

A recycled introduction

(plundering Frank Baum's 1900 introduction to 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz')

Folklore, legends, myths and fairy tales have expressed our spiritual life and struggle through the ages, for every healthy person of faith has a wholesome and instinctive love for stories fantastic, marvellous yet defiantly rooted somehow in real experience.

The blunt angelic messengers and flawed heroes of scripture, meeting God under historic and significant trees, whilst Creation looked on and held them to account, have built more spiritual resilience in religious hearts than all the tomes of academic theology.

Yet the poetic and folkloristic modes of scripture, having served for generations, may now be classed as merely "historical documents" prohibited from speaking with their own voice, especially to new contexts, and heaven forbid we should accept anything outside our own narrow experience as authoritative, or as a record of lived experience, rather than wanton fantasy, manipulated by unreasonably biased scribes according to their agenda. We don't have an agenda, do we? Like we're not racist, nor crafty incrementalist deniers of climate crisis? No, never, perish the thought!

Though, of course, even translators of the greatest integrity only interpret into the idiom they believe they ought to. For some generations, this has meant the loss of the personality and indeed, the witness of Creation/the Earth; especially via the particularly powerful English-language othering tools of 'it-ism' (objectification) and '*Kleinschreibung*' (begrudging entities like Earth, Sky, Creation the respect that goes with a capital letter).

Ah, yes, Anglophone theological types do love to plunder German for jargon. Maybe I'll throw in one more from the European

Churches Environmental Conference: **“heiteres Scheitern”** - happy failure: which comes about when you’ve done your best, recognising that you’re not in charge, and find delight in the gifts that your failure throws up. Which reminds me of the awful mess I got into in training when I began to play with ‘Creation Spirituality’. Not many colleges allow for this, though.

May I fervently wish you all Heiteres Scheitern!

Bizarrely, the spectre has repeatedly sneaked abroad that there might be a possibility of receiving the Word of God in scripture plain and unembellished. Or even distilling the Jesus of Faith to an objectively knowable historical object. Of course, such arrogance early on jettisons baby Jesus with the bathwater. It’s the most depressing manifestation of the wonder of recycling!

And yet in times of piled-up global crises, this narrow and intolerant set of rules, excluding the unknown and inconceivable, let alone the saving connections which come to mind well in advance of the ability to connect them via leak-tight rational pathways, especially is hardly equal to the task.

Even then, with a renewed focus on the love of God comes a reluctance to deal with the ‘wrath’ expressed in cause and effect; that voice of Satan that Jesus resisted on the Temple pinnacle. Surely a good and loving God would not let my hand burn if I held it in the flame, or the stability of the Holocene come to an end if I ‘innocently’ -but to an apocalyptic scale - released carbon stored for millions of years underground into our current atmosphere?

A church leader of academic standing and goodwill, addressing a conference of pastors tried hard to illuminate the challenge of reality by resort to scripture, but fell at the last fence when faced with the determined presence in scripture, not only of warning, but also of ultimatum. God wouldn’t possibly

In a number of conversations with those who prepare pastors for congregations, I’ve noted reluctance to deal with the embarrassingly apocalyptic outbursts of that sensible man Jesus, which in the meantime are beginning to take on the character of news reports, or those from the terribly reticent and respectable proclamations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

If parts of the Bible are too wild or too scary, then maybe we need to lean anew to drive such vehicles in a scary and very wild age indeed. Not in the 'paint-by-numbers' mode of fundamentalism, but as we learn to dance; employing and valuing the full range of senses, feelings, instincts, intuitions and creativity, all the time 'testing the spirits'. A reckless responsibility; a responsible recklessness. Of course, from time to time, you'll fall flat on your face.

'Environmental chaplaincy' was once described as 'reading the Bible with green specs'. But unlike the horribly negative project of 'demythologisation', which pursued an imagined truth by stealing from congregations the resources they need to encounter the challenges of reality, it turns out not to need to add anything, but rather to dig in the field for the pearls of great price. Take off the 'green specs' and the emerald city of Earth's biosphere, and indeed of scripture, traditionally from the same publisher, (if not author) outdoes any fantasy.

Is a reasonable scepticism of the supposed hubris of any code of morality, especially when derived from poetic, rather than prescriptive sources, and a fear of 'ultimatum' keeping us from recycling the message of the preacher who, when they suggested Scriptures might indeed have a bearing on everyday life, had to find a way to evade their congregation throwing the over a cliff. In writing 'the wonderful wizard of Oz' Frank Baum succeeded in failing to eliminate the terror of folk tale, the "horrible and blood-curdling incidents" of which his generation and Disney in particular purged 'fairy tales', sowing the satanic seed in our minds that both formal and folk poetry must be something you grow out of, rather than into, as we become the storytellers and grandmothers of our age.

The tragedy of the pressure on indigenous cultures was summed up by a young Inuit woman at COP, existentially devastated by the prospect of the loss of "the grandmothers of tomorrow". But if you're a preacher, that is who you need to be.

Preaching today, and tomorrow, the cliff is very real, and the congregation - and human cultures are sleepwalking towards it, none faster, nor with more devastating effect for the surrounding

biosphere (like Lazarus on the Rich Man's doorstep) than our own dearly beloved global North.

Wonderful Wizard of Oz" was written solely to please children at the turn of a century full of technological progress and utterly obscene war, debauchery and greed, in which the Earth and their biodiversity were always the first, and mostly unacknowledged casualty, closely followed, of course, by poor or marginalised humanity. The Twentieth Century was one in which 'man' tried to forego even the apprenticeship and install himself immediately as the Sorcerer. But that's another fairy tale, with far more subtlety than a mere moral teaching resource. Baum hoped that **"wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out."** We need to acknowledge the heartaches and nightmares with the help of the wonderment and joy, and not get bogged down in lament or despair. Our faith can help, if we let it. But only if we realise all the possibilities that open up with that phrase, not from the book, but from the film, that 'We're not in Kansas anymore'. Not in the place where everything including the people, and likely their scriptures are greyer and greyer than grey. Yet unlike Dorothy, even if we should come across a pair of 'silver shoes' Kansas, Eden, and especially 'The New Normal' are long gone.

That's the other abuse of myth, legend and recycling: to return to where we started, to sing hymns about 'restoration'. If the Bible is any guide at all, then God, Creator and sustainer knows nothing of 'restoration' but plenty about re-using, recycling, repurposing, recycling, which is how Creation goes on their path, not 'endlessly', but 'from age to age'; not simply 'eternally' but on our journey through the 'ages of ages'.

