

Spirituality and Neighbour Religions

Worship and Prayer

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Neighbour Religions reflected on the Biblical Scene

1. When JHWH started speaks to Abram, what did Abram hear and how was the conditions for him to get any meaning out of what he heard? What were Abram's ideas about JHWH when Abram first time experienced the Divine addressed him? If Abram knew JHWH as God, Abram must have been familiar with the Divine reality before the first beginning we find in Genesis 12. The Abram concept of God is the needed condition for Abram to get any meaning out of the Divine address. The Genesis text tells the beginning of the story as was it the most natural thing in the world that a god called JHWH suddenly is talking to Abram, and the most natural thing that he is not wondering but accepts the calling to start the long walking to an unknown country in the midst of nowhere. Is Genesis 12 telling that the Hebrew religion has its first root in Mesopotamian spirituality? Was the Salem priest Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham in the name of God Most High a sign of this?

2. What knowledge about God did Moses have when he faced JHWH in the burning bush? The Exodus gives a picture of a man born in a Hebrew slave population with a 430 year unknown history, probably with weak identity. He was raised in an upper class society environment, which must have included strong religious elements and praxis. Maybe Moses was most influenced of Median culture and religion because of a long period of ministry at his father in law Jethro, who was the priest of the Median people. When the Israel people after the Exodus of Egypt are coming to the Sinai, a new contact to the Median people and the priest Jethro is described in Ex 18. The name JHWH maybe is rooted in the Median language, and the Ex 18 shows that Jethro knows JHWH. How is Moses understanding of the JHWH linked to the Median religion? (The Kain story, Genesis 4, notice verse 26, and the references to the Kenites, e.g. Num 24:21 and Gen 15:19, indicate that other than the Hebrew people knew the Divine name JHWH.) Is Exodus 3 and 18 telling that the Hebrew religion has its second root in an Egyptian Sacral Royalty combined with theology of Median religion?

3. The book of Joshua and the book of the Judges cover a period of approximately 200 years. The exegetes' works on these two books have raised many questions about the origins of the Israel people and its faith in JHWH. Why some of the tribes are described very detailed and other tribes are only mentioned? In the book of Joshua the most important tribes are the two Josef son's tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. In the Ephraim area the centre of the cult was placed in Shiloh. And in the Ephraim area the centre of political power was placed in Shechem. The establishment of the Israel people in the Promised Land was a process of

several very different actions, which include 1) military conquest, the conquering in South and North are mentioned as examples, 2) negotiations and treaty making, the covenant in Shechem established finally the 12 tribe people, and 3) co-existence with tribes, not able to conquer or make deals with, the Jebusites of (Jeru) Salem is one example. The different ways of integration into the one twelve tribe people have a parallelism in the ways of developing the faith of the Israel people. From the pre-invasion history we know the god names Baal and El from the Canaan people of the Promised Land. In the Canaan religion both Baal and El have their rolls in the cultic drama, but in the meeting with the invading Hebrew tribes the El is adapted as a synonym name of the JHWH and Baal is adapted as a hostile god. The competing tribes of the books of Joshua and the Judges lead to a new reading of the Pentateuch asking: What is the reality behind the Exodus and the Sinai Desert story? The most important tribe in the Pentateuch is the tribe of Levi. The leadership, the many laws describing the privileges and the status of the Levi tribes, the central place of the book of Leviticus are all notable. In the Exodus 32:25-29 Moses ordered the Levites to fight the others tribes because of their celebrating of the golden calf and their lack of loyalty to the JHWH. The Levites kill 3000 men of the other tribes. Regardless if the killing is an act of punishment or the final action of competition between the tribes, the Levites comes out of the confrontation as the tribe having absolute control over the other tribes, and the JHWH cult is conquering the cult of other gods. Behind the first leadership of the Israeli people we see what tribe is the most powerful. Moses and Aron were Levites, the leading tribe of the Sinai period; Joshua was an Ephraim, one of the two leading tribes in the period of invasion; King Saul was Benjamin, the tribe fighting and struggling with its position; and King David and Salomon, both representing Judah, the final conquering tribe, who managed to overrule the Jebusites and make Salem into Jerusalem and move all cultic and political power to its centre. What is the final picture of the origin of the Israel twelve tribe people? Is it a picture of different tribes with different ethnic, cultural and religious background who over several hundred years have been united in a common story and a common religion?

4. Several texts have indicated that the biblical faith in God has been developed in dialogue with people of other faiths. Some examples have to be mentioned:

- Old Testament: Scholars have often called attention to the similarities between the biblical creation story in Genesis 1-2 and other oriental cosmogonies, first of all Mesopotamian epics about creation/cosmos after the Marducs fight against Livjatan/Rahab the chaos-god. Similarities show that the biblical creation text has developed in an environment with other understandings of the world. The biblical creation story is not only a simple copy of a mythology from another religion. Neither is it syncretism. It is, in its similarity, a very well reflected genuine Hebrew proclaiming, where the Hebrew theology is clear, God Elohim is the sovereign god, who creates, setting limitations, with his powerful word, *dabar*, and every creation is good, because it is a result of Gods will. The obvious similarity with another religious mythology does not weaken the unique Hebrew theology. It is most likely that other religious mythologies have stimulated and positively forced the process to form the Hebrew theology of creation. The same kind of similarities is between the Gilgamesh Epic telling the Mesopotamian Flood Story and the Genesis 6-9 telling the Noah Ark salvation story and the rainbow covenant sign. Concerning influence from Egyptian spirituality the Psalm 104 has similarities with the pharaoh Echnatons sun hymn. The Psalm 104 has several formulations very close to the sun hymn, but the differences are obvious too. If the Psalm 104 has developed on the background of a well-known sun hymn then the Hebrew theology is clear. There is no doubt that the only god is JHWH, and he is the only one, who is creator. JHWH set the boundaries and everything in the created world has its existence because of Gods good will. The theology is in harmony with Genesis 1-2. The two examples show that Hebrew

theology was influenced by neighbour religions spirituality, but Hebrew theology was indeed clear and had its unique identity in spite of what it received from the outside.

- New Testament: The Acta gives the first presentation of how the gospel was presented to people without Jewish background. Paul's preaching in Lystra, Acta 14:15-17, and in Athens, Acta 17:22-31, are representing this type of preaching. The only God has given over the ethnic people to their own religions and culture, and the purpose for them is that they shall find God. The ethnic people are given over to their own thinking and imaginations; they are in lack of right information. But they are not principal against God or automatically evil. The Christian gospel is proclaimed as in harmony with what the listeners already know something about from the background they have, even though it vary from location to location. In Lystra Paul says that (God) "he has not left himself without a witness in doing well – giving youand filled your hearts with joy." Acta 14:17. In Athens Paul quotes one of the God given witnesses of the Greek religion, when he quotes Aratos in Acta 17: 28. The Christian gospel is presented in a way where it adapts spiritual elements from the religious culture the gospel is proclaimed into. The first Christian missionaries were in the line of Jewish Diaspora Rabbis. The Septuagint (LXX) is the main example on how Jewish religion was planted into the Greek-Roman culture, and in the same way adapted elements from the Greek-Roman culture into Jewish spirituality. The Septuagint uses words and formulations, which were developed by the Greek-Roman religions, and the fact that the words already were loaded with spiritual meaning made them useful for the Septuagint fathers. It was a risky way to go, and it was only possible because of the superior thinking that the only God is already in the neighbour religions even though the neighbours are limited by lack of enlightenment. The most characteristically word to be translated, as an example on this theology, is the name of god, the JHWH. The Septuagint fathers had the choice either to keep the JHWH unchanged in the Greek texts, and it could have functioned very well, or to find a total new word not loaded with any outstanding value. Instead the Septuagint fathers took a central word from the Greek-Roman sacral-political language, and the JHWH became the Kyrios. From this tradition of the Jewish Diaspora Septuagint fathers the step was not that far for the first Christian missionaries to confess Jesus Christ as the Kyrios. This proclaiming Jesus Christ the Kyrios was from the Jewish perspective loaded with all the theology of JHWH from the Old Testament, and from the Greek-Roman perspective the same word was loaded with the content from the sacral-political power of the Cesar-cult. Another example is the choice of the word Logos. When the first Christian missionaries used the concept of Logos they profited on what the Septuagint fathers already had prepared and what the Greek philosophers, e.g. Plato, had put into the word. The Logos was a well spiritual loaded word when the Christian missionaries decided to use it as a keyword in the proclaiming of the gospel.

First conclusion: The Bible shows an open attitude to neighbour religions, and to some extend new theological understanding and new spiritual inspiration develop in the meeting between the People of God and people of other faith.

The church of Europe

5. When Christianity became the religion of the leaders of the Roman Empire, it was included into the strategy of the mission to Christianise the public life of the society. One way to do this was to change the feast that people were used to celebrate in their old religions. After that model the old roman feast of the returning Sun was changed into Christmas. Christmas was not a feast in the first generations of Christendom. Maybe the Cappadocian Fathers were the

first to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The new situation in the Constantine era made it obvious to introduce Christmas as an instrument for Christianising the public life of the society. It gives also an answer why in the Latin Church focus was on December 25, the date of the old sun feast, while in the Greek Church focus was on epiphany, January 6. When Christianity moved north the Christmas was introduced to the Germanic tribes and was in competition with the Germanic sun feast many generations after the Church was established. After a while the content of the feast in the dark time of the year was more and more Christianised, but it is still an open question what and how many elements from the old Northern religions have survived in the Christmas celebration until today. The name of the feast never changes, and the church adapted the heathen name, Jul in all Scandinavian languages (Yule in English). The time of the year where most people are coming to church in Northern Europe is the time people had their largest feast before Christianity was introduced.

6. Archaeologies can tell us, that many churches in Europe are built on pre-Christian cult places. This fact shows that Christianity took over the place of old religion and gave it a new content from the inside. We know that the old religions and Christianity lived side-by-side over long time. The official time of the entrance of Christianity was quite short because it was linked to the conversion of the local King or tribe chief. But the change of the population into Christianity was a much slower process over hundreds of years. Some part of this history resulted in syncretism, but the same history can be described as Christian mission taking over the place of the religion before. And in the process the pre-Christian religion has been the basis for the developing of the Christianity, we know today. Grundtvig did in the 1800 a tremendous work on the common Northern Europe mythology to describe the spirituality Christianity was planted into. Grundtvig saw a common pre-Christian history for all people around the Nordic- and Baltic Seas, and saw it as the Northern people's "Old Testament."

7. Theologians have tried to puzzle out why the concept of Christendom is looking so different in different places of the world. The new history of mission churches is too short for a question like this. Several hundred years' history is needed to work with this question. So the focus has been Europe, and in Europe we find the contrast between Roman Catholic Europe and Protestant Europe. Why came the Reformation at the time it came? And has the geography any influence on the acceptance of the ideas of Reformation? To make a very long story very short some interesting studies have been worked out with the focus on the culture of the people settled in the different areas of Europe. The Reformation developed mainly within the Germanic tribe population, and from their pre-Christian history they brought some of the same element that the Reformers lifted up, and the Reformers theological points were very easy for the Germanic tribe population to accept. The Romanic people, most formed during the 700 year long period of the Roman Empire, brought with them a quite different spirituality and fundamental values that made it difficult to accept the Reformers ideas. For the Protestant Churches a strong focus is on the reconciliation of Christ, interpreted in several theories of atonement e.g. Anselms interpretation of the offering of Christ as a satisfaction. The focus of the Romanic peoples is the mystery of Christ in the Christian worship and the Eucharist and especially the giving of Christ, as a representative of the human race, to the Father. The question is, do we see a parallelism between on the one side the different churches and on the other side the different pre-Christian spirituality the churches are developed on?

8. The modern mission churches in the Third World show the same history parallel to Europe, but often more compact over few generations. Christian missionaries bring the Gospel and first generation Christians take over the Christianity in the cultural impacts of the missionaries. Second and third generation Christians develop Christianity in-cultivated and

full integrated into the local culture, which include element of pre-Christian religions. The new churches take this as a sign of incarnation of Christ.

Second conclusion: The Church History shows that the mission adapts and transform element from the existing spirituality and gives these elements a genuine Christian content.

Neighbour religion spirituality within the UMC

9. The history of Methodism is very short. At least short when you try to see how Methodism is integrated into the culture it was first introduced to. The strong Methodist identity linked to work of the Wesley brothers in a specific time is still a major part of Methodist self-understanding in many places. First when Methodism has created its own new identity fully integrated in different cultures, we can see the Methodist co-operation with other cultures, religions and churches. Maybe the incarnation of Methodism in the multitude of cultures all over the world will take place within the framework of the ecumenical movement. But already now we can find examples where the Methodist spirituality has adapted spiritual elements from its neighbour religions. The Book of Worship of the UMC 1992 includes a number of prayers from other religions:

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You have come from afar and waited long and are wearied.
Let us sit side by side,
Sharing the same bread drawn from the same source
To quiet the same hunger that makes us weak.
Then standing together let us share the same spirit, the same thoughts
That once again draws us together in friendship and unity and piece.

Prieres D'Ozawamick, Canadian Indian, 20th cent.

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Grandfather, Great Spirit,
You have always been, and before you nothing has been.
There is no one to pray to but you.
The star nations all over the heaven are yours,
And yours are the grasses of the earth.
You are older than all need, older than all pain and prayer.
Grandfather, Great Spirit, fill us with light.
Give us strength to understand and eyes to see.
Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live.
Help us, for without you we are nothing. Amen.

Traditional Dakota Tribe Prayer

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O God, that we may receive your blessing,
Touch our brows, touch our heads, and do not look upon us in anger.
In a hard year, offer us mercy; in a year of affliction, offer us kindness;
dark spirits banish from us, bright spirits bring close to us;

gray spirits put away from us, good spirits draw near to us.
When we are afraid, offer us courage; when we are ashamed, be our true face;
be over us like a blanket, be under us like a bed of furs. Amen.

Traditional Prayer, Mongolia.

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Every part of this earth is sacred.
Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing
and humming insect is holy.
The rocky crest, the meadow, the beasts and all the people, all belong to the same family.
Teach your children that the earth is our mother.
Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.
We are part of the earth, and the earth is a part of us.
The rivers are our brothers, the quench our thirst.
The perfumed flowers are our sisters, the air is precious, for all of us share the same breath.
The wind that gave our grandparents breath also receives their last sigh.
The wind gave our children the spirit of life.
This we know, the earth does not belong to us.
We belong to the earth.
This we know, all things are connected.
Like the blood which unites one family, all things are connected.
Our God is the same God, whose compassion is equal for all.
For we did not weave the web of life.
We are merely a strand in it.
Whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.
Let us give thanks for the web and the circle that connects us.
Thanks be to God, the God of all.

Inspired by Oration of Chief Seattle, Native American.

The UMC hymnal 1989 has even more songs from neighbour religion background. One single
example to be mentioned:

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Great Spirit, now I pray to you,
I pray now to you, Great Spirit, hear me;
My soul is weary, now I pray that your spirit will dwell in me.

Kiowa prayer

Third Conclusion: The UMC already adopts neighbour religions spirituality and uses it as
inspiration of the UMC worship services.

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