

**APPROACHING RELIGIOUS TEXTS WITH “SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS” READERS  
THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR CORES  
SPONSORED BY  
RHODES COLLEGE  
AND  
THE ASSOCIATION OF CORE TEXTS AND COURSES  
25-27 SEPTEMBER 2014  
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE  
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When teaching classical Greek drama I have often pointed out to students that the context in which the dramas were performed included in one moment activities that, in their existence, are segmented into strictly defined categories. They nod in recognition of the cognitive dissonance they experience when entering a darkened space where individual identity is obscured to view intensely graphic images of violence or sexuality on Saturday, then entering brightly lighted space, sometimes completely devoid of visual images, to hear and consider an ethereal verbal discourse on transcendent reality and exempla of right action and order on Sunday morning, then interacting with fellow community members in communal gathering spaces, classrooms, offices, clubs, hotel conference rooms, on weekdays. Aeschylus' para-liturgical courtroom drama, *Eumenides*, on the other hand, was performed during the Great Dionysia, a city-wide wine festival and included the use of ritual intoxicants, told of violent, sometimes catastrophic, incursions of the transcendent into immanent reality, presented some positive but mainly negative exempla of ethical human behavior within the political constructs of *oikos* and *agora*, and concluded with the community departing the theater *en masse* in song, dance, and procession. For someone who grew up in New Orleans, as I did, the conclusion of the *Oresteia* resembles nothing so much as a Mardi Gras Parade.

Students for whom the silo-structured life is a commonplace now find education, especially higher education, similarly segmented. An increased emphasis on quantifying Student Learning Outcomes and a, not unjustified, increased concern for Return On Investment, is reshaping education by questioning its function. There is no need to invoke C.P. Snow or William James today; of more interest to our discussions is the effect of this atomization on students and on studies. On-line, competency-based higher education, in which students need never meet either a professor or a classmate, is a small but growing phenomenon; indeed the notion of class or classmate is obviated in this model. Students, content consumers, enter a *quid pro quo* transactional contract with content providers in a straight exchange of currency for information. The content consumer's role, besides paying, consists solely in acts of cognition and demonstrations of acquisition of information. Students keep their distance, physical and psychic, from professors as well as other students. Investment of personal capital in such interactions is neither expected nor desired. This model is preferable, to some minds, to that in which learning occurs in a communal context, a classroom, for example. While there may be some thrift in a professor delivering the same content to many students simultaneously, some of those students resent the actions other students, like asking questions or interjecting tangential topics into discussion, that reduce the value of the instruction received.

This distancing of individuals pursuing the same goal establishes, if not solipsism, then alienation from others (the obverse, ironically, seems to be the constant need to connect electronically with a network, as if an event cannot be said to have occurred if a photo does not document it). The traditional opportunities for direct knowledge of others in intimate

communities—churches, for example, have evolved into accretions of individuals. As participation in “mainline” church and temple worship declines, two phenomena arise: participation in “mega-churches,” with attendance larger than the entire population of some towns, but in which, unlike Athenian festivals, many are together in one place but in a way that reinforces rather than dissolves the anonymity of any individual in attendance on the one hand, and, on the other, adults who reject outright the institutional church structure, but who, as individuals, experience a desire to connect with an individually understood divine being. In either case there is no common understanding that unites fellow believers; each one is an island, free, because solitary, to understand spirituality as one wishes, unfettered by the beliefs of anyone else. These are the persons that sometimes describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. In many instances they are infatuated by metaphysics, but, lacking any discipline—that which trains the disciple—they are often bested by it. If the logic of intellectual categories cannot be applied to the understanding of spiritual reality, then the result is an experience of spirituality that is purely affective; it is a pleasure one chooses for oneself, but it dies with the logic and orderly exchange of information associated with education, or work. It bears more resemblance to the dark experiences of Saturday night in that respect.

Such spiritual but not religious students may struggle to parse the convoluted sentences of Augustine in the *Confessions*, for example. While the earlier books, rife as they are with the quite human anecdotes Augustine recounts from his early life—the stolen pears, the renunciation of his concubine and the mother of his son, his account of his own education that included forays into the latest intellectual fads of the time, the *tolle, lege* moment of

conversion, even his perpetually nagging mother—speak to a common experience. However, in the later books, Book 10, for example, he blends the analytical language turned to an extremely difficult subject, for which there was an inadequate vocabulary at the time, with spontaneous exclamations of praise and adoration for the God he embraces with all the passion of a lover. The continually shifting of point of view between philosophical *disputatio* and ecstatic invocation is off-putting to readers uncomfortable with hermetic segmentation of the two. Because Augustine saw no reason to separate them out he can say: “Hence He was showed forth to holy men of old; that so they, through faith in his passion to come, as we through faith of it passed, might be saved. For as Man, He was a mediator; but as the Word, not in the middle between God and man, because equal to God, and God with God, and together one God.” Putting memory into words—confessing—makes it analogously co-eternal, that is to say, collapsing time into an all-present.

If the perceived goal is to extricate an answer to the rhetorical question “What is memory?” from the somewhat confusing rhetoric, spiritual but not religious students skeptical of the writings of “saints,” those venerated by that most organized of organized religious traditions, may well react cynically, unable to separate the quite sophisticated study of consciousness from the exuberant soul songs. Conversely, students whose perspective is deeply rooted in the religious dimension of the work, who think of Augustine as saint first and foremost, may read the discourse on memory as a digression from the quest for holiness that Augustine simultaneously articulates.

In a similar way the feminist criticism of the 1980s-90s produced fresh readings into the texts of early women writers for whom acceptable venues were proscribed by a scribal authority exercised by male authority figures. One opportunity for poetic imaginative writing, in fact, was mystical writing within the Christian tradition. Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholars approached these often long-neglected works in order, not to follow them as devotional guides, but to deconstruct them in a strictly rhetorical analysis. This secular perspective on what had been the exclusive purview of religious writing took people like Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich seriously *as writers*, adding much of value to critical discourse on late medieval European literature. Taking these texts out of their religious context can, however, as I have learned from experience, prompt resistance among readers who share the devotional mindset. The work of scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum and Alison Weber shed light on the efforts of the church hierarchy to suppress or greatly restrict the influence of such writings that were perceived to subvert or circumvent that male hegemony. So a Spanish clergy that had Teresa brought before the Inquisition and ordered her books burned during her lifetime were seen to coopt the groundswell of popular devotion to her after her death to declare her a saint and ultimately a doctor of the church.

Religiously conservative readers of these primary and secondary texts, especially, but not exclusively, those of the same faith tradition, i.e., Roman Catholics, may respond defensively, even hostilely, to the attribution of bad faith to authority figures who, they believe, are invested with divine authority. Those who present the contrarian point of view may be identified as heterodox and suffer serious professional consequences as a result. Colleagues

have reported similar situations at evangelical or bible colleges over broaching the subject of evolution.

From both perspectives texts like Augustine's *Confessions*, or Julian of Norwich's *Showings* may seem confounding. If both cohorts of students share the experience of compartmentalizing separate aspects of human experience they may both find the study similarly unsatisfactory and unproductive. If they find themselves in the same classroom, the heightened tension resulting from such a polarization could disrupt fruitful and open dialog, or worse. All of which brings me back to 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Athens, for *Eumenides* depicts just such a polarized, and seemingly irresolvable situation. The prosecution and the defense in the great trial of Orestes speak from polarized stances: the Furies, murderous in defense of life, and Apollo, straining legal rhetoric to the point of prevarication. Neither side is willing to concede a single point; the jury is split; Orestes is doomed, and the cycle of bloodshed and revenge appears likely to last as eternally as the gods themselves until the climactic Athenian moment. Athena breaks the deadlock by being herself, the warrior and the weaver. She transposes either/or into both/and, thus the modality from Phrygian to Lydian. With that first gesture consecutive barriers of separation collapse in turn: first between the feminine earth and masculine sky gods, then between the gods and mortals. Combat becomes dancing; terror resolves into joy. The Furies become first the Eumenides, then the chorus of Athenian women. As the song continues to grow the chorus merges with the citizen/spectators: the Athenian women's chorus is joined by all Athenian women. Mirroring the great goddess herself, the boundary between feminine and masculine dissolves: the Athenian women join, finally, with the Athenian men, as all, divine and human,

actor and spectator, male and female, celebrate ecstatically the tremendous energy released and poured out as blessing upon the now established rule of law that identifies Athens as the city most favored of the gods.

In our discussions here we might productively ask whether endeavoring to collapse the barriers of time and space in an act of imaginative memory to precipitate the *metanoia* that Aristotle suggests is the aim of dramatic *poesis* is 1) possible, 2) valuable, and 3) a worthy learning goal. Might an intersection of the religious and secular realms of experience be effected with similar benefit? If so, absent supplying the intoxicants to minors, how might this best be accomplished?