

Myths and Legends
by
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Source: *The Religions of Man*, Huston Smith

When Chris asked if I would share some thoughts with you this morning, I decided to share with you something of the myths of the great faith understandings of the world. At this happy season, we are immersed (a good word that some Baptists have corrupted) in the elements of Christian myth. I use the term, myth, advisedly and deliberately, because I want to remind you this morning of Joseph Campbell's observation that **myth is true, even if it is not always real.**

Lao Tzu, which can be translated from the Chinese as "the Old Fellow" (or, in USA southern-speak, "good ole' boy"), is credited with having founded Taoism, one of the major religious faiths in China. The legend that surrounds his birth says that he, like Jesus, was the result of an immaculate conception...by a shooting star. The story says that he was carried in his mother's womb for 82 years (imagine that, ladies!), so that he was born, in the 6th Century BCE, as a wise old man with white hair.

Saddened by men's disinclination to cultivate the natural goodness he advocated, he headed westward toward Tibet on a water buffalo. At the Hwang Kao border crossing, the guard sensed that this was a very unusual man, and tried to dissuade him from leaving China. Failing in this, he asked Lao Tzu at least to leave a record of his beliefs for the civilization in which he had been born. He went away for three days, at the end of which he returned with a slender volume of 5,000 characters titled *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Way and Its Power*. It can be read in a half hour, or a lifetime, and remains to this day the basic text of all Taoist thought.

Lao Tzu did not preach; he did not organize a church. He wrote a few pages, rode off on a water buffalo.....so little concerned with the success of his own ideas, to say nothing of fame or fortune, that he didn't even stay around to answer questions, yet whether the story is fact or fiction, it is so true to Taoist values that it will be part of that religion forever.

Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas was born to a noble family in northern India, also in the 6th Century BCE. His life has similarly become encased in loving legend. We are told that at his birth, the worlds were flooded with light. The blind so longed to see his coming glory that they received their sight; the deaf and dumb conversed in ecstasy of the things which were to be. The crooked were made straight; the lame walked. Prisoners were miraculously freed from their chains. Even the beasts were hushed as peace encircled the earth. All of this was to mark and to honor the birth of Siddhartha Gautama.

When, later in his life, people would ask him who he was..... "Are you a god?" "No." "An angel?" "No." "A saint?" "No." "Then what are you?" "I am awake." His answer became his title, for "Buddha" means the Awakened One, or the Enlightened One.

When he was born, his father is said to have summoned fortunetellers to find out what the future held for him. All the seers agreed that he was no usual child. His future was laced with one

fundamental ambiguity, however. If he remained in the world, he would unify India and become her greatest king. If, on the other hand, he forsook the world, he would become not a king but a world redeemer. And true to the prediction, his life became one of teaching the redemptive nature of his understanding.

Buddha preached a religion devoid of authority, devoid of ritual, devoid of speculation, of the supernatural, and of tradition. He taught a lifelong way of intense self-effort. Buddhism has grown into two major branches, the Theravada, essentially centered on the Indian subcontinent, and the Marayana, which is spread across the rest of eastern Asia and which includes Zen.

Jesus of Nazareth was born, according to the legend, in a cattle stall in the provincial capital of Bethlehem. The angel, Gabriel, had appeared earlier to his mother to announce that she would bear a son, and that he would be great, would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no limit....he would be called holy, the Son of God.

As a newborn, he was laid in a feeding trough for livestock, because there was no room in the inn. A single angel, and then a multitude of angels, appeared to shepherds who were tending their flocks in the nearby hills, announcing good news for all mankind – the birth of a savior, Christ the Lord – and praising God.

Another part of the legend says that a mysterious star arose in the East, and that learned scholars followed it in order to worship the newborn king of the Jews.

The historical record of Jesus' life is curiously devoid of any physical description, so we know nothing of what he looked like. He died as a criminal, not a hero, at the hands of the Romans at about age 33. He never traveled more than 90 miles from his birthplace. He owned nothing, attended no prestigious universities, marshaled no army, and wrote no books. This dearth of information has fed the myths about him, so that people are free to conceive of him as they choose: for some he is the gentle, caring nurturer, mild as the lamb which serves as his symbol; to others he is the rugged, full-bearded leader of men who strode over the hills of Palestine and taught the truths of life as he saw them, letting the chips fall where they may. He belonged to first-century Palestine just as much as Shakespeare belonged to Elizabethan England. It produced him, but it cannot explain him.

His legends include the stories of his walking on the sea and of many healing miracles, and conclude with the tale of his resurrection from the dead. He was proclaimed the Messiah because of three things: what he did, what he said and what he was.

Those who follow his teachings and/or who worship him as Christians form the largest religion in the world, organized loosely into three major components – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant.

Interestingly, the subjects of these legends are known for the itinerant nature of their lives. Jesus was a wandering lecturer and teacher...a rabbi without a synagogue, who profoundly affected others, even though his public ministry was no more than three years. Lao Tzu was an administrator who rode off toward the sunset, seen by some as shy and retiring – a solitary

recluse; and by others as natural, genial and homely as Abraham Lincoln, with the same sense of humor. His influence comes exclusively from the book he is said to have composed. Buddha trudged the dusty roads of India for 45 years, hoping to illustrate the value of, and the path to, enlightenment.

All of the religions based on these men depend on myth and legend; all of these myths are true; all of them have profound impact on the lives of men and women.

At this Christmas season, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus with many remembrances of the legend surrounding it.....stars and lights, angels and song, shepherds and swaddling cloths, praise to God, magi and mangers....I hope we can remain appreciative of all efforts to depict the Eternal in our world, for all are right in part. Ours is one of those efforts, and is, of course, very special to us. So it is that I wish you, heartily, a Merry Christmas this morning!