



EPISTEMOLOGIES IN SACRED SPACE : STORYTELLING AT THE CAVE OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS

Gordon Mitchell

Professor at the German-Jordanian University. He holds a PhD in Cultural and Historical Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany.

Abstract : The paper discusses the relationship between places, imagination and spirituality. Why do people have such different ways of experiencing places? How does the Cave of the Seven Sleepers exemplify the capacity of religion to promote self and mutual understanding? Is it possible to become more skilled in cross-cultural epistemology, and what might the benefits be? Are there moments in creative processes which can be described as transcendent? A case study of an educational project using creative storytelling serves as a way of gaining some insight into the ways in which cross-cultural epistemology might operate in places viewed as culturally sacred.

EPISTEMOLOGIES IN DIALOGUE

Why do people have such different ways of experiencing places, particularly those with strong symbolic associations? Places offer a rich array of meaning, particularly if they are regarded as profound markers of cultural identification – as sacred space. The concept of sacred space draws attention to the ways in which certain places may come to be associated with heightened spiritual awareness, places of *mysterium tremendum*. Where there is a complex and intertwined history associated with a place, experiences can be strikingly diverse. If ‘epistemology’ is the study of how we interpret our experience in creating knowledge,

‘epistemological dialogue’ involves making an effort to understand, from more than one vantage point, the influence of cultural and social contexts on the ways in which knowledge is produced and reflected upon.¹

When it comes to encountering sacred space, the biography of each person shapes what is not seen, what is seen, and how the experience is interpreted. Becoming aware of one’s own epistemology involves taking a deliberate step back to observe one’s emotional and cognitive state. It is a gradual process of critical self-reflection, which usually benefits from social interaction. We make a conscious effort to observe and imagine how others

interpret a phenomenon, and how they might imagine our interpretative process. The question “How do I look?” involves both making the effort to watch oneself think, and then imagining how others might perceive us doing so. It is an invitation to engage in ongoing exercises of shared self-reflection.

THE CAVE OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS

Places offer a venue for important thought and emotional processes, experiences which can foster interreligious dialogue and promote greater social harmony. There are many such places in Jordan and in the Middle East, which are revered in the religious cultures of more than one community. “Tourathna: Our Shared Heritage Project” was designed to draw attention to the multiple sites of shared religious heritage in Jordan.² Just to the south of Amman lies the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, a place of pilgrimage for both Muslims and Christians.

The significance of the place is traced back to the story of a band of young men and a dog, on the run from the Roman Emperor for refusing to deny their faith. They find shelter in a cave, fall asleep, and then wake up three-hundred years later! During Late Antiquity, several versions of the story were in circulation. The reference to the story in the Quran draws attention to the debate about details in the story, which then serves as a means of contrasting Divine Omniscience with the extreme limitations of human knowledge:

They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog - guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], "My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone. (Sura 18:22)

A theological point is being made here: truth lies in and beyond ambivalence, which

makes interpretative humility the appropriate response! Human knowledge is elusive and fragmentary, and always tentative.³ The origins of the story itself are usually traced back historically to the persecution of Christians under Emperor Trajan, around 250 CE. It is a story about survival and hope in the midst of devastating persecution. Today, visitors to the cave are Muslims as well as Christians, as are visitors to sites in Turkey and Syria, which compete for the status as the authentic cave. The story has been borrowed and told many times over, and has inspired countless millions of people. It is about a miracle. It is also something of a miracle that people can allow themselves to be inspired by somebody else's story! Sacred Texts such as the Bible or the Quran, which are a tapestry of interwoven traditions, themselves exemplify a creative borrowing founded in respect.⁴ The Cave of the Seven Sleepers, as a place *and* as a story, is a fine example of sacred symbols as an ‘open source’, accessible in different ways to a range of people. There are other places in the region which remain controversial, and might present a greater challenge to such dialogue projects – places which have witnessed conquest, destruction and the appropriation of sacred symbols. Being less controversial, the Cave of the Seven Sleepers might therefore be an appropriate place to start an exploration into whether a carefully designed educational process might offer a model for how the sacred can become a place for fresh innovative thought.

A STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

Is it possible to become more skilled in cross-cultural epistemology, and what might the benefits be? A modest attempt at answering this question has taken place in a cooperative research project at the German Jordanian University and the University of Hamburg, begun in the winter semester 2021/22. It provided opportunity for students to explore the relationship between place, biography, and storytelling.⁵ The scope of the project was limited, and the findings are no more than exploratory.

The visit to the cave was preceded by a series of exercises in becoming more aware of the capacity of imaginative storytelling. The participants were at the outset introduced to Richard Rorty's argument that storytelling and the analysis of stories are uniquely powerful tools for the development of empathetic imagination and the capacity for self-reflection.⁶ Within each story there is a philosophical puzzle: "Why is life like that?", "Why are people so contradictory?". Creating and listening to stories necessitates the use of imaginative empathy. Considerable artistry can go into the creation of a first person singular narrative voice.

Nabokov's *Lolita* serves for Richard Rorty as illustration of how literature can become a prime venue for thinking about right and wrong.⁷ Here a fictional lead character, middle-aged Humbert Humbert, is also in the role of storyteller. His description of himself and his description of his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter Lolita (whom he names and then seduces or rapes – depending upon from whose perspective the judgement is made). This disturbing narrative reveals a person so trapped in his own world that he is not aware of his cruelty. The story is told from his point of view, and only occasionally does the teller inadvertently let slip the extent of the young girl's trauma, as in his waking up at night to the sound of her sobbing. He complains about her puzzling lack of appreciation for his many kindnesses. It is narrated by the perpetrator, who tells the story in such a way as to convince the reader that he is innocent and that the victim is to blame. Humbert is very engaging, and composes his side of the story with great elegance and at times gentle, self-critical humour – as he tries to win over his audience. These ambivalences prod the reader to engage in a critical reading of the narrative.

Lolita is frequently misunderstood, usually by those who have never read it. It is indeed a shocking story, one which draws attention to the human capacity for self-delusion; thereby underscoring the need for epistemological dialogue. Telling a story as though we are one of the characters, requires a

conscious shift in perspective, and much more so if it involves becoming a character very strange or even horrifying to us. For a period of time we become someone else. We explore a stranger's world, even if it is one of humanity at its most despicable.

After a study of a range of first-person singular narration techniques, storytelling groups were formed with the task of creating stories of a human rights violation, with the perpetrator as narrator. The stories were presented and discussed in plenary, in an exercise structured to generate appreciation for the power and potential duplicity of the narrative voice. Participants were then given the opportunity to identify places in and around Amman, which they could visit as part of a new cycle of storytelling.

FIELDWORK AT THE CAVE

The group of students visiting the Cave of the Seven Sleepers had practiced making use of empathetic imagination in the creation of stories.⁸ The new task was very specific:

1. "You are asked to choose a character (one or two of those you see there, or a fictional one, or an historical one), and create a short story of approximately one page in the first person. Provide brief hints about background, how they came to be there, what impression the place makes on them, what they are thinking and feeling then, and later."
2. "Write a page of field notes, in which you record what *you* were thinking and feeling as you sat. Also any details of conversations which you might have had with people you encountered at the place."

The Jordanian Cave of the Seven Sleepers in the village al-Rajib, lies to the south-east of Amman. The peaceful atmosphere of the place, and the reassurance of a story with a happy end, in no way negate the horror of how the story began. During the visit there developed an understanding that it was a place where people came in search of reassurance. After the

excursion, the students constructed stories about people they had seen or imagined being there. As they had been encouraged to do, their stories play on ambivalences and leave gaps which encourage audiences to use their own imagination.

There is the terrifying story of one of the young men in the original story, told vividly in the first-person singular, of being hunted and then with his friends, exhausted hiding in the cave. And then the confusion of waking up in another age and being welcomed back into society. A range of contemporary characters appear in other stories. There is Om Abdulla, a very old woman in a black Palestinian dress, her back bent from “many disappointments, secrets and worries”. And there is the child narrator forced to come by his mother, and there is the narrative voice of an observant cat. There is the Sheikh who is the guide to the place. He observes the four students on their excursion. He notices their curiosity, their hesitation, and the irritation of one at being told to cover herself properly. The story of an Egyptian tourist, told in the third person, also has him observing the visiting students, in the midst of his own questioning and believing. He is particularly intrigued and challenged by the star engraved prominently in the stone wall. What is it doing here? And then with some relief, it must be the same as the one in the Moroccan flag! One author went well beyond requirements, and produced eight stories, underlining the capacity of a Cave to inspire.

Each of these stories indirectly communicates something of what individuals experienced during their visit to the place. Writing Field Notes provided an initial means of self-reflection. For the author of the Sheikh’s story, telling it from his point of view, provided a venue for her to come to terms with her conflicting responses to the place: to its official meaning, and to his insistence that she as a woman wear a full head and body covering while there. Her story, as does that of the observant cat story, is an effort to see oneself encountering the place through another set of eyes. All the stories required effort to enter the

worlds of implied authors and implied audiences.

A further layer of self-reflection came in the form of interaction with a researcher from the University of Hamburg, who interviewed the authors.⁹ While she was concerned mainly about how creative storytelling can support language acquisition, the extremely rich and varied data provides fascinating insight into creative processes. Her thorough analysis of the stories and transcribed interviews confirms that the artistry in storytelling can provide techniques for arranging our experience – helping us to express who we see ourselves to be, and how we feel about that. It is a way of engaging with abstract concepts, at the same time as relativizing them through unsettled role characterization. The process draws on raw experience, on what others reveal in their stories, or on what we imagine the life experience of others to be. It is seldom a linear process from idea to product. What might begin as a clear destination, may soon slide into uncertainty. In hindsight every doubt, every decision is an act of thought. The emerging story becomes a way of coming terms with these experiences, of examining them, and of talking about them. A well-told story leaves the reader space to think, and create their own stories. And, direct interaction with audiences can become a creative moment in itself.¹⁰

THE SPIRITUAL IN THE CREATIVE

Are there moments in creative processes which are so unexpected and so profound that we can call them transcendent? For Richard Rorty the empathetic imagination needed for storytelling has the capacity to promote ‘pity’, which he sees as the summation to all human values. In the stories there is a much wider and more complex range of thought and emotion. There are moments in the creative process which can be banal and deeply moving at the same time. In search of descriptive language, commentators have sometimes turned to traditional theological concepts such as ‘inspiration’, ‘prophecy’, ‘miracle’, ‘revelation’. Theologians, notably Paul Tillich, argue that art discloses elements of

spiritual reality which cannot otherwise be experienced.¹¹ Where art deals with issues of 'ultimate concern' it is religious. Just as Rorty maintains that storytellers are better at doing philosophy than professional philosophers, Tillich insists that artists can do a better job than theologians. There is an unconscious theological character to every cultural creation. In terms of this logic, the artist cannot escape religion even if he or she rejects religion. But not everyone wants to be considered as religious. In an effort to settle this controversy, a broadly defined notion of 'spirituality' might offer a way of speaking about the symbiosis between the creative arts and religion. Ambivalence lies at the heart of art and at the heart of faith! Listening to and telling stories enables the exploration of issues in ways not available to standard teaching approaches. Stories touch emotions – they are felt experiences. We will forget much of what a person tells us, but we will remember how they made us feel. There is an emotional and cognitive intensity in storytelling and audience response that borders on the spiritual.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The Jordanian Cave of the Seven Sleepers is a peaceful place, offering visitors moments for rest and thought. For someone being persecuted for behaving or believing

differently, or for a young girl being hunted by a merciless predator, the Cave offers reassurance that a story can also end well. An author's own response to a place becomes the starting point for imagining how other people might respond. Switching perspective involves becoming aware of how identity and background shape what is seen and what is not seen. Aesthetic space offers such a venue for both privacy and self-disclosure, and thereby encourages dialogue, exploration and growth. The stories that emerged from engagement with a historical site are a reminder that the past does not shape us: it is the stories we tell about the past that shape us. The extent to which we become aware of how we and others create knowledge out of experience constitutes an epistemological dialogue.

Sacred space can become an open source for each to develop their own spiritual dimension. It resists efforts to reduce it to a single meaning. Being there with others reminds us that places can have many stories, and that each in its own way can be inspiring. Through creativity and self-reflection, places offer training for agile minds that can see things from multiple vantage points. Epistemological dialogue requires a level of curiosity about how we make sense of our experience by purposefully including others in our ongoing processes of self-reflection.

NOTES

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