles; much is X-rated! This is much like Sufi poetry where the beloved longed for is God absent and the wine drunk is spiritually intoxicating.

If a spark of God is indeed within us, this implies another concept of sin. We are at fault, because something in us is indeed faulty: we are little or nothing in relation to the being that is all. Our fault is not moral, it is original insufficiency. *Sin is the littleness of being.* Let me say that again: sin is the littleness of being.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 125.

Look at what our Gospel reading for today is saying, Jesus urges us: “Don’t lose your original saltiness” and “Let your light shine before others, so others might see your good works and give glory to your Father.”

In order to be, man must propitiate the divine, that is appropriate it; by means of consecration, man has access to the sacred, to the plenitude of being. This is the meaning of the sacraments, especially that of communion.<sup>11</sup>

The starting point of poetry, like that of religion, is the original human situation—knowing we have been thrown into a hostile and indifferent world. By a path that is in its own way negative, the poet comes to the brink of language. And that brink is called silence; a blank page...sterility precedes inspiration, as emptiness precedes plenitude. The poetic world crops our after periods of drought. I was in one of those unproductive funks, a writing slump, and bought myself some flowers to cheer me brighten up.

**Read: *Tulips***

The poetic image is the bridge. It does not conceal our condition from us: it reveals it and invites us to realize it completely. The act by which man grounds and reveals himself is poetry. In sum, the religious experience and the poetic one have a common origin in their historic expressions—poems, myths, prayers,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg. 129.

exorcisms, hymns, and dance. Let us look at a poem by Rumi that takes flight.

Note: in the Qurán, Joseph is a great hero:

### **Read Rumi: Unfold Your Own Myth**

“Poetry opens up the possibility of being that is intrinsic in every birth: it recreates man and makes him assume his true condition, this is not the dilemma: life or death, but a totality: life and death in a single instant of incandescence.”<sup>12</sup>

In this troubled time, our sin may indeed be the littleness of our being—let’s take wing and go beyond. As our Psalms reading says, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord.”

Let us pray—.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. 139.