

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



EMISSARIES
OF DIVINE LIGHT

THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

24 OCTOBER 2011

Through the work we are doing in consciousness we are opening a window to an inner reality—a reality that is sensed primarily through the heart, although its origin isn't of the heart. It is the inner reality of all things and of ourselves.

I'd like to read from a book by Karen Armstrong. She boldly entitled it *The History of God*. More accurately, it's the history of humanity's ideas and experiences of God. She says this, speaking of Islam:

The Koran urges Muslims to see the world as an epiphany; they must make the imaginative effort to see through the fragmentary world to the full power of original being, to the transcendent reality that infuses all things. Muslims were to cultivate a sacramental or symbolic attitude.

She quotes this from the Koran:

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth and the succession of night and day and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it has been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon; and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages (ayat) indeed for a people who use their reason.

And Karen Armstrong goes on to say this:

The Koran constantly stresses the need for intelligence in deciphering the “signs” or “messages” of God. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason but to look at the world attentively and with curiosity. It was this attitude that later enabled Muslims to build a fine tradition of natural science, which has never been seen as such a danger to religion as in Christianity.

In Arabic, the signs and messages of God are spoken of as *ayat*, a word that refers to verses in the Koran but also to the lessons, signs and revelations we receive from God in whatever way. As an Imam explained it to me, an *ayah* is an open window through which one can understand the Divine, so that everyday experiences of life, and indeed spiritual teachings, create a transparent window to an inner reality for one who is open to truly see.

Unfortunately, in the fundamentalism of Islam, the teachings of the Koran are often not an open window but are seen as something in and of themselves. The same is true of religion in the Judeo-Christian world. What was intended as symbol, as an open window to an experience of a reality, has become a thing in and of itself, as if we could take what was in the Bible, for instance, and believe it at face value—as if the symbols that were being mentioned were something in and of themselves; as if there was such a thing as a literal translation of the teachings and stories that are in sacred scripture.

I assert that that kind of “literal translation” is gross ignorance, and that the art of all of living is to understand what is within the forms of our lives, including religious symbolism. Treating religious symbolism on what is thought of as a literal basis is ignorance. The whole point of the forms used in worship and prayer, and in spiritual teaching, is to create a touchstone for what we cannot see with symbols and forms that we can see. Interestingly enough, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it’s a violation of the Ten Commandments to make graven images of heavenly things—to turn symbols that ought to be alive in mind and heart, giving us a deep relationship with the creative spirit within all things, into the end and object of our worship.

I would like to read one of the richest pieces of spiritual symbolism I know, a passage from our Bible that is full of poetry. It is from the first chapter of Ezekiel. The whole chapter is absolutely magnificent. If we were to try to understand it on a literal basis, I think we would have to believe that Ezekiel was crazy. It is interesting that, in poetic terms, the author—or

at least the translator—went out of their way to make sure that we would know that this is poetry, this is simile. This passage is just following Ezekiel’s amazing description of four-headed beasts, and wheels within wheels:

And there was a voice from the firmament that was over their heads, when they stood, and had let down their wings.

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it.

And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about.

As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake. (Ezekiel 1:25–28)

I defy anyone to interpret that literally!—though I am sure it has been attempted. This poetic description is not the thing itself. It was not the subject of Ezekiel’s vision. It was the “appearance of the likeness” of a reality within all of Being. It was the appearance of fire, and the likeness of a throne. The author has gone way out of their way to tell us that this is poetry, not prose.

The deepest and most profound experiences of our life cannot be explained by prose. We may use a description of form to convey them, but that description is intended to evoke an experience of something marvelous and wonderful, a reality that changes us as human beings.

This is the essence of poetry. This is what poetry is for, both the well-known published variety and the simple, poetic expressions of what we are coming to understand in a deeper way. It is to say to each other what we couldn’t say any other way. When it comes to spiritual things, there is a temptation to try to explain in seemingly scientific terms, to speak in terms of laws and principles, things that appear to be objective and firm. And yet there is a way our soul understands through poetry that it does not understand any other way. We have to understand in poetry and speak in poetry if we are to speak and understand the most important things of life.

I take heed of what the Muslims say—that there’s a “need for intelligence in deciphering the ‘signs’ or ‘messages’ of God.” We have to use the capacity of our mind to discern the spiritual truth within those messages, to receive it at its depth, so that it may become real to us and relevant in our lives.

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