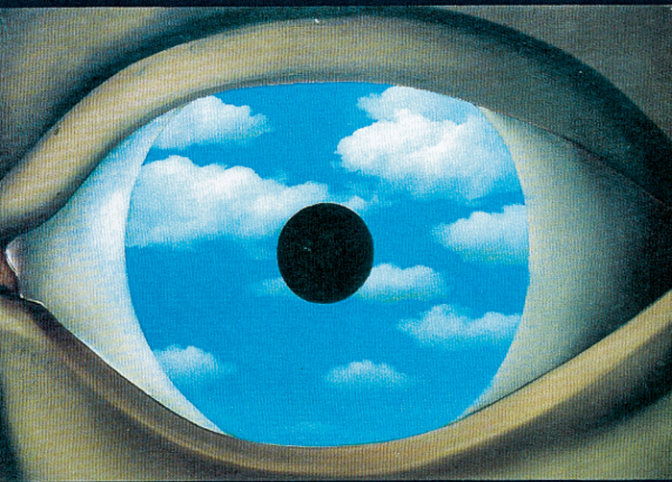


MYTH

A BIOGRAPHY OF BELIEF



DAVID LEEMING

Myth

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A Biography of Belief

David Leeming

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For James & Pamela Morton

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Preface

This book is based on a series of lectures delivered at the Interfaith Center of New York in the fall of 2000. Each of the essays opens with a selection of primarily traditional myths from various cultures. These are intended to bring the reader directly into the world of mythology—to set a mood, as it were. I then move on to definitions of the pattern or archetype revealed in the given myths. The next step involves interpretation of the archetype and its function and includes a number of fictional situations such as a gathering of myth-makers from many cultures and eras and the psychoanalysis of a personified culture. Literary examples are

included in each essay to illustrate the remolding of old myths and the emergence of new ones.

There are those who will be offended by the treatment of religious stories as “myths,” whereas others will recognize in my approach an attempt to move beyond narrow sectarian and exclusive understandings on the one hand and blindness to spiritual issues on the other. Myths reflect our spiritual and psychological development, our spiritual and psychological biography as a species, and it seems fair to hope that religions can also reflect that development.

The first essay is an introductory exploration of the whole relationship between myth and religion. It suggests that a comparative approach to religious narratives—cultural dreams—can lead to a broader understanding of who we are and where we are going. The second essay treats a universal story, the creation myth, in many culturally revealing forms and suggests a new creation myth as reflected in both science and the phenomenon of modernism and postmodernism. The third essay is concerned with the difficult question of divinity, especially as it reflects the question of gender in human history. The fourth essay approaches the hero myth by way of a version of Joseph Campbell's monomyth and the relationship between psyche and soul, ending with a consideration of the strangely ubiquitous human thirst for union with something out of reach.

Myth

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Chapter I Introduction

Myth and Religion

“It is through symbol that man finds his way out of his particular situation and opens himself to the general and universal.”

Mircea Eliade

Kenneth Nolan. *Turnsole*. (1983). Synthetic polymer paint on unprimed canvas, 7' 10-1/8" × 7' 10-1/8" (239 × 239 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Blanchette Rockefeller Fund. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art.

Five “Religious” Myths

Judaism

Happy are you, Israel, peerless, set free!
The Lord is the shield that guards you,
the Blessed One is your glorious sword.
When your enemies come cringing to you,
you will trample their backs under foot.

Deuteronomy 33:29

Islam

There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Messenger.

The First Pillar of Islam

Christianity

God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths.

Paul, Philippians 2:9–10

Zen Buddhism

Nirvana is here and Now, in the midst of Samsara. . . . A wise man will see Nirvana at once in the ordinary things of life. . . . When master Tung-shan was asked “What is the Buddha?” he replied, “Three pounds of flax.”

Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, 30

Moses and the Shepherd

Once Moses overheard a shepherd talking. It sounded as if the shepherd were talking to an uncle or a friend, but he was talking to God.

“I would like to help you, wherever you are, wash your clothes, pick lice from you, kiss your hands and feet at bedtime. All I can say, recalling you, is *abbbbbbbbbbbb* and *ayyyyyy!*”

Moses was very upset. “Are you talking in such a way to the very creator of heaven and earth? Don't you have more respect?”

The shepherd hung his head and wandered off, saddened. But God came to rebuke Moses, saying:

What's wrong for one person is right for another,
 Your poison can be someone else's honey.
 I don't care about purity or diligence in worship.
 Or impurity and sloth.
 They mean nothing to me. I am above all that.
 One way of worshipping is as good as another.
 Hindus do Hindu things.
 Muslims in India do what they do.

It is all praise, and it is all right.
I don't listen to the words the worshippers say.
I look inside for humility. That's reality.
Mere language, phraseology, isn't reality.
I want burning, burning!
Be friends, all of you, with your burning.
Burn your thinking in humility.
Burn your phrases.

Celaladin Rumi

Myth Types

Three general types of myth have been central to human societies and continue to influence the way we think, speak, and act today. *Creation* myths tell us where we came from, how things began. They are our primary myths, the first stage in what might be called the psychic life of the species. Creation is almost always linked to the concept of *Deity*, one of the strongest but most corruptible expressions of our collective being. Deities are metaphors for—dreams of—our ultimate progenitors, and psychology has taught us how important our mental depictions and memories of our parents are to any real understanding of our own identities. The story of the *Hero* is the most human and overtly psychological of the dominant myth patterns. Hero stories can be said to be metaphors for our personal and collective

progress through life and history. Creation, Deity, and Hero all seem to lead inevitably to that very strangest and most mystical expression of the human imagination, the concept of union, which, depending upon era and tradition, has been called by many names, of which nirvana, individuation, self-identity, and wholeness are a few.

We commonly use the word “myth” to mean a generally held belief or concept that is clearly untrue or merely fanciful. It is a myth that crime never pays, that George Washington never told a lie, that all women are intuitive, or that walking under a ladder brings bad luck. This definition of myth as false belief or superstition develops naturally enough from the more accurate understanding of the word as a fabulous and obviously untrue narrative of the deeds of heroes and gods—characters such as Odin or Pallas Athena or the Native American Trickster. But whereas common usage myths of the under the ladder sort are for the most part products of the secular world, mythic narratives are the sacred stories of religions.

All cultures and religions have sacred stories that the common sense of people in other cultures and religions recognizes as myths. The carrying off of the maiden Persephone by the god Hades is a fanciful and untrue story of someone else's religion. We call that story a myth. It is difficult to believe that the Buddha was conceived in a dream by a white elephant, so we call that

story a myth as well. But, of course, stories such as the parting of the Red Sea for the fleeing Hebrews, Muhammad's Night Journey, and the dead Jesus rising from the tomb are just as clearly irrational narratives to which a Hindu or a Buddhist might understandably apply the word "myth." All of these stories are definable as myths because they contain events that contradict both our intellectual and physical experience of reality. But since stories of the ancient Hebrews and Jesus are central to "our" monotheistic religions we tend to resist labeling them as myths. Religious people have always assumed that their sacred stories are both unique and different from myths. Not only the rabbi, the imam, and the priest, but the Hindu holy man, the Navajo shaman, and the Dogon animist will invariably say that the stories of his or her religion are in many cases historical and certainly the vessels of eternal truth.

Certain lay thinkers—Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell are three of the best known—have suggested that both definitions of myth, as illusory stories and as containers of eternal truth, are valid simultaneously. For these thinkers, the great sacred stories are products of the imagination, but are nevertheless in some sense true in ways that history cannot be. Eliade emphasizes that so-called myths are regarded by believers as "true history" because they are always concerned with "realities." The emergence creation story of the Hopis is a "myth" in the common usage sense. It cannot