MYTH: AN OVERVIEW

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The English word myth comes from the Greek μύθος, meaning “word” or “speech.” It owes its significance to its contrast with λόγος, which can also be translated as “word,” but is used especially in the sense of a word that elicits discussion or an argument. The reference to Jesus Christ as the Logos (Word) of God is well known from the Gospel of John; this is a necessary reminder that the lines separating logos and mythos are not rigid. Mythos in its meaning of “myth” describes a story about gods and superhuman beings. A myth is an expression of the sacred in words: it reports realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid as the basis and purpose of all there is. Consequently, a myth functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge. The word mythologize is used for the entire body of myths found in a given tradition. It is also used as a term for the study of myths.

The definition given here contains elements on which not all specialists would agree or place the same emphasis. The use of the word sacred might impress some as defining the subject of myth with a word that lacks more clarity than the term being defined. For the historian of religions, however, no confusion occurs. The distinction between the sacred and the profane emphasized by the philosophically inclined French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) is based on a sober observation: all human traditions and societies heed the sacred and mark it in one way or another. Its ultimate or metaphysical reality is not the issue.

The most general characteristic of the sacred is not that it is exalted, although in many instances that may be the case, but that it is distinct from ordinary, profane, everyday worldly things. In communicating the sacred, a myth makes available in words what is available by no other means, and its words are different from other words: the words of myth have an extraordinary authority and are in that perceivable manner distinct from common speech. The language of myth does not induce discussion; it does not argue, but presents. The most familiar example in the West, the opening words of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is very different from the words in any theological chapter on the doctrine of creation, precisely because the latter are meant to analyze, to systematize, or to discuss God’s creative acts, not to present them. The words have to


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make a case for their validity, while the myth is its validity. A myth, whether its subject is the acts of deities or other extraordinary events, always takes us back to the beginnings of all things; hence cosmogony, the birth of the world, is a principal theme. In each case, the age to which the myth transports us is very different from our own; it is in fact a time beyond any human being’s ken, and hence the events and realities dealt with are literally altogether different from the facts people are concerned with in their everyday human lives. The authority of myth is more than an analogy to authorities on earth.

Myth relies on one of the three forms of religious expression: sacred speech, sacred acts, and sacred places. As such, it occurs side by side in most traditions with sacred places or objects (symbols) and sacred acts (that is, cult, rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonial acts and performances). The chief reason myths attract scholarly attention is their medium: words. They can be expected to elucidate the entire religious life of a community, shedding light especially on the ritual acts and sacred objects that by themselves do not speak at all, or certainly not often, and not as clearly. For instance, a central temple or a sacred pole may be of paramount significance in the religious life of a community, yet it is the recorded myth that is most likely to explain its pivotal role in the community’s religious life.

**MYTH, SYMBOL, AND RITUAL.** The fact that the mode of a mythical expression is words may account, to quite an extent, for the problems the subject has caused for intellectuals from antiquity to the present age. Myths have been looked upon as conscious efforts to veil rational propositions, as allegories for historical events, as poetic imageries, as unconscious verbalizations of inner desires, as mental classificatory schemes, and as social structures. Many scholarly attempts have been helpful in highlighting such relationships, yet each of these attempts has failed to arrive at an overall explanation. Admittedly, none may be possible.

To understand myth, we must do more than accumulate the results of specialized approaches and fragmented methodological views. Rather, a determined inquiry, and any true science of mythology, should take into serious consideration also the whole of religious expressiveness within which myths function. Of course, myths are language and speech and literature. Of course, myths may reveal something of the society in which they were formulated. Of course, myths may manifest deeper human drives than those displayed in civilized life. Nevertheless, human religious expressiveness in its threefold form of sacred speech, sacred acts, and sacred places remains essentially one, and the three forms we distinguish had best be considered as merely the aspects visible to us; our differentiation of the three forms is external, conceptual, formal. The three always occur together, in any culture. We can only observe that, as a rule, one of the three has a dominant role; some civilizations have a wealth of myths, some of rituals, and some of sacred places.

A sociological, psychological, or other special scholarly view may provide illumination, yet the coherency of a religious tradition should not be allowed to fall between the cracks. As in the case of the computer, where output depends structurally upon the questions asked, each of our sciences and scholarly disciplines can only provide answers in accordance with its own definition of problems. For instance, the semantic problem facing historians of religions is not a mere extension of linguistics. Whatever the definition of religion may be, it must have something to do with the totality of human orientation, hence with the underlying certainties or assumptions concerning each particular activity or creation. The history of religions deals with such totality not in the manner of philosophy, by reflecting on premises for coherent and defensible thought and action, but by studying the evidence of religious documents in human tradition. The principal question is not “What is true?” but “What have societies, civilizations, and communities found necessary to point to and preserve as true?” Here the study of myths becomes the obvious source out of the entire store of religious documentation.

**THE UNITY OF MYTH AND THE VARIABILITY OF CULTURE.** The variety of cultures, of their languages, means of production, and evaluation of what is essential, is overwhelming. This variety invites us to look for an explanation of myths in the specificity of each society, and certainly many an answer to many a question can be obtained in this manner. Ignoring the specificity of a tradition would be the worst methodological error. Given this, however, it is essential to remember that by our definition myth emphasizes realities and events from the origin and foundation of the world. This presents a certain difficulty that lies hidden just below the surface. “The world” suggests a oneness, but the myths from the world’s myriad cultures and ages are manifold. It would be easy to conclude that the oneness of the world depicted by myths is in each case at most a collective fiction peculiar to an isolated tribe, and yet such a conclusion would be questionable. For one thing, there is too much contact, exchange, and mutual understanding between different tribes and nations to permit such a conclusion.

Resolving the issue of the origin of the world, and what it is that remains fundamental to the world, does not call for one immutable formula. The question does not demand an answer that prohibits variety but rather one that includes it. Not only do myths vary from culture to culture; each one is itself open to transformation. Staple foods, basic provisions, and tools are among the topics that occur in cosmogonic myths, but these fundamental elements in human existence vary from the hunting and gathering communities and the early peasant and pastoral societies to the most complex urban centers. How essential are these elements to the cosmogonic myth? The answer is that they are at the same time essential and completely insufficient, because the issue goes far beyond nutrition and tool-making and all the other culturally specific human concerns. Just the same, myths take account of these absolute necessities and can even assign
them a direct role in the origin of the world. The multiplicity of mythologies has immediate and important methodological consequences from the outset of any inquiry; the multiplicity is observed from the beginning and is not merely a methodologically inconsequential by-product of our final conclusions. It concerns the very nature of the primary documents of the object of our discipline. Hence, for instance, the history of religions must take the variety in the very first items of nutrition in origin myths seriously; we cannot disregard the choices made by the narrator.

A most important consequence of the multiplicity of mythologies is that by necessity, the investigator has a particular position vis-à-vis a given mythological tradition; and indeed this orientation is necessary in order to gain any perspective on any myth. There is no such thing as objectivity that amounts to neutrality; there is no understanding where the subject has eliminated herself or himself. This absolutely necessary subjectivity is not a whimsical individual stance or solipsism but the recognition of the only ground from which a religious phenomenon can be traced.

One may also state that the world of religions, spawning its myths, is not as remote from the natural sciences as it has been supposed in the humanities and the social studies that developed in the wake of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey’s work; furthermore, the world of science may be affected by mythology in spite of the intentions of scientists.

It is noteworthy for the historian of religions that the ancient problem of the unity of nature is eliciting new interest among scientists. There is no reason to jump to conclusions and equate that interest with the expression of age-old myths, yet the revival by itself is fascinating and promises to overcome unnecessary barriers between the humanities and the sciences. Students of subatomic particles theorize on a possible “supersymmetry” in nature. These theoretical considerations are hard to separate altogether from the ancient and universal mythological interest in the mystery of oneness (whether of the world or God or the Ultimate). Still a reservation is in order here. What distinguishes modern scientists is that they search for mathematical formulation, a direction that cannot be applied to the mythical narration and poetry available to us. To scientists, a serious object of study is principally an invitation to a precise, calculable demonstration of relationships.

The topic of symmetry has received much attention in aesthetics, and has deeper roots than in physics. Here also ties to mythology are visible, even if difficult to define. For the church father Augustine, symmetry was a rational entity, because it does not occur in nature but does occur in human creations. It exists in human reason itself; through it God created humans in his own image. Whether one speaks about Augustine’s reasoning as philosophy, science, or mythology will depend on one’s intellectual frame of reference.

**Myth and politics.** In the study of politics, power is a necessary concept. It is, of course, an abstraction. wielders of power are not sterile laboratory tubes filled with that element. Religion and hence mythological elements play a great part in the exertion of political control over others; and since the nineteenth century there has been a steady growth of ideological theories affiliated with as well as opposed to religious factors. Religion and myth, like power, never occur in pristine purity, but always in admixtures. The fact that people are religious (as well as political, philosophizing, and knowledge-gathering) beings is not necessarily a pleasant or attractive fact. To say that humans are *Homo religiosus* is not a compliment. The unity of myth in various cultures and human inquiries is accordingly the statement of a problem, rather than of a supposed mysterious, pure, dialogic core of all human existence.

In recent times, serious scholars have turned to political power as to some extent explanatory of myth (as well as sacrifice). Even if some of their reasoning may be open to criticism, it certainly cannot be denied that notions of justice—as well as revenge—not infrequently are rooted in myth. Until this very day, Justice is depicted as a blindfolded goddess, wielding scales. In texts, as in speech, justice and myth are frequently inseparable. The expulsion of the first humans from paradise and Cain’s punishment for the first murder as depicted in the book of Genesis are well-known models. True justice seems everywhere most concisely embedded in myth. In Hinduism, Dharma (“Justice,” and in this context in particular, “the right tradition”), is also a god, and Pāndava Yudhīṣṭhira, who is entitled to the throne in the epic *Mahābhārata*, is said to be Dharma’s son. When Buddhism spread through Asia from India to Korea, it was accepted and propagated by the elite, who reformed the juridical system in accordance with the new Buddhist teachings. In ancient Greece, Themis, a consort of Zeus, is called on as the goddess of Justice.

**Cosmogonic imagery.** Another point should be noted: each society, culture, or historical epoch has nothing but its own vocabulary to tell even its most basic myths. This point is so obvious as to run the risk of being overlooked. A comparison with modern science is illuminating. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century astronomers and physicists have discussed a theory of the origin of the universe they have labeled the big bang, as distinct from the steady state theory. Irrespective of mathematical calculations, the discussion could not very well be carried on without labels taken from the common speech of our age; in the final analysis, these are poetical similes that have taken on a life of their own; they have a pregnant metaphorical significance like the imagery in traditional cosmogonic myths.

One of the many accomplishments of Raffaele Pettazzoni, the great Italian historian of religions, is his huge collection of myths and legends from all continents. Included are many cosmogonic myths. Mircea Eliade occupied himself with the supreme significance of cosmogonic myths. That significance is evident in most traditions. Whatever other myths are told—about the origin of animals, plants, institu-
tions, or anything else—they take for granted the basis provided in some myth of the creation of the universe. Even eschatological myths, seemingly positing the end of the world as if in contrast to the beginnings of the world, do not abandon their relationship to the cosmogony. This abiding relation is not paradoxical. All thoroughgoing eschatologies express themselves as renewals of the real, truly intended origin. The reference to Jesus Christ as the new Adam is a well-known example. In the history of Christianity, the Protestant movement saw itself as engaged in reestablishing the pure, original form of the religion. In Marxism (and in the ideas of the young Marx himself) even the most typical eschatological myth of the classless society is expressly concerned with the restoration of the human race as it was originally—without private property.

**Character and Content of Myth.** At first sight, myths may seem to have much in common with other forms of folk literature. They deal with supernatural events, as fairy tales do; they deal with extraordinary figures comparable to those in legends and sagas. The authority of myths, however, distinguishes them clearly from other sorts of narratives. Typically, the myth tells of a time altogether different from the time of our experience ("in the beginning . . ." or "before heaven and earth were created . . ."), whereas the typical fairy tale, no matter how wonderful its events, begins "Once upon a time . . .," which is to say, a time like ours. The saga's hero and the legend's sacred protagonist are no doubt superior to all normal human beings, yet their time resembles the historical time of our experience.

Epics present a special case, for they are often a prime source for our knowledge of myths: the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer are celebrated instances in the Western tradition. Nevertheless, epics as such do not have the authority of myths, no matter how they function as educational tools held in the highest esteem by a society. The myths they narrate in the body of their texts and the mythological references they make can be seen as part of an educational pattern: this is how people should understand the basic, authoritative models in the religious tradition. Moreover, in addition to instruction, epics provide entertainment for their audience. One cannot say this of myths, even though there are good reasons to speak of the narrative style of myths, which can be truly arresting and spellbinding. Raffaele Pettazzoni went so far as to see in epics the first clear signs of a process of secularization.

The themes of myths are innumerable. Often the characters are gods and goddesses, sometimes animals, plants, mountains, rivers. . . . In each case, the myth directly or by implication links its striking presentation of events to an altogether different time and thereby posits its authority. Nevertheless, the astounding variety of myths can best be discussed not in terms of their protagonists or the events they describe, but rather in terms of their various structures and their cultures of origin.

**The Function of Myth in the Tradition of Cities and Civilizations.** Many a modern city-dweller makes the mistake of thinking that myths belong only to a dim, unsophisticated past. Yet not only is there no religious tradition on earth today without its identifiable myths, but the history of cities and urban life itself, which began thousands of years ago, is steeped in myths and rituals. Ancient temples everywhere are spoken of in terms of the mythical traditions with which they are imbued. To understand this properly we have to divest ourselves of the modern habit of viewing religion as something distinct, separate from the "ordinary" things of life. The duties of elected officials in ancient Athens always involved functions they were expected to perform in rituals. Even earlier, in Mesopotamian civilization, temples served purposes we would immediately identify as religious, such as sacrifice, and for administrative matters we would look upon as by nature secular or bureaucratic.

Additional and abundant evidence comes from civilizations in the New World: the Aztecs in Central America and the Incas in South America. The mythologies at the heart of these civilizations generally support a pronounced class structure and a powerful central ruling elite. Adding to the complexity and fascination of mythological development in Central America and South America is the socio-mythological complexity of the Spanish invaders, who themselves emerged from turbulent centuries of Christian, Muslim, and various ancient local traditions. An example of the new, fascinating mythological interweaving appears in the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The emphasis on the religious roots of authority is most striking in the intertwined myths of the New World, with their roots on both sides of the Atlantic. We should add that in spite of great religious upheavals and reforms, remnants of the ancient traditions still remain.

The function of myth is particularly striking in periods when large-scale religious change occurred. One such case has been studied in an exemplary manner. It occurred with the new retelling of local tribal myths in Central Asia and was instrumental in the area's conversion to Islam. The retelling by Muslim missionaries was so effective that Islam became fully accepted, indeed rooted in a large part of Central Asia. History makes it clear that myths, whether or not they are clearly cosmogonic, do not merely relate to explanations of the world's beginnings. They reveal their force and function when history shows their role in renewing life, in a city, a society, a civilization. In each religious tradition such a force of renewal is the most striking manifestation of a myth's function.

**Structure and Style.** What characterizes mythical recitations, and what is their purpose? Contrary to the assumption of much traditional scholarship, myths are not essentially etiological (from Greek etios, "cause") in the sense of explaining origins or causes. It is true that the word etiology could be used, with some caution, but only if one adheres to the sense the Greeks themselves sometimes gave to the term etiosis: a primeval condition. Hence the term could also refer to pri-
myth or first principles. This meaning of the term, however, was not usually in the minds of the scholars who thought of myth in terms of etiology. Until recently many students saw in myths a prescientific endeavor to establish causes for the universe, natural phenomena, and everything else that preoccupies modern science, thereby overlooking the fact that this scientific preoccupation with causality is a very precisely determined feature of modern history, as much as the attendant confidence in technological progress. For instance, it is certainly no coincidence that the very influential folklorist and classicist James G. Frazer launched his idea of fertility as the principal explanation for most of the world's myths and rituals shortly after artificial fertilizer was marketed for the first time in the nineteenth century.

The supposed prescientific nature of myths was incongruous with another view sometimes held at the same time by the same theorists, namely that myths contained the texts necessary to accompany rituals, after the manner of a libretto to an opera. Since the latter theory generally entailed the idea that rituals were only magical acts, all these theories, incongruous or not, were really variations on the theoretical theme of a prelogical mentality, one of the most enduring products of cultural evolutionism and best known through its articulation by the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1959).

Yet myths are not attempts at causality foreshadowing nineteenth-century scientific discussion. Their notion of an origin and basis of all things should be taken quite seriously. If indeed the isolated and desiccated notion of first cause was the central issue in myths—if the myth's only concern was epistemology—one could not very well imagine any need for ritual related to myth. Instead, an academic-style presentation would suffice. Obviously, no myths in that style exist. And that is precisely the issue. A myth does something else, and something more encompassing than presenting a reasonable (or even pre-reasonable) explanation of things. This is the reason Eliade has rightly emphasized cosmogony as the fundamental myth. In whatever cultural or religious tradition a creation myth is recited, it is paradigmatic in a special, one might even say pregnant manner, because of the many things to which its sheer force as a model is able to give birth.

In many instances, creation myths are recited in a special, archaic language, different from the vernacular. One such case is a creation myth in the Ngaju-Dayak tradition (South Kalimantan, Borneo). Its unusual language is not meant to keep it secret but rather serves to underline its significance, preserved by experts in the community. The narrative itself establishes the land, orienting the villages and their mirror-image counterparts in the heavenly realms; it creates the social divisions and their functions, as well as the principles of the legal system. The myth is couched in lyrical poetry, as are many myths in Southeast Asia, including those expressed in the vernacular. Sometimes, a cosmogonic myth is recited on special occasions, as in the ancient Near East on the enthronement of a king or for the renewal of life and kingship together in the New Year festival. Elsewhere instances occur where the cosmogony functions to cure the sick or renew a poet's inspiration. In all these examples the creation of the world is invoked for its fundamental and founding power.

In simple terms, how does human speech succeed in expressing the underlying reality of existence; how can something so ungraspable be expressed at all? All myths can be seen as coming to terms in their own way, within their culture, within their necessities of life, with this question. The special features of myth, in spite of great cultural diversity, result from the unusual task it sets for speech itself to go beyond the ordinary limits of knowledge and perception.

An archaic language for myth is a feature found throughout the world. The phenomenon occurs in very different civilizations and circumstances: the use of Latin in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic church; the importance of the Church Slavonic liturgical language in the history of the Orthodox church; the use and cultivation of Sanskrit in Hinduism; and the attention given to the study and use of Sumerian in ancient Babylon many centuries after that language had ceased to be spoken. Although far from universal, such eclectics of language are a feature of myth that indicate an awareness of a tradition deserving special protection.

Another feature in many traditions is the special care taken that myths shall be recited only at specific times and places. This points out clearly that myths are not like other stories. This awareness of the special nature of myths is illustrated in a folk tale of the North American Wichita Indians concerning a contest between Coyote and an opponent. The two contestants tell stories, and the winner will be the one who knows the most stories. Coyote wins because his store of stories is inexhaustible: he can make them up at will. His opponent restricts himself to stories that have not been made up. He tells only true stories, and those are limited in number. True stories, are, of course, what in our study are called myths.

Humor in myth. One feature of myths that is indeed universal can best be indicated by the word humor. This does not refer to jokes or quick-wittedness, and least of all is it a spur to uproarious laughter. It is closer perhaps to what the German Romantics, who were intrigued by the experience of humor, seemed to think of as a smile that liberates us from anxieties, and especially from the doldrums, of our existence. If successful, myths, setting out to do what ordinary speech cannot reach, have to break through a barrier that is set for our normal understanding, and hence liberation is an apt word for what is envisaged.

An alternative to seeing the humor of myths is to view myth as a primitive form of doctrinal system in the general evolution of the world of thought, as evidence that the primitive ancients could not think like modern people do, or in some other way to force myth into some scheme of logic that
satisfies our contemporary sense of what reason and empirical reality are really all about. In all cases, these distortions neglect the actuality and the immediate presentation of the myths themselves.

A myth of the Brazilian Ge begins by stating that in former times the Indians had neither corn nor fire. It describes how one member of the tribe takes his wife to a distant place in the forest, where they set up a plantation and plant corn and other staple foods. The wife’s lover visits her secretly, and later returns with another man from the village. The husband turns into a man-eating snake, and devours the visitor. Thereupon the villagers kill the snake and bring to their village corn and the other cultivated plants, as well as fire. In the course of the story, the wife gives birth twice to a number of snakes, first in the forest, later in the village, and finally goes back into the forest, where she orders her offspring to bite people forevermore.

Whatever one may want to say about the origins of the enmity between humans and snakes, or about hidden logical systems, or about the frequently attested relation between the acquiring of a civilized life and violence, the myth conforms to other myths in that it contains events that strike the listener as strange or contradictory, beginning with the juxtaposition of the people without corn or fire and the departure of one couple to a forest where they run a plantation and suddenly master fire. Not all etiology is discarded, not all logic made superfluous; no less attention should be paid to cultural patterns and conditioning. Nevertheless, something that liberates, something that shakes listeners loose from their customary habits of mind, is given form in myth.

One need not look far to find other examples. In the familiar story in Genesis, God creates light on the first day of creation, yet the sun, the moon, and the other heavenly bodies do not come into being until the fourth day. By the end of the chapter, on the sixth day, God gives to the wild animals, to the birds of heaven, the reptiles, to every living creature, all of the green plants for food. Obviously, this is at odds with the knowledge possessed by every listener who is familiar with the eating habits of such animals as lions. One may argue that the narrative is not really a creation story but rather a paradise story. Whether we are convinced by this argument or by the realization that, according to the story, the creator god is something other than a prime mover, we are more shocked than persuaded into that novel idea. The accepted lines of thought are ruptured and replaced by new ones.

Of course, adherents of a tradition develop their own explanations, and it is characteristic that for instance the rabbinical commentaries embroider on puzzling texts not merely by analyzing them logically, but by participating in the same mythical vein in which the texts tell their stories. Thus the ancient rabbis tell us that the light created on the first day was not the ordinary light of the sun that we see. Instead, it was light by which one would have been able to see the entire world in a glance from one end to the other. God, in his wisdom, foreseeing human wickedness, hid that extraordinary light—and will not reveal it until the new world to come.

The German writer Jean Paul (pseudonym of Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763–1825), known for his literary essays, was thoroughly aware that humor does not deal with trifling matters but, on the contrary, with matters of ultimate importance. The four forms of humor he defined do not need much modification to be applied to mythical literature. All of them are characterized by their defiance of the wooden habits of human minds.

The first, the Dimming of Opposites, is probably present in most myths. Imagery abounds such as that of a time before creation when heaven and earth were not yet separated, or of a beginning in which the two were so close that people could not stand up straight, or as in Genesis, when it was necessary to separate the waters below from the waters above.

The second variety of humor depicts an Inverse Effect. Somehow, a disastrous event leads to infinite bliss that could not have been anticipated by the listener. Consider the Hindu cosmogonic story of the churning of the ocean. Before all ordinary time, in fact before the creation of the world, the gods and the demons exist in some apparent harmony. Then the gods raise the question of how they may attain immortality. Together with the demons they begin their quest for it by churning the ocean. Completely unexpectedly, instead of immortality a most deadly poison turns up. All variants of the myth state that the great god Śiva rescues the world (which, curiously, has not been born yet) from the poison by swallowing it. The Rāmāyaṇa version has the interesting detail that it is the god Viṣṇu who suggests that Śiva drink the poison on the grounds that the first offering is duly his. The accounts and their interpretations vary, but Śiva does drink the poison, and the world is established. The seriousness of the humor involved is evident, as is also the case with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the origin of Christianity, followed—without anyone among the human actors and witnesses involved anticipating it—by the resurrection.

A third category of humor, Subjective Reserveness, may be the best formula to denote the awareness in mythic narration of the curious union of the human voice that narrates and the sacred, more-than-human reality narrated. This awareness is expressed in many ways, sometimes elaborately, sometimes matter-of-factly. The standard beginning of a Buddhist sutra, which tells of the wonderful teachings and miracles of the Buddha that make freedom, or nirvāṇa, accessible, is the following: “Thus have I heard. . . .” Many myths are interspersed with phrases such as “it is said that,” or “they say.” Part of the tradition of many a Hindu is that he reveres his spiritual teacher, who in turn has his teacher, and so on, until the line finally reaches God. Tradition requires that the entire list of names be recited regularly. Thus, the mere individual quite consciously elaborates on his relationship to the absolute divine ruler.

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A fourth category of humor is Grotesque, a term not generally associated with sacred tradition. Yet it describes the most striking form of humor—in any tradition other than one’s own. Some myths speak of worlds that were created before the present one, and that were failures. For instance, in the tradition of the Hill Saora in India, the first world was a world made of a resinous substance; in that world some brothers set up a still and made liquor. The liquor was not merely excellent, it was too excellent; when it flowed it burst into flames, and as a result the entire world burned up and sank back into the primordial ocean. We may also recall the snakes of the Ge in Brazil and the Hindu story of the churning of the ocean. Often, the grotesque is a matter of exaggerated attention to detail or measurement. Grotesqueness helps to emphasize the complete otherness of that time at the beginning of the world or that time on which all salvation, salvation, or bliss hinges.

**Change and disappearance of mythical traditions?** There is no doubt that myths change in the course of time. In addition, the spread of the great missionary religions, mainly Islam and Christianity, has no doubt contributed to the neglect and disappearance of many a mythological heritage. We are however far from a dependable assessment of the entire globe’s mythological state at the present moment. We do know that the role of myths has been important in many periods in which large-scale religious change occurred, as it was in the conversion of Central Asia to Islam. The revision of the old myths by Muslim missionaries was not destructive but fruitful, and led to full acceptance of Islam.

**History of study.** Questions about religion, including the subject of myth, are undoubtedly older than recorded history, and hence a full history of the study of myths would have to begin a very long time ago, in that undatable period hidden from us in which religion originated. Explicit intellectual discussions on the subject are closer to us and have an important beginning with the ancient Greeks. Some of the standard methods of explaining myths owe their first formulation to the Greeks, so a rapid survey of mythology, in the sense of the study of myths, ought to commence with them. The concentrated intellectual discipline of a religio-historical study is, however, much more recent, not coming into its own until the early nineteenth century.

**The classical world.** Greek thinkers developed three modes of accounting for myth, each of which can be distinguished clearly. Each continued in the scholarship of later centuries. Hence, in Western civilization the Greek ideas on the subject of myth do not merely represent a start but form the roots that nourished systems devised by later scholars.

In the first place, allegorical explanations served to extract the meaning of myths for many thinkers in classical civilization. The text of myths was explained not by what it said literally but as depicting or concealing in poetic images a reality behind the text, if the text could only be properly understood. A good example may be found in the widely accepted interpretation in classical Greece of Homer’s *Iliad* as intending not the physical involvement of the gods in the war that the epic describes but instead the inner human struggle between good and evil.

The allegorizing of myth has occurred all over the world and in many periods, often when texts or customs that could not be summarily dismissed are no longer understood or perhaps have taken on an offensive quality in a new age. Many of the well-known classical thinkers, beginning with Theagenes (seventh century BCE), Heracleitus (c. 540–480 BCE), Parmenides (born c. 515 BCE), Empedocles (c. 490–430 BCE), and including Plato (c. 429–347 BCE), employed allegorical explanations of myths. An interesting feature, not only surviving since the classical period but expanded into an elaborate system in nineteenth-century nature mythology, was the assumption that many myths could be read as allegorical accounts for natural phenomena.

Rational explanations of various sorts also occur throughout the classical texts. One of these which often strikes the modern reader as far ahead of its time is found in a famous fragment from Xenophanes (c. 560–478 BCE):

Mortals suppose that the gods are born, and that they wear men’s clothing and have human voice and body... but if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own, horses like horses, cattle like cattle.

We should see this passage in a proper perspective. Xenophanes, though we know him only from some fragments, must have had in common with the majority of classical thinkers the desire not merely to destroy prevalent assumptions by means of some rational analysis but to make room for a philosophy worthy of the name; in the case of Xenophanes this philosophical concern was to create a proper understanding of the idea of transcendence. There were some classical thinkers, nevertheless, who spent great effort to demonstrate the worthlessness of traditional myths. The eclectic Latin writer Cicero (106–43 BCE) is quite critical in this regard; and the Latin didactic poet Lucretius (c. 99–55 BCE) is very sharp in his rational criticism.

A manner of explaining myths called euhemerism is named for the Greek writer Euhemerus (c. 340–260 BCE). Euhemerus was not a philosopher or a scholar, but the author of an imaginative story in which the narrator tells of a voyage to an island in the east whose kings bestowed gifts of lasting cultural value (such as the calendar, granted by Uranos in the tale) and were elevated to the status of gods by their grateful subjects. Hence euhemerism depicts deities as mortals who came to be venerated because of their contributions to the human race. This reinterpretation was to have a life which no one could have foreseen, in the classical world and long thereafter.

**The Christian world.** With regard to mythology, the intellectual world of Christianity was in most respects an immediate continuation of the Greek. Allegorical and rational
explanations as well as euhemeristic reasoning abounded for centuries. Nevertheless, especially in euhemerism, the apologists and church fathers introduced a change. Where the classical world told admiringly of men whose great exploits caused them to be worshipped as deities, the Christian world speaks of the gods of classical myth as mere men remembered because of their excessively evil deeds and vices. This change came about as a result of a larger shift in orientation—once that Plato, Aristotle, or any of the ancient thinkers could never have foreseen. The new Christian world makes much of the distinction between true and false religion. For Christian thinkers, true and false religion was not simply a topic for discussion, as it had been for the ancients. The Christians believed that theirs was the true knowledge of God, and other traditions were seen as false and pagan. Thus pagan gods were not gods at all, but demonic beings.

This twist in euhemerism filled an intellectual need and was generally accepted. Nevertheless, during the Middle Ages a narrative tradition of many streams, akin to the euhemerism of the classics, also continued. Thus the Norse gods could be categorized by tracing them through stories of kinship from the heroes in the Iliad and ultimately linking them by the same procedure to the creation story in the book of Genesis.

The eighteenth century. The eighteenth century is the prelude to the modern study of myth. For the first time serious efforts were made to assess the discoveries by voyagers of the Renaissance. One very important assemblage of myth was collected by Jesuit missionaries in North America. Questions of revelation and of falsehood and truth raised in the Christian tradition were revised and given new, complex forms. In the work of Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757), old and new ideas intermingled. Like other authors of the period, he begins by assuming the factual reality of God’s revelation in the Old Testament and speculating on the intellectual inability of other nations to accept that original knowledge. The new age is visible in his effort to show the similarity between myths found among American Indians and those of the ancient Greeks and in his view that the inability of those peoples to accept true religion reflected an intellectual childishness. The childishness of the ancient and so-called savage races becomes a standard image in many of the explanations that follow in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Fontenelle’s most original idea, next to his insistence on comparing different pagans, is his inference that all peoples have the same mental disposition and that, as a result, comparable developments occur in different parts of the world. More clearly than Fontenelle, Charles de Brosses (1709–1777) makes a case for comparative studies and shows an interest in questions of origins that would characterize much of the scholarship of the next century. His studies led him to the conclusion that elements of West African religion in his time could explain Greek mythological conceptions. Hence, in his view, the study of later “savage” can reveal much about earlier traditions.

Besides an expanding knowledge of the world, an even more significant factor marked the eighteenth century and made it a watershed: the rationalism of the Enlightenment. This change within the history of philosophy made it possible to narrow down the narrative euhemeristic expositions into a principle of explanation. For the study of myths this new intellectual direction was of course a mixed blessing. The new mood demanded laws of causation rather than seeking the coherences present in myths. Although the greatest legacy of the philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) is his critique of overconfidence in reason, his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779) contains many passages that typify the eighteenth-century obsession with definitions. De Brosses, who was certainly a man of the Enlightenment, made extensive use of Hume’s ideas in his own work.

The Romantics. The Romantic movement that swept Europe and America had its strongest exponents in Germany, and the movement’s influence on the study of myths, historical linguistics, and other related comparative studies such as art, law, and culture, was profound. Indeed, many of these disciplines were initiated under the Romantic influence. While the Enlightenment had sharpened the tools of the intellect in its resistance to the ancien régime politically and to the church religiously, the Romantic movement, without rejecting the Enlightenment’s accomplishments, created a very different center of attention that can be captured by such words as emotion, vision, and genius. Emotion came to be seen as at least of equal importance to the rationalism of the previous age.

The theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who left his mark on all areas in the study of religion in the nineteenth century and beyond, was of the opinion that the divine, in itself ungraspable, was represented mythically; the mythical he explained as “a historical representation of the supra-historical.” As was typical in the Romantic outlook, the emphasis fell on a vision of something eternal, not subject to the vicissitudes of history, yet expressed in history. The age that saw the Faustian creativity of Beethoven, the fully Romantic works of Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schubert, and Schumann, the writings of the young Goethe, Blake, and the German poets Friedrich Hölderlin and Novalis, as well as the paintings of Delacroix, Turner, and Théodore Géricault, saw also the philosophical creations of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

Hegel’s thought was the first since late antiquity (most especially, that of the non-Christian Roman thinker Plotinus, 205–270 CE) to develop a system free from the Christian philosophical opposition between true and false religion. Another idealistic, Romantic philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), wrote a philosophy of mythology centered on a totality of human vision. Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) was an important early Romantic, especially for his essays on poetry and mythology. During the Romantic period, many works of scholarly intent were written on symbolism and mythology. A few of these
made a lasting mark, among them the writings of Karl Otfried Müller (1797-1840) and the brothers Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm.

Nineteenth-century evolutionism. Without the Romantic impulse, the astounding nineteenth-century scholarly achievements in mythology and religion would be inconceivable. In the nineteenth century much new data became available, through ethnology, archaeology, and the study of ancient and distant civilizations and their languages. Compiling dictionaries, constructing grammars, and investigating Indo-European linguistics all demanded an extraordinary effort, and this effort, whether among government administrators in the colonies acquired by Western powers, in the expansion of newly established missionary societies, in the laboratories of science, or in historians' scrutiny and classification of documents, owed its principal inspiration to the Romantic thinkers. The idea of evolution—of development from low to high, simple to complex—that became so enormously influential in nineteenth-century thought is inseparable from the Romantic movement, predating the influence of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) in the work of Hegel, and also the much more positivistic works of the English social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857).

The cumbersome examination of facts and their compilation united with a Romantic attitude is perhaps nowhere as clearly to be seen as in the person of the Vedic scholar F. Max Müller (1823-1900). In his theories on the origin and development of language and myth, Müller posited as a beginning a pure awe in human experience before nature—especially in viewing the dawn—which he thought he had documented in the Vedic hymns. He marshaled all his knowledge of ancient Indo-European languages and literatures as a basis for a theory that a "disease of language" accounts for the formation of misunderstandings, which are deposited in myths as those of the Hindu Purāṇas. The finishing touch is provided by the general idea of evolution, according to which religions evolve to ever higher and purer forms.

Modern studies. The nineteenth century saw greater and greater complexity in materials available for study and the methods that could be employed. The achievements in the area of mythology by anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists, philologists, sociologists, and historians of religions were innumerable. Nevertheless, for a general intellectual orientation, it is possible and helpful to speak of variations on the theme which was set with the opposition and complementarity of rationalism and romanticism. And certainly in the study of myths the rationalists and the Romantics gave such a wide view of things that all later labors can sometimes seem like mere embellishments to their discussions. We can definitely speak about a constitutional or structural contrast between scholarly concerns for the problems and scholarly concerns for unity in the study of myths.

The earliest Romantics, in the 1770s, known in German literary history by their association with Sturm und Drang (storm and stress), can be understood in their opposition to the rationalism ushered in by the French philosophers. Even the influential ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder concerning the origin of language and myths, composed in his ecstatic writings about nature, can be read for their reaction against an intellectualist attitude which prevailed in Herder's day. The growing Romantic movement, however, was not engaged in combating the progress the Enlightenment had brought about and so frequently invoked. The new expressions we find among such Romantics as Schleiermacher point more to a transformation than an opposition, allowing subjects such as myth and history to be approached in fruitful ways.

More extreme Romantic scholarly work, such as that by Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771-1858), elicited stern criticism from Christian A. Lobbeck (1781-1860) because of its speculative features, its lack of evidence. In F. Max Müller's work and, as we must infer, in his personal make-up, the rational and the Romantic existed harmoniously.

Since the late nineteenth century the non-Romantic side has predominated. Scholars such as the classicist Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), Franz Cumont (1886-1949), and Martin P. Nilsson (1874-1967), who have contributed greatly to our knowledge of mythology, are splendid examples of this type. Fewer in number, scholars with an avowed Romantic outlook have included the German classicist Walter F. Otto (1874-1958) and the Dutch historian and phenomenologist of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950).

Sometimes the two attitudes are openly discussed, yet more often they are not. Whatever names are given to the two sides may not be accepted by one or the other party involved. Mircea Eliade preferred the term morphology of religion to phenomenology, which was employed by Van der Leeuw. Whichever term one likes, it is easy to see that in Eliade as well as Van der Leeuw the emphasis is on the sacred, and the study of its manifestations. This interest goes back to Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) and to Friedrich Schleiermacher. The reaction to this keen interest in the sacred itself is not difficult to detect, though it is multifarious. Many historians (such as Raffaele Petrazzini) have been more concerned with a proper understanding of the variety of myths than with what seemed speculation on a unity behind the variety; such scholars have been suspicious of theologically inspired apologetic tendencies as well. Many anthropologists, especially in the school of Franz Boas (1858-1942), has been too preoccupied with the puzzling coherences of specific cultures in all their creations to pay much attention to an underlying ultimate significance of myths.

A generalization that can be made, with caution, is that the beginning of the third millennium seems characterized by a longing for unspeculative, concrete results.
An increasing number of studies have come to focus on the social and political aspects of religion and storytelling rather than on ultimate meanings of myths. Together with this focus goes a decreased interest in philosophical aspects of religion. This tendency might make the study of myth in days to come different from what characterized previous eras in mythology and the history of religions.

The occurrence of problems and disagreements in the study of myth and religion is of course nothing to be unduly worried about. What we have referred to as an opposition/complementarity is a natural feature in any discipline concerned with people and their cultures and societies. Next to structural anthropology, historical anthropology makes its voice heard. Whereas the former, if not concerned with an ultimate unity, is at the very least concerned with coherences in myths and other human creations, the latter spends more time on the specifics and changes in any culture. An issue that has received no profound discussion is the difference, or rather, lack of contact, between the search for unity pursued by phenomenologists (or morphologists) and by structuralist anthropologists. That both are searching for coherences in myths is clear, yet the nature of a unifying goal is assumed in two very different manners. The choice of rationalism and romanticism as labels may be helpful in this case, yet they are not telling us the whole story.

It is striking, however, that Eliade's conception of the sacred is missing in the work of the field's foremost anthropological structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (born 1908); instead, Lévi-Strauss shows an obvious interest in the very visible yet long overlooked, typically human, ceaseless drive to reconcile empirical knowledge with the equally human drive for control over the world. Translators like to leave the term *bricolage* untranslated; it is the term Lévi-Strauss uses to describe the widespread process at work all over the world in tribal traditions to build up knowledge; the closest equivalent in English is *tinkering*. Lévi-Strauss is a gifted author and wrote several books that present not only his theories, but the living context in which his theories developed. No doubt his early philosophical interest accounts for the fact that his theories on structuralism are so well thought-out. A voracious reader, he was also well aware of the use of the term *structuralism* in other fields of study before he himself adopted it. Its use was common in anthropology, and Lévi-Strauss repeatedly makes reference to work of the Dutch structuralist anthropologist J. P. B. Josselin de Jong, and contributed to a book in his honor. In his perhaps most autobiographical and certainly most eminently readable book, *Tristes Tropiques: An Anthropological Study of Primitive Societies in Brazil*, he writes most directly about his impatience with the disorder in the still rather recent study of anthropology. In *The Savage Mind* he writes with fervor and with obvious delight about the knowledge fostered in "primitive" societies.

The knowledge that the then-traditional practice in anthropology, with its emphasis on the supposedly primitive or even savage elements it perceived among the natives was in fact the science of the concrete. It seems likely that Lévi-Strauss sees in the science of the concrete, built up through a tinkering process, something that is not all that far away from the good French scientific, sober, rationalist tradition, not only of Descartes, but also with a taste of Auguste Comte.

The absence of any notion of the sacred in Claude Lévi-Strauss's work cannot be ignored. In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss writes about his youthful experiences during World War I in the house of his grandfather, who was the rabbi in Versailles. The corridor leading from the house to the synagogue had to be negotiated in absolute silence. It seems obvious that for him "the sacred" retained a tone he had difficulty with. At the time, he says, "I was already an unbeliever." An unbeliever at the age of nine or ten? He relates this to the experience of amazement he would have later in Buddhist temples where monks slept in the same room where services were held and did not mind caressing their pupils between lessons in the alphabet. In the same work he refers disdainfully to the philosophy as taught in France in his student years as "mental gymnastics."

Dutch anthropologist J. van Baal, who served as the last governor of Dutch New Guinea, learned much from J. P. B. Josselin de Jong, who was one of his teachers, and was himself a splendid observer of various societies in Southeast Asia and their ceremonial interactions. As an administrator, he was less given to theoretical expositions than Claude Lévi-Strauss. At the same time, like other structuralists, he was hesitant to attribute "reality" to religion, yet was not averse to dealing with great problems in society. In 1972 he published a small, very interesting book, *De bondschap der drie illusies* (The message of the three illusions). The illusions are respectively religion, art, and the element of play in all human culture. No human society exists without these three, van Baal suggests, yet they do not have the reality of a concept like physics.

**Myths and the Modern World.** Myths and mythmaking have certainly not disappeared from the modern world. That notion, still rather popular, was fostered by nineteenth-century evolutionists who posited a decline of religion as part of some general world-wide progression. The process of history does not give up its most basic constituents, including its mythological creativity, because prevailing ideas change. The fact that in common parlance the word *myth* has a derogatory meaning has no bearing on the issue. Antiquity was already familiar with that same use of the term. The apostle Paul is among those on record as despisers of mere myths. Two religions of India, Buddhism and Jainism, have expressed strong misgivings about prevailing religious ideas, and these misgivings are another kind of deprecation of myths. Myths have continued to flourish, however, and the misgivings of any given religion, religious grouping, or age do not change that fact today any more than in the past.
In entering upon the study of myths, we should quickly reject the illusion that we are entitled to speak of the mythology, in the sense of the entire body of myths of any group, whether they be ancient Mesopotamians or an African people or the citizens of the United States of America. In none of these cases are we ever looking objectively at a total belief system. We are never in a position to do so. All we have before us are at best good selections by a scholar or a good sampling by a field worker. The availability of a collection in print between two covers does not make our position that of an objective observer readying himself for complete understanding. We look only at a fragment in time and place. The nature, structure, and style of myths points not merely to the existence of bodies of material, but to living traditions. The humor in myths changes in time, together with everything else in history, but it also indicates a universal human propensity. The erroneous idea that our own world is largely devoid of myths or is rapidly purified of such things rests largely on the assumption that our world, in whatever way that term is defined, is real and does not depend on fiction. Every age, however, and every civilization, rests on a foundation of mythic fictions. The philosopher Alphonse de Waele, in Castelli, Mythe et Foi, has rightly pointed out that we are able to see quite clearly the outline of a myth only after that myth has ceased to function unassembled and unquestioned, that is to say, as an expression of supposed reality.

In our own world, we lack the distance necessary for clear views of our own myths, and the question of which ones will stand out as central can be discussed seriously only by later generations. These future scholars also will have to make up their minds on the basis of fragmentary information, just as our scholarship must always remain conscious of the inadequacy of our information about mythology in ancient Mesopotamia or present-day Iran, or the nineteenth-century myths of evolutionism, materialism, missionary optimism, colonialism, or Marxism. Our own world with respect to its mythology is completed by the manner in which we orient ourselves not only within our transcendences, but also vis-à-vis other people in our endeavors to define and interpret their myths. This, one might say, concludes our circle of interpretation.

The Danish thinker Sören Kierkegaard (1813–1855) once conjured up the image of a man with his mouth so full of food that he could not swallow. Kierkegaard raised the question of whether one might better help that man by stuffing more food into his mouth or by taking some out. Obviously, only the latter could be a solution. In the same way, Kierkegaard argues, a man can be so filled with information, which he mistakes for useful knowledge, that even in the face of his own protests and his insistence on adding even more to his store of learning, the only cure is to take some of that knowledge away. This is the task Kierkegaard assigned himself in using the comical to make the overburdened man see the uselessness of what he knew. Kierkegaard’s parable is a perfect illustration of the unceasing propensity toward myth-making in modern times and, at the same time, of the need for the mature intellect to occupy itself with the issue of mythology.

Endeavors to explain religion (or explain it away) have been a by-product of culture since antiquity, if not earlier. In the nineteenth century such endeavors were part of Marxism, and they became part of the educational curriculum in the twentieth-century Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China. The trend in this direction is actually part of life in all industrial nations. Claude Lévi-Strauss dismisses religion, and yet he also makes efforts to understand myths scientifically, that is to say, in a way that as objectively as possible makes sense out of them. Several scholars have objected to the dismissal of religion, among them anthropologists such as Adam Kuper and Clifford Geertz. Nevertheless, the modern aversion to scholars like Rudolf Otto, who emphasized the religious experience as the key element in religion, is much more general, and certainly affects notable historians of religions as well.

An adequate assessment of the present-day situation in the study of myths would require extraordinary talent. It is, however, not easy to avoid one impression: the study of religion and religions has not been flourishing in recent times, and—with notable exceptions—no longer has a strong basis in linguistics and philology, the traditional basis of the history of religions.

SEE ALSO African Religions, article on Mythic Themes; Australian Indigenous Religions, article on Mythic Themes; Cargo Cults; Chinese Religion; Mythic Themes; Cosmogony; Euhemerus and Euhemerism; Humor and Religion; Indian Religions, article on Mythic Themes; Intuition; Japanese Religions, article on The Study of Myths; Logos; Mesoamerican Religions, article on Mythic Themes; Miletarianism, overview article; Myth and Ritual School; North American Indian Religions, article on Mythic Themes; South American Indian Religions, article on Mythic Themes; Structuralism.

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**Kees W. Bolle (1987 and 2005)**

**MYTH: MYTH AND HISTORY**

At first glance, myth and history appear to be complete opposites. To be sure, they are both narratives, that is to say, arrangements of events into unified stories, which can then be recounted. But myth is a narrative of origins, taking place in a primordial time, a time other than that of everyday reality: history is a narrative of recent events, extending progressively to include events that are further in the past but that are, nonetheless, situated in human time.

This initial definition, however, calls for a series of qualifying remarks that reveal a network of more complex relations in the place of this stark opposition. Let us first consider the fact that our very model of myth has come down to us from the stories of the gods in ancient Greece. Furthermore, a transition from myth to history can be seen in the