

# The Problem of Defining Myth

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## *The semantic span of the concept of myth*

The first thing that one realises in trying to grasp the semantic implications of myth is that myth can cover an extremely wide field. Without resorting to an enumeration of the different ways in which the term is used nowadays, it is clear that myth can encompass everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious impression to an absolutely true and sacred account, the very reality of which far outweighs anything that ordinary everyday life can offer. The way in which the term myth is commonly used reveals, too, that the word is loaded with emotional overtones. These overtones creep not only into common parlance but also, somewhat surprisingly, into scientific usage. That myth does, in fact, carry emotional overtones in this way is perhaps most easily seen if we think of terms such as prayer, liturgy, ritual drama, spell: they are all used for different religious genres but would seem to be more neutral than myth. It appears to be difficult for many scholars to discuss myth simply as a form of religious communication, as one genre among other genres.<sup>1</sup>

All attempts to define myth should, of course, be based, on the one hand, on those traditions which are actually available and which are called myths and, on the other, on the kind of language which scholars have adopted when discussing myth. In both cases, that of the empirical material and that of the history of scholarship on myth, the picture that results is far from uniform. Among those factors which have influenced, and still do

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<sup>1</sup> The genre analytic aspect as well as some other aspects of myth research I have recently discussed in an article "Der Mythos in der Religionswissenschaft", *Temenos*, 6, 1970, p. 36 ff., and earlier in "Genre Analysis in Folkloristics and Comparative Religion", *Temenos*, 3, 1968. Here I do not wish to repeat much of what I have already said, but I hope that the reader will consult those articles for further bibliographical references. In this paper the bibliographic apparatus will be reduced to a minimum.

influence to some extent, the situation I should like to mention three. The first is: demythologisation; the second: the explanations provided by antiquity, and the third: modern theories concerning myth.

### *The typology of demythologisation*

There are three main forms of demythologisation. It is possible to talk about a *terminological* demythologisation. This means that the actual word myth is avoided but the account, the story itself is retained. To call the Resurrection a myth may be a dastardly insult to a Christian for whom the concept myth has a pejorative sense. He would probably prefer some such expression as holy story or sacred history: perhaps quite simply history for in Christianity as in Judaism there is a marked tendency to transform religious traditions into history. Such a tendency is a culturally bound phenomenon: in some other cultures there may be noted a clear preference for the term story instead of history. Christian theologians are faced with certain difficulties when using the terms myth, history and sacred history. It is possible to imagine that someone might try to classify the Creation as myth, the Crucifixion as history and the Resurrection as sacred history.<sup>1</sup>

The second main type of demythologisation may be termed *total and compensatory*. Here the mythical tradition is rejected completely; such stories are unnecessary for the civilised mind, it is claimed. Then we are faced with two problems: how do we explain the continuing existence of myths and the influence they exert? How can we persuade others of the worthlessness of these stories? The first question has often been answered by means of evolutionary arguments. Comte, Dardel and many others have entertained ideas of a mythical period followed by non-mythical periods. However, historical developments have given the lie to such speculations. Philosophers who have been eager to abolish myth have realised that a vacuum is immediately created if the contribution made by myth to culture is explained away. They have therefore tried to provide constructive suggestions as to what might take the place of myth and its place in culture. David Bidney's answer runs as follows: "Myth must be taken seriously precisely in order that it may be gradually superseded in the interests of the advance-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Honko, "Der Mythos in der Religionswissenschaft", p. 56.

ment of truth and the growth of human intelligence. Normative, critical and scientific thought provides the only self-correcting means of combating the diffusion of myth, but it may do so only on condition that we retain a firm and uncompromising faith in the integrity of reason and in the trans-cultural validity of the scientific enterprise."<sup>1</sup> The renowned author of "Theoretical Anthropology" believes, then, in science, which will replace religion. He provides proof for the claim which is advanced from time to time that science is a religion for scientists. This somewhat trivial generalisation is of less interest to us here, however, than the fact that the advocates of demythologisation turn to compensation and substitution. A classic example of this is Plato's concept of an elite: he refused to admit Hesiod and Homer into his Ideal State. Another example is August Comte, who tried to fill the gap left by demythologisation by founding the worship of "le Grand-Être".

The third type of demythologisation is of a *partial and interpretative* type. Advocates of this line of thinking explain that there is no justification for believing myths quite literally. Myths, they say, are symbols or representations: it is insight into what lies behind them that is important. In order to gain this insight we need the help of an interpreter who can explain what we shall believe. The origin of partial and interpretative demythologisation is often to be found in the fact that a philosopher notes that the religious tradition of myths is no longer enough: it no longer agrees with the other premises of the contemporary world scene. Instead of opting for the alternative of total demythologisation he tries to salvage something of the myths by interpreting them. This was what happened in Ancient Greece and, more recently, there has been Bultmann's campaign along the same lines, beginning in 1941. Without going through the whole of Bultmann's theology one gets the impression that he does not demand that the Creation, the healing miracles of the New Testament nor even the Resurrection be accepted as the complete truth. Instead he emphasises that the important thing is to gain insight into the essence of the Christian faith and find an existential solution to one's problems in the light of interpreted Christian traditions. Bultmann is not without his critics. In the debate between Bult-

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<sup>1</sup> D. Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism and Truth", *Myth, A Symposium*, ed. by T. A. Sebeok, 1955, p. 14.

mann and Jaspers, for example, the important difference between the two seems to be that Jaspers is able to accept that a myth may be capable of several interpretations while Bultmann tends to hold that a tradition can be reduced to a single meaning which has universal validity. Both regard the priest as playing a decisive role as interpreter but Jaspers accepts interpretations adapted to certain situations. Bultmann, on the other hand, strives to discover the correct meaning of a tradition.<sup>1</sup>

### *The interpretations of antiquity*

The part played by classical antiquity in mythological scholarship can hardly be overestimated. Ancient philosophers postulated some ten explanations for myths, which have been resurrected from time to time right up to the present. The significance of these theories did not begin to wane until the breakthrough of empirical research at the beginning of this century. To clarify what I mean by these theories concerning the explanation of myths here is a list:

1) *The mythographic interpretations* belong partly to religious practice and partly to literature. Hesiod in his *Theogonia* and Homer in his epics (or the compilers of those works) were believers in tradition and transmitters of it, but they probably allowed themselves some freedom of interpretation or poetic expression.

Criticism was levelled against the mythographers and 'profanized' myths. There were demythologisers of the total and compensatory kind. So we have

2) *Philosophical criticisms* of various kinds. The rejection of traditional myths is total and compensations range from Xenophanes' monotheism and Heraclitus' somewhat pantheistic concept of *λόγος* to Plato's almost cynical view of religion as an instrument for dealing with uncivilised classes.

3) *The pre-scientific interpretation*. According to Thales water was the prime cause of all things and Anaximander talked about *ἀπειρον* as a sub-

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<sup>1</sup> On the problem of demythologisation see, e.g. K. Goldammer, *Die Entmythologisierung des Mythos als Problemstellung der Mythologien (Studium Generale, 8)*, Berlin 1955, p. 378 ff., and on the debate between Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity, An inquiry into the possibility of religion without myth*, New York 1958.

stance which was the material base of the universe. This natural science of physical origins did not severely contradict religion (Thales believed in a universe full of deities). The rejection as well as compensation remained implicit and latent.

There were those who wanted to rescue myths by means of partial and interpretive demythologisation. So we have, for example, the allegories of Theagenes such as

4) *The allegorical explanation based on natural phenomena* according to which Apollo is fire, Poseidon water, Artemis the moon and Hera the atmosphere (cf. the "hymns" composed by Parmenides and Empedocles) and

5) *The allegorical explanation based on spiritual qualities* according to which Athena is wise judgement, Ares boundless unreason, Aphrodite desire and Hermes the discerning intellect (cf. Anaxagoras, who explained that Athena is art, Lethe forgetfulness and Zeus intellect).

6) *The etymological interpretations* were also aimed at creating the impression that myths 'make sense'. It was thought that the secret of the gods lay in their names and epithets. Plato derived, from the verb *θεῖν*, the theory that man created the idea of god by observing the regular movement of the stars. The Stoicist Kleantes had two alternative etymologies for Apollo (verbs *ἀπολλύναι* 'destroy' and *ἀπολαύνειν* 'dispel').

7) *The historical (comparative and derivative) interpretation* was founded by Herodotus. The myths and gods were borrowed always *from* other cultures to the Greek. There were Libyan gods such as the one that later came to be called Poseidon or Egyptian gods like Zeus (derived from Ammon), Athena (from Neith), Apollo (from Horus). Interpretations of the names of gods and their attributes served as evidence. The 'ethnological' view created an atmosphere of relativity and secularisation.

8) *The Euhemeristic interpretation* was also historical but in the sense that gods were explained to have developed from the biographies of human beings. Herodotus and Prodicus made suggestions of this kind. Later the worship of Heracles and Aesculapius and, above all, Alexander the Great served as contemporary examples. The idea of cult attributed to human beings, mainly kings and heroes, was systematically applied by the novelist Euhemerus in his writings (the tale of a visit to the island, Panchaia, where the

genealogies of Greek gods, originally kings, etc., were found engraved on a golden pillar).

9) *The 'sociological' interpretation or the deceit of priests, lawmakers, rulers etc.* was introduced when the veneration of the wise leaders waned. The sophist Critias taught that the gods had been invented to maintain social order. Epicurus also referred to man's evil conscience as the prime source of myths and Polybius said that the ancestors had wisely introduced gods to restrain the ignorant masses by fear of the unknown. Socrates and Plato attributed much of the content of myths to the phantasy of poets.

10) *The psychological interpretations* are already discernible in the previous trend. Fear as a source of belief and worship was advocated by Epicurus, among others. It was Statius who coined the sentence: *primus in orbe deos fecit timor*. Prodicus taught that worship of the gods is based on gratitude e.g. for a good crop, successful hunting; it is man's reaction to the favour and efficacy of cosmos and earth. The gods are benign powers: bread = Demeter (Mother Earth, protector of crops), wine = Dionysos, fire = Hephaistos.<sup>1</sup>

These explanations were designed to serve the elite: folk religion and official cults were not deeply affected by them. This has been the case ever since. You may follow the formation of various religions on the one hand, and the development of scholarly frames of reference on the other. They do not necessarily coincide or correlate.

### *Modern theories of myth*

Since the conception that we have of myth has continually to be revised in the light of modern scholarship a brief classification of present theories about myth, or of the angles from which myth is studied today, would not be out of place. I have compiled a list of twelve ways that scholars have used in their approach to the problem of myth: among these twelve approaches there may be distinguished four sub-groups, namely, historical, psychological, sociological and structural perspectives.<sup>2</sup> These approaches may

<sup>1</sup> For the theories of antiquity see, e.g. J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*, Freiburg 1961, p. 43. Cf. J. de Vries, *The Study of Religion. A Historical Approach*, New York 1967, p. 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. S. Cohen, "Theories of Myth", *Man*, 4, 1969, p. 337 ff., where the number of theories is more limited.

sometimes be mutually opposed and in competition with each other but, nevertheless, I think that there are two facts which are today accepted by the majority of scholars. The first is that these theories in fact overlap and complement each other to some extent. The second is that myths are multi-dimensional: a myth can be approached from, shall we say, ten different angles, some of which may have greater relevance than others depending on the nature of the material being studied and the questions posed.

1) *Myth as source of cognitive categories.* Myth is seen as an explanation for enigmatic phenomena. The intellect needs to conceptualise certain aspects of the universe, to establish the relationship between different phenomena.

2) *Myth as form of symbolic expression.* Myth is placed on a par with other creative activities, such as poetry or music. Myth has its own laws, its own reality, its own forms of expression: it may be looked upon as a projection of the human mind, as a symbolic structuring of the world.

3) *Myth as projection of the subconscious.* Myth is seen in relation to a substratum shared partly by all humans, partly only by members of the same race, nation, culture (Neo-Jungian emphasis on socialization and cultural group instead of racial-genetic inheritance). Freud offered the concept of day-dreams as models for myth. The message is disguised and condensed, projection of the subconscious is controlled partly by tradition, partly by elementary facts of life.

4) *Myth as an integrating factor in man's adaptation to life: myth as world view.* In myths man is faced with fundamental problems of society, culture and nature. Myths offer opportunities of selecting different elements which satisfy both individual tendencies and social necessities. From these elements it is possible to create an individual, but at the same time traditional, way of viewing the world.

5) *Myth as charter of behaviour.* Myths give support to accepted patterns of behaviour by placing present-day situations in a meaningful perspective with regard to the precedents of the past. Myths provide a valid justification for obligations and privileges. Myths act as safety valves by making it possible for people to ventilate their emotions without socially disruptive effects.

6) *Myth as legitimation of social institutions.* Myths sustain institutions:

together with ritual they give expression to common religious values and consolidate them.

7) *Myth as marker of social relevance.* Myths are not regarded as a random collection of stories: in a culture there is a clear correlation between the distribution of mythical themes and what is considered socially relevant in that culture.

8) *Myth as mirror of culture, social structure, etc.* Myths are considered to reflect certain facets of culture. This reflection is seldom direct or photographic but it may reveal values which would otherwise be difficult to detect.

9) *Myth as result of historical situation.* Stress is laid on the reconstruction of those events which were most decisive in the formation of the myths. Myths are appraised in the light of their historical background: their subsequent use and modification in view of new historical developments are placed in relation to their origin.

10) *Myth as religious communication.* Myths may be regarded as information which is transmitted from sender to receiver via different media. Closer analysis of this communication process implies such things as observing the redundancy in the language of religion and in non-verbal forms of expression, the definition of the basic elements of a message, etc.

11) *Myth as religious genre.* Myths are regarded principally as being of a narrative nature: They are seen, however, in relation to other narrative genres and to non-epic genres of the kind which contribute to spread the message of myth. This genre analytical aspect of myth implies that traditional forms condition the nature of the communication process.

12) *Myth as medium for structure.* To this category belong those methods of research which are often characterised as structural but which deal in varying ways with the language, content and structure of myths. The structure of myths may be analysed from a syntagmatic or paradigmatic angle, for example. The concept of binary opposition is one of the most popular watchwords in this respect.

### *A descriptive definition*

What has been said above is intended to provide the background against which the development and uses of the concept of myth may be understood. Ideas as to what is comprised by the concept myth vary considerably.



Personally I favour a middle course between the extremes of too wide a definition and too narrowly drawn a definition. As an example of far too wide a definition, so wide as to be almost amorphous, there is the so-called mythopoetic conception which Cassirer represents, for instance.<sup>1</sup> I cannot believe that such an abstract definition is either necessary or useful even for those who wish to make use of the results achieved by Cassirer in his research on mythological symbols. On the other hand, Theodor Gaster's view may be cited as an example of too narrow a conception of myth. According to him direct proof is required that a story has been used in connection with a rite before it can be accepted as a myth.<sup>2</sup>

As a descriptive and concise definition of myth I have in the past used the following:

“Myth, a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all the parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms, it provides patterns of behaviour to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult. The true milieu of myth is to be found in religious rites and ceremonial. The ritual acting out of myth implies the defence of the world order; by imitating sacred exemplars the world is prevented from being brought to chaos. The reenactment of a creative event, for example, the healing wrought by a god in the beginning of time, is the common aim of myth and ritual. In this way the event is transferred to the present and its result, i.e. the healing of a sick person, can be achieved once more here and now. In this way, too, the world order, which was created in the primeval era and which is reflected in myths, preserves its value as an exemplar and model for the people of today. The events recounted in myths have true validity for a religious person. For this reason the use of the term myth in everyday language is from the scholarly point of view inexact (in ordinary language myth is often used expressly for something untrue, utopian, misguided, etc.). The *point de départ*, then, is criticism directed towards religious groups and traditions

<sup>1</sup> See Honko, “Der Mythos in der Religionswissenschaft”, p. 38 f.

<sup>2</sup> Honko, “Der Mythos in der Religionswissenschaft”, p. 39 f.

from outside and this criticism has always existed. Nowadays attempts have often been made to brand non-religious ideas, political ideas, economic teaching, etc., as myth."<sup>1</sup>

### *The four criteria*

In order to clarify more exactly what is meant by the definition given here it may be noted that it is built on four criteria: form, content, function and context.

In terms of its *form* a myth is a *narrative* which provides a verbal account of what is known of sacred origins. There are in addition, of course, brief intimations, allusions to myths and mythical symbols. These can be understood only if a certain narrative content can be considered a background for them. Mythical prototypes, exemplary figures and characters as well as repeated heroic deeds or creative acts can all be verbalised in the form of a narrative. The question is: can myths be expressed through the medium of other genres than narrative, for example, prayer or sacred pictures where there is no need to recite the narrative content? When investigating a certain myth all the information that helps to perpetuate the myth must be included. There can be no limiting the material under investigation to the most traditional and fixed forms of the myth's manifestation: attention must also be paid to every individual, temporary, unique and non-fixed aspect of the use of the myth.

Myth can be brought to life in the form of a ritual drama (enacted myth), a liturgical recitation (narrated myth) in which case both verbal and non-verbal media (sermons, hymns, prayers, religious dances) can be utilised. Similarly myth can be manifested in religious art (ikons, symbolic signs). In addition to these codified forms we also have the way in which myth is transmitted in speech, thought, dreams and other modes of behavior. A religious person may in the course of his experience identify himself with a mythical figure. Myth may totally dominate his behaviour but it need not be verbalised. Since the material which empirical research into myth has to work with is so varied, it would perhaps be useful to have a term for the minimum amount of information that the human mind needs in order to create a recognisable version of a myth no matter what form or context the

<sup>1</sup> L. Honko, *Uskontotieteen oppisanastoa*, Helsinki 1971, *sub voce* Myytti.

myth might adopt for its expression. Henry A. Murray's term "mythic imagent" might be used for this minimum.<sup>1</sup>

Myths vary greatly, of course, as to their *content* but one link that ties them together is encountered in the fact that, in general, myths contain information about decisive, creative events in the beginning of time. It is no coincidence that *cosmogonic* descriptions occupy a central position in many mythological accounts. One has only to think of the part played by cosmogony in all three main types of ritual: calendar rites, rites of passage and rites of crisis. The importance of myths of creation as a kind of proto-myth becomes abundantly clear as soon as an attempt is made to list the countless examples which show how readily the origin of widely differing phenomena is linked with the creation of the world. Cosmogonic myths seem, in many religions, to provide a special authority for stories of how culture originated. But, of course, not all myths are cosmogonic in content if the word is used in its strictly literal sense. The most important thing perhaps, at least it would seem so to me, is the structural parallel between cosmogonic myths and certain other stories of the world's origin which the social group accepts as the ultimate source of its identity. In other words, the term cosmogonic in this sense comprises all those stories that recount how the world began, how our era started, how the goals that we strive to attain are determined and our most sacred values codified. Seen from this point of view the 96th sura of the Koran, the birth of Christ, the life of Lenin, Che Guevara's death and Mao's speeches are all material which, under certain conditions, can be structured in a way which resembles ancient cosmogonic myths.

Myths *function* as examples, as models. From myths it is possible to obtain a more or less uniform explanation of the world at the basis of which lie the creative, the formative activities of the gods, culture heroes, etc. The mythical view of the world is experienced as something static: there are no changes, no developments. In principle it is possible to find exemplars and models for all human activity and all perceptible activity

<sup>1</sup> He defines it "an imagined (visualized) representation of a mythic event" and points out that a book of mythic stories on a shelf in the library is inoperative—a mere residue of past imagination—so long as it is never read, never generates influential imagents in other minds. See H. A. Murray, *Myth and Mythmaking*, Boston 1960, p. 320 ff.

in the events of the great beginning. The religious person's share in this lies in the fact that he preserves these examples in his mind, he follows and copies them. Myths have, of course, numerous specific functions but we may generalise and say that they offer both a cognitive basis for and practical models of behaviour. From this point of view myths can be characterised as *ontological*: they are incorporated and integrated into a coherent view of the world and they describe very important aspects of life and the universe.

The *context* of myth is, in normal cases, *ritual*, a pattern of behaviour which has been sanctioned by usage. Myth provides the ideological content for a sacred form of behaviour. Ritual brings the creative events of the beginning of time to life and enables them to be repeated here and now, in the present. The ordinary reality of everyday life recedes and is superseded by the reality of ritual drama. What was once possible and operative in the beginning of time becomes possible once more and can exert its influence anew.

### *Concluding remarks*

The definition that I have tried to sketch here has been mainly intended to draw attention to the different levels which are relevant to the undoubtedly complex concept myth. If one differentiates between these four levels, namely, form, content, function and context, it is much easier to encounter the varied uses which the concept has acquired in scientific literature. By this I mean that it is possible to delimit and yet be flexible at the same time. There is no need to welcome with open arms just any traditions into the fold of myth research: but nor is it necessary to exclude, for example, studies of myth where the context criterion, i.e. a context of ritual, is not fulfilled. The degree of flexibility that can be achieved is dependent on the approach that the scholar has chosen. Should he wish to include both literary sources and oral material in different cultures and perhaps also in different genres, in order to cast light on all the manifestations of a myth motive, then it is pointless to demand that their function and context should correspond to those of the ideal type of myth. In such cases it has often been possible to circumnavigate the problem by speaking of, for example, a mythologeme instead of a myth. In this way one avoids deceiving the

reader into believing that the subject under discussion is ritual text. For example, when, in a ballad recited by young girls in Ingermanland, a variant of a cosmogonic myth is included, it is better to refer to it as a mythogeme rather than as a myth to avoid giving the reader the impression that it is a ritual dance. It is thus a question of an expedient liberty at the level of context, which is justified as long as the scholar limits his claims strictly to the content. It would of course be desirable to say which of the criteria is or are the most decisive but it would appear to be without justification to give a normative recommendation here. It is and will continue to be the task of every scholar to give the concept an operative definition, i.e. to give it a content which most effectively and consistently serves the ends which his own particular research situation demands. In the process, each of the criteria mentioned above should be carefully scrutinised in some way or other.