

TRANSCENDING THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS



The Philosophies of
The Sun Also Rises and Bashō Poetry

FRANK KYLE

*Do human beings have a cosmic purpose apart from that offered by religious myths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? They do, a cosmic raison d'être based on science and philosophy and rooted in humans' unique ability to be intelligent, appreciative observers. This and related topics are examined in *Transcending the Abrahamic Religions*.*

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By Frank Kyle

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Introduction

The Sun Also Rises

This book is essentially about worldviews and words. Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* is a good place to begin because it describes the abrupt transition from an older worldview based on JudeoChristian theology to a post-Grand Narrative¹ worldview and postmodern way of life. World War I invalidated the religious worldview for many of those who experienced the war. It also called into question the prewar belief that societal evolution is progressive.² Within the context of the story, the characters exist in an intermediate state. In this case, the postmodern condition is an intermediate condition like the one described by Matthew Arnold in his poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse":

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

It's a troubled state of mind for those affected by the war because the future has become uncertain. The war itself suggested that the world to be born most likely will not be a happy one. We know that to be the case because we know that the near future held the rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II. "With nowhere yet to rest my head" implies nothing to believe in thus no beliefs to commit oneself to. The postmodern response of the characters is to embrace the *carpe diem*, an epicurean lifestyle: eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow is uncertain. This condition threatens nihilism, the belief that life has no greater value than sensual satisfaction, which, as Arthur Schopenhauer warns, always leaves one dissatisfied yet sensual and emotional pleasure is all there is because there is nothing else to commit oneself to. The story, however, doesn't leave the reader stuck in a nihilistic quagmire. It offers other meanings as profound as those offered by the JudeoChristian Grand Narrative, meanings based on reality rather than fantasy.

¹ The Grand Narrative referred to here is the JudeoChristian story of the Universe, from its beginning to its end. It's all there in one book, the Bible. The narrative begins with the Book of Genesis and ends with the Book of Revelation. It's a big story thus a Grand Narrative. From this point on, however, post-Grand Narrative is written post-Narrative.

² In the age of nuclear weapons the belief in social progress is dead; the reason being is that in spite of other forms of progress, such as in medical science, World War III would negate all progress by returning humanity to a new Stone Age.

The Sun Also Rises also has a lot to say about language—the good, bad, and ugly. The ugly is revealed in Lesley Blume’s book *Everybody Behaves Badly: The True Story Behind Hemingway’s Masterpiece The Sun Also Rises*. She explains how the novel was written with the intent of hurting people who didn’t deserve to be hurt. The bad aspect of the novel is its use of disparaging ethnic slurs such as *nigger* and *kike*. Yet, this bad aspect can become good if it motivates the reader to rhetorically evaluate the purpose of such language and the harm it causes.³ And in spite of Hemingway’s use of the novel to hurt many of people he associated with in Paris, readers can put it to better use.

The Abrahamic Religions

First the worldview. The worldview of the three Abrahamic religions is based on stories and personal, private revelations collected in the Old Testament, New Testament, and Quran. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the triad of a single Grand Narrative that originated with the ancient Jews and refurbished by the writers of the Gospels and Muhammad. The story begins with God, Yahweh, creating the world and all the species in six days, though later he would flood it destroying all life but a boatload. The story finally comes to an end with the destruction of most of the world. For the Jews the end will come with the arrival of the Messiah who will implement the Messianic Era that will establish global peace and harmony and be ruled by the people of Israel. For Christians and Muslims the end comes with Judgment Day and the sentencing of most people to the fires of Hell and rewarding stalwart followers with eternal life in some form of paradise. The evidential problem with the trio’s worldview is that it’s based on mythology that originated over three thousand years ago and is derived from the imaginations of prophets rather than empirical reality. And even if the myth were true, it doesn’t offer a happy ending for the world (some form of Armageddon) or for nonbelievers, the vast majority of humanity, who will spend an eternity or a very long time in the fires of Hell.⁴

³ After reading Blume I doubt that was Hemingway’s intention.

⁴ Just before the arrival of Jesus the wise Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius tried to alleviate people’s dread of the afterlife by telling them there was nothing to fear because after death the atoms of the body disperse. Then came along Christianity and Islam to elevate dread to terror. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus warns, “It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire” (18:8). In the Quran threats of burning in Hell is a constant refrain. Here is one: “Garments of fire will be tailored for those who disbelieve; scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins; there will be iron crooks to restrain them; whenever, in their anguish, they try to escape, they will be pushed back in and told ‘Taste the suffering of the fire’” (22:19-20). These ideas have haunted people for centuries. Once an idea gets into a person’s head it’s hard to get rid of it. Of course, the purpose of this horrific language is to

What characterizes the Abrahamic scriptures most is the language of hate. The Old Testament declares pagans to be the enemies of God, and as such they have no moral rights. Thus they can be conquered, robbed, murdered, and enslaved with not only God's approval but encouragement. In the Old Testament and Quran he even joins the fight. In the New Testament Jesus tries to transform the old hateful Judaism into a religion of love and compassion, but his religion of peace was hijacked and then buried by the writers of the New Testament, men who were temperamentally very much like traditional Jews, full of hate and animosity. They corrupted Jesus' message of creating a better world in the here and now with a different metaphysics: a man-god savior and eternal life in Heaven or Hell. The Old Testament was a declaration of war on pagans but primarily those within the boundaries of the Promise Land. The New Testament declares global war on Jews and pagans. Relevant here is the fact that none of the writers of the New Testament actually knew Jesus.

Catherine Nixey's book *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World* describes in great detail the destruction and killing JudeoChristians engaged in during their bloody rampage against classical pagan civilization. She calls these JudeoChristians "destroyers." What I want to emphasize though is the cause of the hatred that inflamed their desire to destroy: language, the language of the Old Testament and New Testament. These scriptures, religious ideologies that are nothing more than collections of words, were used to program susceptible minds. Once programmed, believers became tools, destructive tools that served political and religious authorities. The revelation here, which could not be fully comprehended until the advent of computers and robots, is that language can program humans just as COBOL, ALGOL or Fortran can program robots. Robots can be programmed to be good, helpful Robots like C-3PO, R2-D2, or Robby the Robot or evil robots like the first Terminator or HAL. It's all about language and programming.

The Quran is also a declaration of war (jihad) on pagans or really all non-Muslims (including the other two members of the Abrahamic trio). Allah says, "As for those who disbelieve and die disbelievers.... These will have a painful torment, and will have no saviors" (3:91). This is the warning to Muslims who are considering giving up their faith: "As for those who disbelieve after having believed, then plunge deeper into disbelief their repentance will not be accept; these are lost" (3:90). This means they will burn in the fires of Hell. The main message of the Quran is that "God rejects those

use fear to encourage conversion or to discourage thoughts of quitting the religion. These are illustrations of how language can be used to terrify.

who disbelieve” (2:89) and “We destroyed those who denied Our revelations and would not believe” (7:72). The harm caused here results from declaring certain people enemies of God. As such, in the eyes of believers they are worthless and have no moral rights. This is explained and illustrated below.

In addition, the Quran makes it clear that Islam’s great ambition is global conquest: “It is He [Allah] who sent His Messenger (angel Gabriel) with the guidance and the religion of truth, in order to make it prevail over all the religions, even though the idolaters dislike it” (9:33) and “Say to those who disbelieve: if they desist, their past will be forgiven. But if they persist, then it is well known what happened with the people of the past. [Allah punished them.] Fight them until there is no more persecution, and religion becomes exclusively for Allah...” (8:38-39). Muhammad was Allah’s first military commander. He commanded the early aggression against nonbelievers, pagans, and Jews. And after his death, Islamic conquests of other nations continued for centuries. Even our century has witnessed the legacy of the Quran in the rampages of the Islamic State and numerous Islamic attacks in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere.

Matsuo Bashō’s Poetry

The worldview of Bashō’s poetry is rooted in immediate lived experience shared by all human beings.⁵ It really doesn’t extend beyond immediate experience. The beginning and end of the Universe is unimportant. What is important are the entities—animate and inanimate—of the mundane world that exist within the range of one’s perception. There is, furthermore, no condemnation or hatred in his poetry. All things are equal simply because they are finite and mysterious. Here’s an illustration:

a peasant’s child
 husking rice, pauses
 to look at the moon.

The poem captures three important elements of human existence: the necessity to work and the mystery and beauty of nature. The world is mysterious to the child, as it should be to adults. Yet, the practical duties of daily life tend to cause adults to lose their childhood fascination with the world. To truly appreciate the world one must see it as a child would. Ultimately the Universe and all its inhabitants are mysterious even if we know scientifically how they came to be. The mystery captured by this poem

⁵ As oppose to the supernaturalism of the Abrahamic regions, which is based on the revelatory experiences of a few prophets.

is the existence of the moon and the child and their relationship: the moon as the object of enthralled awareness. It is a symbiotic relationship. Without the child, here representing all of humanity, the moon would remain unknown and unappreciated. Without the moon, representing all of nature, the child would be denied the opportunity to be an appreciative observer.

In Bashō's poetry there is no animus or hatred. No ideology, religious or secular. No escaping reality into an ego-inflating fantasy world. No suggestion that other worldviews are unacceptable. No words denigrating people who believe differently or words provoking violence against them. No suggestion of nature's being a subordinate reality. What Bashō offers through his poetry is how to achieve a fulfilled life by living peacefully and appreciatively.

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