

MEADVILLE/LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

THE SENTENCE OF SCHEHERAZADE:
TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF STORY
FOR LIBERAL RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

"The sentence of Scheherazade" is the the sentence of living through stories, of telling stories to live. The story of Scheherazade dates back as far as the tenth century, and frames the 1001 nights. In the story, the king of the land in which Scheherazade lives has become disgusted with women, and is systematically killing all the young women in the kingdom. Scheherazade intervenes, and by the telling of stories, she is able to heal the king, and save the women of her country. She told her story so that she and the women of her country might live. The power of the telling of stories in Scheherazade's time and in our own time is certainly profound. Stories can be enlivening, can speak to and name our deepest fears and aspirations, can console us in times of chaos, and can help us to orient our lives in more meaningful, life-giving ways.

My first introduction to story and religion in seminary came from reading Michael Novak's Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove for a course on Liberal Religious Theology and Mythos in 1981. His suggestion that we all tell a story with our lives, and that this is essentially religious resonated with my perceptions of religion. In his words:

Religion, some think, is believing in doctrines, belonging to an organization, saving one's soul through an attitude (trust in God) or works. But there are countless ways of living out the

same doctrines, many different ways of "belonging," an endless number of ways of misperceiving one's own soul. That is why it seems better to imagine religion as the telling of a story with one's life.¹

At the Meadville/Lombard Midwinter Institute in 1983, I gained some deeper understanding of the place of story in religion. Thomas Groome was the primary lecturer for the institute, and described his method of "shared praxis" which focused on the use of story in religious education. Again, I felt some strong resonance with Groome's work in the area of story.

Looking back on the experience, it is not especially surprising that I found these resonances. I was nurtured in a church school shaped by a great storyteller, Sophia Lyon Fahs. Many of the religious educators present at the institute commented that Groome's method was not unlike the method which they used already. In fact, the method used by many, if not all, of Unitarian Universalist religious educators is strongly influenced by Fahs' work, and is not unlike Groome's method.

Once through with the writing, I found that it was, at least in part, a religious archeology. I have sought in this thesis to explore my religious roots, and to discover what undergirds my religious life. It was less grueling than I would have thought and has provided insight into my personal story that I would not have expected to

¹Michael Novak, Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Invitation to Religious Studies, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 45.

find. I hope that it may provide some inspiration and framework in which to address issues facing Unitarian Universalism today.

THE SENTENCE OF SCHEHERAZADE:
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Linda A. Hart

For humankind is addicted to stories. No matter our mood, in reverie or expectation, panic or peace, we can be found stringing together incidents, and unfolding episodes. We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We all seem to be under the sentence of Scheherazade. We tell our stories to live.¹

CHAPTER ONE

Story has increasingly become an important category for understanding religiousness and religious community. A wealth of literature has emerged over the last 20 years which considers the role of story in religion. In this chapter I will first define what I mean by a theology of story, and the terms which I will use throughout this thesis when writing about story. Second, I will discuss the understanding of story and the method of story as it is currently understood in Unitarian Universalism, drawing primarily from the work of Sophia Lyon Fahs. Finally, I will suggest the issues which I consider to be important to the development of a theology of story for religious liberals.

¹John Shea, Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography, (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978), pp. 7-8.

A writer who is helpful in understanding what a theology of story might involve is Michael Goldberg. I will be referring to his work often throughout this chapter. Goldberg describes the writers who might be considered “narrative theologians,” as is the case with the thinkers who will be cited in this thesis, as theologians who claim that “the religious convictions which are at the heart of theological convictions depend on narrative for their intelligibility and significance.” Theology in this sense is seen as “the elucidation, examination and transformation of the religious convictions of some given community.”² Narrative, as Goldberg understands it, indicates “the telling of a story whose meaning unfolds through the interplay of characters and actions over time.”³ Thus the primary claim of a narrative theologian

is that in order justifiably to elucidate, examine, and transform those deeply held religious beliefs that make a community what it is, one must necessarily show regard for and give heed to those linguistic structures which, through their portrayal of the contingent interaction between persons and events, constitute the source and grounds of such beliefs. In short, the fundamental contention is that an adequate theology must attend to narrative.⁴

This, then, will be the definition that is understood as undergirding the writers used in this thesis, and the contours of what is being

²Michael Goldberg, Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 34.

³Ibid., p. 35.

⁴Ibid.

sought. A theology of story for religious liberals is one which accepts that theology depends upon the narratives which operate within the lives of individuals and communities. The purpose of theology is to elucidate, examine and transform the deeply held beliefs of individuals and communities. A theology of story is one which claims that this is best done through attention to those stories through which individuals and communities understand their world and their interaction with it.

DEFINITIONS

Before entering into a discussion of the specific relationship of a theology of story to religious liberalism, and more particularly, Unitarian Universalism, I will define the terms which I will use in the rest of this thesis. For the purposes of this study, I will be using three terms to discuss what has typically been called story. The three terms are “mythic story,” “narrative,” and “Story”.

The first term which will be used in this paper is mythic story. Using the term “sacred story,” Stephen Crites articulates this concept well. In his article “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Crites argues that there are “fundamental narrative forms” which can be described as “sacred stories.” He chooses this term

not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because [our] sense of self and world is created through them....For these are the stories that orient the life of a people through time, their lifetime, their individual and corporate

experience and their sense of style to the great powers that establish the reality of the world.⁵

Mythic stories are those fundamental structures which are narrative in form, and through which we perceive our world. John Dominic Crossan would put this sort of story into the category of "myth": it "creates world."⁶ As Crites noted, this doesn't mean that they are necessarily in consonance with a particular religious tradition -- they are mythic in that they orient people to their world and to all that occupies their world. Each of us live through a mythic story whether or not we perceive it.

Another writer who has addressed this dimension of mythic story is John Shea. His insight in this general category of stories is not unlike that of Crites. He claims that we cannot live without stories, that we grow and are shaped by the mythic stories that surround us. Further, he writes that mythic stories

and their corresponding worlds are, in the first instance, the property of communities. They precede any given individual and provide the imaginative atmosphere in which we live. We develop in relationship to people who tell mythic stories and to some extent, because their lives are shaped by them, they are living embodiments of the story. As we grow, we are in dialogue with the world creating tales of our people. These

⁵Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 33 (Sept., 1971), : 295.

⁶John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story, (Allen, Texas: Argus Communications, 1975), p. 59.

stories are encouraging and critiquing us, setting boundaries, and modeling behavior.⁷

It is worth noting at this point that usually people have a “tangle of stories” rather than one comprehensive mythic story by which they orient their lives. Michael Goldberg notes that

in a secularized, pluralistic society such as ours, we are heirs to many different stories, and each of us consequently bears within himself or herself fragments from many different narratives, e.g., the story of modernity, the American story, the Christian story.⁸

We are part of a wide variety of communities, and our personal mythic stories are shaped and formed by the communities of which we are a part.

The first term, then, is mythic story. This means the fundamental narrative structures through which world is created and through which we understand our world. It can be seen as both personal and communal. Each of us has a mythic story -- or several mythic stories -- which has been shaped and formed by the communities of which we are a part.

The second term which I will use is “narrative.” A narrative in this context is a “simple” or “mundane” story. Scholes and Kellogg in The Nature of Narrative describe narrative as “a general term for

⁷Shea, Stories of God, p. 57.

⁸Goldberg, Narrative and Theology, p. 252.

character and action in narrative form.”⁹ This is the large and general category which encompasses all the sorts of stories of which we might speak. It includes the stories we tell each other of our lives, what happened yesterday or last year, and the fairy tales we read to children at night.

Another writer who has been helpful in making this distinction is Stephen Crites. In his language, a narrative is a “mundane story”. In describing his use of this term, he notes that

it...implies a theory about the objectified images that fully articulate stories must employ, i.e., about words, scenes, roles, sequences of events within a plot, and other narrative devices: that such images to be capable of being plausible objects of consciousness, must be placed within that world, that phenomenological mundus, which defines the objective horizon of a particular form of consciousness.¹⁰

A narrative is an expression of a mythic story and is set within the mythic story. Though no narrative encompasses a mythic story, each grows out of a particular mythic story.

A helpful distinction is made by John Dominic Crossan in this regard. Crossan suggests a five types of story. The first, noted above, is myth. Myth creates a world. The second type is apologue, or moral fable, and it “defends world.” The example of this that Crossan gives is the comic strip “Dick Tracy.” In this strip, the

⁹Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 208.

¹⁰Crites, “Narrative Quality,” p. 296.

fundamental values and world view are never questioned, what is good and bad is clear, and Detective Tracy is fighting on the side of good. Action, the third type of story, "investigates world." This type of narrative doesn't judge, it simply explores. A fourth type is satire which critiques world -- this is the approximate opposite of apologue. An example of satire would be the comic strip "Doonesbury" which accepts the picture of the world as understood in the story, but pokes fun at it. Finally, there is parable, which subverts world. Parable as understood by Crossan attacks the mythic story. That is, a parable questions the fundamental structures of the world, and suggests differing world views.¹¹

Of the five types of story, myth and parable would fit into the category of mythic story as understood in this thesis. Apologue, action and satire are narratives, because all accept a certain understanding of the world. I will return to these distinctions in chapter 4.

The second term, then, I will use is narrative. This is taken to mean simple, mundane, or action stories. It includes anything written or told which relates characters and events to each other and to the readers or hearers in a narrative form. This is the broadest of the three categories.

The final category that will be used in this thesis is Story. I have taken this term from the writings of Thomas Groome. Groome's

¹¹Crossan, The Dark Interval, pp. 59-61.

work has focused primarily on the use of Story in Christian religious education in the setting of the institutional church. He distinguishes between story and Story:

By Story I do not mean simple narrative. Narratives are indeed a part of our Story, but our Story is much more than our narratives....By Christian Story I mean the whole faith tradition of our people however that is expressed or embodied.¹²

Groome's definition -- one which I will at this time take without criticism -- distinguishes between narratives and the whole faith tradition of a people. His concern is clearly with an institution, and with the particular mythic story that institution embodies. Story is, then, one particular mythic story embodied by narratives, traditions, practices -- it is a mythic story embodied, however incompletely, by a religious community. In Groome's case, this is the Christian mythic story especially as it is embodied in the Roman Catholic Church.

Thus, we have three types of stories which will be used in the rest of this thesis. The first is mythic stories which are understood as "fundamental narrative forms" which orient our lives. The second is narrative or simple story. The third, specific to a religious tradition, is Story.

Though we can distinguish between these types of stories, we cannot really separate them. Each of these -- narrative, mythic story and Story -- can be seen as a part of the others. The kinds of

¹²Thomas Groome, Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 192.

narratives we tell each other are shaped by our mythic story, as the mythic stories are shaped by the narratives we hear and tell. In Stephen Crites' words:

From the sublime to the ridiculous, all a people's mundane stories [or narratives] are implicit in its sacred story, and every mundane story takes soundings in the sacred story.¹³

Narratives are shaped by mythic story, and mythic story is shaped by narrative. In addition, Story may be as related to narrative and mythic story as they are to each other, and in the same ways. However, there is a further dimension to Story and its relationship to narratives and mythic stories. Narratives are part of a Story, according to Groome, and their claim is that they are a -- if not the -- mythic story.

STORY AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

The work done in the area of story and theology has particular relevance to Unitarian Universalism, as we are an association with no canon, no single story, no single authoritative source for any of the types of stories described above. This point was made in a sermon by Duke Gray, delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Chicago on May 10, 1981. In this sermon, he asks what our faith stories are. He comments:

We teach about religion, but never nurture faith, when we perpetuate the illusion of universality that pretends we can stand inside all stories just by telling them. And so, we teach

¹³Crites, "Narrative Quality," p. 296.

by saying “those Jews have an interesting story,” and “those Hindus have an interesting story,” and....“those Christians have an interesting story,” indicating that we feel outside from it...[I]t raises a profound question about what is to be our story.¹⁴

Because there is no clearly articulated rootage in any one tradition or any one mythic story, the question becomes what our mythic story is. This is not simply a problem of religious education, but is symptomatic of a larger problem within Unitarian Universalism. Gray goes on to state that “our religious education programs simply mirror our entire religious movement as a whole.”¹⁵

Unitarian Universalism employs a method of education which uses story as a foundation. There is an understanding of story which is generally shared among Unitarian Universalists: as Gray notes above it is the understanding that we can stand within all stories. That is, there is a general assumption that by relating the narratives of other cultures, we can “stand within” the mythic story of that culture. Gray, though he doesn’t name her, is speaking of the influence of Sophia Lyon Fahs.

If we were to select one person who has most profoundly influenced the Unitarian Universalist understanding of story, that person would have to be Sophia Lyon Fahs. Her work was innovative

¹⁴Duke T. Gray, “What Shall We Advocate,” sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church, Chicago, Illinois on May 10, 1981.

¹⁵Ibid.

and visionary for her time, and it has shaped the understanding of story in our denomination.

Sophia Fahs, nearly 80 years ago, began to collect stories and put them to use in curricula, and her work is still foundational for our concept of religious education. As David Parke notes:

The appointment of Mrs. Fahs in 1937 was the crucial event in the modern history of Unitarian religious education. In its way it was more important than Channing's address on the Sunday School in 1837, for whereas Channing only announced a revolution, Mrs. Fahs effected one.¹⁶

Her influence can still be felt today. One has only to look at the titles available from the Sales Distribution Center of the UUA, and the curricula which are currently available to see how persistent her influence has been. It has been persistent because her work was innovative and tapped the deep needs within liberal religion. Part of the innovation and depth of her work was that it articulated and used themes important to the liberalism of her time in American religious history. Fahs was seeking to bring to religious education the insights of progressive education, the new historical criticism, the vision of a world community and evolution.

The insights offered by these disciplines function in two ways for Fahs. First, they provide the framework which informs Fahs' understanding of story. Secondly, they provide the mythic story in

¹⁶David B. Parke, "The Historical and Religious Antecedents of the New Beacon Series in Religious Education," Ph.D. dissertation, (Boston: University Graduate School, 1965), p. 381.

which Fahs lived. Thus, both the content of the narratives which Fahs employed in her method of religious education and the method itself are informed and shaped by a particular mythic story: that is, the mythic story of early twentieth century American liberalism. In this thesis, I will be concerned primarily with the method and the expected results of that method. I will only refer to the content inasmuch as it affects the method proposed by Fahs, and the results which she expected from that method.

However, it is not possible to entirely separate Fahs' world view from the method she employs. Therefore, I will establish some elements of the mythic story in which Fahs was living by briefly discussing Fahs' understanding of progressive education, historical criticism, cosmopolitanism (or the vision for a world community), and evolution. By doing this, I intend to suggest some of the contours of her mythic story, and suggest as well that these influences are still present in Unitarian Universalism today, if only because Fahs' work is still in use.

The insights of progressive education that she sought to apply to religious education grew primarily from her study of John Dewey under the tutorage of Frank McMurry, her professor at Columbia Teacher's College. (Dewey didn't transfer from Chicago to Columbia until 1904, after the bulk of Fahs' time there.) As she explains it,

A very important concept of John Dewey's philosophy was that we learn in and through "real life situations," actually had or imaginatively experienced. I became with Dewey convinced that the records of the past become valuable to any one only as these are visualized and felt as if they were real experiences

such as we ourselves might have had or might have witnessed and been moved by.¹⁷

Though there are many implications to this understanding of Dewey, the point here is that Fahs was committed to the use of vicarious experience in her educational method. This is especially clear if we look at her writing career.

In 1907, Fahs published Uganda's White Man of Work,¹⁸ which was a "missionary biography." It was her intention that in this work she could provide a concrete story of a Christian life, believing that it would be more easily understood than Bible stories, or even lessons from the Bible. Her use of stories continued throughout her career as a religious educator and as editor of children's curricula for the American Unitarian Association. Initially, her concern was bringing Christian principles alive for children. She refers to her own attempt to teach the Ten Commandments to a class of kindergarteners. By her own account, she failed dismally, and hence sought to find a better way to communicate these to children.¹⁹

Later in life -- most significantly in her work for the Unitarians -- her concern was to bring to children the "sense of wonder" in the

¹⁷Ibid., p. 299

¹⁸Sophia L. Fahs, Uganda's White Man of Work: A Story of Alexander M. Macay, (New York: Interchurch Press, 1907).

¹⁹Edith Hunter, Sophia Lyon Fahs: A Biography, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 65.

world as expressed by all people at all times, and to attempt to articulate a variety of ways in which all people shared a religious impulse. Her hope in this was to bring children to an awareness of their own religious impulse. In her own words:

We regard stories as opportunities to enlarge children's experiences vicariously. Through the story the child lives imaginatively for awhile in someone else's shoes.²⁰

In addition, she believed that the church school must begin to recognize "the value of mediated or secondary experience in the educational process, namely, the use of story telling, or reading, of dramatization, of hand work and of the many methods through which an individual imagines the life situation experiences of other people."²¹ Fahs was clearly committed to the use of vicarious experience for children, and her primary means of communicating experience was stories.

Historical criticism provided a means of getting to experience. The influence of historical criticism can be clearly seen in Fahs' introduction to Jesus the Carpenter's Son. She describes the method by which the Gospels were edited for that book. She explains that some of the "stories have been omitted because they are apparently legends or garbled reports of what happened." In addition, she states that

²⁰Sophia Fahs, Today's Children, Yesterday's Heritage, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 207.

²¹Parke, p. 276.

many of the details in the stories might have happened, but I do not fancy they actually did happen just as I have told them. Yet they are not the kind of details that would have been put into a fairy tale. They have been based upon facts gathered from the study of many books written by scholars.²²

Part of Fahs' concern here is transmuting the ancient narratives (and this is characteristic of her work with the Bible) into a form intelligible to the secular minds of her day, in accordance with Dewey's thought. This meant stripping away any of the myth, the tradition through which these stories had been interpreted, and any hint of supernaturalism. She wants in this only the seed of the possible experience that could be verified by historical research. Historical criticism provided the tools for Fahs to make the ancient tales come alive.

Her work also seeks to be cosmopolitan -- Fahs hopes to teach children that all people share the same goals and hopes and dreams. In the introduction to Long Ago and Many Lands, she writes that an important principle in selecting the stories included in that work "has been to choose stories from a wide variety of different cultures, races, and religions so that early in life children may begin to feel some of the human universals that bind us together in a common world brotherhood."²³ In this regard, she is hoping to promote a

²²Sophia Fahs, Jesus, The Carpenter's Son, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), p. vi.

²³Sophia Fahs, From Long Ago and Many Lands, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), p. vi.

universal community. Fahs is seeking to find that which binds us together as a community, and the community that she seeks to bind us to is a world community, drawing on the wisdom of the ages and many cultures.

Finally, Fahs was committed to an evolutionary cosmology. In an interview with David Parke in 1962, Fahs commented:

The whole of science interested me alot, evolution very much so. Adjusting concepts of God to the evolutionary theory I still struggle with. I expect I always will.²⁴

Fahs did struggle with the concept of evolution and the concept of God. In Today's Children, Yesterday's Heritage, she describes in several places her understanding of evolution. First, evolution provides for Fahs a "hope for the future." She wrote:

Although the trend as set forth in the story of evolution is not one of continuous or inclusive or inevitable progress "onward and upward forever"; nevertheless, as thus far enacted in history, it is a record of astounding progress for certain branches of living creatures, and it is a promise of further possible progress to come.²⁵

In addition, her understanding of evolution is influenced by a search for an ontological base for cooperation. "Instead, then, of an evolution which is primarily a process of competition and warfare between different forms of life," she writes

²⁴Parke, p. 301.

²⁵Fahs, Today's Children, p. 107.

the process becomes one of balancing the two basic and valuable urges within all living things -- the urge to preserve the individual life, and the urge to be joined with other life forms. Evolution would have been impossible without this balance between freedom and socialization.²⁶

Evolution is an important theme in Fahs' work. It influences her understanding of human development, her cosmology, and her concept of God.

Fahs, like many others in her era, was seeking to make religion intelligible for the liberals of her day. The position which she held to was not unlike that of liberals of her era. This position has been characterized by Langdon Gilkey as

the deliberate attempt of religious thinkers, who accepted the results of modern physical science and modern historical study, to make their faith intelligible to the increasingly secular mind of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They felt that this accommodation was forced upon them because both the basis of traditional doctrines and the content of these doctrines seemed incredible to the intelligentsia of that age.²⁷

One of the consequences of this attempt to make religion intelligible to the liberals of her age was a search for, and finally some satisfaction with, a method of teaching which allowed for all of the themes outlined above -- progressive education, historical criticism

²⁶Ibid., p. 119.

²⁷Langdon Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 73-4.

and world community. The method that she found was the use of stories.

Because of her focus on the use of story, Fahs has provided a rich resource for exploring religion. In some ways, we have only begun to recognize the value of her method in the use of story. However, the mythic story which informs Fahs' use of story is no longer adequate.

PARTICULAR ISSUES

The world view or mythic story in which Fahs lived has created particular problems for Unitarian Universalism. The first of these problems, and the most important is the understanding of story which is implicit in Fahs' work. Some of the foundations on which Fahs built her method have been seen in light of recent research to be less sound than Fahs had believed. I will discuss this at length in Chapter Three.

Another problem was noted above by Duke Gray. This is the problem of community. It is an issue addressed by writers such as Thomas Groome and John Shea. Within Unitarian Universalism there is no single or authoritative Story, or -- most importantly -- the recognition of a mythic story functioning in Unitarian Universalism. Because of this, there is no perceived center, no particular mythic story which claims us all. There is not a particular mythic story to which we can point in order to establish what it means to be part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

It is worth noting these two issues were not unknown to Fahs in her own time. Reinhold Niebuhr and others in the neo-orthodox movement rebelled against Fahs' understanding of religion. These criticisms can be equally well applied to her understanding of story and the method she employed. Fahs was unaware of the controversies of her own time. As David Parke notes:

Carl H. Voss....recalls that "Mrs. Fahs seemed remote from the intellectual maelstrom in theology which had been precipitated by the appointment of Reinhold Niebuhr to the faculty of Union Seminary in 1928, followed by the appointment of Paul Tillich in 1934. She appeared bewildered, even startled, by the swirling controversies over Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann as taking place in another world quite foreign to her own."²⁸

Because she was unaware of these controversies, she was unable to draw from the thinkers involved in this particular intellectual movement. Though it was not in the language of story, Reinhold Niebuhr addressed these issues in a selection in his journal, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. Edith Hunter suggests that the "delightful expert" to whom Niebuhr refers in a passage on religious education may well have been Fahs.²⁹ Referring to the idea that children are to have their own experience before learning the religious forms through which they are expressed in a particular tradition, Niebuhr writes

²⁸Parke, p. 285.

²⁹Hunter, Sophia Lyon Fahs, p. 179.

If we continue along these lines the day will come when some expert will advise us not to teach our children the English language, since we rob them thereby of the possibility of choosing the German, French or Japanese languages as possible alternatives....We do not get a higher type of religious idealism from children merely by withholding our own religious ideas from them (however they may be filled with error), any more than we would get a higher type of civilization by letting some group of youngsters shift for themselves upon a desert island.³⁰

The insight expressed by Niebuhr here is not unlike that of some of the writers mentioned above. Specifically, Shea's comment that mythic stories are the "property of communities" and Groome's concept of Story both claim that we cannot withhold our religious ideas (or mythic story) from children, because they are embodied in the people and traditions of the community. Both would also affirm that this is a critical part of establishing identity: children should be instructed in the ways in which the world is understood from our mythic story. For Niebuhr, like Shea and Groome, the mythic story that is or should be communicated is the Christian Story.

Additionally, Fahs' mythic story would not allow her to take into consideration the criticism offered by the neo-orthodox of her time. It appears, as well, that the neo-orthodox had a clearer grasp of the dimensions of story, and the differences in types of stories than Fahs did. In Today's Children Fahs writes:

³⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (San Francisco: 1980), p. 160.

A neo-orthodox theologian may describe Bible history as “salvation- history” and say we do not go to the old Bible for real history; but such a distinction can have no useful meaning for most serious students. The religion of a people and their history are inevitably woven together. To study them separately robs both the history and the religion of their truth.³¹

Though we might agree with Fahs that when engaged in a historical study of a group of people, their religion is an important element in their history. However, there doesn't seem to be any distinction between the history of a people and their mythic story, described in this passage as “salvation history.” That Fahs was unable to appreciate these insights offered from outside her mythic story is a continuing problem within Unitarian Universalism. The insularity of the mythic story as represented by Fahs limits our ability to “elucidate, examine and transform” our mythic story.

All of these factors -- the criticism raised by the neo-orthodoxy and the internal criticism as expressed by Duke Gray -- point toward the need for a reassessment of our present understanding of story and its role in religious community.

To summarize, in this chapter I have established a definition of a theology of story for religious liberals. In short, it is a theology which is dependent upon the narratives which operate within the lives of individuals and communities. Elucidation, examination and transformation of individuals and communities is the proper field of

³¹Fahs, Today's Children, p. 80.

theology, and this is best done through attention to the narratives through which individuals and communities understand their world.

Secondly, I defined the terms mythic story, narrative and Story. A mythic story is one which defines the world in which we live. All individuals operate from mythic stories, and usually there are more than one operating in any one individual. A narrative is a simple or a mundane story which is understood as a story in which characters and action. Narrative grows out of mythic story, but mythic story is not encompassed by narrative. A Story is the mythic story of a particular community, and in this context is understood as the mythic story of a religious community.

Third, I examined some of the contours of the mythic story which informs liberalism as it is articulated by Sophia Fahs. Fahs here is used as a representative and spokeswoman for the liberal mythic story. The elements of the story which were specifically addressed were progressive education, historical criticism, world community and evolution. These elements to a large degree formed the world view which Fahs held, and is generally descriptive of liberalism in the early to mid-twentieth century in the United States.

Fourth, I addressed the specific concerns on which this thesis will focus. The two issues are the understanding of story as expressed by Fahs and community. Both of these concerns have been expressed within Unitarian Universalism, as represented by Duke Gray; and from outside of Unitarian Universalism, as represented by Reinhold Niebuhr.

In Chapter Two, I will more closely examine the influences of historical criticism, progressive education, and the search for a world community in Fahs' life and work. In doing this, I intend to establish the method which Fahs brought to her use of story for religious liberalism. In Chapter Three, I will examine the research of recent writers in order to offer a critique of Fahs' method. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will suggest revisions for the understanding of story as it has been conceived by Fahs, as well as suggesting directions for further study.

CHAPTER TWO

Sophia Fahs: Her World View and Story

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will begin by broadly surveying Fahs' early life.¹ A sense of Fahs' childhood is helpful in understanding her life's work. It seems that the missionary zeal of her childhood carried over into her adulthood and was expressed by her evangelism of a "new religion" embodying the themes described above. In addition, her early experiences in China and her concern for world missionizing seem to have provided Fahs with a sensitivity to the broad variety of cultural narratives which she used extensively in her work for the Unitarians.

Secondly, I will examine the intellectual shifts in Fahs' thought. The changes in Fahs' thought between 1900 (at which time she was still expecting to go to China as a Christian missionary) and 1937 (when she joined the staff of the AUA), had profound influence on the work that she did at the AUA. Each of these shifts can be tied to the educational institutions which she attended during that time.

¹The more specific details of her life are covered well in Edith Hunter's biography of Fahs. The little details are helpful in seeing the woman in the context of her time and life, but beyond the scope of this paper. Additionally, I will not be dealing with her "internship" with her family, a time in her life when her primary concern was raising children and trying to deal with their questions and concerns. This internship, along with working with several Sunday School programs took up the time in between her study at Columbia Teacher's College and Union Theological Seminary. This was, by Fahs' own assessment a critical part of her development, but beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

The first and most far-reaching intellectual shift in her life can be characterized as a movement from orthodox Christianity, to a more “rational” and “historical” Christianity under the influence of the University of Chicago and the historical critical method she encountered there. The second shift was to the radical individualism of the methods of progressive education to which she was introduced at Columbia Teacher’s college. Finally, at Union Theological Seminary, she had the opportunity to synthesize these two influences -- the historical critical method and the theories of progressive education.

As noted earlier, Fahs wove these threads of her thought together with the use of story. As I examine each of these intellectual shifts, I will also examine the consequences of these influences on Fahs’ later work. For this, I will mainly use her apologetic for her curricular work, Today’s Children, Yesterday’s Heritage.

Finally, I will summarize the effect of these influences with particular attention to how they affected her epistemology and method of story.

FAHS’ LIFE

Sophia Blanche Lyon was born in Hangchow, China in 1876 to the Reverend David Nelson Lyon and Mandana Doolittle Lyon. Her parents were serving as Christian missionaries and had been in China since 1869. Her father was a preacher of the Christian Gospel, and her mother ran the school in the mission. The family remained in

Hangchow until 1880, when they returned to the United States. Sophia's early life was shaped and formed by the experiences of being a stranger in the only country she knew, surrounded by people with whom she couldn't speak, places she couldn't go, a culture within the compound of the mission, and an entirely different one outside. Upon the family's return to the United States, she was again an outsider, not knowing the games of the community in which she found herself, wearing "foreign" clothes, and knowing foreign customs. Fahn herself doesn't comment anywhere on this experience, though her sister Abbie, a writer, did. In the introduction to her book Bamboo, Abbie Lyon Sharman wrote:

For some of us, Orient-born, China lies at the root of many habitual emotions. Probably the Orient colors subtler moods in ways we do not recognize. Memories which we cannot quite get back, turn up queerly in dreams and subconsciously influences our tastes.²

Fahn's father was an absent, but influential part of her life. Mr. Lyon spent the years between Sophia's tenth birthday and her graduation from high school in China, while the rest of the family remained in Ohio. Of her father, she said, "[He] was an evangelistic Presbyterian...The 'old story of salvation' is what my father preached in a very believing manner -- not too severe, but pretty stern."³

²Hunter, pp. 15-16.

³Parke, pp. 248-9.

Her descriptions of her home life are also illuminating. She describes herself as a “very serious person”, and further comments that the whole family was serious. She goes on to say that

We tried awfully hard to be good. We had family prayers and Bible reading every day. Each of us took our turn until we went right through the Bible. Sunday was a very carefully observed day, spent mostly going to church, reading religious books, and playing Bible games and singing.⁴

Her upbringing was profoundly influenced by the missionary zeal in her family. Three of her siblings became missionaries, and she, too, devoted herself to mission work in China. The letters from which Edith Hunter draws her biography of her early life are liberally sprinkled with questions about how she should, “live my life for God”. God’s plan was central to her -- dilemmas were taken to God in prayer before she could make a decision. In 1899 Sophia began working as a traveling secretary for the Student Volunteer Movement. Her job consisted mainly of visiting colleges and meeting with groups and individuals about the need for overseas mission workers. The hope was that students would pledge themselves to doing the work. She, of course, took the matter to God in prayer. In her assessment of the job, Hunter describes the list of reasons why Sophia thought that she should undertake this task:

She was best at such work; she liked it; it would be excellent preparation for her life work; it would keep her reading and thinking along missionary lines...; it would bring her into contact with “spiritually strong characters”; give her a wider contact with people and “enrich my conception of God’s plan for the world.” The work would give her an opportunity to do

⁴Parke, p. 249.

something about her conviction that “the church is trifling with the work of world evangelism.”⁵

This was the sort of world in which she grew. There was a clear emphasis on the Bible and the “old story of salvation” as preached by her father. There was also a clear emphasis on evangelism which in her family took the form of mission work. The theological emphasis was on a God who controlled all of one’s life -- an everpresent God to whom one turned for comfort and guidance. From what can be gathered from her letters and reminiscences in later years, this was the center of her faith through these years. Though she doubted these beliefs in college, she nonetheless professed them and seemed to live her life by them.

From her childhood and youth, Sophia Fahs retained the missionary zeal which characterized her family. In addition, she retained the commitment to world missionizing, though the content of her missionizing was to change radically over the years. She continued through her life to be concerned with the larger view offered by her missionary family -- trying to be inclusive of all peoples. In her work, this manifests itself in a concern for trying to create a world community.

For Fahs, the movement toward a world community is simply a fact of life. A common kinship with all people is not something which needs to be argued for, but is a common assumption. It is an unexamined presupposition of all of her work and surfaces briefly in

⁵Hunter, p. 37.

each chapter of her apologetic work, Today's Children, Yesterday's Heritage. In making her plea for a broadly based religious education program she states:

As humanity seeks one common human brotherhood, embracing all religious cultures, and differing religious beliefs are exchanged freely and sympathetically, we may discover the great ways in which we are all alike, and thus we may see our differences in their true perspective.⁶

Later in the same chapter Fahs comments, "As never before in history, the world needs those who can feel spiritually related to all kinds of people."⁷ A means for encouraging those "who can feel spiritually related to all people" is by providing for them a broad variety of world views, and educating children with "that heritage that comes down to us from all quarters of the earth."⁸

Fahs provides some of "that heritage" with her two textbooks Beginnings: Earth and Sky, Life and Death and Long Ago and Many Lands, both of which are collections of tales and narratives from a wide variety of cultures. The first volume deals primarily with creation narratives from such a diversity of cultures so as to include the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert and the scientists of her age. Long Ago and Many Lands, on the other hand, relates a wider variety of narrative. In the introduction Fahs notes that, "this collection of stories has been made as a kind of pre-history for children...whose

⁶Fahs, Today's Children, p. 97, emphasis mine.

⁷Ibid., p. 99.

⁸Ibid.

feelings for the long, long ago are vague, but still stretching.”⁹ She goes on to state that one of the fundamental principles that led to this choice

has been to choose stories from a wide variety of different cultures, races, and religions so that early in life children may begin to feel some of the human universals that bind us together in a common world brotherhood. Our finest moral and spiritual ideals have been shared by many peoples.¹⁰

Additionally, the creation of a world community is particularly helped by the use of stories. In Today’s Children, she notes further that:

By entering thus imaginatively into the experiences of people in different countries and times and through discussing their own feelings, the children came to feel an emotional tie binding them to unnumbered peoples. Such an awareness of relatedness when it is warm with sympathy and understanding, in spite of differences in knowledge and racial background, comes to have a richness of quality that well deserves being called religious.¹¹

It is the telling of narratives which allows for the beginnings of a world community. We are all to feel related to each other by “entering imaginatively” their world and world view. And this “new” relatedness is not only a particularly religious experience, but it also leads to new affirmations about the nature of our religiousness:

We feel joined together in one family, all seeking for a richness of life never before known. We feel as learners, adventurers,

⁹Fahs, Long Ago, p. v.

¹⁰Ibid., p. vi.

¹¹Fahs, Today’s Children, p. 188.

experimenters. With God living in us, we seek together to find out how to bring new values into living, how to widen our feelings of fellowship -- not with saints alone, but with all kinds of people.¹²

Creating a world community is clearly a commitment of Fahs'. Narratives facilitate communication between cultures, and make possible the broad sympathies for which Fahs was striving. This a primary focus of her work -- helping to provide the educational atmosphere which would facilitate the creation of broad sympathies and the world community. It is worth noting that Fahs believed that this should be the foundation for all people's faith. At one point she notes that the "Bible has the disadvantage of being the historical record of but one people." Further, she suggests that

instead...of leading children at the beginning of their historical study through the narrow channel of the Hebrew or Christian tradition exclusively, we would give them a broader outlook on [humanity's] quest for life more abundant, and a feeling of being deeply related to the whole human race.¹³

Thus, the world community --a remnant from her early missionary commitments -- is a significant motivation for Fahs' use of narrative, and this vision undergirds her work. The contributions of historical criticism aided Fahs in this pursuit, in that it helped to relativize the Jewish and Christian tradition. Historical criticism opened the possibility of making the stories from the Bible narratives

¹²Ibid., p. 153.

¹³Ibid., p. 183.

rather than sacred stories. I will now turn to the influences on Fahs in this regard and how these took form in her work.

In an interview with David Parke, she commented: "In college, I could go to evangelistic meetings and weep my head off, but even then something bothered me about the idea of Jesus as savior."¹⁴ This discomfort with the faith of her childhood found a greater articulation at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The influences there came from William Rainey Harper, Ernest DeWitt Burton, Shailer Matthews and Harry B. Sharman.

It was at the Divinity School (1901-2) that Fahs came into close contact with historical criticism of the Bible. Studying with Harper and Burton she was, "quite thoroughly introduced to higher criticism."¹⁵ Yet, the more profound influence on her during this time appears to have been Henry B. Sharman, her brother-in-law. Sharman was concerned with discovering the "actual person who lived and taught in Galilee" through weeding out the "unhistorical additions to the ancient story." Fahs commented that

As a result of this study there came a revolution in my philosophy of life. The miraculous savior turned into an admirable man, keen in his insights, loyal to truth at any cost, courageous, forthright, independent, free of tradition, with a deep respect for life; and I could not help but want to embody in my own life some part of the greatness which I saw in his life.¹⁶

¹⁴Parke, p. 249.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 251.

This is the first, and perhaps most important shift in Fahs' thought. Her comment on this shift was that from that time on, "the Bible became a truly human book."¹⁷ Her allegiance at this time seemed to be shifting from the authority of a tradition and a sacred story to a sacred story of science and history, and from the external (God) to the individual's ability to discover truth.

This influence manifests itself in Fahs' work as the tool for transmuting the sacred story of the Bible into narratives. In Today's Children, Yesterday's Heritage, Fahs writes,

The Bible newly interpreted, as a result of our new knowledge, is shown to be a collection of records of human experiences. It is about people. It tells us what they were like and how they believed about God and their world, and how these beliefs affected their living.¹⁸

The Bible, from this view, is just a collection of narratives. It has lost its quality of sacrality. No longer can it "create world" -- it is a narrative just like all other narratives in Fahs' work. Her language in a later section is illuminating. She writes, "We recognized that the Bible as a historical record of experiences is a difficult book even for adults to understand."¹⁹ The Bible is seen as only a historical record of people long ago and far away.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁸Fahs, Today's Children, p. 76.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 89, emphasis mine.

The desacralizing of the Bible (which had functioned as a sacred story for Fahs until this time) meant that all narratives were equal. In addition, the intellectual shift that Fahs went through at the University of Chicago, and especially the shift in the locus of authority that accompanied it, paved the way for Fahs' work in progressive education. Finally, Fahs' experience at the University of Chicago also set her on the road to find the truth of the narratives, understood as the historical facts which can be determined through historical research.

The second shift came when she was working toward a Master's of Education at Columbia Teacher's college (1092-4). This was where she began to see the potential of the theories of progressive education. It was here that the thought of John Dewey was given to her through the person of John McMurry. Of Dewey and his work Fahs wrote, "Although I never felt I knew Dr. Dewey personally,...his philosophy of education was a significant influence [upon me], and I used to feed on his books as they came out."²⁰ This was not only a methodological shift for her -- it was the precursor of the profound theological shift which would characterize her later work. The insights of progressive education as she applied them to

²⁰Parke, p. 299.

teaching religion that shifted her theology from God-centered to person- and experience-centered theology.²¹

Edith Hunter comments that studying at Columbia, “was truly a conversion experience [for Fahs], not a theological one -- her theology would be effected in time -- but with respect to educational philosophy.”²² Hunter’s language about this time in school is disclosive of the nature of the change. It was not only a change of educational philosophy for Fahs, but one which took a guiding place in her theology for the rest of her life. The shift was from an external authority to an entirely internal authority -- trusting the child or any individual to determine what was true from an entirely experiential base. The experiential base was the direct experience the individual had, as free as was possible from the bonds of any tradition.

Fahs later wrote:

Again a chain was broken that bound me to a traditional way. I was able to face the question, What use should be made of Biblical material in the Sunday School, without fear of losing

²¹This was also the time during which Fahs became a storyteller. Fahs commented to Parke “I...began to look at Bible narratives and asked, What really happened -- what were the people feeling, thinking, doing? In order to give the story to the children, I felt I had to see the story before I could tell it. That technique got ahold of me as a result of teaching John G. Paton to the children....I began learning to tell stories also in the very process of teaching other Sunday School teachers how to tell stories.” (Parke, p. 260) Also clear in this passage is Fah’s concern with historical truth and narratives.

²²Hunter, p. 62.

values that I cherished. No longer could I ever justify using Biblical material simply because it was Biblical. The issue was rather what sort of material is best fitted to meet the needs of the children for whose development we are concerned? I had learned by experience that a Sunday School could be non-Biblical and still be very religious.²³

At Columbia, Fahs breathed in the air of progressive education. The study she undertook there, and her continuing work in an experimental Sunday School affiliated with Columbia shaped the questions which Fahs would address in her theological work 20 years later at Union Theological Seminary.

The consequences of this shift is evident throughout Today's Children. Fahs sets the stage for this early in the book when she comments:

If one thinks of religion primarily in terms of something created by each individual, the first question to be asked is not: What has religion to give to a child? It is rather: How may a child contribute to his own religious growth.²⁴

Fahs reinforces the absolute authority of the individual later in the book when she notes that "the worth of one ideal above the other depends on the value judgement of the reader."²⁵ In addition, she writes that religion is to be "regarded as a vital and healthy result of

²³Parke, p. 258. Fahs made this comment in relation to using a missionary biography. As noted in the first chapter, Fahs herself wrote a missionary biography.

²⁴Fahs, Today's Children, p. 16, emphasis mine.

²⁵Ibid., p. 80.

[the child's] own creative thought and feeling and experience as he [or she] responds to life in its fullness."

It was at Columbia that Fahs was introduced to progressive education, and the seeds for the eventual transformation of her theology were planted. After a 20 year "internship" with her family, she undertook study at the Union Theological Seminary. It was at Union that Fahs began to synthesize these two threads of thought.

Fahs enrolled at Union Theological Seminary (1924-26). This was a time of synthesis for her, rather than a time at which her thought took a new turn. At Union Theological Seminary, she continued her work with the Sunday School and wrote her thesis on "Certain Problems Involved in Building a Curriculum in Religious Education." In her work there, she was honestly engaged in the attempt to apply the insights of progressive education directly to religious education. In an interview with David Parke, Fahs commented:

My knowledge of Christianity was influenced by my theological professors; my theological thinking was more influenced by people outside the field of theology than by those within.²⁶

Because of this, her tenure at Union seemed to have been a time to gather more information on historical Christianity which she would later apply to her work with the Bible, and a time to begin to synthesize her theological positions, aligning herself clearly with progressive educators rather than systematic (Christian) theologians.

²⁶Parke, p. 271.

In her thesis the struggle that Fahs went through trying to find the application of progressive education to religious education can be clearly seen.

For her B.D. thesis, Fahs drew on her experience as Supervisor of the Sunday School of Riverside Church in New York. The goal of the thesis was precisely to apply the insights of progressive education to religious education. The center of this paper is the suggestion that the church school should consider

the value of mediated or secondary experience in the educational process, namely,...the use of story telling, or reading, of dramatization, of hand work and of the many methods through which an individual imagines the life situations and experiences of other people.²⁷

Combined with this emphasis on vicarious experience is the experience of the children involved -- their concerns, likes and dislikes, and the "real problems" of the children in the church school. In her own words, "curriculum for the religious education of children should be based on the discovered problems of the children themselves."²⁸ With this as the starting point, Fahs focuses almost exclusively on the individual child and how to address the child from her or his own life experience and concerns. The radical individualism of Fahs' work surfaces in this thesis.

Fahs' intellectual allegiance at this time (and through the rest of her life) is with progressive education rather than with any

²⁷Ibid., p. 276, emphasis mine.

²⁸Ibid., p. 277.

religious tradition or community. Evidence of this is the following paragraph from her thesis. I quote here at length to give a full flavor of her allegiance:

It seems to me [in 1930] that the stories of the people represented in certain parts of the Bible, are well worthwhile sharing with boys and girls — at the proper ages — when they are old enough to appreciate these men and women and to recognize a kinship with them. And that these stories of the past should be given vividly, dramatically and as fully as the records will permit us to do and still be true to what careful study leads us to regard as historical at least in its general spirit and outline. Although it is harder to make Moses and Jesus come to life as real persons for boys and girls, than it is to make Jane Addams...or Abraham Lincoln live, yet it is possible, provided we as teachers will pay the price in study, and the children have already in the day school classes begun a study of history so that they can place the characters in some specific time and place. And if such stories are told at all the story teller should be true not to the narrative as it is in the Bible but to the historical truth about the man which the Bible narrative may have distorted in order to teach some outworn theological or ethical proposition.²⁹

Though this shift began while she was at Columbia, it came to fruition at Union. While at Columbia, Fahs wrote that “although the Bible must ever remain the textbook norm for Sunday-school instruction...it is not a children’s book.”³⁰ By the time she wrote her thesis at Union her allegiance to a Biblical tradition (as seen in the above quotation) had nearly -- if not entirely -- disappeared.

²⁹Ibid., p. 280, emphasis mine.

³⁰Parke, p. 261.

What is important about these developments is how they each fed into Fahs' understanding of story, and how they influenced her later work. Each development built upon the one prior -- had it not been for the influence of historical criticism, she might not have been able to pick up the threads of progressive education, and without progressive education, the eventual shift in her theology might not have occurred. Each of these are interdependent.

How do these shifts affect Fahs' understanding of story and her method of using story? Perhaps the clearest example of their effects is in the introduction to Long Ago and Many Lands. As noted above, it is here that Fahs outlines the principles by which the stories included in this volume were selected. These were guiding principles in all of Fahs' work, and illuminate the themes outlined above.

The first principle used in selecting the narrative was that the stories be, "the kind of narrative that, in our judgement, children from seven to nine will enjoy."³¹ This is an example of the influence of progressive education -- that the material meet the individual at the appropriate developmental level. The second criterion also grows out of the influence of progressive education, that "in some pertinent manner, [the narratives] should bear on the child's own living."³² She goes on to add that

[the child's] own experiences and those told him from long ago should be like two opposite currents of electricity. They should

³¹Fahs, Long Ago, p. iv.

³²Ibid.

be different enough to attract each other, and yet fundamentally they should be so much alike that when they are brought near together a spark is born that unites the two into one common experience.³³

Here, clearly, is Fahs' concern with vicarious experience. The idea that the child's experience should become entwined with that of "those of old" into "one common experience" is a poetic rendering of Fahs' understanding of vicarious experience. The experiences of the child are fundamentally the same as those of old, but are expressed in somewhat different form and under different circumstances.

Following along with this idea of vicarious experience and the fundamental similarity of all people's experience is Fahs' third principle. This principle, as noted in the first chapter, was to provide narratives from a wide variety of cultures to help children "feel some of the universals that bind us together in a common world brotherhood."³⁴ This is an expression of Fahs' concern for world community.

With the criteria of developmental appropriateness and the breadth of the narratives established, Fahs then turns to the insights which she gained from her study of historical criticism. "We have intentionally excluded from this collection," she writes, "stories telling of divine, miraculous interventions in the affairs of men,

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

involving the setting aside of known laws of the natural world.”³⁵ She goes on to explain that this has led the editors to leave out most of the commonly told stories from the Jewish and Christian scriptures because “such stories are usually either accepted as factual by young children or else seem entirely unbelievable.”³⁶

However, three exceptions are made to this rule. Because it “is practically impossible to protect young children from hearing the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus,” that story (in transmuted form) is told alongside the birth narratives of Buddha and Confucius. I will quote from Fahs at length to help express her position on this:

In our manner of telling the story of the birth of Jesus, however, we have tried to give some understanding of how the story first came to be told, and in addition we have placed it alongside the stories of the miraculous births of Buddha and Confucius. With the three stories side by side, it is hoped that children may be given a broader understanding which will enable them to think for themselves. This should be possible, at least for those children who have already been told some of the scientific facts regarding the birth of babies. We hope that the result will not be merely a negative disbelief; that it may rather be a new appreciation of the significance to [humanity] of a truly great person and a realization that all people everywhere feel touched by an unutterable mystery when in the presence of a newborn babe.³⁷

In this passage, we see several influences. The first is the historical critical method. The attempt is to tell of how the story

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. vii.

came to be by use of historical tools. In her introduction to the narratives, Fahs notes that the primary means by which these narratives were communicated was oral, and that because of that they were subject to the memory of the storyteller (which might fail), details added at a later times, and the possibility of exaggeration.³⁸ However briefly, she attempts to locate these narratives in the long ago time in which they were created.

Secondly, Fahs is clear here that the insight which grows from these three narratives should come from the child him or herself. This is a means of presenting children with several world views from which to choose. The authority described here is clearly that of the child. The information which she is providing is to “enable the child to think for [her or] himself.”

Finally, that they are placed in comparison with the birth narratives of Buddha and Confucius again suggests Fahs’ concern with the world community. All of these stories celebrate the same event -- the birth of a great man -- and express again the mystery that all people feel in the presence of birth.

As Fahs continues to explain the reasons for excluding miraculous stories and magical stories, she makes this interesting comment, “This collection...does contain a number of fanciful tales.” She explains the inclusion of these stories by stating that “young children can recognize the fancifulness and will not mistake it for

³⁸Ibid., p. 176.

fact.”³⁹ Why and how the child will do this with these tales and not others is never addressed.

In this chapter I have broadly surveyed Fahs' life looking particularly at the themes of world community, historical criticism, and progressive education. Fahs' commitment to a world community can be traced to her early experiences with missionizing, and with her early family life. Her commitment to historical criticism and to progressive education can be seen as world view shifts which occurred during her attendance at the University of Chicago, Columbia Teacher's College and Union Theological School. Evidence of these influences and her commitment to these ideas and methods can be seen in her later works.

In Chapter Three, I will examine Fahs' thought in light of contemporary thinkers. The two issues which I will particularly explore are that of Fahs' approach to story and community. In assessing Fahs' approach to story, I will discuss the nature of mythic story, and some problems with contextualizing narratives, as Fahs did. My discussion of community will focus on both the issue of authority and the role of religious community.

³⁹Ibid., p. viii.

CHAPTER THREE

Contemporary Writers and Story

Such stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that [we] behold, but like dwelling places. People live in them.

Stephen Crites¹

Much of the work that Fahs did, and the influences which shaped her are still valuable and vital to liberal religion. Yet there are contributions that have been made in the last 20 years which can deepen our understanding of story and help us to better articulate the theology of story which is implicit in Fahs' work. The first issue which must be considered is that of her approach to story.

APPROACH TO STORY

In the language of Stephen Crites, whose words open this chapter, Fahs views the narratives which she employs as "monuments" which we behold -- they are what was believed by those of old, and can be "known" by those hearing the narrative. The experience expressed in the narrative itself can be in some sense "re-experienced" by the hearers of the story. All the narratives presented by Fahs are "objective," that is, in the telling she tries to present all stories as neutral, as "monuments." None of these stories are "dwelling places," none are presented as mythic story. All are presented as growing out of a mythic story, but those mythic stories are no longer living, or viable for our time. However, it seems Fahs'

¹Crites, "Narrative Quality," p. 295.

hopes that through the retelling and placing of the narratives in their historical, geographical and anthropological context, the mythic story will be communicated to the hearers.

In light of the recent thought on the nature of story, and especially in the area of mythic story, this approach needs reconsideration. It is helpful to begin this reconsideration by turning back to the definitions being used in this thesis. Particularly, Stephen Crites and John Shea offer an understanding of mythic story which critiques Fahs' approach as it is informed by the insights of progressive education.

Crites' main claim in his article "The Narrative Quality of Experience" is that there are fundamental structures which orient us to the "powers of the world," and that these structures are narrative in form. These fundamental and inarticulable structures are "sacred stories," or in the terms of this thesis, mythic stories, and gain expression in the culture itself, in the people who embody the mythic story (i.e., lead their lives by it), and in the narratives which those living in that mythic story tell.

Mythic stories are interactive with experience. These mythic stories "inform people's sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience."² The mythic story informs and shapes our experiences as well as describing them. Crites goes on to note that

²Ibid.

the way we remember, anticipate, and even directly perceive, is largely social. A sacred story in particular infuses experience at its root, linking a [person's] individual consciousness with ultimate powers and also with the inner lives of those with whom he [or she] shares a common soil.³

John Shea takes a somewhat different approach to this issue, but agrees with Crites' assessment. Rather than using the image of narrative to describe the fundamental structures, Shea describes "mythic activity" which is the interaction between personal experience and the mythic stories that Crites describes. Shea writes that

mythic activity creates world by structuring consciousness, encouraging attitudes, and suggesting behaviors. In the first moment the mythic story configures experience so that certain elements are highlighted. It calls attention to certain patterns present in the encountered reality and entices the person to relate to that reality through those patterns.⁴

With this understanding of mythic story, the possibility of truly experiencing the mythic stories of other cultures by the retelling of narratives seems unlikely. A mythic story is told not only through the narratives that are expressed as part of the mythic story, but more than that, it is expressed in the activity of living in the world created by that mythic story. The mythic story of a people is told through a variety of experiences -- seeing the people who live them out, the experiences that are highlighted by the mythic story, and being offered the invitation to continue to "relate to that reality

³Ibid., p. 304.

⁴Shea, God, p. 52.

through those patterns” suggested by the mythic story. In addition, these narratives are filtered through a mythic story that does not, and cannot encompass them, but only gaze upon them as monuments.

Fahs primarily uses contextualized narratives to communicate the mythic stories of other cultures, and the mythic stories of our time and culture.⁵ Though both Shea and Crites would include narratives as a part of a mythic story, they can in no sense represent anything more than a small part of the full world inherent in any mythic story. They are truncated and partial pictures of the world as understood through the mythic story. These narratives “are applicable to certain relationships within human existence but not to human existence as a whole.”⁶

Because of the central place it holds in Fahs’ presentation of the narratives, and because it provides the framework in which the narratives are told, the contextualization of the narratives in Fahs’ books deserves some comment here as well. By contextualization I mean the manner in which Fahs places these narratives in their own context. As noted in the previous chapter, Fahs introduces all of the narratives in both of her books on narratives from other cultures. Each of the narratives is preceded by a description of the area in

⁵See Fahs, Beginnings: Earth, Sky, Life, Death: Stories Ancient and Modern, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), pp.141-201. Along with the creation myths of ancient peoples, Fahs includes the “Stories From the Scientists of the World.”

⁶Shea, God, pp. 60-1.

which it was told, and the reader is given information about the particular culture from which it grew. With the Christian and Jewish narratives, Fahs goes one step further and grounds them in “real” history, that is, the history which we come to know through the historical critical method.

Though this method may allow for a greater opportunity for the experience described in the narratives to be transmitted vicariously to the hearer, there are two significant limitations to it. One limitation of this approach is illuminated by Bruno Bettelheim in his work on fairy tales. Bettelheim agrees with Fahs on a fundamental level about the efficacy of vicarious experience. In a passage that is reminiscent of Fahs’ own words, Bettelheim writes:

Some of the fairy and folk tales evolved out of myths; others were incorporated into them. Both forms embodied the cumulative experience of a society as [people] wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations. These tales are the purveyors of deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence, a heritage that is not revealed in any other form as simply or directly, or as accessibly, to children.⁷

However, unlike Fahs, Bettelheim’s concern is with the developmental crises which are addressed through the use of narratives, and specifically the use of fairy tales to organize and resolve these crises through the use of fantasy. The fundamental difference between the two is that while Fahs hopes to communicate

⁷Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantments: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 26.

that all people have the same experiences, Bettelheim wants not only to communicate the similarity between the characters in the narrative and the hearer, he also contends that narratives relate directly to the internal life of the hearer.

Because of this difference in Fahs and Bettelheim in the function of narratives, they disagree on several points. The differences which are important in this thesis are manifest in their use of history and rationality. Where this is most clear is in Fahs' use of contextualization of the narratives, and Bettelheim's rejection of contextualization in the use of narratives. Contextualization necessarily depends upon adult interpretations of the meaning of the narratives, and adult decisions about what is most important in them. "Adult interpretations, as correct as they may be," Bettelheim writes "rob the child of the opportunity to feel that he, on his own, through repeated hearing and ruminating about the story, has coped successfully with a difficult situation."⁸

In addition, Bettelheim rejects the scientism which pervades the contextualizing of the narratives. He states his view clearly:

From an adult point of view and in terms of modern science, the answers which fairy stories offer are fantastic rather than true. As a matter of fact, these solutions seem so incorrect to many adults -- who have become estranged from the ways in which young people experience the world -- that they object to exposing children to such "false" information. However, realistic explanations are usually incomprehensible to children, because they lack the abstract understanding required to make sense of them. While giving a scientifically correct answer

⁸Ibid., p. 18.

makes adults think they have clarified things for the child such explanations leave the young child confused, overpowered and intellectually defeated.⁹

Finally, Bettelheim is more concerned with the inner world of the child and the effect that the narratives may have on him or her. Fahs is concerned with the connections that the narratives may help the child make with the outside world. Fairy tales -- and we might say most narratives -- for Bettelheim have primarily an internal function. He writes:

The fairy tale clearly does not refer to the outer world, although it may begin realistically enough and have everyday features woven into it. The unrealistic nature of these tales (which narrow-minded rationalists object to) is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual.¹⁰

Thus, while agreeing with Fahs on the issue of the efficacy of vicarious experience, Bettelheim disagrees with the function of narrative.

The second limitation of Fahs' contextualization grows primarily from her use of the historical critical method with narratives. The narratives which this affects are primarily those from the Jewish and Christian traditions. As noted in Chapter Two, Fahs sought to find the "actual person" who lived and preached in

⁹Ibid., pp. 47-8.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 25.

Galilee. She wants to present the facts of the Biblical narratives, regardless of the traditional interpretation of those narratives.¹¹

The view of history which Fahs brings to her work is one which has been addressed by a variety of writers. It is a naive view, and represents some of the unfortunate baggage of the modernist movement. For a narrative to be true for Fahs, it must be grounded in the "real" facts of what might have happened.¹² Yet, even within this distinction, Fahs is assuming that the "facts" that she presents are somehow more true or more real than those presented in the narratives themselves. Fahs wants the narratives that she relates to carry the power of history, and history is true. Recent thinking on the issues has contradicted this assumption. It isn't that history springs from an entirely different source than does myth, but that both are part of the same process of creating narratives, and both are "both made and true."¹³

¹¹Although this is also true to some degree of all of the narratives which Fahs' employs, it is especially true of the Jewish and Christian narrative. It may be that Fahs is battling against the understanding that the Jewish and Christian narratives have the weight of historical fact in our culture -- or at least at the time in which she was doing this work.

¹²As noted in Chapter One, Fahs is especially concerned with the "real facts." Her comment that the kinds of details found in her stories are "based upon facts gathered from the study of many books written by scholars," (Fahs, Jesus, p. vi.) certainly supports this.

¹³James Wiggins, "History as Narrative: Remembering Creatively," in Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness, Lee W. Gibb and W. Taylor Stevensen, eds., (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 77.

A writer who has addressed this from the perspective of literary criticism is Frank Kermode. In his book Genesis of Secrecy, Kermode notes:

We can, indeed, no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world.¹⁴

Kermode, in considering the Gospel of Mark, argues for attending to what was written, rather than what was written about. The focus in Fahs seems to be what was written about -- the historical data, rather than the richness of the narrative itself. He later notes that because "interpretation, which corrupts or transforms, begins so early in the development of narrative texts that the recovery of the real right original thing is an illusory quest."¹⁵ The point in this is not that history is bankrupt, but that it doesn't rest on the solid foundation which Fahs believed it did. In addition, by focusing on

¹⁴Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 108-9.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 125.

what was written about rather than what was written, Fahs misses the richness of the tradition and of the narratives themselves.¹⁶

In this section, I have examined some of the recent writers in the area of story and religion with an emphasis on critical issues in Fahs' approach to story. The work of Crites and Shea put strong limits on what can be transmitted by narrative as it is an expression of a mythic story. The work of Bettelheim suggests that the work that Fahs did in trying to contextualize the narratives may have robbed them of the vital internal vicarious experience that had characterized their use. Kermode, as well, suggests that the richness is lost by the attempt to historicize the narrative.

COMMUNITY

The second major issue is that of religious community. In this section I will examine Fahs' understanding of community, and the limitations of that understanding as provided by recent writers. This exploration will be focused on two issues: authority and the role of the religious community. First, Fahs' understanding of experience

¹⁶Kermode at another point in the book states: "We should never underestimate our predisposition to believe whatever is presented under the guise of an authoritative report and is also consistent with the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute." Genesis of Secrecy, p. 113 This gives some greater appreciation for what Fahs was doing. She was predisposed to believe that historical facts were truer than the narratives themselves, and that was part of the mythological structure in which she was working.

which vests total authority in the individual needs reconsideration in light of recent work.

In the last chapter, I discussed the work of Fahs in relation to community. Her primary concern is for a world community, and providing a consciousness of the wide interrelatedness of human experience. A secondary concern is the particular community, which she viewed as a gathering of companions, a “communal experience with our friends.”¹⁷ Additionally, she notes

the child must do for himself, but he cannot do it always by himself. He needs the feeling of honest and intimate togetherness with a group of his own kind. To encourage a fellowship is goal enough for any leader in church or synagogue or family.¹⁸

A fellowship is all that a community can offer to an individual from Fahs’ point of view. This is a consequence of her appropriation of the theories of progressive education. Fahs emphasizes the primacy of the individual’s experience as the foundation of education and of religion. Fahs did not believe that within community there is a mythic story or a Story, but that within community an individual may find fellow travelers on their own personal quests. “First of all,” she writes, “children need to have many opportunities to learn and notice for themselves.”¹⁹

¹⁷Fahs, Today’s Children, p. 210.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 57.

She sought to programmatically reverse the traditional formula for teaching religion. That is, she believes that children must have an experience of religiousness which is then translated into a particular faith. In Today's Children, Fahs writes:

Most teachers of religion would persuade children very early in life to become little Christians, or Jews, or Buddhists, or Mohammedans. Later during adolescence, perhaps, they would permit young people to study other religions. But first of all, they would have the children well grounded in their own religious heritage. We have been experimenting in another way. We believe that children need first to have religious feelings of their own; that they need to be themselves religious before they can be good Christians or good Jews or the followers of any specific faith.²⁰

This understanding of the method of learning religion and becoming religious can be critiqued on the same terms that Fahs' approach to story was critiqued above. First, the expectation that there is experience that is somehow free of the mythic structures of the world in which we live must be questioned. We all have a mythic story, which we have received from the communities in which we have been nurtured.

Michael Novak in Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove, provides some insight into the question of experience and its primacy as understood by Fahs. Novak, like Fahs, views experience

²⁰Ibid., pp. 97-8.

as “the mother of everything human.”²¹ However, he further notes that that experience is

more various, more rich more diffuse than our words, images, or symbols have yet selected for our attention. We swim as it were in a sea of experience too overwhelming to intussuscept.²²

Experience, then, is at the base of all things, though it is experience which has already been filtered through a story. As was noted above, the mythic story in which we live “configures experience so that certain elements are highlighted.”²³ Experience is never “raw” -- we experience those things which are highlighted by the mythic story in which we live, rather than experiencing and then finding a framework in which to put the experience.

As noted in Chapter One, stories are the “property” of communities. It is within a community that the stories can be seen in the common affirmations offered, in the lives of the participants, and in the life of the community. More than that, however, we are born into the midst of a story. In Shea’s words, we are “middle people.” He writes, “Our first awareness is that we are swimming. We wake in the water.”²⁴ We are born in the midst of many stories,

²¹Michael Novak, Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Invitation to Religious Studies, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 16.

²²Ibid.

²³Shea, God, p. 52.

²⁴Ibid., p. 11.

and “develop in relationship to people who tell mythic stories and to some extent...are living embodiments of the story.”²⁵ Stephen Crites also comments on this. He writes:

People do not sit down on a cool afternoon and think themselves up a sacred story. They awaken to a sacred story, and their most significant mundane stories are told in the effort, never fully successful, to articulate it.²⁶

We do not create our own stories out of raw experience. We are born into a world that is populated by many stories, and it is through the interaction of the stories, their cultural embodiment, community and the individual that a personal story develops. Thus, the question is not, as Fahs perceived it, whether or not to put a framework around the experience, but more a question of exploring the frameworks in which we already live. This then has consequences for Fahs’ understanding of authority and religious community.

First, because we have learned the stories from a community of people, whether that community is a family, church, school, or the culture at large, the stories which the communities embody do have power for individuals. Because we, too, embody the stories either because we have chosen to identify ourselves with the stories of the community, or because we are born into it, the community has the authority to encourage or critique the present behavior of the individual in light of the communal story.

²⁵Ibid., p. 57.

²⁶Crites, “Narrative Quality,” p. 296.

An example of this can be drawn from Fahs' work, and demonstrates that one of the stories that was embodied by her work was violated. The incident related below appears in Today's Children, and was drawn from Fahs' work with church schools. The incident occurred in a class in which the children were discussing various conceptions of God, and the particular child, Richard, was struggling with a conception of God in which God began small and grew. Fahs writes:

But the idea was too strange for young Richard's mind to hold. He fumbled for a moment. The teacher tried to encourage him to go on. But finally he said "Of course it's all a big lie, because God didn't start small in the first place -- he was always big and just the way he is now." We regretted that the hand of tradition already lay so heavily upon Richard's mind that he felt compelled to deny his own momentary and independent insight.²⁷

Fahs does not tell us if Richard was reprimanded for this response, but it is likely that the displeasure of the adults present was communicated to him. In the mythic story in which Fahs was working, choosing a traditional conception of God was outside the story, and therefore not acceptable behavior. Unconsciously, in this passage Fahs clearly communicates the authority of the community to critique and encourage particular behaviors and ways of thinking that are embodiments of the story of the community.

Authority is vested both in the individual and the communities from which she or he draws a story, rather than being entirely

²⁷Fahs, Today's Children, p. 164.

vested in the individual. What then, is the role of the religious community, and more particularly, the liberal religious community?

For insight into this issue, I will turn to Thomas Groome. Groome is a Roman Catholic religious educator who has proposed a "shared praxis" method for religious education which involves experience, Story, and Vision. Although Groome's primary audience is Christian, he brings insights about the nature and role of a religious community which is accessible to liberal religion.

The central point in Groome's method is that people all become religious -- and for him this means Christian -- in the context of a religious community. His approach to religious education is founded on this belief. He agrees with Crites and Shea on their assessment of the function of story and experience. In a discussion on self-identity, he notes that

because we come to self-identity through interaction with our social ethos, Christian self-identity requires that we be socialized by a community of Christian faith. That is where faith begins and is enabled to grow to maturity. The more faithful our communities are, the more likely it is that younger members will come to authentic Christian faith and older ones continue to grow in it.²⁸

In addition, because of the wide variety of world views and stories which are present in our culture, one of the functions of religious education is that of discernment between the stories. In his words:

²⁸Groome, Christian Religious Education, p. 122.

A great variety of world views and value systems, some of which are very contrary to a Christian self-identity, vie for our acceptances. Thus the socialization to which we are exposed inevitably might well have been a decidedly un-Christian influence on us. Consequently, it is imperative that our religious education develop in us a critical capacity for discerning the mixed influences of socialization on our lives.²⁹

This critical discernment is achieved through his shared praxis approach to religious education. This approach consists of five components: "1) present action, 2) critical reflection, 3) dialogue, 4) the Story, and 5) the Vision that arises from the Story."³⁰ By use of this method Groome escapes the bondage to a reified tradition, as well as the illusion of ultimate individual authority. I will briefly describe each step in his method. In my description, I will not be attending to the faith component of Groome's description of his method, but it should be noted that this method is described as a primarily Christian activity, and centers on discovering and exploring our relationship to God and Christ in the context of a Christian community. The faith component does have an effect upon his method, particularly at the stage of telling the Story and proposing a Vision.

By present action, Groome refers to "our whole engagement in the world, our every doing that has any intentionality or deliberateness to it."³¹ This is mainly self-reflection, though he

²⁹Ibid., p. 123.

³⁰Ibid., p. 184.

³¹Ibid.

makes a distinction between the primary reflection, which is on the self, and the ultimate reflection which is "on the social context by which the self comes to self-identity."³² In addition, he goes on to state that

it is the historical self and society that are reflected upon, since our present action is the consequence of our past and the shaper of our future. By reflecting on present action, we can uncover the "pasts" that have brought us to such action, and raise to consciousness the "futures" in that action by becoming aware of its likely or intended consequences.³³

In this step, Groome brings to the process an awareness of and a concern for the experience of the individual involved in religious education. Along with this concern for the individual's experience there is a recognition of the variety of stories which have shaped that experience, and how that is likely to influence the future.

The second step in Groome's method is "critical reflection." This is a means of examining the present, the past and the future. Critically reflecting on the present is a means of attempting to "perceive the obvious." In his words, "Very often the obvious is so much a part of our given world that it is 'taken' for granted and either no longer noticed or seen as inevitable." Critical reflection on the present is an attempt to see what is taken for granted, to "critically apprehend it rather than passively accept it as 'just the

³²Ibid., p. 185.

³³Ibid.

way things are.”³⁴ Secondly, critical reflection is an attempt to retrieve from the past why we think the way we do. Groome comments

in reflecting upon the source of our activity, we come to know our own story and to name our own constitutive knowing, that is, the knowing which arises from our engagement in the world. Without this our stories are forgotten, and the world is named for us.³⁵

Finally, critical reflection draws on the imagination to envision the future. He draws upon the imagination as a “creative and shaping activity that gives intentionality to the future as it arises out of the present and the past.”³⁶ In this step Groome seeks to draw upon three dimensions of the individual’s experience. The “obvious” which may have been overlooked, the memory of the individual and influences upon the individual, and an attempt to envision the future.

The third step is that of dialogue. By dialogue, Groome means “a subject-to-subject encounter..., in which two or more people share and hear their reflective stories and visions.” He goes on to state that “by listening to others disclose themselves to me, I can help them discover themselves. And in disclosing myself to others, I can discover myself.”³⁷ This is a critical step for Groome, for it

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 186.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 189.

undergirds the rest of the praxis approach. He quotes Paulo Freire to get his point across:

dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between [people] who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth.³⁸

The fourth component is that of telling the Story. As noted in Chapter One, by Story Groome means "the whole faith tradition of our people however that has been expressed or embodied."³⁹ One element of his description of Story is the faith statement that accompanies Groome's definition. The faith that is expressed is that the Story relates back to the historical event of God incarnate in Jesus, and the belief that as God was active then, so is God active now. Thus, by retelling the story, the participants have access to God's action in the past, and are invited to see how God is now active in their lives.

Finally, a Vision drawn from the Story is proposed. Groome intends the metaphor Vision "to be a comprehensive representation of the lived response which the Christian Story invites and of the promise God makes in the Story."⁴⁰ Vision for Groome is the means

³⁸Ibid., p. 190.

³⁹Ibid., p. 192.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 193.

for the participants to draw their own futures in relation to their own experiences, and the Story. He goes on to state that

the Christian Story and its Vision find expression, though not perfectly, in a community of Christian faith. They can be encountered there in the reflectively lived and shared faith of the whole community. But within the community, and in a context of intentional religious education, the educator has the responsibility of ensuring that the Story is encountered and its Vision proposed. In the community encounter between our own stories and the Story, between our own visions and the Vision, we can come to "know God" in an experiential/reflective manner. It will be a praxis way of knowing that arises from our own praxis, from the praxis of our community of pilgrims in time, and from the praxis of God in history.⁴¹

This method suggests some critiques of Fahs' work. First, as noted above, this method does remove the entire power of authority from the individual. Although it is clear that the beginning of the process is the individual and the end result is the individual, the intervening steps are relational -- in relationship to a small community of seekers who share their struggles in becoming religious, and in relationship to a Story which all involved have acknowledged as a mythic story.

Second, the introduction of critical reflection expands Fahs' understanding of the manner in which experience is to be used. Rather than only drawing upon the experience, Groome expresses a concern for several dimensions in a consideration of experience. Present experience is not only what one believes right now, but also the experiences that shaped that belief, and a consideration of what

⁴¹Ibid.

implications that belief has for the future. It is not simply grounded in the here and now, but also attempts to stretch beyond the limits of the present moment into both past and future.

Third, Groome's concern for dialogue suggests a greater participation by community in the development and exploration of one's experience which is lacking in Fahs. Because for Fahs the locus of authority is the individual, there is no place for dialogue as Groome defines it. There is only room for "depositing" of ideas. Fahs' method and approach to story only allows for a discussion, not for a dialogue.

The steps of Story and Vision are somewhat more difficult to apply to Fahs, because of the explicitly Christian content which is integral to Groome's description. If it is to be applied to liberal religion, several questions must be asked. Briefly, these questions relate to the possibility of achieving some consensus on what precisely is the Story of liberal religion, or at least achieving a working definition. I will return to this question in the next chapter.

What Groome offers to liberal religion and as a critique of Fahs is an understanding of the function of community in regard to story which is seriously lacking in Fahs. Community takes on the function of relationship for the individual, not simply as a fellowship of seekers, but as an encouraging, guiding atmosphere in which the individual is presented with what it means to be a part of that particular community, and is encouraged to be true to the ideals of that community in light of his or her experiences.

In this chapter, I have examined two critical issues in Fahs' work in light of recent thought in the field of story and religion. First, I offered a critique of Fahs' approach to story through narrative on the basis of work done by Crites and Shea on the nature of story. Because story is embodied in a community, and only partially expressed through the narratives, Fahs' hopes that children would be able to enter into the world of other cultures is severely limited.

As well, Fahs' attempt to contextualize the narratives which she used was critiqued in light of the work of Bettelheim and Kermode. Bettelheim, though agreeing with Fahs on the efficacy of vicarious experience, focuses primarily on internal experience, whereas Fahs was more concerned with the external relationships which the narratives could communicate. He also cautioned against adult interpretation of the narratives, and scientific explanations of the narratives. Kermode offered a critique of Fahs' use of history as "more true" than the inherited texts from which Fahs worked.

Second, I examined the issue of Fahs' understanding of authority, focusing initially on the way in which experience is understood. Whereas Fahs accepted experience as a neutral phenomena, free of any structure until a structure is imposed by the individual, the more recent writers describe experience as understood only through a story. This understanding of experience as filtered through a story indicates that the community which "owns" the story then does have the authority to critique and

encourage certain behaviors and ideas which also embody the story as it is understood in that community.

Finally, I briefly described the method of Thomas Groome in relation to authority and community in the religious context. Groome's method is inclusive of both individual and community and tries to create a middle ground between the absolute authority of the community and the absolute authority of the individual.

In my final chapter, I will reconsider these points in relation to story and liberal religion, offer my critique of both Fahs and the recent writers, and suggest directions for further study and consideration.

CHAPTER FOUR

Toward a Theology of Story for Religious Liberals

In this chapter, I will first discuss the limitations of a theology of story for religious liberalism. Second, I will refer back to the concerns raised in Chapter One to address how the recent writers might, within the limits set, help to broaden our understanding of story in relationship to the issues of community and authority. That which cannot be addressed or answered by the recent writers can at least be clarified for further work. Finally, I will suggest the requirements for a theology of story for religious liberals.

First, I will discuss the fundamental limitation of a theology of story as it relates to the issues discussed in Chapter Three. As noted particularly in the discussion of Thomas Groome's method, there are some serious limitations which must be put on a theology of story for religious liberals.

LIMITATIONS

Before turning to the affirmations which can be made about a theology of story for religious liberals, we must examine the fundamental limitation of a theology of story. First, it must be noted that many of the sources referred to in this thesis have been writers from the Roman Catholic tradition. Most of this critique grows from a consideration of Thomas Groome's work, and I will focus my remarks about this limitation on a critique of his work.

Although Groome's writing and method seem easily transferable to a liberal religious tradition, there are some problems in it. Groome's definition of Story, seems especially easy to translate -- "the whole faith tradition of our people however that is embodied or expressed."¹ As he goes on in his description, he writes:

As our people have made their pilgrimage through history, God has been active in their lives (as God is active in the lives of all peoples). They, in turn, have attempted to respond to God's actions and invitations. From this covenanted relationship there have emerged particular roles and expected lifestyles, written scriptures, interpretations, pious practices, sacraments, symbols, rituals, feast days, communal structures, artifacts, "holy" places, and so on. All of these embody, express, or recreate some part of the history of that covenant.²

One of the limitations of using Groome can be seen in this passage. Groome, coming from a Roman Catholic tradition, has an inherited tradition which has been passed along, and has authority as the tradition. Decisions have already been made about what is part of the tradition, and what legitimately may constitute the tradition, and that is not in the hands of the writers, nor is it in the hands of the participants. The Story is already determined, and the people engaged in a process such as Groome's in the context of the Roman Catholic Church (or in Christian churches with a similarly clear tradition) have granted authority to the tradition as a sacred story to a greater or lesser degree.

¹Groome, Christian Religious Education, p. 192.

²Ibid.

Within Unitarian Universalism, it is not clear just precisely what the tradition is. Although some suggestions have been made about this -- that our tradition encompasses all the liberal yearnings of religious people through the centuries, for example, might be such one suggestion -- there seems to be little consensus on what constitutes our tradition. Without an agreement on what our Story is, or how to determine what is to be included in our tradition, asking the kind of allegiance required for the method described by Groome is unreasonable. For Groome's method to work, the individuals involved must both accept the Story as authoritative, and be responsible to that tradition.

This limitation -- the lack of an authoritative or, at least, agreed upon Story -- is fundamental, and must be examined further. Because of this lack, it is possible, if not probable, that the "tradition" will become whatever the whim of the educator happens to be. Or, perhaps even worse, it will be the whim of the time, and the current cultural trend.

A concern raised in the first chapter was that of Duke Gray, and again this relates to the limitation as discussed in relation to Groome. Gray wants Unitarian Universalism to "advocate" something. To do this, he asks that the denomination, congregations and membership begin telling their "faith stories." As suggested in a discussion of Gray's concern, the telling of stories has been shaped by the work of Fahs. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the telling of stories in our congregations has been influenced by both the historical

critical method, and the appropriation of the insights of progressive education.

As noted in Chapter Three, the understanding of story as described by Fahs under these influences is inappropriate in light of recent thought on the subject. One way of addressing this concern, at least initially, might be to take the narratives out of the scientific and "objective" language in which they currently are, or at least acknowledge that the narratives are being used in that manner. But this only addresses one small element of Gray's concern. The narratives, even if revised, would still have the quality of "monuments," and not the "dwelling places" which Gray is seeking.

The fundamental limitation of a theology of story surfaces again here. For Unitarian Universalists to begin telling their "faith stories," or for the association to begin to advocate a particular faith story would mean that some consensus of what constituted a Unitarian Universalist faith story would be necessary. As noted above that is an almost impossible task. Additionally, to begin to engage in dialogue about faith stories (rather than discussing them), Unitarian Universalists need a common language in which to speak. Stephen Toulmin is helpful in understanding this point. In Human Understanding, Toulmin writes:

Our personal beliefs find expression only through the use of communal concepts. The new molds in which our individual thoughts are cast acquire a definite form only when they

become -- at any rate, potentially -- the collective intellectual instruments of an appropriate community.³

To be able to engage in a dialogue of personal faith stories, or an institutional faith story, Unitarian Universalists must have a common language in which to speak. Only through the use of communal concepts can we honestly relate to one another on the level that Gray seeks. Because of the diversity of languages in which Unitarian Universalists express their faith stories, it is unlikely that much serious dialogue can occur. For example, a woman who finds that Christian language best expresses her faith story is not likely to be able to engage in conversation with a man who finds the language of humanism the best expression of his faith story. The language of each is valid within "an appropriate community": for the woman, a community that expresses itself in Christian language, and for the man a community that expresses itself in humanist language. Hence, dialogue is not likely to occur, and it is certain that faith stories will not be shared.

How Unitarian Universalist should respond to this is not clear, nor will it be easy to determine the response. However, some of the limitations are implicit in my consideration of Fahs in Chapter Three. First, the middle ground of scientism and "objectivity" that Fahs sought is inadequate for a religious community. It is inadequate because, first, it presents "facts" rather than worlds. With "facts," there can only be discussion, not dialogue. Secondly, that particular

³Stephen Toulmin, Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 40.

choice of language is exclusive of a wide variety of people in Unitarian Universalism who could not describe their faith stories in the language of science, and who would reject it as a viable choice for appropriate “communal concepts” in which to express their faith stories.

The question of a shared language in which to speak of our faith stories cannot be resolved here. It is, however, the most pressing issue for Unitarian Universalists to consider in the use of a theology of story.

Within these limits, what are the possibilities of a theology of story? As defined in Chapter One, a theology of story is dependent upon narrative, and its role is to elucidate, examine and transform individuals and communities. In Narrative and Theology, Goldberg outlines the necessary criteria for a “justifiable” narrative theology. The criteria which Goldberg presents grow from some of the same understanding of story which has been expressed by the other writers cited. I will briefly review his criteria, suggesting applications within Unitarian Universalism. Finally, I will make some claims for a theology of story within Unitarian Universalism.

The first criteria that Goldberg suggests is “primary conditions.” What this means is that at minimum

the convictions embraced by that theology have indeed arisen from something that counts as narrative in our common language; moreover, since there are conventions in the language which help class narratives according to various literary genres, our primary conditions further require that to be justifiable, a narrative theology’s convictions must be

appropriate to the kind of story which that theology claims as their ground.⁴

For Unitarian Universalism, this means, first, that there must be a narrative from which the convictions are drawn. The statement of Purposes and Principles, for example, would not fit into a narrative theology, because it is the abstracted convictions and not the narratives which undergird the statement. This again points us back to the question of what the Unitarian Universalist Story is, and how to define that. Though that definition is beyond the scope of this paper, I can affirm that the presence of that statement indicates that there are perhaps narratives from which those convictions have been drawn which operate in our societies, and in individuals within the denomination.

The second requirement under primary conditions is that of identification. In Goldberg's words this requires, "that whatever narrative is used has been properly identified and subsequently used as the kind of narrative it is, e.g., a myth and not a historical account."⁵ This is, as noted in Chapters One and Three, a continual problem with Fahs' work. It is necessary for a greater clarity in the kinds of narratives which we are using to justifiably claim a theology of story, or to use a theology of story.

⁴Goldberg, Narrative and Theology, p. 201.

⁵Ibid., p. 213. It is interesting to note Goldberg's comment at another point in the text. "In this regard, one of the mistakes of fundamentalists and secularists alike is the failure to draw distinctions among the different narrative genres in the Bible, the fundamentalists accepting them as all histories and the secularists rejecting them all as myths." p. 204

Thirdly, there is the question of an interpretation of narratives. Goldberg writes that “whatever narrative is used,” it must be “correctly understood within the context of meaning provided by the communal tradition which claims it as its own.”⁶ What this means is that the method of interpretation must be present within the Story, or, at least, within the mythic story. Goldberg comments further that “while in any rich and complex narrative may have a whole range of valid interpretations of its meaning(s), there are nevertheless some interpretations which do not and will not fit.”⁷ There are general interpretive traditions within Unitarian Universalism, and they are along the lines of Fahs’ mythic story. They involve use of rationality (e.g., historical criticism), and at best a concern for the existential human situation rather than a supernatural interpretation. Again, a full consideration of the interpretive tradition within Unitarian Universalism is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an area for further study.

The second criteria is that of the truth of convictions which arise from the narratives. This again refers to the clarity of kinds of narratives and stories, and the kind of claims that each genre may make. The examples which Goldberg uses are history and fictions. Of history, the truth claim made is that of historical facticity. These are narratives which are judged “true by definition.”⁸ He contrasts this to the truth of convictions arising from fictions, which are true

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 212.

⁸Ibid., p. 214.

by representative force, that is, that they “ring true” to the experience of the hearer. By this Goldberg doesn’t mean that the narratives which are grounded in historical fact are “more true,” as Fahs did, but that by discerning the type of narrative we can better judge the truth claims that it makes.

Finally, for a narrative theology to be justified, the hearing and telling of the narratives must have an effect upon the lives of those involved. Goldberg states it well:

For...a narrative theology, there is the conviction that when such stories are told through preaching, ritual, or liturgy, there exists not only the intention that they have...[a] transformational dimension, or the fact that intent is so understood by those hearing these stories, but that furthermore and perhaps most importantly, without such stories being told and heard, the hoped-for transformations affecting both persons and events would never come to pass.⁹

This is perhaps the center of a theology of story: that the telling and hearing of stories can bring about a transformation within the individuals hearing and telling them. This is not unlike the insight of Thomas Groome in his discussion of dialogue. And it is perhaps the most difficult to translate into Unitarian Universalism. Although most within our movement would affirm the possibility of insight arising from all sources, the lack of a common language described above, and the issue of authority as examined in Chapter Three severely limit the possibility of this happening. If the story is couched in language which is acceptable, and if it carries with it the force of authority, as might be found in a Christian community, then

⁹Ibid., p. 227.

this sort of claim can be made. Once again in this regard a theology of story is limited in a Unitarian Universalist community by the lack of a common language in which to speak of issues of faith, and by the lack of an authoritative Story from which to draw these narratives.

Thus, from these criteria, some directions and possibilities are clear. First, the lack of a common language is once again a limit upon a theology of story. Additionally, the lack of an authoritative Story is a limit upon such a theology. Yet, as individuals and particular communities, some of these criteria can be met, and some of the requirements addressed.

A theology of story would have to meet the "primary" condition of examining convictions and the narratives which inform those convictions. As well, the narrative would have to be recognized as a particular kind, such as myth or historical account, and be treated accordingly. Third, there must be a means of interpretation of the narratives. Within Unitarian Universalism this is possible on the level of congregations or individuals.

Second, the truth of the claims made in the narrative must be made. Once again, this requires, a clarity about the kind of story which is being used, and an understanding of the sort of truth claims each can make. Those who would claim a theology of story must have a sensitivity to the kinds of claims which can be made by the different sorts of stories, and must be sensitive to the issues raised about story by Bettelheim and Kermode in Chapter Three.

Finally, a theology of story must be judged by the effect the stories have upon the lives of individuals and communities. The question of authority is especially problematic at this level. A Story, or mythic story presents to the hearer a particular orientation to the world, and if that orientation is not accepted, then the theology has failed on a fundamental level.

It is possible at this time to make some distinctions in the term “theology of story.” One interpretation of this would be the broad statement of Goldberg’s that has been used throughout this thesis, and this would be appropriate for Unitarian Universalism. Another interpretation grows out of the work of Thomas Groome and others, and takes Goldberg’s statement one step further to specify a particular story, or, at least, an agreed upon Story which can make authoratative claims for individuals and communities. Clearly, this second interpretation would not be applicable to Unitarian Universalism. The first is a method of or an approach to theology which is less specific to content, while the second is more specific to content. In this section I will use the terms “story approach to theology” and “a theology of story” as interchangeable terms.

Rather than attempting to make sweeping statements about a theology of story for Unitarian Universalism, I can make claims about a theology of story for individuals and, to a lesser degree, for congregations. Because of the limits set by language and issues of authority, it is not possible to make sweeping claims about a Unitarian Universalist theology of story.

As with my consideration of Fahs, this will focus primarily on method and less on content. Clearly, method and content cannot be entirely separated, because the acceptance of a method indicates convictions about the nature of the world, how we know, etc. -- in short, acceptance of a method implies a particular sort of mythic story. The claims I make are intended to be preliminary, subject to revision as this particular area is more fully investigated.

Fahs provided the basic framework for a theology of story by her use of a method focused on story. Her acceptance of the validity of the use of story within a religious setting and its wide acceptance within our congregations as evidenced by the use of her work still I will accept as indicative of a framework. However, the method and theory must be refined and made explicit.

A theology of story is possible for individuals within Unitarian Universalism. In this context it may be understood as a particular method of theology, and one of many options which are available. There are some particular benefits for this method of theology even within the limitations mentioned above. This way of approaching theology, if done right, can provide individuals a means to bring together community and personal convictions grounded in existential concerns. The story approach to theology, as well, can bring together past, present and future for the individual within the context of a community.

To use a theology of story, several understandings must be accepted. The first would be on the grounds of the nature of story

and its relation to life. A story approach would require at minimum an acceptance of the nature of story as understood by Fahs. That is, that story can communicate basic human truths and yearnings in a manner more powerful than simply describing concepts. However, as was discussed in Chapter Three, this minimal assumption creates problems, and if taken just as this, will keep story on a superficial level by not attending to the world creating power in stories.

To move beyond this superficial level, story must be viewed as both as an expression (narrative) of a deeper story (mythic story), and as part of a Story -- whether that Story is connected to a religious tradition or is part of a particular cultural group. Without this awareness, a theology of story cannot be effective in "examining, elucidating, and transforming" an individual or community. Without this awareness, stories will only be narrative, and access to those deeper levels of awareness from which transformation is possible.

Secondly, a theology of story requires that the individuals taking this approach be clear about the genres of story being used. It is critical that the kind of story that is being used in this approach be clear to those using it. The reason for this is that the truth claims of any story are entirely tied to its genre. The claims made by a historical story are different from those made by creation myths, or fables or fictions. As noted in Chapter Three, historical narratives have their own limitations within a theology of story, and must be understood within the context of the criticism of Fahs offered there.

The types of stories as outlined by Crossan merit some attention here. In Chapter One, I described the five types of story as understood by Crossan as: myth (creates world), apologue (defends world), action (explores world), satire (attacks world), and parable (subverts world). A story approach to theology would also have to take into account these types of story. Although most narratives can be understood as representative of a myth, there are some which are more foundational than others. For example, in Fahs' case the story of evolution carried more power as world creating. Many of her narratives can be seen as defending of a view of cosmic evolution (apologue). Thus, not only is there a requirement of clarity about genre of story, there must also be a recognition of the type of story being used within this typology. The more central the story is to a mythic story, the more powerful it is.

As well as an attention to these types of story, a theology of story must work toward transformation of the mythic stories. Again, as with the understanding of story as required by a story approach to theology, the lack of this awareness limits this approach to a superficial level. To reach beyond the level of defending, exploring or attacking world, this approach must encompass an awareness of these types of story, and seek to examine the more central stories within individuals and communities. In other words, theology of story must be centrally concerned with myth and parable.

Third, those using a story approach to theology must articulate as much as is possible the interpretive tools being used. This is not an area in which I can make prescriptions about the particular tools,

but one which must be explored by those using this approach. Because there is no clear cut interpretive tradition within Unitarian Universalism, it is not possible to draw from the tradition a set of interpretive tools. There are, as mentioned above, some tools which may "fit" better than others, but it is not within the boundaries of this thesis to suggest them. Here I simply note that clarity about the interpretative tools used is crucial to a story approach to theology.

Before leaving this area, it is worth repeating that the interpretive tools used must be appropriate to the kind of story under consideration. That is, it is not appropriate to interpret a fable with the same tools which are used for historical texts. One of the serious drawbacks of Fahs' work is that because there was little or no distinction between types of stories, she applied the same interpretive tools to all of them. If this approach to theology is to be effective, it must recognize the different truth claims made by different types of stories, and interpret them accordingly.

Fourth, theology of story is best understood in the context of community. Community here is more likely to be a small group within a congregation, or a small congregation. It is within a dialogue, as described by Groome, that a story approach can be most effective. As individuals, we are less likely to be confronted by differing stories, as well as being less likely to engage in the kind of examination required by a story approach within the setting of a group. It is in dialogue that individuals are asked explicitly to attempt to articulate their own stories, and as Groome noted, they are often surprised by the stories that they tell.

At issue here is the question of intentionality, as well as justifiability. If all the components above are present, then a story approach within a community setting would require that individuals are intentionally examining their own stories, and communicating their mythic story (however incompletely), articulating their insights and interpretive tools for the convictions which arise from those stories.

Finally, the issue of sacrality must be raised. Again, this is beyond the scope of this paper to address fully, yet it must be raised for consideration. A sacred story would have to be in some manner redemptive and live giving to the individual or community. Although all people have mythic stories, only some of them can be seen as sacred. Groome notes this in his discussion of the factors of socialization by mentioning that people gather mythic stories from a wide variety of sources, and that some of them are contradictory to the Christian Story. Crites, too, suggests that the "modernist" mythic story is a destructive story. In more graphic form, we all would agree that Hitler operated from a mythic story, though few Unitarian Universalists would consider that sacred. It is more likely to be considered as demonic.

What precisely signifies the presence of a sacred story is not easy to determine. Aside from the question of language, this is perhaps the most critical issue to be explored in a consideration of a theology of story. This is critical for both individuals and congregations, and a story approach is powerful and positive in beginning to address this issue.

One direction which this exploration might take is to consider how inclusive the mythic stories are. As noted throughout this thesis, each mythic story proposes a world. To consider the sacrality of a mythic story, one would have to ask the question of how inclusive the mythic story is. Michael Novak's writing is helpful in understanding this question. Novak speaks of religious conversion as a movement from "standpoint to standpoint."¹⁰ In a discussion of learning wisdom, Novak writes:

To grow in wisdom...is to have undergone many transformations. It is to have known joy often. For joy is the taste of reality. And each transformation of one's horizon is for the sake of a profounder, more comprehensive penetration into the mystery of one's own existence, into the reality of the world in which we live. We are never directly in touch with reality. We proceed, little by little, into an ever more tutored, more accurate grasp of what it is to be a human being under these stars.¹¹

It is precisely this sort of movement that a theology of story should help to achieve, that is, a "more accurate grasp of what it is to be a human being under these stars." The broader and more inclusive a mythic story is, the more sacred it will be. However, a fuller exploration of this issue must be left to others.

An example of a story approach to theology on the congregational level is found in Building Effective Ministry, in an

¹⁰Novak, Ascent of the Mountain, pp. 53-9.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 58. Implicit in this statement of the shift of horizons is the notion that all movement will be good and toward a wider vision. This is an unfortunate optimism, I believe, because it ultimately absolves individuals from justifying their positions. However, the suggestion that the movement to a broader horizon is a movement toward sacrality is worthwhile.

article by James Hopewell. In this book, a crisis situation in an actual church is discussed from a variety of disciplines, including literary criticism. In his article on "The Jovial Church: Narrative in Local Church Life," Hopewell analyzes the particular church in the terms of that church's narrative. In doing this Hopewell engages in attending to the linguistic structures that create the world in which the members of the congregation are engaged, and is able to offer insight into the crisis which was not otherwise available. Though a Christian church, the narrative structure that Hopewell discerns in this church is not the "Christian Story" as embodied in the Story as Groome describes it, but the Zeus myth. By discerning this story, Hopewell can then address dimensions of the church crisis which were not directly articulated by the members of the congregation.

Hopewell then notes the kind of information which can be gained by a use of literary criticism in the local church setting. Its strength, he writes, "lies in [its] capacity to explore [the] pattern of [the story]; to understand its meaning among those people who undertake it."¹² He goes on to note that

what...presents [the] issues powerfully to the congregation itself is more likely story than theory. Although ethnographers may by observation and interview gather in their minds what they find to be the more abstract themes of a church, their subsequent talk within that culture about these themes tends to assume narrative form. Narrative historical accounts were often the source of these cultural themes, and story is often the framework that carries their import on-site. Story is not then just the play of children nor the protoscience of primitives. It

¹²James Hopewell, "The Jovial Church: Narrative in Local Church Life," in Building Effective Ministry, Carl Dudley, ed., (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 80.

is the mastery of metaphor by which a group interprets its common life. Any ongoing ministry in a church relies upon story in its attempt to interpret its life. It is not just sermons that need illustration; all of corporate life needs imaging for its communication.¹³

A sensitivity to narrative as it is present in the individual congregation is, first, a tool for professional leaders within a church. Because of the present understanding of story in Unitarian Universalism as represented by Fahs denies a story within the denomination or within a particular congregation, this has not been as accessible to Unitarian Universalist congregations. As was noted in Chapter Three, Fahs did operate from a story, though she did not perceive it. The same claim might be made about Unitarian Universalist congregations and membership at the present time. A disregard for, or a disavowal of the story dimension of congregational life closes off a significant opportunity to “elucidate, examine, and transform those deeply held religious beliefs that make a community what it is.” An awareness of the story dimension, and using a story approach to theology can facilitate significant change within congregations.

Similar pictures could be explored for individuals, but are more difficult to pin down. The same sort of sensitivities and exploration would be necessary for this consideration, and so I will not draw out the individual story. However, learning to perceive the mythic stories which individuals and congregations are living out are achieved in a similar manner. Michael Novak suggests that

¹³Ibid., p. 81.

“one...examine one’s own favorite metaphors, verbs, adjectives”¹⁴ as a preliminary step to discovering the mythic story which one is living out. The metaphors, verbs and adjectives that an individual or group uses to describe their world and actions in that world provides information about the kind of world in which they are living. As Hopewell points out above, this is the sort of activity which will help to recognize the mythic story in which people are living, and once that is know, work can begin on examining, elucidating and transforming the values which grow from that story.

I contend that this is a significant task for ministry. A recognition of, first, of the story dimension which is a part of our communal life is necessary to gain access to this opportunity as suggested above. Secondly, professional leadership, as well as the membership of congregations, must become sensitive to these dimensions, and learn how to apply them to congregational life. These sensitivity and skills will allow our leaders and membership to transform their stories, which may indeed be demonic and destructive of those individuals involved, into a life giving, sacred story.

SUMMARY

In this thesis, I have considered a theology of story for religious liberals. I did this by in Chapter One, defining “theology of story” as a theology which is dependent the upon narratives which operate within the lives of individuals and communites, and whose

¹⁴Novak, Ascent of the Mountain, pp. 55-6.

purpose is to elucidate, examine, and transform individuals and communities. I also defined the terms mythic story, narrative and Story for use in this investigation. I briefly reviewed the work of Sophia Lyon Fahs to establish that she was and is the most vocal spokeswoman for this sort of approach in Unitarian Universalism, and as representative of a particular world view or mythic story which still functions within Unitarian Universalism.

In Chapter Two, I examined the influences of the historical critical method, progressive education, and the search for a world community which shaped Fahs' understanding of story within the context of liberal religion. Each of these influences can be seen as growing out of particular times during Fahs' intellectual development. The issues which most profoundly affected Fahs' work in this regard were: authority understood as a primarily individual responsibility; her particular understanding of the results of vicarious experience; the language she used in communicating narratives; and her concern for historical facticity.

In Chapter Three, I critiqued Fahs in light of recent research. The work of John Shea, Stephen Crites, Bruno Bettelheim, Frank Kermode, and Thomas Groome suggest a different understanding of story than the one which informed Fahs' work. Specifically, Crites and Shea critiqued Fahs' understanding of story as it relates to community, by acknowledging the deeper structures which Fahs had not perceived in her use of story, and by stating that mythic story is best known in relationship to people who hold those stories. Bettelheim, while agreeing with Fahs on the efficacy of vicarious

experience as the basis for learning, suggested the the kind of learning which occurs through vicarious experience -- the telling of stories -- relates primarily to the internal life of the individual. With Thomas Groome, the issue of the authority of the community was addressed, and using his method, authority is grounded both in the individual and the community.

In this chapter, I have discussed the limitations of a theology of story for religious liberals, and specifically for Unitarian Universalists. The limitation which is most significant is that of a language in which to speak about stories. I then outlined the criteria suggested by Michael Goldberg for a “justifiable narrative theology.” However, within this limit, a theology of story is possible for religious liberals. By fulfilling the requirements outlined above, I believe that a story approach which encompasses some of the positive features of a theology of story can be put to use in Unitarian Universalism.

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