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Creed or Chaos

By DAVID BROOKS

You can feel a jolt of energy surge through the audience of “The Book of Mormon” about a quarter of the way into the show’s first musical number. It’s a jolt of joy, gratitude and laughter — a confirmation that this Broadway production is going to live up to its rave reviews.

The jolts keep coming and the audience I was part of rose up at the end with a raucous standing ovation of the sort I’ve rarely seen. There are four musical numbers that are truly fantastic, and the rest of the show is clever, fast and surprisingly warm. The play is about Mormon missionaries who find themselves in an AIDS-ravaged, warlord-dominated region in Uganda. It ridicules Mormonism but not the Mormons, who are loopy but ultimately admirable.

The central theme of “The Book of Mormon” is that many religious stories are silly — the idea that God would plant golden plates in upstate New York. Many religious doctrines are rigid and out of touch.

But religion itself can do enormous good as long as people take religious teaching metaphorically and not literally; as long as people understand that all religions ultimately preach love and service underneath their superficial particulars; as long as people practice their faiths open-mindedly and are tolerant of different beliefs.

This warm theme infuses the play with humanity and compassion. It also plays very well to an educated American audience. Many Americans have always admired the style of belief that is spiritual but not doctrinal, pluralistic and not exclusive, which offers tools for serving the greater good but is not marred by intolerant theological judgments.

The only problem with “The Book of Mormon” (you realize when thinking about it later) is that its theme is not quite true. Vague, uplifting, nondoctrinal religiosity doesn’t actually last. The religions that grow, succor and motivate people to perform heroic acts of service are usually theologically rigorous, arduous in practice and definite in their convictions about what is True and False.

That’s because people are not gods. No matter how special some individuals may think they are, they don’t have the ability to understand the world on their own, establish rules of good conduct on their own, impose the highest standards of conduct on their own, or avoid the temptations of laziness on their own.

The religions that thrive have exactly what “The Book of Mormon” ridicules: communal theologies, doctrines and codes of conduct rooted in claims of absolute truth.

Rigorous theology provides believers with a map of reality. These maps may seem dry and schematic — most maps do compared with reality — but they contain the accumulated wisdom of thousands of co-believers who through the centuries have faced similar journeys and trials.

Rigorous theology allows believers to examine the world intellectually as well as emotionally. Many people want to understand the eternal logic of the universe, using reason and logic to wrestle with concrete assertions and teachings.

Rigorous theology helps people avoid mindless conformity. Without timeless rules, we all have a tendency to be swept up in the temper of the moment. But tough-minded theologies are countercultural. They insist on principles and practices that provide an antidote to mere fashion.

Rigorous theology delves into mysteries in ways that are beyond most of us. For example, in her essay, "Creed or Chaos," Dorothy Sayers argues that Christianity's advantage is that it gives value to evil and suffering. Christianity asserts that "perfection is attained through the active and positive effort to wrench real good out of a real evil." This is a complicated thought most of us could not come up with (let alone unpack) outside of a rigorous theological tradition.

Rigorous codes of conduct allow people to build their character. Changes in behavior change the mind, so small acts of ritual reinforce networks in the brain. A Mormon denying herself coffee may seem like a silly thing, but regular acts of discipline can lay the foundation for extraordinary acts of self-control when it counts the most.

"The Book of Mormon" is not anti-religious. It just endorses a no-sharp-edges view of religion that is all creative metaphors and no harsh judgments. The Africans in the play embrace this kind of religion. And in the context of a hilarious musical, that's fine.

But it's worth remembering that the religions that thrive in real-life Africa are not as nice and naïve as the religion in the play. The religions thriving in real-life Africa are often so doctrinaire and so socially conservative that they would make Pat Robertson's hair stand on end.

I was once in an AIDS-ravaged village in southern Africa. The vague humanism of the outside do-gooders didn't do much to get people to alter their risky behavior. The blunt theological talk of the church ladies — right and wrong, salvation and damnation — seemed to have a better effect.