14

MYTH

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Open a newspaper, a magazine or even a scholarly book and find the word "myth." The odds are that the writer uses the word to convey one of two meanings. First, "myth" commonly denotes widely shared beliefs that are simply false—as in Bruce Lawrence's *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (1998), an attempt to expose and correct stereotypes of Muslims, or John Shelby Spong's question, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1994), or Naomi Wolf's best-selling *The Beauty Myth* (1992), a critique of the way women are forced to estimate their social and personal selves with reference to an impossible, ideal beauty standard. Second, "myth" is used to tag apparently fictional stories that originated in early human communities as attempts to explain commonplace but mysterious events in the natural world. Myths, in this sense, are understood to be aetiologies that explain the origins or causes of something that cannot be explained by scientific accounts. Although the first use of "myth" is harsher than the second, in both cases the word carries with it a strong judgment about ourselves and others: either we labor under falsehoods—unbelievable beliefs, stereotypes that disfigure those not like us, punishing standards of beauty, and so on—or, despite our best efforts, we do not understand the way the world actually works and so we use stories to come to the rescue where knowledge fails us.

Despite the fact that these two senses originated in dramatically different social and historical contexts, as we will see, they co-exist so comfortably in the popular imagination today because both are *modernist* in character in that they are based on the premise that one can somehow perceive and distinguish between *reality as it really is*, on the one hand, and *reality as it happens to be (mis)represented*, on the other. Without this modernist supposition, neither of these uses of the word "myth" would make much sense at all. And it is precisely the underlying premise of the two most common uses of "myth" that should occupy our attention when considering the category "myth."

Beware of Mythmakers

The term "myth" is not of our own recent invention; it comes to us from ancient Greece. Because it is with the Greeks that any commentary on myth must begin, surveys of the history of myth studies typically begin by recounting the difference between two Greek terms, *mythos* and *logos*. Although these two terms originally seem to have been synonyms, both signifying "word" or "story"—in the ancient world a *mythologos* was a storyteller—*mythos* eventually took on restricted meanings. When Greek intellectuals and critics began to question the traditional tales of gods and heroes during the period of the "sophistic enlightenment," *mythos* became an "implausible story" (Herodotus 2.23.1), mere "fabulous" tale-telling opposed to true history (Thucydides 1.22.4), or popular but false stories and even outright lies opposed to *logos*, which especially Plato defined as propositional statements open to demonstration and proof by means of logical reasoning (see Graf 1993: 1-2).

Plato's oppositional classification of *mythos* and *logos* has become a master trope in popular and scholarly discussions of myth. As for Greek thought, however, things were a little more complex than this. Richard Buxton (1994) has shown that Plato's clean, oppositional distinction between *mythos* and *logos* is not always evident in ancient Greek literature and thus may not have been as widely representative of Greek views on *mythos* as is now customarily thought. Since Plato's classification has been so axiomatic in Western myth studies, representing it as *the* Greek view, it may have more to do with the modern European "imaginary" Greece—among the most often used genealogical authorities for sanctioning everything from our own classificatory language to our culture—than with the historical Greek meaning of *mythos* and *logos*.

In addition to the possibility that Plato's classification functions as a myth of origins for modern myth scholarship, we should take into account another provocative ambiguity. In the modern era the term "mythology" usually denotes both a collection of a people's myths as well as the science of studying collections of myths. The former refers in Platonic manner to a grouping of stories spun out of the human imagination, that is, unverifiable discourses, while mythology as a scholarly activity connotes, in similarly Platonic fashion, rational, demonstrable argumentation, the trading in verifiable discourses. The scholarly *mythologos*, the teller of scientific truths, thus works both in concert and in contest with the folk *mythologos*, the teller of fabulous and fantastic tales. It would seem, getting ahead of ourselves a bit, that it is not all that clear who the mythologists really are.

We see here one instance of the messy state of the category "myth." Although it is usually used as a simple classificatory term to set off one kind of discourse from another, it turns out that the category is often *intellectually committed* to an *a priori* clean distinction between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, fabulous delusion and scientific lucidity, us and them, just as it is *rhetorically wielded* to reinforce these oppositions by coordinating them with a

scale of moral, social and political values. Hence the power to label someone's story as myth, and to classify our world-view as "scientific" over against their world-view as "mythic," is not only to classify stories, but people (are they gullible or intelligent?), societies (are they uncivilized or civilized?) and cultures (are they primitive or advanced?). The apparently straightforward distinction between false and true tales (*mythos* vs. *logos*) is therefore loaded with social significance and consequence.

For example, we would be naïve to think that Plato opposed *mythos* with the superior rationality of *logos* simply out of pure theoretical interest. Despite expressing what seems to be a sincere admiration for the talent of the poet, that is, the story-teller (*Republic* 398a; see also 568a–c), Plato thought that poets are dangerous. But why?

> The mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution, by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favour with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the lesser, but calls the same thing now one, now the other. (*Republic* 605c)

Readers who are acquainted with the rest of the *Republic* might wonder why, if such imitation and re-presentation by means of story-telling should be disallowed, Plato is so free to tell his own story that sounds suspiciously like a *mythos* of origins to authorize his just state (*Republic* 414c–415e)? What appears, then, to be ultimately at stake in Plato's—and our?—distinction of *mythos* from *logos* is a contest for the right to define the proper constitution of the state, the right to define the proper constitution of "the good," "the true" and "the just." It was a contest in which "the myths that Plato didn't like … were lies and the myths he liked … were truths," as Wendy Doniger bluntly puts it (1998: 3). Plato's *mythos* was not so much an innocent classificatory term as a word that he used to censure views he did not like in the arena of public discourse and persuasion.

Turning to a more recent example, we could demonstrate how the *mythos–logos* distinction was once strategically allied to European expansionism and colonialism, an interest for which people characterized as primitive, uncivilized and gullible do come in handy as needy beneficiaries of European "civilization" (Bowler 1992; R. Williams 1980). If we throw in the once common view of European writers of the early modern era concerning the dawn of a slow but steady victory of science (*logos*) over mere superstition and religion (*mythos*), a dawn that must not only enlighten Europe but all the nations of the globe, we see once again that the classification "myth" is far from an innocuous academic label. It is instead a master signifier that authorizes and reproduces a specific world-view.

With all this in mind, there just might be something to the fact that an ancient storyteller and the modern scientific study of mythology bear the same name. When thinking about the category of myth, therefore, we must reckon with, and not evade the possibility that

myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype ... Thus, instead of there being a real thing, myth, there is a thriving *industry*, manufacturing and marketing what is called "myth." "Myth" is an illusion—an appearance conjured or "construct" created by artists and intellectuals toiling away in the workshops of the myth industry. (Strenski 1987: 1–2)

To anticipate the conclusion of this essay, despite our apparent interest in talking about real things—myths that are lived, told, written down, anthologized and studied—we are continually struck by how our very judgment as to just what is and what is not a myth betrays some generally undetected logic inherent in our own social world and does not necessarily tell us about something that is self-evidently inherent in data we classify as myth.

Some Workshops in the Myth Industry

Although the use of the label "myth" to distinguish false from true stories continues to live on, the story of "myth" in the course of the past several centuries of modern scholarship fortunately is richer than that. Because there are a wealth of good resources that survey the many uses of "myth" (see for example Bolle 1968, 1983, 1987; Bolle et al. 1974; P. Cohen 1969; Doty 1986, 1999; Eliade 1973, 1991; Graf 1993: 9–56; Kirk 1973; Segal 1980; Vernant 1980: 203–260), we will only briefly sketch some of the major types here.

1. *Pre-scientific explanations of natural phenomena.* Prominent among a group of nineteenth-century anthropologists was the view that myths are attempts on the part of early human beings to explain aspects of their natural environment. This understanding of myth was articulated influentially by the German philologist Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812), though he had forerunners (on Heyne and his predecessors see Graf 1993: 9–19). Heyne recovered and rehabilitated the term *mythos*, preferring it over his contemporaries' use of *fabula* (fable) which Heyne considered to be too tied up with notions of the fictive and absurd to capture what he considered the serious intent of *mythos* (Graf 1993: 10). As with so many of his contemporaries, Heyne believed that the key to understanding myths is located at their origin, which he pursued by a textual "paring knife" approach (i.e., source-critical and philological methods) on the assumption that the textualized myths available to him had accreted to themselves many additions and modifications in their oral and literary history. He concluded that

> myth arose in prehistoric times, during the childhood of mankind . . .
> [He] did not suppose that myth was a bizarre invention of primitive
> man; instead, he thought that it came into being naturally and
> inevitably at the moment when early man, overawed or frightened by
> some natural phenomenon, first sought to explain it, or when,
> moved by a feeling of gratitude toward some exceptional person, he
> wished to recount and extol a person's deeds. (Graf 1993: 10)

This view reflects a commonplace in the scholarship of the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, a view that culminates in the Intellecualist tradition
associated with such figures as F. Max Müller, Herbert Spencer, Andrew
Lang, Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. As suggested above, this
understanding of myth continues to dominate today's popular imagination.

2. *Tales of heroes.* For Heyne, myths were an explanation of natural phenomena
   as well as a memorialization of dramatic past events or heroic deeds, a view
   that goes back to the philosopher Euhemerus of Messene (340–260 B.C.E.),
   who suggested that tales recounting the deeds of the Olympian gods actually
   were disguised stories that glorified the exploits of real, but long dead figures.
   In the modern era, this approach—sometimes called Euhemerism—was
   reintroduced by one of the fathers of evolutionary theory, Herbert Spencer.
   Spencer argued that the historic origins of the belief in supernatural beings was
   to be found in the ancient worship of actual but long-dead ancestors. Over
   time, such ancestors came to be venerated as powerful beings (ghosts, gods,
   etc.), who were satisfied by means of ritual offerings. "Ancestor worship is the
   root of every religion," Spencer concluded, and myths were both the proof for
   and the access to the historic "roots" of religion.

3. *Expression of mythopoeic mentality.* Another line of European thought
   focused on the emotive or expressive sources and functions of myth.
   Rather than understanding myth as an attempt to explain the natural
   world, it could be taken as the spontaneous expression of what many
   label the "mythopoeic mentality." For instance, Bernard de Fontenelle
   (1657–1757) regarded myths as the evidence of a so-called "primitive
   mentality," a form of pre-logical cognition and rationality that pre-dates
   logical and scientific rationality in the evolutionary history of the human
   mind. Fontenelle then drew a direct link between ancient human beings
   and contemporary "savages" (e.g., Iroquois, Laplanders, Kaffirs), a link
   that allowed him to make inferences about ancient people by studying
   the emotional life of his "savage" contemporaries. In this tradition of
   myth scholarship we could also place the early twentieth-century
   philosopher Ernst Cassirer, a key figure in focusing attention on the
   fact that what sets humans apart from other members of the animal
   world is our ability to traffic in symbols. In the words of Percy Cohen
   (1969: 339), for Cassirer

myth-making can no more be explained or explained away than can the making of poetry or music: myth is one way of using language for expressive purposes, through the symbolic devises of metonymy [when one thing stands in for another] and synecdoche [when a part stands in for the whole] and myth-making is, in some respects, an end in itself.

For yet others, the "savage" was an appealing figure in its own right. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), for example, thought that the more "savage" a group was, the more spontaneous and alive they were. Valorizing immediate "experience" and its raw expression, Herder and other nineteenth-century Romantics evaluated myths positively as "repositories of experience far more vital and powerful than those obtainable from what was felt to be the artificial art and poetry of the aristocratic civilization of contemporary Europe" (Bolle et al. 1974: 718). Assuming that "religious" emotions are somehow different from other experiential states, myth becomes the medium by which those emotions, inspired by the numinous or the holy, are expressed and made public. A fairly coherent tradition develops around this assumption of religion as "feeling" or "experience" which is expressed by myths or other phenomena that can be studied in an attempt to gain access to religious experience. Joachim Wach's dictum that myths should be read as the "theoretical expression of religious experience" (Wach 1958: 65) is a more recent statement of a very popular tradition that continues among scholars and the general public alike. (On the problems of "experience" as an analytic category, see J. W. Scott 1991; Sharf 1998.)

4. *Social dreaming.* In some psychology-based theorizing, myths function on the social level much as dreams, nervous habits or slips of the tongue do in the life of the individual. That is, myths are thought of as the disguised expressions of anti-social but completely natural desires and wishes. Sigmund Freud (1913; see Segal 1996: vol. 1) painted a picture of the human condition as one in which individuals attempt to fulfill their private needs for pleasure (e.g., sex, food, power) while simultaneously attempting to secure their place in a larger social unit where such wish-fulfillment is rarely allowed for the sake of maintaining the social unit (e.g., to preserve family harmony few of us actually tell our family members what we really think of them). Freud theorized that to be human means one is caught in a catch-22 of the worst kind: we are stuck with completely natural wishes that we have no choice but to suppress and internalize for the relative harmony of social life. Such suppression, however, creates anxiety. Sooner or later this repression-induced anxiety builds to such a point that the repressions must be let out, but only in a disguised form (since we can never actually act on the real desire), thereby giving vent to the anti-social desires but in a more socially acceptable manner. As a cruel footnote to this state of affairs, the guilt associated with acting out

disguised desires, that is, expressing desires inauthentically, produces new anxiety and the cycle is endlessly repeated.

To be human, therefore, is to be neurotic to varying degrees, and myth is a narrative mechanism, a kind of collective therapy of neurotic desire, that allows social groups to act out their desires and fantasies while allowing them to remain a coherent social unit. For instance, what better way is there to fulfill ones love–hate relationship with authority figures (based on desires of incest and patricide) than by telling and retelling, acting and living out tales of children rising up against parents and siblings battling each other? Be it the ancient Greek myths (e.g., Hesiod's tale of the origin of the gods in the *Theogony*), biblical stories (e.g., the fratricide in the Cain and Abel story, or the sacrifice of Jesus, the supposed son of God) or modern movies, novels and soap operas, this view sees them all as narrative vehicles for projecting and momentarily resolving the inevitable and never-ending anxiety associated with social existence.

5. *Expressions of the collective unconscious.* Other psychologists see myths not as mechanisms for venting and coping with anxiety but as symbolic messages projected from ourselves and directed to ourselves. Following Carl Jung, these scholars understand myths as the means whereby aspects of our personality that are banished to our unconscious are given symbolic voice in the forms of certain archetypes (e.g., the Wise Old Man, the Earth Mother, the Innocent Virgin). We therefore ignore the messages of myths to our own peril, for they are the expressions of our full potential and true personality (Hudson 1966; Segal 1998). In our time, the late Joseph Campbell is perhaps the best known advocate of this viewpoint. Following a number of anthropological theorists before him, Campbell identifies a universal three-part *quest motif* involving departure–confrontation and change–return that comprises heroic stories told the world over throughout time. (Campbell draws attention to the exploits of Luke Skywalker in George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy as one of the most recent instances of this age-old narrative.) Our attraction to these stories is understood as a function of our identification with their archetypical images (e.g., the viewer becomes Luke Skywalker or maybe Darth Vadar), an identification that helps us to realize and balance the various aspects of our own personality. Campbell asserts that the proper analysis of stories as different as the adventures of Odysseus and the televised images of the Apollo astronauts splashing-down in the ocean can provide evidence of certain fundamental aspects of not just individual human psyches but also aspects of our common human need to "follow your bliss" (Joseph Campbell 1968, 1988; Noel 1990)—a recommendation that, for some, earned Campbell the title of guru to the yuppy generation (B. Gill 1989).

6. *Structuralism.* For modern scholars of myth, the challenge generally is to see these apparently illogical and fantastic narratives as very much ordered and therefore understandable. Following the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss

(1972b, 1975–78), himself influenced by the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, some scholars study myths much as one studies language: as structured public evidence of the order of human cognition itself. Myths are structured in a fashion similar to the structuredness of human language which is functional and meaningful only because of the complex inter-relationships among its basic units such as letters, phonemes, words, sentences, and so on. Structuralists thus study myths not in terms of their historical development and change (the Euhemerist approach), nor as evidence of a pre-scientific rationality (the Intellectualist approach), nor as expressions of some raw emotional or mystical mentality (mythopoeic analysis), nor by artificially isolating one of their many elements in an allegorical hunt for archetypes (Jung). Rather, structuralists think that the message of a myth results from how its elements relate to each other as part of a coherent structure (Gordon 1981; Leach 1967, 1976).

7. *Myths as truth.* The theories of myth surveyed so far obviously arise from a diverse number of disciplinary fields (anthropology, philosophy, psychology, etc.). Drawing on these and other theories, a group of scholars in the history of religions school (a designation that translates the German *Religionswis-senschaft*, literally "science of religion") has developed an approach to the study of myths that is particular to much scholarship on religion. From this viewpoint, myths are stories that convey, in some veiled, encoded or symbolic form, a social group's deepest personal and social values. Although programmatically exemplified in the works of Mircea Eliade (1959b, 1960, 1963a, 1974), myths as veiled, deep truths is the operative assumption in most current scholarship on religion. Here is a representative sampling:

> Myth is above all a story that is *believed*, believed to be true, and that people continue to believe despite sometimes massive evidence that it is, in fact, a lie ... [W]hat a myth *is* is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories. (Doniger 1998: 2)

> The governing function of myth is to reveal exemplary models for all rites and all meaningful human activities. (Eliade 1991: 4)

> Myth is an expression of the sacred in words: it reports realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid for the basis and purpose of all there is. Consequently, a myth functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge. (Bolle 1987: 271)

> Myth is a narrative of origins, taking place in primordial time, a time other than that of everyday reality. (Ricoeur 1987: 273)

> Myth is a distinctive expression of a narrative that states a paradigmatic truth. (Long 1987: 94)

> *Myth* is the *first form* of intellectual explanation of religious apprehensions. (Wach 1951: 39)

Encoded in these tales (i.e. tales "dating" from when the gods walked the earth, so these authors might argue) are the abiding values that help to form and maintain a social group. For example, myths told and acted out in ritual reinforce the value that humans are at the center of an orderly, created world, or the value that despite being a unified whole society is a complex hierarchy and all of its members have their own particular duties and responsibilities. Regardless of how reality *really is*, the view of myth as veiled communication of the true constitution of the world and humanity's place in it suggests that in studying myths the modern reader can learn how past or distant societies believed reality—and their place in it—to have been.

At the heart of the "myth as truth" approach evidently is the attempt by scholars to celebrate myths as containing some sort of profound truth that "cannot be expressed in simple propositions" (Sharpe 1971: 43). "Mythology," to quote the late Italian historian of religion Raffaele Pettazzoni, "*as the science of myth*, must quit its traditional anti-mythical attitude. It must be livened by the spirit of humanism, by an attitude of sympathy towards the myth as a mark and a document of our human estate" (1954: 36, emphasis added). Studying myths thus amounts to divining our deepest human "estate" (essence), for all myths are generated by that estate and convey it, if only we apprehend the mythic narratives rightly. According to this view, the proper use of "other people's myth" means recognizing that "their myths have always been our myths, though we may not have known it; we recognize ourselves in those myths more vividly than we have ever recognized ourselves in the myths of our culture" (Doniger-O'Flaherty 1986: 224). With this sympathetic turn in myth scholarship, the distance between the liar and the truth-teller has disappeared, as has the distance between the mythmaker and the myth analyst. For, insofar as we are all parts of social groups we all have myths, myths we live by (to echo a phrase of Joseph Campbell). If the academic *study* of religion is understood as something other than the *practice* of religion, then this sympathetic turn (and it is, rightly put, *sympathetic* rather than *empathetic*) has profound implications for whether it is possible to study religion in an academic sense.

Redescribing Myth as Something Ordinary

Despite certain differences, the approaches I have outlined are unified in that all see myths either as a terribly false or as a deeply true narrative object to be read and interpreted. Common to all these approaches is the assumption that "myth" is the product, the effect or an evidentiary trace of some absent, forgotten, distant—that is, not immediately apparent—phenomenon or human intention. Thus the mission of myth scholarship has generally been construed as a reconstructive and hermeneutic labor bent on ferreting out the truth or falsity of myth, on decoding and then recovering obscured meanings. In short, common to all approaches has been the view that myths are signs of such personal or interior causes and intentions as (1) a mentality, (2) an emotional or psychological "experience," (3) a universal human "estate" such as Human Nature. Given the utter difficulties of studying such interiorized dispositions and mentalities—after all, scholarship can only examine that which is public, observable and documentable—is there another way of defining and tackling the issue of myth? Can the category "myth" be redescribed and the study of myth be rectified?

Recall the definition of myth offered by Doniger: "what a myth *is* is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it" (1998: 2). Most scholars of religion would accept this definition as straightforward and uncontroversial, but attention needs to be focused on two words: "sacred" and "important." Both words convey socially-based value judgments. After all, the word sacred comes from a Latin root that means "to set apart." It seems that deeming myths as sacred, true, essential, paradigmatic or important is somewhat circular, for what makes something sacred or true in the first place? Thinking of Eliade's understanding of myths and rituals as the apolitical containers of primordial truths—truths that are repeatedly made manifest in retellings and reenactments—we can reply that "primordiality does not emerge out of natural givenness, but is an essentially fragile social construction which—like every social construction—needs special rituals and communicative efforts [myths] in order to come into existence and be maintained" (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995: 78). Taking this view makes yet another part of Doniger's definition stand out: she noted that "a group of people ... *find* their most important meanings *in* [myth]" (1998: 2, emphasis added). Might it not be that a group of people *fabricate* their most important meanings *by means* of myth?

Instead of perpetuating the view that myths are self-evidently meaningful things (whether true or false, oral or written or ritually performed) that can be learned, retold, recorded, interpreted and studied, I would like to suggest that we redescribe the term "myth." Let us think of it not so much as a kind narrative identifiable by its content (e.g., traditional tales of the gods or ancient heroes) as a *technique* or *strategy*. Let us suppose that myth is not so much a genre with

relatively stable characteristics that allow us to distinguish myth from folk tale, saga, legend and fable (Bolle et al. 1974: 715–717; Graf 1993: 6–8) as a class of *social argumentation* found in all human cultures. Let us entertain the possibility that myths are not things akin to nouns, but *active processes* akin to verbs. Instead of saying that "a people's myths reflect, express, and explore the people's self-image" (Bolle et al. 1974: 715), or that the contents of myths act as a "pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom" (Malinowski 1926), a shift in perspective allows us to suggest (1) that myths are not special (or "sacred") but ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in "worlds," (2) that myth as an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance makes *this* rather than *that* social identity possible in the first place and (3) that a people's use of the *label* "myth" reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image. To build on Malinowski, we can say that myth is the vehicle whereby any of a variety of possible social charters is rendered exemplary, authoritative, singular, unique, as something that cannot be imagined differently.

Redescribed in this manner, the study of myth becomes not just the domain of historians of religion conversant with long dead languages and cultures—their data understood by them to be "an autonomous, hermetically-sealed territory" (Buxton 1994: 14)—but the domain of a far wider collection of scholars who study the ways by which human beings the world over construct, authorize and contest their social identities (on religious studies as a domain within culture studies, see Fitzgerald 1997, 1999). No longer would myths be considered unique, symbolic, religious narratives, identified by the fact that they are "specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience" (Bolle et al. 1974: 715). Instead, scholars would query just what it is about *these* tales—and what it is about many *other* modes of public discourse—that leads people, including scholars, to boost them into the realm of the extraordinary in the first place. After all, for the scholar in the human sciences, the data of human behavior is ordinary (which does not mean simple or simplistic) to begin with in the sense that it is *human* behavior. Myths thus are utterly mundane and assigning them an "extraordinary" status as a precondition for studying them rightly is to begin our study with a mistake that deflects us from a more interesting and productive scholarly aim: undertaking the difficult study of the mechanisms whereby societies create the extraordinary from the everyday. Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 21) puts the issue properly:

> There is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness. Flaubert was fond of saying that it takes a lot of hard work to portray mediocrity. Sociologists run into this problem all the time: How can we make the ordinary extraordinary and evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is?

While the study of specific types of stories—stories with gods set at the beginning or the end of time, for example—is indeed fascinating and well worthwhile, would it not be far more interesting to study the mechanisms whereby just these and not other stories became important or sacred to begin with? Taking for granted the importance, the sacredness or the extraordinary character of certain stories only puts off asking what I take to be a more basic question: how is it that individual human beings accomplish, in part by dealing in myths, the all too ordinary but fascinating trick of coming together and acting collectively over great spans of time and space?

Myth as What-Goes-Without-Saying

To begin answering this question, we can appeal to Roland Barthes who examines the process of "mythification," or even "mystification," a term that might be more appropriate than "myth." For when he identifies myths he examines not stable stories but networks of actions, assumptions and representations—what other scholars might term a discourse. Like Bourdieu after him, Barthes' interest concerns the manner in which the ordinary is made to stand out, is set apart (made sacred) and made to appear extraordinary. Barthes therefore problematizes the " 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (Barthes 1972: 11; see also Moriarty 1991 and Saper 1997). For Barthes, then, myth "is not defined by the object of its message, but by *the way in which it utters its message*: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial ones' " (1972: 117; emphasis added). He departs from the traditional way of defining myth with reference to its unique substance or content and opts, instead, to see myth as a particular type of human endeavor displayed in but not limited to storytelling. Breaking away from some long-held notions, Barthes answers his own rhetorical question: "Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this" (1972: 117).

Within the field of religious studies we find a related sense of myth as human activity—this time the active process is aptly renamed "mythmaking"—in the work of the scholar of Christian origins, Burton Mack, whose most recent book is subtitled, *The Making of the Christian Myth* (1995). For Mack, the art of mythmaking "turn[s] the collective agreements of a people into truths held to be self-evident" (1995: 301). As noted by the French scholar of ancient Greece and Rome, Paul Veyne, "truth is the most variable of all measures. It is not a transhistorical invariant but a *work of the constitutive imagination* ... [N]ot only the very aim of our divergent assertions but our criteria and means of obtaining true ideas—in short our programs—vary without our realizing it" (1988: 117–118, emphasis added). According to this position, we do not find, discern or interpret truths and meanings. Rather, in every age and culture people actively *work* to

selectively *make* some things true and meaningful and other things false and meaningless. If we see myth as one way of making meanings, then it is little wonder that the rhetorical mechanisms which have constructed the seemingly self-evident meaning and authority of both the Bible and the U.S. Constitution is equally interesting to scholars like Mack. Both documents are particularly powerful instances where active processes have dressed up what might otherwise be mundane and forgettable historical moments as extraordinary ones.

I can think of no better example of such practices than the familiar words used in the U.S. Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." There is a rhetoric embedded here that generally passes by unnoticed. These words *do* something, but what? The opening of the Declaration effectively removes readers from the tug-and-pull of the contingent, historical world and places them in an abstract, ahistorical realm where such things as truths are obvious, enduring and self-evident. Through this rhetoric of self-evidence, then, the long European history of philosophical, political and social debate and development which eventually led to this document—and the nation-state founded upon it—is completely obscured, as if the Declaration, and later the U.S. Constitution as well, spontaneously arose from the ground fully formed. After all, self-evidences do not have a history, they leave no trace and they are not manufactured. They simply appear and announce their existence.

Although lost on the masses of people, these so-called self-evidences were perceived by a privileged class of "Constitutional framers." Within such texts, then, there is also a rhetoric of discernment—only some of us have "eyes to see and ears to hear." Just as the pre-existent Veda was heard only by the Indian *rishis* of old, the pre-existent Qu'ran was heard only by Muhammad, the pre-existent voice of YHWH prompted a response only in some listeners, and the Christian "Word" (*logos*) which pre-existed creation itself was truly heard by only a few, so too the content of the Declaration benefits from (i.e., is authorized by) not just a rhetoric of self-evidence but by the privileged status of those wise or lucky enough to have discerned it. To push this a little further, it is wholly misleading to talk of the document being authorized, for this document cannot exist apart from the social world from which it arose and which it supports. Therefore, the all too real world of its framers and users is what ultimately gains legitimacy. Considering the manner in which many "founding fathers" of the U.S. continued their practice of owning slaves, the supposedly self-evident, timeless rights of equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are circumscribed in terms of the interests of a rather narrow ruling élite of land-owning white males.

Mythmaking and Social Formation

Reconceiving mythmaking as the ongoing process of constructing, authorizing and reconstructing social identities or social formations would be to create a

"catalog of strategies for *maintaining* paradoxes, *fighting* over dissonances, and *surviving* [and recovering from] breakdowns" (Lease 1994: 475)—breakdowns in so much as social identity is not eternal. After all, despite the success of certain ways of producing social identities, people today do not identify themselves as Roman citizens—unless, of course, one recalls how Mussolini and the Italian fascists tried to "recover" the glorious Roman past in their attempts to forge a new Italian social identity in the mid twentieth century.

Such a catalog of strategies would amount to a map of the many social sites where tales, behaviors, institutions, clothing styles, even architectural details are used to generate and defend (and sometimes to overthrow) authority (Lincoln 1994). Acting as a sort of demythologizer reminiscent of a tradition in New Testament studies that was made famous by Rudolf Bultmann (1958), Burton Mack (1995: 11) writes:

> Social formation and mythmaking are group activities that go together, each stimulating the other in a kind of dynamic feedback system. Both speed up when new groups form in times of social disintegration and cultural change. Both are important indicators of the personal and intellectual energies invested in experimental movements ... Social formation and mythmaking fit together like hand and glove.

This reciprocal relationship between social formation and mythmaking was made clear as early as Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]: 425).

> A society can neither create nor recreate itself without creating some kind of ideal by the same stroke. This creation is not a sort of optional extra step by which society, being already made, merely adds finishing touches; it is the act by which society makes itself, and remakes itself, periodically.

In keeping with the Durkheimian tradition of sociological studies on religion and myth, we could say that a social formation is the activity of experimenting with, authorizing or combating, and reconstituting widely circulated ideal types, idealizations or, better put, mythifications that function to control the means of and sites where social significance is selected, symbolized and communicated. It is this tradition of scholarship on mythmaking to which Gary Lease contributes when he speaks of religions as totalized systems of meaning, or J. Z. Smith when he thinks of ritual as exercising an "economy of significance" and of myth as a "strategy for dealing with a situation" (1982c: 56; 1978a: 97). I place Roland Barthes in this tradition as well, for he speaks of the ways myths authorize contingent History by re-presenting it as necessary Nature. Because this is a tradition that sees mythmaking as an ideological activity, we also find Bruce Lincoln here. Over a decade ago (1986: 164) he noted that

an ideology ... is not just an ideal against which social reality is measured or an end toward the fulfillment of which groups and individuals aspire. It is also, and this is much more important, a screen that strategically veils, mystifies, or distorts important aspects of real social processes.

Mythmaking is a species of ideology production, of ideal-making, where "ideal" is conceived not as an abstract, absolute value but as a contingent, localized construct that comes to represent and simultaneously reproduce certain specific social values *as if* they were inevitable and universal.

Social formation by means of mythmaking, then, is explicitly caught up in the ideological strategies of totalization, naturalization, rationalization and universalization. With Benedict Anderson we could say that social formations are based on mythic "ontological reality [that is portrayed as] apprehensible ... through a single, privileged system of re-presentation" (Anderson 1991: 14). Accordingly, Durkheim's thoughts on the creation and authorization of "some kind of ideal" find their modern equivalent in the works of the authors just named. Social formations are the ongoing results of mythmaking activity (where I see mythmaking as a discourse involving acts and institutions as well as narratives), an activity that unites into a totalized system of representation what Mack refers to as the epic past, the historical past, the historical present, the anticipated historical future and the hoped-for epic future in one narrative, behavioral and institutional system (on the production of history see Braun 1999). Where but in religions and forms of nationalism do we see this happening most effectively?

We should not forget that despite attempts to construct a past or future long removed from the present, mythmaking takes place in a specific socio-political moment and supports a specific judgment about the here and now. Myths and rituals, therefore, do not simply project consensual agreements that have been reached; they do not merely communicate some specific substance so much as give shape and authority (i.e., significance) to this or that system of judgments and messages. Myths present *one particular* and therefore contestable viewpoint as if it were an "agreement that has been reached" by "we the people" (a phrase that is part of a powerful mythic rhetoric common in the history of the U.S.). For instance, to take up Mack's use of the contemporary American situation as an example, a rhetoric that brings together references to the founding fathers (the epic past), the image of the patriarchal nuclear family of the 1950s (historical past), current crime rates, teenage pregnancy rates, abortion and divorce rates (one of many particular presents), projections for budget reductions in the next ten years (historical future), all of which contribute to the future well being or "security" of the American nation (epic future), is the consummate art of mythmaking. By means of mythmaking, the historicity and specificity of each of these elements is collated into one grand unfolding narrative. By means of a disguised or undetected ideological slippage, "is" becomes "ought," the myth of presence and self-identity is established,

and value-neutral "change" is judged to be either good or bad, progressive or retrograde (Jameson 1988b: 17; Geertz 1968: 97). Mythmaking, "a particular *register* of ideology, which elevates certain meanings to numinous status" (Eagleton 1991: 188–189), has here done its work.

Evidently, this view of "myth" differs significantly from the suggestion that, because "mythlike ideologies" such as capitalism and communism have taken on greater prominence in recent time, "the word ideology might indeed be replaced, in much contemporary discussion about politics, by the term mythology" (Bolle et al. 1974: 727). The tradition of writers I have surveyed would hold just the opposite position: by means of mythmaking local, symbolic worlds of significance are authorized and naturalized by being (mis)taken for or actively portrayed as universal, literal ones. This is the role of ideology in human affairs.

Because one of the premises of all social-scientific scholarship is that all human doing is contextualized within historical (social, political, economic, gendered, etc.) pressures and influences, we must therefore understand all such doings partial and linked to specific temporally and culturally located worlds. "There is no primordium," as J. Z. Smith reminds us (1982a: xiii), "it is all history." Or, as Marx and Engels put it, "social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of human practice" (1970: 122). Acknowledging this ensures that we do not lose sight of the fact that mythmaking allows a sleight of hand; it is the art of manufacturing, from raw materials which are by definition only part of the whole, total symbolic systems. Because social values, truths and ideals are hardly universal, because, as Durkheim noted, the "mystery that appears to surround them is entirely superficial and fades upon closer scrutiny . . ., [when one pulls] aside the veil with which the mythological imagination covered them" (1995: 431), there is an inherent contradiction embedded at the core of social formations—a point taught to us by Marx long ago. Accordingly, there is much at stake for members of a social formation to maintain the mythic status of the system of representation and signification— their very self-identity is continually at stake! As Lease comments concerning the inherent contradictions of all totalizing practices, "a society cannot live without [totalizing practices], nor can it live with them" (1994: 475). It is precisely the mythmakers (theologians, politicians, teachers, pundits and, yes, even and too often scholars of religion) who develop discourses that obscure and thereby manage these contradictions (see further McCutcheon 1998c).

"Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain"

Mythmaking, then, is the business of making "particular and contingent worldviews appear to be ubiquitous and absolute" (Arnal 1997: 317). Social formation

by means of mythmaking is nothing other than the reasonable response to the inevitable social disruptions, contradictions and incongruities that characterize the ordinary human condition. Systems of social significance, encoded within narratives of the epic past and the anticipated plenary future, coordinated within behavioral and institutional systems of cognitive and social control, characterize our responses to the various incongruities and disruptions that come with historical existence: "myth both unites the group and provides an interpretive framework for coping with the exigencies of, and threats from, the natural world" (Giddens 1984: 265). Mythmaking might even be the preeminent means for creating cognitive and social continuity amidst the discontinuities of life. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, it is our way of maintaining our accumulative culture by way of "stockpiling the past in plain sight" (1994: 10). Or, as the scholar of early Christianity Ron Cameron puts it: "Religion as mythmaking reflects thoughtful, though ordinary, modes of ingenuity and labor" (1996: 39).

We should thus expect that mythmaking is a highly political affair, that "mythmaking is an everyday practice which permeates the discourse of political communicators" (Flood 1996: 275). As Flood goes on to say, when redescribed in this fashion,

> there is no need to consider myths as variant expressions of psychological archetypes. There is no need to posit a special form of consciousness or to situate the process of mythmaking within a consciousness or to situate the process of mythmaking within a psychopathology of the irrational. There is nothing strange about mythmaking There is nothing wrong with it. It is an entirely normal way of making political events intelligible in the light of ideological beliefs.

Classifying and studying so-called myths of origins, end-times, tricksters, and so on, as if these tales express some deep, abiding truths that require some kind of deep, abiding appreciation on the part of scholars, leaves this entire form of political analysis untouched—a point brought home with sharp clarity in Graeme MacQueen's critique of Alan Dundes' (1984) collection of essays by myth theorists, most of whom understand myths as essentially apolitical.

The implication of all this for scholars of religion is that if we take for granted the already established meaning and unquestioned authority of "myth"—myth's sacredness—we too may have come under its spell and, as a consequence, perpetuate a politics of which we may be unaware (Cady 1998; McCutcheon 1997c, 1998d; Murphy 1998). In so doing, we miss out on asking: What is going on when we constantly dress up our own creations in "decorative displays" to make them pass for what Barthes calls "what-goes-without-saying"? How can the descriptive "is" so smoothly become the prescriptive "ought"? If anything, I presume that Bolle's use of the phrase "expressions of the sacred in words" would attract Barthes' interest in demystification just as

much as does professional wrestling, the striptease and even margarine, only to name a few cultural goodies that occupy his attention (Barthes 1972). Where historians of religion are often content to employ a purely descriptive, supposedly value-free phenomenological method simply to determine what people hold to be sacred, exemplary and paradigmatic, Barthes' and Mack's critical methods identify the strategies that construct the set-apartness of various conventions, beliefs and practices in the first place.

The gain of this redescriptive turn in myth studies is its applicability to all human efforts to construct a place beyond criticism, then to equate a particular instance of human society and culture with the "place beyond criticism." After this redescriptive turn, myths are no longer merely stories. Rather, myths are the product and the means of creating authority by removing a claim, behavior, artifact or institution from human history and hence from the realm of human doings. A rectified study of myths thus turns out to be study of mythmaking. Despite my disagreement with much scholarship on myth, I think that Bolle, Buxton and J. Z. Smith were on the right track when they suggested that "a myth has its authority not by proving itself but by presenting itself" (1974: 715). In attempting to manufacture an unassailable safe haven for the storage of social charters and "worlds," mythmakers, tellers and performers draw on a complex network of disguised assumptions, depending on their listeners not to ask certain sorts of questions, not to speak out of turn, to listen respectfully, applaud when prompted and, in those famous lines from *The Wizard of Oz*, to "pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

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