

QUUF

Sunday, 13 Jan 08

Guest Speaker: Margaret D. McGee

Readings

I have readings from two writers this morning, and they require a bit of introduction. One is by a Christian writing about the theology of a Sufi mystic, and the other is poem written by a different Sufi mystic. Why the mystics? Well, in my sermon, which you'll hear shortly, I refer to God a couple of times. It occurred to me that if I was going to mention God from the pulpit, it might be good to say what I meant by God.

This is not easy. For me, God is connected to the essence of being, to whatever it is that makes things be. I'm loathe to get more specific. A friend, retired now from a combined career of Episcopal priest and Adlerian psychologist, says that any definition of God is idolatry, and I think that's probably true. Still, I can say that I'm in sympathy with the theological approach expressed in these two readings.

The first is from an unpublished paper by Dr. Norvene Vest, a Benedictine oblate who recently completed her Ph.D. in Mythology in the tradition of Depth Psychology.

Dr. Vest's paper is titled "Faith That Works in a Disbelieving World: A Mythic Re-Visioning of Religious Experience." I'll read an excerpt from the section about imagination.

The concept of uniting the passionate imagination with a movement toward God is foundational to a stream of Sufi mysticism initially developed by Ibn ʿArabī in the eleventh century. In the transforming work of imagination, Ibn ʿArabī conceives the human being as a kind isthmus, or barzakh, between God and the created world, transmitting to the created world the light and truth of God, while also communicating the twinkling reflections of the created world back to God. This barzakh, like a metaphor, links a known to an unknown, uniting two similar but dissimilar things. The barzakh is neither one nor the other of the things it links, yet it shares in qualities of both.

[skipping ahead]

The lens of imagination offers a way to inform and direct spiritual passion toward wholeness, serving a mediating and integrating role for the sensate and the conceptual, by bringing God's reality into the world and vice versa.... [This requires] a kind of dying, a relinquishment of old certainties and a willingness to trust the living God in what may seem to be darkness. The new vision does not offer certainty, but rather invites an ability to live at ease in an open story, a story that is always renewing itself, always subject to ambiguity and creative disorientation. The mythic vision proposed here is a lively one, fluid and

full of surprises. It rests in the idea that the key to the spiritual life is a kind of ongoing conversion of heart.

I love the idea that just as the created world, including me, grows and changes, God is also growing, changing, and that our action in the world provides some of the "juice" for that change. This gives me a feeling of engagement in creation—a sense that I play a small role in the ongoing epic myth of the cosmos.

The second reading is a poem of the 13th century Persian poet Mahmud Shabestari.

EVERY PARTICLE OF THE WORLD IS A MIRROR

Every particle of the world is a mirror,
In each atom lies the blazing light
 of a thousand suns.
Cleave the heart of a rain-drop,
 a hundred pure oceans will flow forth.
Look closely at a grain of sand,
 the seed of a thousand beings can be seen.
The foot of an ant is larger than an elephant;
In essence, a drop of water
 is no different than the Nile.
In the heart of a barley-corn
 lies the fruit of a hundred harvests;
Within the pulp of a millet seed
 an entire universe can be found.
In the wing of a fly, an ocean of wonder;
 in the pupil of the eye, an endless heaven.
Though the inner chamber of the heart is small,
 the Lord of both worlds
 gladly makes [a] home there.

-- Mahmud Shabestari, from *The Essential Mystics: Selections from the World's Great Wisdom Traditions*, edited by Andrew Harvey