

ENG 390: Sacred Texts as Literature

North Central College – Spring 2015

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Office: 210 Kiekhof Hall (630-637-5280)

Hours: Tu 11-12, 4-5;

Wd 11-2; Th 11-12

TEXTS:

Al-Qur'an. Ahmed Ali (trans.)

Bhagavad Gita. Barbara Stoler Miller (trans.)

Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzu). Ursula LeGuin (trans.)

Dhammapada. Ananda Maitreya (trans.)

The World's Wisdom. Phillip Novak (ed.)

Handouts of key excerpts from works by Derrida, Patanjali, and others, plus the film listed for 5/28/15.

Bible – Students should also have a Bible, which I have *not* ordered for the bookstore, presuming that many of you will have one already. My favorite translation is Today's New International Version, and I also like the paraphrase version called The Message. Any translation will do, although the King James has had the most influence on English language and literature. Note also that because of the special place the Bible holds in the tradition of the English language and in Christianity, it is the *only* book *not* italicized as other book titles are. It is simply: Bible.

COURSE GOALS:

If ever there was an impossible course, this is it. First, this is a hybrid course, an ACR (All College Requirement) course, helping students fulfill their intercultural seminar requirement. Thus, though it is a 300-level literature course, it is open to *all* upper-division students regardless of major, and thus must be pitched more towards a generalist rather than specialist audience. More important, our goal is to touch on major texts from six major religions—Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism—reading portions of them as if they were forms of literature, which they are and are *not* at the same time. Part of our task, then, will be to employ various methods of literary criticism on our texts. See the “Outline of Literary Methods” included later in the syllabus. I generally divide literary methods into two types, Intrinsic and Extrinsic, the first focusing mostly inward on the text itself, the second mostly outward on how history, gender, politics, and the like relate to the text. The line between intrinsic and extrinsic methods is blurry, often more a convenience than anything else. Obviously, for this course, religious concerns will be unavoidable and will impact close reading immensely. Nonetheless, a literary approach is different in important ways from an approach one would take in, say, an Old Testament course in the religious studies department, or a history or sociology or anthropology of religion course you might take. We will say more about such differences as the class proceeds. By the end of the term we hope you have a renewed appreciation of both how to read a text (any text), and how our specific texts relate to great religious traditions—their own as well as others. All this in ten weeks. And, finally, all this with texts *not* in their original languages—*all* translations. More on this later as well.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE:

Mar	31	Introduction. "Literary readings" of Genesis: 1-2; I Kings: 18-19.
Apr	2	Voice and text in Islam. Novak: 281-332; <i>Al-Qur'an</i> : Suras 1, 82, 91, 97, 99, 101
	7	Islam, Jihad, and The Book <i>Al-Qur'an</i> : Suras 2, 5, 8, 9, 22, 25; 4, 12, 14, 19, 21
	9	No class
	14	Bible—Phases of Revelation. Novak: 175-226; <i>Al-Qur'an</i> : Sura 14
	16	Phase I—Creation: Genesis. <i>Tao Te Ching</i> : 14. Phase II—Revolution: Exodus
	21	Phase III—Wisdom: Proverbs (selected), Ecclesiastes, Psalms (selected), Job
	23	Phase IV—Prophecy: Isaiah (selected), Hosea. Phase V—Gospel: Novak: 227-279
	28	Gospel (contd.): Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, I John
	30	Phase VI—Apocalypse. Bible: Revelation. The Bible as Comic Form.
May	5	Hinduism: Illusion-Reality-Fate. Novak: 1-48. Jihad-Revolution-War. <i>Bhagavad-Gita</i> : Teachings 1-5
	7	Discipline and Totality. <i>Bhagavad-Gita</i> : Teachings 6-11
	12	No class.
	14	Devotion. <i>Bhagavad-Gita</i> : Teachings 12-17 and Conclusion
	19	Tai-chi and the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali. Suffering. Novak: 49-109
	21	Presence & Absence. Derrida: "Structure, Sign, and Play..."
	26	Mindfulness. <i>Dhammapada</i> : 1-11. Discipline/Happiness. <i>Dhammapada</i> : 12-26
	28	"Shut." Excerpts from the film <i>Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring</i>
June	2	The Way. Novak: 145-174; <i>Tao Te Ching</i> : 2-40
	4	The Power of Not-Naming. <i>Tao Te Ching</i> : 38-81

GRADES WILL BE BASED ON...

1) Class participation. Please come to class each day having read the assignment **carefully**. Then be willing to answer questions, *and to ask them*, and to share your insights and comments. Obviously, absences will hurt your participation grade. (100 pts.)

2) Completion of the following class projects:

A) "Translation" project. Pick a passage from any of our sacred texts and do an original "translation" of it—that is, a version of it from a particular angle that is important to you personally or academically, or both. This "translation" must be prefaced by a 4-6 page essay that: 1) details your reasons (personal, scholarly, or both) for choosing the passage you did; 2) briefly describes and justifies the literary and scholarly sources you consulted; 3) explains the "translation" choices you made, focusing on the *language* of the original vs. your own language

choices. From the beginning of class you can easily see differences in translation by referring to the Novak book. Compare, for example, the first “poem” of the *Tao* he uses to Ursula LeGuin’s translation of the same. Much more in class. (100 pts.) DUE April 23rd

B) Literary Analysis project. Pick any passage from any of our sacred texts we have and write a *literary* analysis (4-6 pages) using any combination of methods in the “Outline of Literary Methods” included just below. Your passage will most likely come from the Bible or Qur’an, but not necessarily. (100 pts.) DUE May 14th

C) “Issues” project. Pick an issue of your choosing closely related to any of the sacred texts we are studying this term. Possibilities are nearly endless. In the past students have focused on issues of feminism, doing readings of certain Bible passages, or speculating on how Buddhism can help create a new feminist rhetoric. Students have focused on “religious people,” like Mary Magdalene, Mother Teresa, or Gandhi. They have explored the “truth” behind pop culture phenomena related to religion, such as the novel and movie *The Da Vinci Code*. They have tackled tough social and political issues related to the Bible, *Al-Qur’an*, or *Bhagavad Gita*, or explored issues of language brought up by Zen koans. You must clear your topic with me by the end of week two. The grading for this project will come in two parts:

1) A 1-2 page précis of your topic, including your thesis and two major scholarly sources you will be using. (25 pts.) DUE.

2) The finished paper itself. (100 pts.) DUE at the beginning of our Final time.

Your paper should be 6-8 pages long, and may be written in the form of a traditional research paper, **OR** a hybrid paper combining story and/or personal narrative with your research. More on this latter form in class. In any case, the paper must include a *minimum* of five solid sources—no fluff.

D) “Summary” paper. By the beginning of week ten, please post to our Blackboard page, a short paper consisting of an abstract of your issues paper, 2-3 of your major sources, and a revision of your translation. Besides giving you a chance to revise your “translation,” this short paper will also serve to expand the knowledge base of the entire class. The paper should begin with a statement of your “problem.” (25 pts.)

E) Quizzes and Short Papers or Projects as given. These will be given periodically throughout the term, mainly to make sure you understand key concepts and to encourage participation and careful reading of the assignments. (Usually 10 pts. each)

Any work produced for this course may be used for assessment purposes. If so, it will be used anonymously and will not affect your course grade in any way. If you do not wish to have your work so used, you must state so in a letter to me by the end of the course’s second week.

Papers will be graded according to the following:

- How well they fulfill assignment instructions
- Being on time. Five points (5) deducted for each *day* (not class) late.
- How well written they are in terms of:
 - ▷ Presenting a clear, well-supported thesis
 - ▷ Being clearly and purposefully organized, both overall and by paragraphs

- ▷ Writing with “style”—using “lean,” flexible, varied, even “elegant” sentences
- ▷ Understanding connections between audience, style, and rhetoric
- ▷ Handling grammar, spelling, and MLA citation forms well.

Please proofread carefully. Papers should be free of basic errors in spelling, grammar, or syntax. Any excess of such errors will lower grades dramatically. The three most elementary *grammar* errors are: Comma splices (cs), Run-On sentences (ros), and sentence Fragments (frag), or incomplete sentences. The major syntactical error is Dangling, or misplaced, modifiers (d-mod).

Write “lean,” not wordy prose. Eliminating the following word types *as much as possible* will help: **prepositions** (in, of, from, to...), **“to be” verbs** (is, was, were...), **relative pronouns** (that, which, who...).

Academic Honesty and Documentation

Plagiarism carries serious consequences, including possible dismissal from the college. Please refer to the *NCC Guide to Writing*, now on-line and easily accessible from the library’s web page. You must cite sources for ideas, summaries, uncommon facts or statistics. Exact wording needs to be placed within quotations (or, for long quotes, set aside with special indentation) **and cited**.

Addenda to the syllabus

- 1) An Outline of Literary Methods
- 2) Sample of the Project / “Translation” SUMMARY PAPER.
An exemplary summary paper. Notice Mr. Gunnick’s “translation.” Also note how his “translation” exhibits some of the interests he outlines in the summary of his issues project.
- 3) Paul Rudnick’s “Intelligent Design,” from the infamous “Shouts and Murmurs” feature of *The New Yorker* magazine. Consider this an example of a “translation,” though admittedly an over-the-top sample! Yours will probably be more sober—though not necessarily. In class you will be given other examples of “translation,” including several of the Lord’s Prayer.
- 4) Cartoons. Look them over. Laugh. And think. We’ll discuss a few in class.
- 5) Karen Armstrong’s “Every Eye Beholds You” essay.

Some of the following addenda pieces take forceful—maybe close to blasphemous—pokes at religion. Still, though this course’s academic focus is literary, it also takes sacred texts very seriously when they urge us to make commitments to follow a spiritual path faithfully, or to search for one, also faithfully. It encourages a respect, even love, for all religious texts, but this does not imply an “all-religions-are-the-same” approach. It, like the religious texts at its core, encourages you to take a stand for your particular faith. For many personal and historical reasons, for instance, I am a Christian. I attend Friendship United Methodist Church in Bolingbrook, which has one of the most multicultural congregations in America. I have been chair of the church council and still head several programs. Though I am certainly an imperfect Christian, I approach this faith seriously and would encourage anyone to do the same. What I am struggling to say near the end of this syllabus is more important than mere academics. Commit to a faith, while making profound respect for all religions a part of that commitment.

1) An Outline of Literary Methods (Adapted in part from Steven Lynn's *Text and Contexts*)

A. "INTRINSIC" methods of "Reading" a "Text"

1. New Criticism

☐ Major assumptions:

- a. The work itself should be the focus, not author's intention or audience's response.
- b. Purpose is to explain works organic unity.
- c. Great works are complex, having tension, ambiguity, irony, levels of meaning.

☐ Major techniques/questions:

- a. Read closely, assuming everything has been carefully calculated. What formal elements does this work have (structure, imagery, diction)?
- b. Find oppositions, tensions, ambiguities, ironies. How can these formal elements be arranged in opposing pairs or groups?
- c. Indicate how all these are *unified* by an idea or system of symbols. What unifying idea holds these opposing elements together?

2. Reader Response

☐ Major assumptions:

- a. The reader's response is what counts.
- b. Readers actively create meaning guided by goals and rules personal and communal.
- c. Responding to a text is a process, and describing that process is valuable because different responses may enrich one another.

☐ Major questions/techniques:

- a. Move through the text carefully, in slow motion, describing the expectations and the actual experiences of an "ideal" reader. What is your response to the text?
- b. Move through the text slowly, describing *your* response. If the text were changed in some specific way, how would that change your response?
- c. Focus on how particular details shape readers' expectations and responses. To what extent is your response personal and idiosyncratic vs. shaped by shared norms?

3. Deconstruction

☐ Major assumptions:

- a. Meaning is made by binary oppositions, and in every binary relationship one item is favored or privileged.
- b. This favoring can be reversed and questioned through imaginative and playful reading.
- c. Such reversals undermine dogmatic thinking, opening up new ideas and suggesting that meaning is ultimately unstable and open-ended.

☐ Major questions/techniques:

- a. Identify the oppositions and determine which ones are favored. What does the text most obviously seem to say?
- b. Identify what seems central to the text and what seems marginal or excluded. Based on this, how can the text be turned against itself, even saying the opposite of what it seems to want to say?
- c. Reverse the text's hierarchy, arguing that what appears marginal is actually central. How can something apparently marginal be brought to the center of attention?

B. "EXTRINSIC" methods of "Reading" a "Text" (a small sample)

1. Historical, Post-Colonial, and Cultural Studies

☐ Major assumptions:

- a. It matters when, where, and by whom something was written.

b. Important considerations include facts about the author's life and status, the larger history around the author and the work, and the intellectual paradigms available to the author and readers.

c. Although we must be careful to distinguish literature and "real life," the two and illuminate each other powerfully.

❑ Major questions/techniques:

a. Research the author's life and relate that information, carefully, to the work. Are there common issues between the work and the author's life?

b. Research the author's time (political, economic, intellectual history, etc.) and relate these, carefully, to the work. How can these, including literary context, be connected to the work?

c. Research how people reasoned during the author's lifetime. What were the patterns and limits to how they made sense of things? Is the author part of a dominant, colonial, or post-colonial culture, and how does that status affect the work?

2. Psychological Criticism

❑ Major assumptions:

a. Creative writing—like dreaming—represents the disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish or fear.

b. Though everyone's formative history differs in particulars, there are basic patterns of development for most people. These patterns and particulars have lasting effects.

c. In reading literature we can make educated guesses about what has been repressed and transformed.

❑ Major questions/techniques:

a. Apply a developmental concept to the work (various complexes (Oedipal, for example), anxieties, confusions). What appears to be motivating the author, character, or even reader?

b. Relate the work to psychologically significant events in the author's life. What other motivations, repressed or disguised, might be at work?

c. Consider how repressed material may be expressed in the work's pattern of imagery or symbols. What developmental concepts might help explain this behavior or patterning?

3. Feminist Criticism, Post-Feminism, Queer Theory

❑ Major assumptions:

a. Your interpretation is influenced by your own status, including gender, class, race, sexual orientation, religion, and much more.

b. In the production and reception of literature, all people have not had equal access to writing, publishing, and reading. People of color, women, working-class people, etc., have often been excluded.

c. Literature can influence social change.

❑ Major questions/techniques:

a. Identify qualities of gender, class, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc., and say how these are used to portray members of some group. How does the work advance or question a particular political agenda?

b. Consider whether the text promotes or undermines stereotypes? How are individuals in this work portrayed as a part of a group or class?

c. Imagine how the text might be read—or neglected—by a certain type of reader. How would readers of different political stances read this work differently?

SAMPLE OF PROJECT/TRANSLATION SUMMARY DUE LAST DAY OF CLASS

Breaking the Mind of Logic
(Brady Gunnink)

There is no canonical text of Zen kōans, because Zen Buddhism teaches against relying on scripture. I spent time on some commonly used kōans which I took from Hoffmann's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Smith's *The World's Wisdom*, but the main focus of this paper was on kōans in general. I argue that Zen kōans use language to create a cognitive dissonance which puts the reader in a state of mind beyond language and conceptual duality. In essence, kōans are filled with paradoxes and logical contradictions. The reader who attempts to understand them logically will fail. What the Buddha discovered about himself and men in general was that they suffered, because they were by nature limited by their perspective and selfish for what they thought they did or did not have. Man makes a distinction between himself and the rest of the world, and language is both a function and cause of this understanding. Buddhists know academically that this distinction between the self and reality is artificial and arbitrary, but it is only through meditation that they can truly dissolve those boundaries and experience a state of enlightenment in which the ego ceases to function. Zen Buddhists realize that since language creates the conceptual divisions which keep humans from enlightenment, humans must move beyond language to be enlightened. However, they also understand that this is not an easy leap to make, nor is it something a student can be told and passively accept. Thus, they developed kōans, which use language to bring the student to his or her own cognitive realization regarding the inadequacies of dualism. Not only do these "psycho-linguistic puzzles" lead to "a dynamic and dramatic insight based on the unity of self and reality, humans and nature, subject and object," (Heine 360) but they also embody other key tenets of Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhists have known for centuries with what today's Deconstructionists are still figuring out today: language is limiting, but it is only by using it that we can move beyond it.

Heine, Steven. "Does the Koan Have Buddha-Nature: The Zen Koan as Religious Symbol." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 58 (1990): 357-387.

Hoffmann, Yoel, trans. The Sound of the One Hand. New York: Basic Books, 1975.

Hofstadter, Douglas. Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid. New York: Basic Books, 1999. 246-272.

Loy, David R. The Deconstruction of Buddhism. Suny P, 1992. 27 Feb. 2006
<<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ENG/loy10.htm>>.

The Tao that can be told
is not the complete Tao.
The reality that can be defined
is not complete reality.

That which is completely infinite is indefinable.
Expression is the birthplace
of all finite things.

Those who have open minds recognize these gaps.
Those with an agenda imagine they see wholeness.

Yet these gaps and the words which surround them
spring from the same source:
unspeakable reality,
the hidden treasure of existence.

The “translation” project requires a prefacing essay detailing

- Your reasons for choosing the passage you chose (these can be personal or scholarly reasons—**or both**);
- A brief description of—*and justification for*—the sources, both literary and scholarly, you consulted to make your “translation;”
- An explanation of why you made the “translation” choices you made based on your personal situation and/or the literary and scholarly sources you consulted.

For your summary, you need include **only** your “translation.”

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

BY PAUL RUDNICK

Day No. 1:

And the Lord God said, "Let there be light," and lo, there was light. But then the Lord God said, "Wait, what if I make it a sort of rosy, sunset-at-the-beach, filtered half-light, so that everything else I design will look younger?"

"I'm loving that," said Buddha. "It's new."

"You should design a restaurant," added Allah.

Day No. 2:

"Today," the Lord God said, "let's do land." And lo, there was land.

"Well, it's really not just land," noted Vishnu. "You've got mountains and valleys and—is that lava?"

"It's not a single statement," said the Lord God. "I want it to say, 'Yes, this is land, but it's not afraid to ooze.'"

"It's really a backdrop, a sort of blank canvas," put in Apollo. "It's, like, minimalism, only with scale."

"But—brown?" Buddha asked.

"Brown with infinite variations," said the Lord God. "Taupe, ochre, burnt umber—they're called earth tones."

"I wasn't criticizing," said Buddha. "I was just noticing."

Day No. 3:

"Just to make everyone happy," said the Lord God, "today I'm thinking oceans, for contrast."

"It's wet, it's deep, yet it's frothy; it's design without dogma," said Buddha, approvingly.

"Now, *there's* movement," agreed Allah. "It's not just 'Hi, I'm a planet—no splashing.'"

"But are those ice caps?" inquired Thor. "Is this a coherent vision, or a highball?"

"I can do ice caps if I want to," sniffed the Lord God.

"It's about a mood," said the Angel Moroni, supportively.

"Thank you," said the Lord God.

Day No. 4:

"One word," said the Lord God. "Landscaping. But I want it to look natural, as if it all somehow just happened."

"Do rain forests," suggested a primitive tribal god, who was known only as a clicking noise.

"Rain forests here," decreed the Lord God. "And deserts there. For a spa feeling."

"Which is fresh, but let's give it glow," said Buddha. "Polished stones and bamboo, with a soothing trickle of something."

"I know where you're going," said the Lord God. "But why am I seeing scented candles and a signature body wash?"

"Shut up," said Buddha.

"You shut up," said the Lord God.

"It's all about the mix," Allah declared in a calming voice. "Now let's look at some swatches."

Day No. 5:

"I'd like to design some creatures of the sea," the Lord God said. "Sleek but not slick."

"Yes, yes, and more yes—it's a total gills moment," said Apollo. "But what if you added wings?"

"Fussy," whispered Buddha to Zeus. "Why not epaulets and a sash?"

"Legs," said Allah. "Now let's do legs."

"Are we already doing dining-room tables?" asked the Lord God, confused.

"No, design some *creatures* with legs," said Allah. So the Lord God, nodding, designed an ostrich.

"First draft," everyone agreed, and so the Lord God designed an alligator.

"There's gonna be a waiting list," Zeus murmured appreciatively.

"Now do puppies!" pleaded Vishnu. "And kitties!"

"Ooooo!" all the gods cooed. Then, feeling a bit embarrassed, Zeus ventured, "Design something more practical, like a horse or a mule."

"What about a koala?" asked the Lord God.

"Much better," Zeus declared, cuddling the furry little animal. "I'm going to call him Buttons."

Day No. 6:

"Today I'm really going out there," said the Lord God. "And I know it won't be popular at first, and you're all gonna be saying, 'Earth to Lord God,' but in a few million years it's going to be timeless. I'm going to design a man."

And everyone looked upon the man that the Lord God designed.

"It has your eyes," Zeus told the Lord God.

"Does it stack?" inquired Allah.

"It has a naïve, folk-artsy, I-made-it-myself vibe," said Buddha. The Inca sun god, however, only scoffed. "Been there. Evolution," he said. "It's called a shaved monkey."

"I like it," protested Buddha. "But it can't work a strapless dress." Everyone agreed on this point, so the Lord God announced, "Well, what if I give it nice round breasts and lose the penis?"

"Yes," the gods said immediately.

"Now it's intelligent," said Aphrodite.

"But what if I made it blond?" giggled the Lord God.

"And what if I made you a booming offscreen voice in a lot of bad movies?" asked Aphrodite.

Day No. 7:

"You know, I'm really feeling good about this whole intelligent-design deal," said the Lord God. "But do you think that I could redo it, keeping the quality but making it at a price point we could all live with?"

"I'm not sure," said Buddha. "You mean, what if you designed a really basic, no-frills planet? Like, do the man and the woman really need all those toes?"

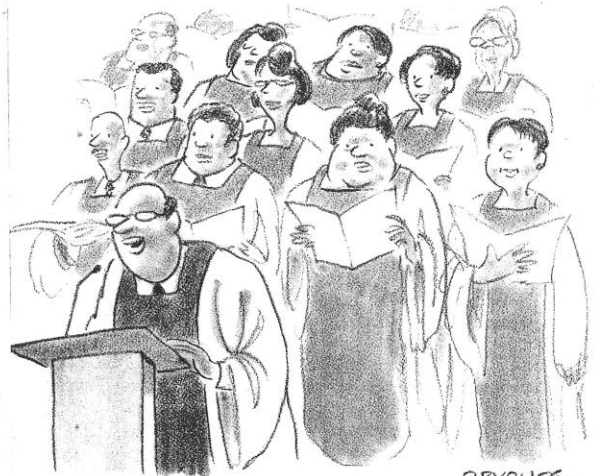
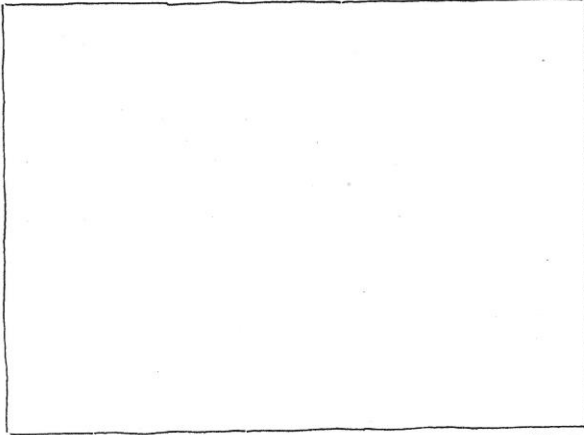
"Hello!" said the Lord God. "Clean lines, no moving parts, functional but fun. Three bright, happy, wash 'n' go colors."

"Swedish meets Japanese, with maybe a Platinum Collector's Edition for the geeks," Buddha decided.

"Done," said the Lord God. "Now let's start thinking about Pluto. What if everything on Pluto was brushed aluminum?"

"You mean, let's do Neptune again?" said Buddha. ♦

PLEASE ENJOY THIS CULTURALLY, ETHNICALLY, RELIGIOUSLY,
AND POLITICALLY CORRECT CARTOON RESPONSIBLY. THANK YOU.



R. BYRNES.

"This is an old, upper-middle-class white spiritual."

IN THE GURU DISTRICT



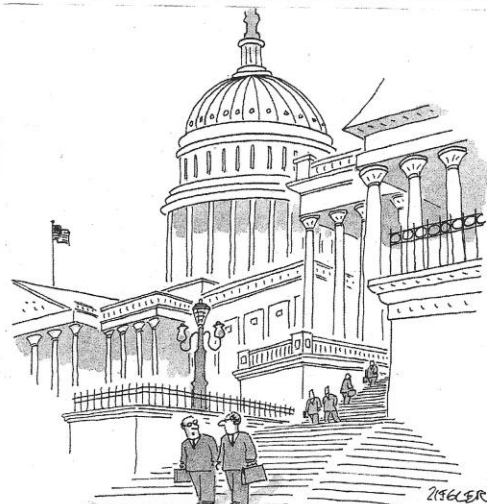
R. CHAS



D. H.



O. BERONTHE



ZIEGLER

"Of course, it would be a different story entirely if
we could extract crude oil from stem cells."

THE DOG-EARED PAGE

excerpted from

Every Eye Beholds You



KAREN ARMSTRONG

Karen Armstrong is a prominent scholar of world religions. A former Catholic nun, she has authored numerous works on comparative religion, emphasizing the importance different faiths place on the virtue of compassion. The following excerpt is from her introduction to Every Eye Beholds You, edited by Thomas J. Craughwell, an anthology of prayers culled from the world's religions.

We tend to equate faith with believing certain things about God or the sacred. A religious person is often called a "believer" and seen as one who has adopted the correct ideas about the divine. Belief is thus seen as the first and essential step of the spiritual journey. Before we embark on a religious life, which must make considerable demands on our moral, social, professional, and personal affairs, we think that we must first satisfy ourselves intellectually that there is a God or that the truths of our particular tradition — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or whatever — are valid. It seems pointless to make a commitment unless we are convinced about the essentials. In our modern, scientific world, this makes good, rational sense: first you establish a principle, and then you apply it.

But the history of religion makes it clear that this is not how it works. To expect to have faith before embarking on the disciplines of the spiritual life is like putting the cart before the horse. In all the great traditions, prophets, sages, and mystics spend very little time telling their disciples what they ought to *believe*. Indeed, it is only since the Enlightenment

that faith has been defined as intellectual submission to a creed. Hitherto, faith had been seen as a virtue rather than a prerequisite. It meant trust, and was used in rather the same way as when we say that we have faith *in* a person or an ideal. Faith was thus a carefully cultivated conviction that, despite all the tragic and dispiriting evidence to the contrary, our lives did have some ultimate meaning and value. You could not possibly arrive at faith in this sense before you had lived a religious life. Faith was thus the fruit of spirituality, not something that you had to have at the start of your quest.

All the great teachers of spirituality in all the major traditions have, therefore, insisted that before you can have faith, you must live in a certain way. You must lead a compassionate life, transcending the demands of the clamorous ego and recognizing the sacred in others; you must perform rituals (often enshrined in religious law) that make even the most mundane detail of our lives an encounter with the ultimate; all traditions insist that you must also pray. Prayer is thus not born of belief and intellectual conviction; it is a practice that creates faith.

Hindus, Buddhists, Native Americans, African tribespeople, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all have very different *beliefs*, yet when they address the sacred, they do so in strikingly similar ways. It is surprising that prayer is such a universal practice, since it is fraught with problems. Everybody insists that the ultimate and the transcendent — called variously God, Nirvana, Brahman, or the sacred — cannot be defined in words or concepts, and yet men and women habitually attempt to speak to the divine. Why do they do this, and what are the implications of this verbal attempt to

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The selections on the Dog-Eared Page come from works that have deepened and broadened our understanding of the human

condition. Decades, or even centuries, may have passed since these words first appeared in print, but for us they're still beacons.

If you have a suggestion for the Dog-Eared Page, please send it to The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. We're sorry, but we're unable to respond personally to your suggestions.

bridge the yawning gulf that separates us from the sacred? Many Hindus, for example, see Brahman as strictly impersonal: It cannot, therefore, be addressed as "Thou"; it cannot speak to human beings nor relate to them in a personal way; it cannot "love" or get "angry." But at the same time, Brahman sustains and pervades *us*. It is so bound up with our very existence that it is not really appropriate to speak *to* it or think *about* it, as though it were a separate entity. And yet Hindus pray like the rest of us. They thank, they beseech, they crave forgiveness.

Prayer, one might think, should be easier for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, since their God is experienced as a personal being. As the Bible and the Koran show, he can get angry and feel love for us; he can speak to us and encounter us. Even so, there are difficulties. Does God really need to be told by us that he created the world and redeemed us and that we are miserable sinners? Surely he knows all this already. Does he demand that we thank him, praise him, and plead for mercy? There is something slightly repellent in this notion, as it suggests a despotic deity who demands endless sycophantic obeisance from his worshipers. And what does it mean to refer, as I have just done, to God as "he"? Theologians constantly remind us that God goes beyond all human categories, including that of gender. Yet it is so difficult to avoid gender words — to say nothing of the limiting and even abhorrent ways in which such qualities as anger, love, and the like suggest a God who is all too human. All talk of and to God stumbles under great difficulties. Is there not a danger that our prayers will anthropomorphize God, making "him" loom in our imaginations as a being like ourselves only writ large, with feelings, intentions, and inadequacies similar to our own? If we are not careful, our prayers can cut God down to size and help us to create a deity in our own images and likenesses. Such a God can only be an idol and hence offensive to the true spirit of monotheism.

When men and women pray, they are in some profound sense talking to themselves. This does not mean that they are not also addressing the ultimate, since all the world's faiths do not see the sacred as simply Something "out there" but as a reality that is also encountered in the depths of our own beings. But it is also true that people who pray are addressing deep personal needs and fears. We live in a frightening world and are the prey of mortality, injustice, cruelty, disaster, darkness, and an evil that can seem palpable and overwhelming. Unlike other animals, we humans fall very easily into despair. We rarely allow ourselves to voice these deep fears and anxieties. We are all struggling to survive. We cannot afford to admit our weakness and terror too freely. We are fearful of burdening others; we do not want to appear weak or to open ourselves to exploitation in the battle that is life. We protect ourselves in all kinds of ways, especially by means of words. We are cautious and defensive and use language to bolster our sense of self

for our own sakes as well as to impress others. We are rarely willing to admit our shortcomings and are quick to respond to a slight with a verbal counteroffensive. We make jokes to ward off our sense of life's tragedy or to make others (whom we fear or envy) objects of ridicule. We have fits of meanness in which we feel impaired by others' success. We exalt our own achievements, scuttle over our humiliations, shield ourselves from hurt, and make derogatory remarks about those who threaten our sense of security in ways that we do not always understand. We thus turn our words into weapons that attack as well as defend. All such activity embeds us in the prison of our own frightened egos.

Prayer helps us to liberate ourselves and to use language in an entirely different way. In prayer, we learn to acknowledge our vulnerability, our frailty, our failures, and our sins. By putting our unutterable weaknesses into words, we make them more real to ourselves but also make them more manageable. When we admit that we need forgiveness, we realize in a new way that this will be impossible unless we also forgive. We give voice to our neediness, our longing, our terror. This daily discipline helps us to break through the defensive carapaces that we all form around ourselves, thus allowing the Benevolence and Rightness for which we long to penetrate the prisons of our cautionary being.

But prayer is not only an expression of fragility. Human beings have always experienced the world with awe and wonder. Despite the terrors and sorrows of the cosmos, its grandeur and beauty fill us with delight. It seems that the more we learn about the world, the more this sense of wonder increases. We used to think that science would eliminate this and make the mystery of the universe plain. But this has not happened. Sometimes cosmologists and physicists today appear to be creating a new type of religious discourse, making us confront the dark world of uncreated reality as the mystics did and forcing us to see that the nature of existence exceeds the narrow compass of our minds. Thus science, which can impart a false sense of pride and self-sufficiency, can also impart a humbling experience of our ignorance, smallness, and limitations. It can lead us to that attitude of silent awe of which the great contemplatives speak.

Yet the sheer busyness of our lives often leaves little time for contemplation. The world can become familiar to us. Prayers of praise and thanksgiving help to correct this. When they list the wonders of creation, these prayers are not groveling attempts to flatter the Creator but serve to remind us of the marvels that exist all around us. They thus help us to see what is really there: a mystery that cannot be simplistically defined but that becomes apparent when we learn how to strip away the veil of our animality that obscures it. Such prayers help to hold us in the attitude of wonder that is characteristic of the best religion.