

MORE THOUGHTS ABOUT NAPS ON BOATS AND BIBLICAL COUNTERBLOWS TO [NEOLIBERAL, CAPITALIST] OPPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

This address is in fact two addresses or, to be a bit accurate, there is a meta-address as well as the one obviously given below. The meta-address concerns the fact that, in liberal religious circles (the one I most often inhabit and in which this address was given) most of our time is spent *pro-fanum*, i. e. in the precincts outside/before (*pro-*) any holy place/site/sanctuary (*fanum*) discussing

whether, if and how we can/might actually enter, with a clean heart and full pathos, into such a place of *faith*. We are prone to like having all our justifications and reasons lined up neatly and fully and rationally thought through before we can even deign think about entering such a place. Whilst this critical/sceptical way of proceeding has it's great merits (and I wouldn't want to loose it) it can sometimes serve to stop us from *ever* going into the place of *faith*. This latter outcome can become, or so it seems to me, a kind of liberal religious *profanity*.

Anyway, the address which follows and which I have divided into two sections, *pro-fanum* and *fanum*, illustrates this well because I spend most of the time in the former in the hope that, at the very end, a place of faith can be entered and a statement of faith uttered. A question I don't address in what follows is whether we could find ways by which we could more equally and creatively divide/toggle our time between what we are minded to call *pro-fanum* and *fanum*? But that's for later . . .

READINGS

From 'The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus', Polebridge Press/Harper San Francisco, 1998, pp.76-77

Jesus stills the storm

Mark's account of the stilling of the storm brings us to the first of the so-called nature wonders. It also introduces a new and different sense of who Jesus is into the gospel story. The stories of Jesus as an exorcist (1:21-28) and Jesus as a healer of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), of the leper (1:40-45), of the paralytic (2:1-12), of the man with a crippled hand (3:1-6) identify Jesus as simply another charismatic sage with healing powers; but a Jesus who has the power to calm the seas and still the wind puts him in a category with the other gods — with Yahweh, with Zeus, with Poseidon. In other words, the "christology" of this story is that of the early Christian community. For this reason alone, many scholars have concluded that the tale is the fictional product of the believing community.

The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar were unanimous in their judgment that the stilling of the storm is not based on an event in the life of Jesus. John P. Meier reached the same conclusion independently. E. P. Sanders thinks the Christian tradition "augmented and enhanced" the miracle stories in order to make them impressive; he is also inclined to the view that Jesus' miracles were

“relatively minor and excited the public only temporarily.” He does not, however, come to a firm conclusion about this particular story.

Mark 4:35-41 (trans. David Bentley Hart)

And on that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] says to them, “Let us cross over to the far shore. And dismissing the crowd they take him, as he was in the boat, and other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves broke into the boat, so that now the boat was filling. And he was sleeping on the pillow in the stern. And they rouse him and say to him. “Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are perishing?” And, being woken, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent, quell yourself!” And the wind fell and a great calm came about. And he said to them. “Why are You so afraid? How is it you do not have faith?” And they were afraid, enormously afraid, and said to one another, “Who then is this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

From Leo Tolstoy’s ‘Gospel in Brief’, Chapter 6 — ‘The False Life’ (Harper Collins)

And it happened once that Jesus needed to travel by boat with his students. He said, “We’ll go across to the other side.” A storm arose on the lake and began to fill their boat with water so that soon it was on the verge of sinking. And he lay on the deck and slept. They woke him and said, “Teacher! Do you really not care that we are going to perish?” And when the storm had grown quiet, he said, “How is it that you are so timid? You have no faith in the life of the spirit within you.”

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ADDRESS

More thoughts about naps on boats and biblical counterblows to [neoliberal, capitalist] oppression

PRO-FANUM

Last week I reminded you of the story found in the synoptic gospels in which, amongst other things, Jesus takes a nap. I brought it into play as part of address centred on the efficacy of

copying the human Jesus as our community's primary (but not only) inherited example of how to get going in the liberal religious life. Jesus taking a nap in the middle of an exhausting period of ministry and in the middle of a storm struck me — and the writer of the New Year's Resolution we were considering — as an example of something we might copy Jesus doing and, in so doing, find a counterblow against the faithless, frenzied and destructive, storm-inducing ways of being in the world that have been forced upon us by [the neoliberal form of capitalism](#) that has metastasised and spread almost everywhere in our culture.

But for perfectly understandable reasons for a while after the address the focus of our conversation was not centred upon this counterblow but, because the story also contains one of the gospels' many miracles, it seemed unbelievable enough for many of us here to be inclined to reject the story — at least in its surface appearance — as teaching us anything truly helpful.

Yet, clouds (if a cloud this was) often have silver linings, and last week's conversation gives me the opportunity today, firstly, to reiterate the point I made most recently on both [Christmas Day](#) and [Epiphany Sunday](#) that more often than not the authors of the Biblical texts are not offering us descriptions of actual events but, instead, through means of aesthetic ideas and images, they are trying to pass on to us some resonance/feeling/insight which had welled up in the inner reaches of their consciousnesses (cf. [Michael McGhee: Transformations of the Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice, CUP 2000, p. 17](#)). In other words, through these aesthetic ideas and images the authors were trying to give us 'an approximation of [their] experience and, in so doing, gave it the **semblance** of objective reality' ([McGhee p. 119 my emphasis](#)).

I cannot emphasise enough that the point here is the authors' state of mind and not their apparent description of a supposedly actual event that took place, in this case, on the Sea of Galilee.

In any case, as our reading from the Jesus Seminar reminded us, many biblical scholars (and certainly the ones with whom I am in sympathy) are convinced that this story is an entirely 'fictional product of the believing community'. That's a vital thing to know and I suggest, once it is known, it is much easier to grasp the possibility that the gospel writers' primary hope was that if the state of mind they felt well up in the inner reaches of their consciousnesses could achieve a certain 'external' reality in their stories then they and we could all begin to talk with each other about **that**. It's the state of mind which the story sets off in us that counts here and not the semblance of objective reality it does (or doesn't) have.

But this creative and non-literalistic way of reading the text is often blocked to us thanks to one important consequence of our protest during the sixteenth-century Reformation and beyond against the way the Bible was consistently and crudely understood in mainstream, [Magisterial Reformation](#) circles as being both literally and infallibly true and, therefore, THE sole seat of authority for Christian faith and practice ('sola scriptura').

As part of the [Radical Reformation](#) our communities strongly felt that the true seat of authority was not to be found in scripture alone but always-already in some kind of innate, inner light and guide. As the anonymous, seventeenth-century [Collegiant](#) who authored the '[The Light upon the Candlestick](#)' put it

The Light . . . is a clear and distinct knowledge of truth in the understanding of every man, by which he is so convinced of the Being and Quality of things, that he cannot possibly doubt thereof.

We adopted, developed and nuanced this kind of stance in part because our early communities experienced first-hand how the Bible, understood as the sole, infallible seat of religion was all-too often then used by Church authorities brutally to suppress truth and all forms of critical free-thinking.

But our earliest forebears still knew, as [Ernst Bloch \(1885-1977\)](#) pointed out in his book from the mid-1970s, '[Atheism in Christianity](#)', that:

There is only this point: that the Church and the Bible are not one and the same. The Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience [and, although the Bible has often been used as a cattle-prod by the powerful it is vital to recall that] the counter-blow against the oppressor is biblical, too, and that is why [the Bible] has always been suppressed or distorted, from the serpent on (AiC p. 13).

As a dissenting, free-thinking religious movement we naturally wanted completely to dispense with the Bible as the sole, infallible seat of authority and a cattle-prod against the oppressed. But in our eagerness to do this as we moved into the twentieth-century we all too often forgot the other half of Bloch's point, namely, that the 'counter-blow against the oppressor is biblical, too.' Once we got rid of the Bible as the only infallible seat of authority in religion and began — rightly — to lay weight more and more weight on the inner lights of reason and conscience, many of our communities decided it was fine to get rid of the Bible completely. To be sure that got rid of it as a cattle-prod of the powerful but, in so doing, it simultaneously got rid of all those powerful biblical

counterblows for freedom it contained.

It's why in my own ministry I have continued to keep the Bible in regular use within our religious community. As far as I understand it, the Bible remains one of the most revolutionary texts we possess.

But last week's conversation reminded me that I cannot use the Bible in a way that gives us as a community **immediate access** to those biblical counterblows. To put it another way, I find I am always compelled to spend a lot of time — as I'm doing now — making the case for why I think the Biblical text can, and should, still be employed to provide us with counterblows on behalf of freedom. It's all too easy to spend all my time doing this and never getting to the delivery of any actual counterblow against oppression — i.e. merely to spend all our time together in front of the sacred place — the '*profanum*' — and hardly any time actually within the it — the '*fanum*'.

To continue — *profanum* — I grant you that it seems likely that the original authors of the story we are considering today did have in mind the idea that Jesus was some kind of wonder-worker and, by telling a story in the way they did — which would have had resonances with other well-known tales about Yahweh, Zeus or Poseidon — they could also suggest to their hearers/readers something about Jesus' close relationship to divine power, to god. But, as the influential biblical scholar E. P. Sanders suggested, Jesus miracles were 'relatively minor and excited the public only temporarily'.

If that is the case — and I take it to be the case if not then, then certainly now — then it seems worth asking whether something else might be going on?

With this thought in mind I now return to my opening point about understanding the writers of the story under closer consideration today as trying to share, not a description of something that happened, but a state of mind. Once we can encounter the story in this way then there opens up for us the possibility of accessing an energy (a resonance) within the story that can be released through us as in the form of a counterblow against the oppressor — in this case all purveyors of the exhausting and destructive culture that is neoliberal capitalism.

As I mentioned last week I take the story (as did Tolstoy) primarily to be about what it is like to be in the presence of any unflappable and wise teacher or idea. You will all, I am sure, have experienced examples of this kind of calming influence in your own life.

I suggest that the authors of the story primarily wished to communicate to their first hearers and to us a calm and unflappable state of mind that their own, immediate forebears — i.e. those who had directly encountered Jesus — told them being Jesus' presence had created in them.

In the story we are considering today Jesus' ability to sleep through the storm that is freaking out everyone else is one aesthetic idea and image. Jesus teaching about this is another aesthetic idea and image. Jesus' apparent stilling of the storm is yet a third aesthetic idea and image.

Taken together, to my mind, the authors are building a cumulative set of aesthetic ideas and images that are designed to create in us a certain, similar, calm state of mind, trust and faith. It's the **calm state** that counts, not the aesthetic idea and images that have the semblance of objective reality; and it's certainly not to pass on to us the unquiet state of mind that is the desperate desire always to know or prove that the story is/or is not to be taken as a piece of good, factual reporting before it can be taken as being helpful.

Once we know, really know, that it's a set of aesthetic ideas and images and not a description of an actual event then we can re-engage with the story to see where it contain elements that might be used as cattle-prods against freedom on the one hand and, on the other, where they can be used as effective counterblows to oppression.

I take it that when the story is read literalistically by either conservative fundamentalists or by us as hyper-skeptic liberals, then the story quickly becomes a cattle-prod against different kinds of freedom. In the hands of conservative fundamentalists it's a cattle-prod designed to force us into problematic propositionally-based beliefs and behaviours connected with ideas around an infallible, all-powerful judgemental God-man, all of which push against the inner light, aka freedom of conscience and thought. In the hands of liberals it's a cattle-prod designed to force us into problematic beliefs and behaviours connected with ideas about how our foundational stories must be based solely on measurable and proven scientific and historical fact, all of which pushes against the poetic freedom that is found in all of the creative arts.

As your minister I'm always and only seeking ways by which the Bible's texts can be read such that they create in us states of mind that release creative energies that can serve as effective counterblows against oppression and for freedom.

To do this we have, of course, always needed all the resources we can find and, since our culture

is inextricably shaped by and enmeshed with the Biblical stories, it strikes me as sensible always to be finding ways to continue to generate new readings, even revolutionary re-readings of the Bible which can radically reorient the senses of the work that have perviously guided/misguided us.

FANUM

So now, after this necessary, albeit incomplete, clearing of the decks, I can finally enter the *fanum* and conclude with my very simple message, a message that is, in the end, made in *faith* that following the human Jesus' example is a pretty good way to be in the world and on the side of freedom and not oppression:

In this new year and decade I'd strongly suggest trusting Jesus enough to copy him by finding all kinds of ways by which everyone across the planet can, with calmness and faith in the life of the spirit within us, admit both our exhaustion and our exhausting behaviour and stop, rest and sleep more and more. It may well turn out to be one of the most effective, yet gentle revolutionary counterblows available to us as we seek to challenge the present, exhausting, oppressive, planet-destroying storm that is engulfing us everywhere.

POSTSCRIPT

One contemporary philosopher whom I admire and who has taken up this theme in ways I find very amenable is [Franco "Bifo" Berardi](#). For those interested in thinking further about the revolutionary potential of stopping and resting I'd recommend taking a read of the short following essay:

[**Exhaustion and Senile Utopia of the Coming European Insurrection**](#)