

Class 2a

Postmodern Challenges to Religious Narratives



Outline

- The Bible in the pre-modern period: authoritative master narrative
- Characteristics of the modern and postmodern periods
- How do we see the Bible now – history? fact? fiction?
- "Inspiration," "revelation," and the "sacred"

The Bible in the Pre-modern Period Authoritative Master Narrative

- The pre-modern view of authority
 - Powers beyond the human govern our destiny
 - Hierarchy of power is "natural"
- "Master narrative"
 - Since time is governed by the transcendent, so is the story of time
 - The Bible is one such story

Characteristics of the Modern and Postmodern Periods

- Modern
 - [Derive the features from your reading; we will review them in class]

Characteristics of the Modern and Postmodern Periods

In the Postmodern moment, one accepts that all forms of life—even the most rationalistic—depend on prior belief.

And "facts" do not exist outside of rhetoric or language.

Characteristics of the Modern and Postmodern Periods

- Postmodern critique of "grand narratives"
 - All of them—even the scientific or technological ones—have become incredible, leading to dislocation and disillusionment
 - We can be characters within [stories] because we can be mastered by them. And it would seem that most of us want to be within such a story. We want to be mastered or written into a narrative that is longer, larger, and stronger than our own. This is because stories are secure places. We know how they begin and end.... But what happens when these stories break down...?*
(Loughlin, 303-304)
 - The modern replacements themselves became incredible, undesirable, even horrible *bricolage*
 - We are left with the "rubble" of the stories, on our own to pick pieces from those that seem useful—on the model of a consumer in a capitalist society

Questions We Pose to the Bible

- Is it fact or fiction? (or both?)
- What does it mean anymore to imagine that the Bible is “inspired,” “revelation, or “sacred”?

Defining the Sacred Dictionary Definitions

- The “sacred” originally referred to the gods or anything in their power
- It was a term that designated space set apart for reverence of the gods, distinct from the “profane” space outside the temple precinct

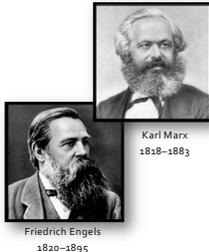


The Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem
450 BCE – 70 CE

Defining the Sacred The sacred as illusion born of injustice

Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels

- Religious belief is a reflection of human alienation and material deprivation
- It gives expression to the breakdowns in the social fabric; it is thus a symptom—not a cause—of economic dysfunction
- As part of the cultural “superstructure,” it is managed by those in power, comforting the rich while feeding illusions to the poor



Friedrich Engels
1820–1895

Karl Marx
1818–1883

Defining the Sacred

The sacred as a social phenomenon

D. Émile Durkheim

- Sacred things are those things set apart and forbidden
- Communities *form themselves* by these beliefs and practices



D. Émile Durkheim
1858–1917

Defining the Sacred

The sacred as wholly other

Rudolf Otto

- The holy or sacred is that which is "numinous"—a non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self
- The numinous or sacred is both terrifying to us and fascinating to us at the same time
- It is an experience that feels wholly other than any other experience



Rudolf Otto
1869–1937

Mircea Eliade

The sacred manifests itself to us as something wholly other (hierophany); it is a reality that does not belong to this world, even while it often manifests in profane places or objects



Mircea Eliade
1907–1986

Defining the Sacred

More Recent Developments

- More recently, sociologists and anthropologists have shied away from these dualistic views
- They now imagine the sacred as those things that embody *the most significant interests* of the social group, following Durkheim
- More recently (1990s→), some anthropologists have looked to evolutionary theory and genetic or cognitive science to explain the roots of human belief in the sacred

Defining the Sacred

The sacred as an evolutionary adaptation

Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion (1993)

We personify dangerous things and events; this is rooted at least partly in brain functions associated with survival



Stewart Guthrie
1942-



David Sloan Wilson
1949-

Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society (2002)

The religious impulse evolved to help make social groups more cohesive, cooperative, and fraternal



Dean Hamer
1952-

The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes (2004)

The tendency toward religious belief and behavior may be traceable to a variant coding of DNA on one specific gene

Defining the Sacred

From within a Christian faith perspective

Karl Rahner, SJ

- God is the sacred: absolute mystery, incomprehensible and impenetrable
- Yet human beings can know and relate to this mystery because God communicates through creation, through revelation, and through Christ
- Because we are part of creation, human beings have a pre-apprehension of "the infinite reality" or the transcendent God, and can experience grace
- God and these experiences are thus "sacred"



Karl Rahner
1904-1984

Your paper for Monday

- Create an image and write an accompanying paper that present the "sacred" moments in your life.
 - For your image, follow the pattern of the Tavola of St. Clare, with *your* image in the center and scenes or symbols of the sacred moments from your life around the periphery.
 - In your accompanying 3-page, double-spaced paper,
 - explain the perimeter scenes—what each is and why each is so significant for you
 - close with a statement about what all the scenes have in common—that is, what makes a moment in your life sacred or significant, and
 - define what the term "sacred" means to you.
- Format it properly
- Upload it to Camino before class.
