

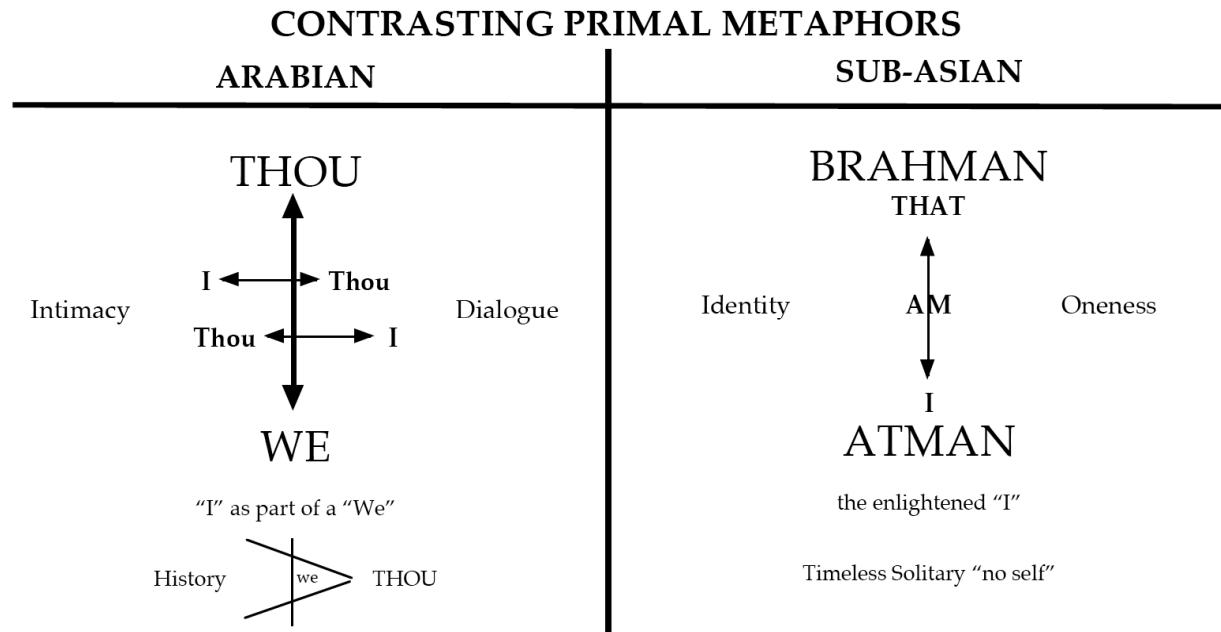
Chapter 24

The Primal Metaphor of Arabia

Arabia is the cultural geography that initiated Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three of these religions have traveled beyond their place of origin, and they took their Arabian primal metaphor with them. The primal metaphor of Arabia is distinctly different from the primal metaphor of Sub-Asia. I have chosen the name **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** to illuminate the contrast with the Sub-Asian **Uniting with the Infinite Silence**. The Arabian religious formations are characterized by a more passionate attention to the details of history and an emphasis on interpersonal relations among humans and between humans and Final Reality.

Arabic stories sound something like this: "In the beginning the Infinite Communicator Spoke and the temporal cosmos appeared." Every aspect of temporal reality is the Speech of this Infinite Communicator. "In the beginning was the Word." This Word is not a set of Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, or English words. It is the speech of the Infinite. We can state the nature of this Word in a starkly paradoxical manner: this Word is the Speech of the Infinite Silence. How do we experience this Speech? We experience it in the events of temporal history. Our birth is a first Word to us. The presence of the entire natural world is a Word to us. The ups and downs of social history are all Words to us. The end of society is a Word to us. The end of our own historical lives is a Word to us. This is how Reality is visualized: a conversation: Thou-I-Thou-I-Thou-I-Thou. This is a temporal picture. It is not timeless. It is a dialogue taking place through time. Time is important in the Arabian primal metaphor; it is where Final Reality is met and responded to. Time is where we fall away from our loyalty to Final Reality and where we are restored to the family of those who are devoted to Final Reality. This is the metaphor of Arabia. Time has a meaning not given to it in the Sub-Asia primal metaphor.

The following diagram lays out some contrasts between these two primal metaphors:



Notice the emphasis on solitary identity in the Sub-Asia primal metaphor compared with the emphasis on intimacy (I-Thou and WE-THOU) in the Arabian primal metaphor. By "intimacy" among humans I mean the experience of looking into the

eyes of another human being and seeing a conscious being looking back. Of course, Sub-Asian cultures are not oblivious to intimacy experiences, but in the Arabian cultural antiquity this intimacy experience became basic to its primal metaphor. The relations among humans and between humanity and Final Reality are drawn as an intimate dialogue through time. The Almighty "Thou" calls us into conversation. Too often in our scientific age this metaphor has been dismissed because its interpreters have understood it literally. Of course, Final Reality is not a big person who inserts Hebrew, Greek, or Arabic words into our passive heads. "Dialogue" is a metaphor for understanding the actual eventfulness of our lives. We are called out of Egypt to be an un-Egyptian experiment in social law and communal life. We are taken into Exile to learn that our devotion is not limited to simple nationalism. We return to our Promised Land to reestablish our treasury of living wisdom for all nations. This deep communal and historical emphasis of ancient Judaism is also present in Christianity and Islam. I have used the terms "We-Thou" in the above diagram to signal this primary emphasis on being a people – a people of God, a Divine Kingdom, a Holy Commonwealth, a communion of saints, a "We" commissioned by this "Thou" to bring healing to all peoples.

But in spite of these fundamental differences in emphasis between these two distinct cultures, members of these two cultural groups can speak to and understand each other. Indeed, they possess some important common ground. Both primal metaphors have enabled deep clarity on the "FACT" that whatever is born and dies is not Eternal – that temporal "things" are not worthy of our absolute devotion. Our nations come into being and go out of being. Our families come into being and go out of being. Our own bodies come into being and go out of being. Our feelings come into being and go out of being. Our thoughts come into being and go out of being. Our personalities are developed by us and die with our bodies. Indeed, our view of who we are may die sooner than our bodies. We may see in this present moment that our personalities are finite, built by ourselves, a pattern of habits that imprison us. We may see now that in our profound depths we are more than our personalities, more than the egos that our personality habits imply that we are. Sub-Asian Buddhists may speak of realizing our "no self." Arabia speaks of dying to self in order to find our True Self. Both groups of religious traditions imply that what we truly are is beyond personality and ego – and beyond all the temporal relations that comprise our ongoing historical lives. We are Eternity-participating beings.

Also, both primal metaphors include a strong emphasis on freedom. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all witness to an awareness of imprisonment in the patterns of finite selfhood as well as an awareness of the possibility of realizing our deep freedom – the freedom to break out of the habits of the past, the freedom to choose freedom as our mode of operation rather than continuing in our addictions to what we desire or want to flee. The Arabian saint sees that each of us, instead of embracing this freedom that is our real lives, have been enslaved to the temporal in two ways: (1) we are attached to things that are passing and (2) we flee from the fullness of life and its responsibilities. The deep self, the true self, the essential soul of a human being is a boundless freedom that is not determined by our circumstances, our bodies, our emotions, our thoughts, our habits, our personality. We can access that freedom or we can lose that freedom into an incarceration in personality patterns that we have invented and with which we identify and passionately defend.

"Plant your feet firmly therefore within the freedom that Christ has won for us, and do not let yourselves be caught again in the shackles of slavery."¹ This was a core teaching of the apostle Paul. According to the original witnesses of the Christian breakthrough, our estrangements from Reality have formed a prison of bondage. The meaning of the Christ happening in our lives is that this bondage has been broken

¹ Galatians 5:1; J. B. Phillips translation

open; we can walk forth as free beings. We have “idolized” things that are born and that die, and thereby lost our loyalty to both Eternity and our time-embodied lives. But when we have died with Christ (the profound human) and been raised up into this profound humanness, we manifest a freedom from our estrangement from both time and Eternity. Similar teachings about freedom appear in Judaism and Islam.

After such “liberation,” we find that both Arabian and Sub-Asian cultures describe the freed person returning to live freely within the temporal flow. That does not mean a full control of the flow of temporal events. We still face limitations as part of the external realities of life. But this inner freedom is a freedom to accept limits as well as to engage in possibilities that have a limited but relevant and surprising impact upon the course of events.

The contrast between the primal metaphors of Arabia and Sub-Asia is most vivid in how this temporal living is pictured. Sub-Asia emphasizes a sort of timelessness that tends to minimize the significance of specific temporal events, while the Arabian sensibilities tend to see each temporal event as a Word or Communication with the Final Reality that calls “the hearer” into the freedom to respond to that Final Reality in the flow of history. Arabian worshipers see themselves called to make history. Sub-Asian sensibilities focus on liberating individuals from the karma of history.

Both of these emphases are meaningful, and these two cultures are learning from one another (made possible by this interreligious era). For example, a number of contemporary Buddhist teachers now advocate an engaged Buddhism than seeks to enthusiastically define justice and social action. In Christian circles it would sound strange to speak of an engaged Christianity, for Christianity, at its prophetic best, is always engaged in history. In Christian circles we sometimes speak of a contemplative Christianity. But in Buddhist circles, they need not speak of a contemplative Buddhism, for such a focus is assumed.

Seeing that both the primal metaphors of Sub-Asia and Arabia are metaphors rather than literal truths brings the “dialogue” between Sub-Asia and Arabia into a deep level of lucidity. Like viewing light as both *wave* and *particle* in the domain of physics, *dialogue* and *union* in the domain of religion are two inventions of the human mind – neither of which can fully comprehend the human participation with Final Reality. Light is neither *wave* nor *particle*; it is both. And Final Reality is more than a “Thou” with which we *dialogue through time* and it is more than a *timeless union* in which the ordinary self disappears. Our experience of Final Reality is both of these perceptions, and it is more.