Unit: Sacred Stories

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The purpose of stories and story telling

The purpose of story and story-telling is to help shape who we are, where we have come from and who we might become. We all have a personal story but it needs to talk to other people’s stories and the bigger story of life. Human beings need to hear and tell stories because we operate within communities and other people’s stories shape our stories so in hearing the story we begin to work out how we belong to the group in which we are in. We also need to hear stories outside of the group because that extends our imagination and validates the experience of “the other”.

Story, in a way can act as a window and a mirror. It can open our eyes to see other things that we mightn’t have imagined or thought of but it can also reflect back on us about the way we operate in the world ourselves and can tell us something about ourselves as well as about others.

“Once upon a time” is no time and every time. It is the standard phrase that introduces us to other worlds and to our own world, that connects humanity to a common story and to story teller. That is why story telling and story listening are so congenial, for, in one way or another, we are hearing about ourselves. William J. Bausch.

Sacred stories

All human beings have an innate need to hear and tell stories and to have a story to live by. Religion, whatever else it has done, has provided one of the main ways of meeting this abiding need. Harvey Cox.
Sacred stories operate on a number of levels. You may have a sacred story that is special to your family or to your culture or to a nation as a whole, but generally sacred stories are related to religious traditions. They are ancient stories that also help people to live life in contemporary situations. Sacred stories touch the deepest level of our being. They tap into something inside us that resonates with who we are and who we might want to become.

All religions have some way of recording and retelling stories which are significant for the believers within their tradition. Usually these stories are recorded in special books which are given great authority and considered holy or sacred. In some religious traditions, sacred texts are also believed to be divinely inspired. Religions that depend on the oral traditions often express and transfer their sacred stories through body painting, masks, tattoos, carvings, rock paintings, ritual objects and even sand paintings.

In some ways there is a distinction between sacred text and sacred story. While sacred stories are part of sacred texts not all sacred texts are stories. For example some sacred texts might be rules for living such as the Ten Commandments or in Buddhism the rules for monks and nuns. Other sacred stories might be more sermons rather than story. For example in Christianity there is The Sermon on the Mount. And in Islam most of the Qur’an is to do with sermons rather than telling a story.

**The sacred texts of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism**

**Christianity**

The sacred text of Christianity is known as the Bible from the Greek phrase *ta biblia* meaning the books. It is a library of books written by different people and collected in two large
groupings consisting of the Old Testament a collection of the Jewish Torah (Teachings/Law), Prophets and Writings (Psalms, Histories and Wisdom literature)) and the New Testament (Christian Scriptures). Christianity has a unique relationship with Judaism because the Hebrew scriptures (Jewish sacred texts) make up most of the Old Testament although some of the stories are read and interpreted differently. In addition to the thirty nine books from the Hebrew scriptures, Catholic and many Orthodox Christians include seven extra books known as the Deutro-Canonicals or Apocrypha. These seven books are not included in the Old Testament of the Bible of other Christian traditions. The ancient term Septuagint refers to the Greek translation of the Hebrew which is the translation that Catholics and Orthodox use. Protestant traditions use the original Hebrew. Some Orthodox traditions include more works then these, such as the “Similitudes of Enoch”. There are 27 books in the New Testament: the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that tell of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Acts of the Apostles which is like a history of the beginning of the Christian church, a series of letters or Epistles written to communities of the first century C.E to encourage people in their faith and finally, the book of Revelation which is what could be described as Apocalyptic literature about the end times.

Judaism

The sacred texts or sacred scriptures of Judaism are divided into 3 groupings: the Torah or Law, the Nev’im or Prophets and the Ketuvim or Writings collectively known as the TaNaK.

In the Torah or Law there are five books or five scrolls which Christians know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
In the Nev'im, we have the stories of the major prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and we also have the stories of the minor prophets such as Micah. There are also the stories of Joshua, Judges, the books of Samuel 1 and 2 and the books of Kings 1 and 2.

In the Ketuvim or the writings there is a large variety of text types which are probably more along the line of story than the other two sections. The Writings include: Psalms, Proverbs, the Book of Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations.

For Orthodox Jews, the words of the TaNaK are revealed truth dictated by G-d to Moses at Sinai. Liberal forms of Judaism interpret the scriptures as being written by human beings but divinely inspired. The Talmud, a 5th century collection of “oral law” is also considered sacred by some Jewish traditions.

Islam

For Islam, the sacred text is the Qur’an and the Qur’an is more a collection of sermons and sayings rather than a series of stories or structured arguments. The Qur’an is not written by the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur’an is written by God or Allah and revealed to Muhammad who then provided that text to others.

The Qur’an is quite repetitive which enables easy memorisation. It would be common for some children as young as ten or twelve to have memorised the whole of the Qur’an. Learning the Qur’an by rote and being able to recite it is important in some traditions within Islam.

There is less emphasis on personal interpretation of the Qur’an for Muslims than there would be on interpretation of sacred texts in other faith traditions. There are formal commentaries on
the Qur’an but it is only within the last 10-15 years where a greater emphasis in the more liberal versions of Islam, has been placed on contemporary interpretation of the Qur’an. The emphasis on the whole within Islam is on a traditional interpretation of the Qur’an.

**Hinduism**

In Hinduism there is a set of Holy books called the Vedas and these are the most ancient books in Hinduism. Within the Vedas there are verses, sung chants, sacrificial prayers and special texts used only for priests. Also within Hinduism, depending on what caste you are born into, you have access to some of these religious texts and not others.

A well-known Sanskrit Hindu text is the Ramayana which is the story of Rama. This is a story that all Hindus would be familiar with because it isn’t only a sacred text that they would read but it has been made into a cartoon format for Indian television. So this text has become a common part of the Indian culture as well as the religious tradition itself. The Mahabharata is the other great epic Sanskrit work, and has also been popularised by Indian television.

**Buddhism**

Sacred text is treated somewhat differently in Buddhism and studying them is one of the most important religious activities a Buddhist can perform. The Buddha did not record anything formal himself. After the Buddha died, his cousin told the story of the Buddha’s life to a council and eventually that story was recorded over a period of about a hundred years.

Three forms of sacred texts developed within Buddhism and they’re known as the Three Baskets (the Tipitaka.)
There is the Basket of Discipline, the Basket of Threads and the Basket of Higher Teaching.

The Basket of Discipline talks about the rules for monastic life. The Basket of Threads contains teachings for all Buddhists to follow. Within the Basket of Teachings there are short teachings and long teachings. There are also what they call themed teachings and some minor teachings. The final grouping includes sayings or words of the prophet which have been remembered by his followers and put into the last grouping.

As well as the Tipitaka, there are extra texts in Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, the books or texts are considered sacred because they contain the Dharma (Truth or Law). They are kept in places of honour in shrines. The oldest copies have the greatest place of honour.

**Are the stories still sacred if they are not heard in their original language?**

For some religious traditions, the original language is important. For example in Islam, sacred scripture always has to be written and heard in Arabic, so a translation of the Qur’an in English, doesn’t have the same weight for the Muslim as it does in Arabic. So when Muslims read scripture, they are expected to read it in Arabic and when they pray using the words of the sacred text they must pray in Arabic which poses a problem if you are not an Arabic speaker. Indonesian Muslims for example, are praying in a language that they may not be using on an everyday basis without really being familiar with the language itself.

Many Jews pray in Hebrew. Believers from Reform traditions pray and read their scriptures in their own language but the Hebrew text is significant if people are going to investigate the sacred story and the origin of that story.
For centuries, Christians have heard their sacred texts in their own language. However, in order to delve deeper into the meaning of a sacred story, it is helpful for scholars to have some contact with the original language of the text. For example, there might be four or five different words for the English word read as ‘love’ in the original Greek with each word providing a different insight into what kind of love might be being spoken about. Most Christian denominations encourage the use of biblical commentaries and contemporary exegesis as aids to interpreting scripture and value the continuing contribution of scholarship.

**Do you have to be able to read sacred stories to make meaning or engage with sacred stories?**

Many sacred stories began as oral traditions meant to be heard or proclaimed rather than read from the pages of a book. The power of hearing the story is that the listener can take that story into their own lives and they can imagine it in a variety of forms.

The telling of stories over time has been important and in the telling of the story particularly in oral traditions, there is often a patterning to that story that helps the believer in that tradition to remember the story. For example in the story of creation in the Book of Genesis, there is a particular pattern to the first three days that is followed and expanded in the second three days. Each act of creation begins with “and God said let there be” and then there is an action. And then there is a concluding part to the story that says “and it was good” and so the patterning of the story helps us to remember the story. Before everybody could read, they knew stories. Particularly in Medieval Europe, the sacred stories of Christianity were told through both the visual arts and the performing arts. The windows in stained glass window in
cathedrals often represented the birth of Jesus through to his resurrection. When you brought your crops to town at Easter, often the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus was acted out in the market place and so in many ways you didn’t need to be able to read, because what you heard and what you saw enabled you to engage with the sacred stories of Christianity.

Why do human beings need a story to live by?

We need stories to live by because they stretch our imagination. They provide memories of our origins, give words to human hopes and dreams, provide wisdom and moral guidelines, insight into truths and the human condition, assurances of faith, challenges to act, reveal the depths, darkness and possibilities of human character and open us up to the mystery and wonder of things. They enable us to see ourselves and other people in new ways. They may even provide us with insights into how we can live in this world built on wisdom of those from the past.