

Myth

1. Defining "myth": No single accepted definition of myth exists. The popular concept is an untrue story of the distant past. Psychologists may use the term to refer to stories or ideas that express our unconscious needs and wishes (e.g., Freud), anthropologists and sociologists may consider them tales borne of social conflict or need (a type of verbal dynamic equivalent of the actions associated with ritual; e.g., Malinowski); and some combine approaches (e.g., Eliade, who considers myths to be paradigms of behavior borne out of genuine divine/human encounters). The following selected definitions give the basic approach used in this course:
 - a. Myths are instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon. . . . Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend. (Murray, *Myth and Mythmaking*, 355-6).
 - b. Myths represent a culture`s first principles which provide the frames of reference within which all thought and belief is circumscribed. It provides not only the lens through which people bring reality into focus but also the particular blinders that keep a culture from seeing itself as others see it. (Summerhill, "Holy War within the Mythic Horizon", p. 85). In this sense, myth serves as a "world view" framework. Thus, everyone, without exception, lives in "myth".
 - c. A mythological corpus consists of a usually complex network of myths that are culturally important imaginal stories, conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation, the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind`s roles and relative statuses within it.

Mythologies may convey the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent myth themes having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy. (Doty, *Mythography*, p. 11)
2. Intimately related to the question of definitions, there are many modern theories of myth and its functions. Many of the theories overlap and complement each other. No one theory can adequately explain myth--myths are multidimensional in nature. At least twelve theoretical approaches to myth can be identified (Honko, "The

Problem of Defining Myth", 46-8):

- a. Myth as source of cognitive categories: it is an explanation for enigmatic phenomena. It gives us categories for things we cannot `rationally` explain.
- b. Myth as form of symbolic expression: it is on par with music or poetry; it has its own laws, its own reality, its own forms of expression. It may be seen as a symbolic structuring of the world.
- c. Myth as projection of the subconscious: the message of myth is a message coming out of the subconscious (whether individual, as with Freud, or collective, as with Jung). This message is disguised, and interpretation is controlled partly by tradition, partly by elementary facts of life, and partly by personal history.
- d. Myth as an integrating factor in man`s adaptation to life--myth as world view: myths offer opportunities of selecting different elements which satisfy both individual tendencies and social necessities.
- e. Myth as charter of behavior: myth supports accepted patterns of behavior by placing present-day situations in a meaningful perspective with regard to precedents of the past.
- f. Myth as legitimization of social institutions: they sustain institutions by providing the belief/value systems upon which those institutions are built.
- g. Myth as marker of social relevance: the actual myths collected and passed on in a culture is correlated to what that culture considers socially relevant.
- h. Myth as mirror of culture, social structure, etc.: myths reflect certain facets of culture, especially in the values they promote.
- i. Myth as result of historical situation: in myth we reconstruct historical events to shape our understanding of both our current situation as well as the historical development of events which led up to the situation
- j. Myth as religious communication: communication is the focus (sender, receiver, media of communication, etc.)
- k. Myth as religious genre: myths are principally as being of a narrative nature within the framework of religion
- l. Myth as medium for structure: myths are built to reinforce the structures we perceive of as reality, and they may be analyzed structurally to open up a culture. This is typically done through the means of binary opposition (following

Levi-Strauss).

3. The character of myth (Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 20-23):
 - a. Myth offers ways of ordering experience
 - b. Myth informs people about themselves and validates their world view
 - c. Myth expresses a saving power in human life
 - d. Myth provides patterns for human actions and social control
 - e. Myth is enacted in rituals
4. Functions of myth (Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 23-28):
 - a. Psychological functions:
 - i. In the face of uncertainty, they contribute to the reduction of anxiety
 - ii. When threats come to our ego, they are a mechanism of ego defense
 - iii. They are a source of security and a symbolic resolution of conflicts
 - b. Social functions
 - i. They promote the integration of society
 - ii. They are a cohesive force binding a community together
 - iii. They encourage social stability by sanctioning the existing social order and justifying its status system and power structure
5. Myth as an aid to Missionary work (adapted in part from Loewen "Myths and Missions," pp. 325-332). Understanding of the cultural mythic structures enables us to:
 - a. Locate points of contact for witness
 - b. More appropriately preprogramming the missionary message
 - c. Locate points of conflict between the culture and the Gospel
 - d. Understand know how people are evaluating the message
 - e. Discern felt needs within the culture
 - f. Have a cultural data-base useful for solving problems

- g. Translate the Bible more accurately (since we understand the categories of thought)
 - h. Spot syncretistic tendencies more quickly and facilitate local ability to head them off before they go too far
 - i. Help us understand our own myths (see the story "The Rabbi from Cracow" in O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths*, p. 137).
 - j. Help us see ourselves as the "other" viewed through our host's lenses.
6. Case Study: Myth and approaching folk religions out of the Euro-American context. How does our heritage affect our understanding of folk religions? Several themes from our cultural myth framework may be noted:
- a. The important part is the *fight* and the ultimate victory.
 - b. The battle between the hero and the villain is a chess game
 - c. Right and wrong will always be clearly seen
 - d. Good will always triumph simply because it is right
 - e. The hero is readily identified
 - i. The **archetype** hero (Superman, Batman [the comic book version!], Ransom of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill)
 - ii. The **accidental** hero (Maxwell Smart, Doug, Inspector Cleuseau, Dudley DoRight)
 - iii. The **converted** hero (Mark Studdock in *That Hideous Strength*; Darth Vader in *The Return of the Jedi*)
 - iv. The **anti-hero**, of which at least two types may be identified:
 - (1) Social outcast (Spiderman; in some senses the movie version of Batman) *or*
 - (2) Rebellious person who becomes the hero even though (s)he does not deserve it, and may actively oppose it
 - f. The hero's quest: Victory comes after defeat is imminent or through trials and tribulations

- i. Sometimes, early in the story, the villain beats up the hero, appearing stronger and better trained to fight.
 - ii. Often the villain cheats (e.g., poison, use of banned weapons, breaking the rules of engagement) and gains an unfair advantage over the hero.
 - iii. Occasionally the villain defames the hero, tying his hands by breaking the trust the people have in the hero and turning them against him.
- g. When faced by violent enemies, violence is an appropriate response.
7. Where myth fits:

