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Killng bin Laden and common Islamic and Christian myths

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 16, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

It is almost overwhelmingly ironic that the military intervention to kill bin Laden -- symbol of the seemingly nothing-in-common state of Islamic?Christian relations -- was a *Night Journey*, an example of the mythic religious themes that Christianity shares with Islam.

These are found in Andalusia?s Cordoba where, cascading through history, a big two-hearted river of Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices deposited its treasures and its traces in what is now called the ?mosque/cathedral.? The Catholic bishop insists that it is strictly a Roman rite cathedral and the city?s Muslim leader claims that it is solely a Muslim mosque.

The walls of this ?mosque/cathedral,? however, hold the faded inscriptions of the shared symbols and images of creation, life, and love that make Islam and Christianity seem as if they were twins separated at birth rather than Cain raising a rock above Abel on the far side of Eden.

The embattled ?mosque/cathedral? is less a blunted and muddied salient of religious conflict than a still radiant point of convergence, in which are displayed not the trophies of war but the bounty of mystical traditions shared by Islam and Christianity and, therefore, by almost the whole world.

These include the master concept of the ?pilgrimage? -- that ageless spiritual/physical mode of transit through which we can still join the mythic ?hero?s journey.?

Pilgrimage, according to David Leeming, is ?the defining character of the human species? so that ?we live with the constantly present metaphor of a journey.? We are the only species concerned with the ?idea of the journey of life,? with mythos, the story we tell, ever the same beneath surface variations, of our being on pilgrimage in life.

The notion of the Pilgrimage is the backbone of both Islam and Christianity for their teachings were disseminated through similar aching and dusty pilgrimages.

Standing amidst the candy striped pillars of Cordoba?s ?mosque-cathedral? we hear overlapping Muslim and Christian voices singing of such shared mythic concepts as the dark night of the soul and the descent into the underworld.

Night Journeys are found in each tradition, including Muhammad?s from Mecca to Medina -- generating the same aura of mystery as that of the descent of the Jews into and passage out of Egypt and of Jesus? silently slipping into the desert or noisily entering Jerusalem. Are Christians surprised that Islam too has a Garden of Eden and in which a Fall occurred with dire consequences for all humans?

Here pawing the ground is the miraculous ?winged mule? that carried Muhammad on his night journey to Jerusalem; is this not, mythologically speaking, also the rough beast that bore Christ to Jerusalem, where each would be confirmed in his calling?

Is this not, in Judaism, the same mythic mule that carried Abraham (Ibrahim) to find Hagar and Ismael (Ismail)?

Each tradition also speaks of *ascents* -- mystical metaphors in each dispensation for the passage (again invoking the theme of pilgrimage) to wholeness or enlightenment.

To this day, pilgrimages, whether as grand as those crowding into Rome or Mecca or as simple as a lonely widow?s making the Stations of the Cross in a mission church, allow believers to participate in the original mythic passages.

We also learn that Cordoba was once a lively common ground, a university, so to speak, for fruitful conversations between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Their common myths, or stories, tell us that they were exploring identical spiritual questions and pursuing a shared destiny (a word that comes from the pilgrimage notion of *destination*) and imagining and speaking of them in very similar ways.

The night journey of the brave Navy Seals to kill bin Laden shouts of an estranging war between Islam and Christianity but it also whispers of how much beyond any counting of it these religious traditions share with each other.

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