Misuse of Myth: Conscious Adherence or Authoritative Control Mechanism

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Abstract
Myths are significant in explaining the existential questions of life, but when they are adopted uncritically, they may generate more harm than good. Admittedly, there is no way out of myth; we are the mythical creature. We need, therefore, to become more aware of myth and more critical of the myths we already, if only unknowingly, have adopted. This research addresses common misconceptions of the definitions of myths, attempts to identify the conscious and unconscious use of myths in our daily lives, and ultimately introduces the concept of modified myth adoption. This is done by analyzing and synthesizing selected scholarly works and psychological studies on the subject with the objective of promoting understanding of one’s own and other peoples’ worldviews and belief systems.

Introduction
It is early morning on December 25, 2005. The seasonal decorations in this particular home reflect the Western world’s typical adherence to Christianity. These include a nativity scene of the birth of Jesus Christ and a Christmas tree covered in lights and ornaments. There are also individually wrapped gifts placed beneath the tree. This scene represents a family’s joyful and happy time while simultaneously revealing some religious significance. However, there is also something else at work here. Two different horizons of consideration that I contend are not so different at all: religious truth and myth. Religious truth is represented by the nativity scene, which is universally accepted by Christians as a historically proven fact depicting the birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem, Judah while being attended to by his earthly mother and father, Mary and Joseph. C.S. Lewis, scholar and theologian, says of this story,

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened. (Lewis, 2004, p. 21)

Secondly, the myth, represented here by the decorated tree, is of Jolly Ole’ St. Nick, Santa Claus, who has gained entry to this home by means of the chimney and is bearing gifts for all. The Catholic Encyclopedia (2003) says of Santa,

In the 19th century, St. Nicholas was superseded in much of Europe by Christkindlein, the Christ-child, who delivered gifts in secret to the children. He traveled with a dwarf-like helper Pelznickel (a.k.a. Bilsnickel) or with St. Nicholas-like figures. Eventually, all three were combined into the image

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that we now know as Santa Claus. “Christkindlein” became Kriss Kringle. (p. 1106)

How is it that one scenario is known to be false (e.g. Santa Claus) and the other (e.g. the birth of Christ) is viewed as historical, religious truth, and yet they are celebrated together with equal fervor during this time of the year? The answer to this question is, I believe, an extremely important one for all of us to contemplate and attempt to understand.

One reason for our need to understand the answer to this question is the fact that many scholars, who have studied mythology and its effects on our human relationships and how we relate to the physical and metaphysical universe, are inclined to acknowledge that humans view myths as “connecting them to the world around them and explaining where they fit in,” as “explaining the existential questions of life” (May, 1991, p. 37), and as “necessary for a healthy psychological existence while revealing the meaning of life and of the universe” (Greenberg, 1998, p. 87). Though such statements highlight the importance of this topic, they also cause even more complex issues to surface, such as the closeness that exists between myth and religion, theology and science. Another complex issue, which will be addressed in this study because of its age, size, and its rich mythological content. But, to suggest that myth actually elevates Christianity as opposed to reducing it raises a whole series of challenges. Two such challenges for the individual researching this area are the absence of scholarly work on the subject and its sensitive nature. Watts (1968) acknowledges both saying,

There are sound reasons for this omission, for the subject [Christian Mythology] is one of extreme delicacy and complexity, not because of the actual material, but because the whole problem is, in a very special way, ‘touchy’ (p. 5).

Because humans are the mythical creature we cannot get away from myth. This is also the case when Christians analyze and research myth; one admittedly cannot get away from Christianity, hence, the need for definitions of both myth and Christianity.

Myth and Christianity by Definition
If this study helps to clarify what I believe to be the connotation of myth, we may be better able to understand myth’s conscious and unconscious use in our daily lives, recognize the potential to abuse its power by manipulation, acknowledge the need for acceptance of modified myths, and encourage rather than discourage the connection between myth and religion—even by believers. To accomplish this, we first need a workable, explanatory definition of myth.

Today, to say myth and Christian in the same sentence, or worse, extend the context to include the phrase Christian mythology, is to incur instant protest and a figurative rising of the hair on the back of the neck. This, along with an extremely defensive posturing, makes explication of the proper use of myths difficult. Therefore, what follows is my personal definition of myth (a definition that should assist in observing myth as it is intended, at least for the sake of this research, and not as it is commonly misconstrued). Myths are deep, numinous narratives that figuratively express the very foundations of human life. To enunciate it another way, myths are organized, supernatural expressions that use metaphor to reveal human connections to life and the universe. The key words here are metaphor, supernatural, and figurative, all of which denote something other than the literal. According to WordNet (2003) metaphors are “figures of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something other than what it literally means.” Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2000) defines supernatural as “existing or occurring outside the normal experience or knowledge of man” (p. 1437) and figurative as “containing figures of speech, metaphoric” (p. 528). Again Watts (1968) illuminates the subject:

For the word myth is not to be used here to mean ‘untrue’ or ‘unhistorical.’ Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—
which, for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meanings of the universe and of life. (p. 7)

In this regard, James Oliver Robertson (1980) puts it plainly, “Myths are that which holds us together” (p. 80). As mythic creatures, we need the hominess of myths and without them we hunger for it and are lost. Nietzsche understood this mythical hunger. In “The birth of tragedy: Out of the spirit of music” (1956) he writes,

> What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb? (p. 496-497)

These definitions of myth help to clarify this point: when contemplating myths the attention or concentration should be on their themes, their life lessons, their moral education, and the universal truth to be extracted and not on the literal degree of fact or fantasy therein.

The most common perception of the definition of myth is that of being a false story, merely a myth, untrue. If one were to apply that definition to the Christian account of human beginnings, to take that story simply as mere myth, one might be inclined to be attentive only to, and become wrapped up in, the rich poetry of it, to marvel at its magic, and be awe-struck by its splendor, then, simply relegate it to the inferior position of a mere myth, unbelievable. That certainly would not be the position referred to earlier by Watts (1968) as the “tremendous dignity of myth” (p. 2). Once again, Watts makes it clear when he says:

> There is no more telling symptom of the confusion of ‘modern thought’ than the very suggestion that poetry and mythology can be ‘mere.’ This arises from the notion that poetry and myth belong to the realm of fancy as distinct from fact, and that since facts equal Truth, myth and poetry have no serious content. Yet this is a mistake. (p. 64)

Furthermore, both the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary of the English Language (1999) list myth as a “fictitious story” only in their fourth and final definitions, which by implication and placement, seems to show it to be more of a common application in everyday English, not necessarily the primary or most accurate application. In definitions one through three in both dictionaries, there are no references to the historical accuracy or degree of fact in myth. Notice one such definition:

> A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world of delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society. (American Heritage Dictionary, p. 869)

Therefore, this study contends that what is viewed by some in Christianity (and other religions) as religious truth cannot be degraded simply by referring to it as mere myth. Also, a phenomenon referred to as myth or mythical is not merely a false story related simply for entertainment, but something elevated to a dignified position above history. In fact, Campbell (2002) contends that myth is pre-history, science—particularly nature, or time—, which Watts (1968) describes as “behind all time” (p. 2).

> What, then, of Christianity? To find total consensus on this definition would be next to impossible. Therefore, for the sake of this study, I define Christianity as follows:


As such, the Christian story can be referred to with reverence and contemplated as one of the greatest stories ever told in Western civilization. It can be viewed not just as an event that happened (true or false, historical or fantasy) but as something with tremendous significance in shaping and connecting the lives of Christian believers worldwide and from which personal religious truth, a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality, can be extracted. Believers can then act upon it mythically, finding truth in their actions—thinking it forward. And in this simple sense, Christianity is mythic!

Conscious and Unconscious Adherence to Myth

Individually and as a society we accept or at least adhere to various myths in certain cultural practices. In the introduction, one such practice was referred to, the practice of celebrating Christmas as a historical, religious truth. Before we examine this horizon of consideration, let it be stated that just as Christianity does not validate every Western myth, neither should we...

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1 This action, or process of examining a story, event, or myth for the purpose of realization of its personal, fundamental significance, the following of its meaning to see where it leads you personally in the universal scheme of things, the extracting from it personal, realistic truth for one’s own life, is what I refer to as thinking it forward.
attempt to validate all religious truth via related myths.

If an individual, a believer, can draw personal truth, a connection to the universe, and find answers to the existential questions of “Where do I go when I die?” or “Why do I have to die at all?” or “Why is there suffering in the world?” or “What are my obligations?” from the story of the birth of the Son of God on earth, then that story has become their myth. It is mythical; it is alive and functional. It is not true or false, but religious truth, a myth. That same individual, so as not to accept that truth uncritically, should think the myth forward, examine it from the standpoint of where it leads us, and be cognizant of the history that influences the myth. Then, and only then, can one relate the myth to the doctrine or practice being examined. By way of example, let’s think this myth forward and see where it leads.

History bears out the fact that the present day Christmas celebration was more likely than not borrowed from the Roman celebration of the Saturnalia, a week-long riotous feast, dedicated to the god of seed and sowing, Saturnus. This was the most famous of the Roman holidays because restrictions were relaxed and the social order inverted. Public gambling was allowed and, according to one writer of the time, Seneca, “The whole mob would let itself go in licentious pleasure” (as cited in Holford, 1988, p. 251). Early Christians, not wanting to be aligned with this pagan practice, forbade the celebration of Christmas in this fashion. In fact, its celebration was illegal here in the United States as recently as one hundred years ago. If, with this knowledge of the history of the celebration and thinking it forward as to where it will lead, one can still find within the Christ story and the adherence to a Christmas celebration religious truth that connects them to life and their place in the universal scheme of things, then the myth, a deep, numinous narrative, has served its intended purpose—to figuratively express the very foundations of human life.

Conscious adherence to a celebration, like Christmas for example, should be intentional on the part of the believer, especially if a person has given the celebration critical examination, thought it forward. However, we also unconsciously adhere to myths. The Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung (1959) stated that myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche. He referred to them as involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings (p. 50). Levi-Strauss (1978) described our thoughts of myths as unconscious saying, “I have written that myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him” (p. 3). If myths are indeed unconscious, our adherence to them can also be unconscious. This especially is the case when we contemplate those myths involving the psychological stages of human life. Psychiatrist and sociologist, Dr. Rollo May (1991) refers to these stages as the “existential crises of life” (p. 39). Of those, none is more prominent than the crises of death. I would venture that if we were to assemble all of the myths that deal with our existential considerations, we would find that none influences our daily unconscious thoughts and behavior more than the phenomenon of death and our inherent fear, and subsequent denial, thereof. I refer to denial in the sense that, for example, we can’t seem to let go of our loved (or hated) ones who have died. So we create for our loved ones a never—ending paradise in spiritual places and eternal torment for our enemies. Is not Dante’s Divine Comedy: Inferno (1300), where Dante meets with his dead friends and acquaintances, a prime example? (Inferno XXI, lines 112-114). I refer to fear of death in the same sense as cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker (1973) does when he said:

The idea of death, the fear of it haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destination of man. (xvii)

This fear is so overwhelming, says Becker (1973, p. 5), that man, in order to create for himself some “primary value,” some “cosmic specialness,” an “ultimate usefulness to creation” will carve out a place in nature by building a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, or a family that spans three or four generations. Without getting too far afield of how this fear of death relates to myth, we should allow Becker to make clear this point:

The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they will outlive or outshine death and decay….(p. 5)

What can then be implied is that our passionate pursuit to possess things here in America’s capitalistic, commercial-driven society can be, from an unconscious psychological point of view, classic reactions to the myths of everlasting life and life eternal. For the sake of another, albeit darker, example let us examine unconscious adherence to the combined myths of “redemption” and “racial superiority.” Redemption, according to Christian dogma (American Bible Society, 1976, Genesis 3:14-18), is necessary because of mankind’s Fall from Grace (Genesis 3: 14-18) as a result of the sin of the first man, Adam. In order to get back the perfect, eternal life that Adam lost,
there had to be a perfect life sacrificed in return, to balance the scales, to take away the sins of the world. This was provided for by the sacrifice and crucifixion of the Son of God as he bore mankind’s sins and punishment (American Bible Society, Isaiah 53: 4-6). How has our culture socialized this idea of redemption? Do we still look for someone to bear the burden of our guilt, to be our vicar? If so, what does recent history show as to its manifestations?

This cultural or societal need for someone to bear peoples’ guilt or sin is not universal because, for one, not all people believe that there was a Fall from Grace and therefore no redemption is needed, but history has shown us what can happen, when an individual or group seeks a replica of the Divine Scapegoat. I refer here to anti-Semitism as an authoritative control mechanism, perpetuated upon those who, consciously or unconsciously, adhere to the concept of the Fall from Grace. By means of such a reference, I also reveal why this section was introduced as an example of adherence to the combined myths of redemption and racial superiority. Kenneth Burke (1930, p. 31) referred to Hitler’s campaign of “the science of genocide” as the manifestations of someone “symbolically laden with the burdens of individual and collective guilt.” Would such a manifestation not, then, present the need for figurative (or ritualistic) purging? And, according to Burke, is it not interesting that now, in the post-Christian era, we identify Jews and other minorities in our present society? Because these negative attitudes towards minorities have not been dispelled by identification and acknowledgment, we have to be cognizant of the fact that the potential for such a horrendous campaign of destruction still exists, but on an even grander and more prolific scale.

Knowledge of such potential is one of the underlying motivations and objectives of this essay: to promote understanding of one’s own and other peoples’ worldviews and belief systems. One of the primary means of achieving this understanding, as has been discussed, is critical analysis of adopted myths.

**Myth vs. Science vs. Theology**

Critical examination of any myth should be natural for people because as humans we use two faculties as a means of adaptation to the world around us: memory and reflective thought. When we think the myth forward, make it one’s own, as opposed to adopting it uncritically, we become less vulnerable to the interpretation of the one who is relating the myth. Thinking the myth forward should not be understood to mean dissecting the Christ story, to refer to a previous example, for the purpose of revealing truth or historical accuracy; instead it is to uncover the myth’s significance to the very foundations of human life. This form of thinking, or reflective thought, should not be confused with scientific thinking. When we employ the processes dictated by the criteria of empirical discovery, we use limited, trained mental abilities that progress us along, step by experimental step, to the total understanding of the examined phenomena. In reflection, we attempt to arrive at a general understanding of life and the universe—as it relates to us personally. Though I disagree with his use of the word illusion in his explanation of this point, Levi-Strauss (1978) makes clear his theory when he says:

We are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature, while, of course, myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. However, it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. (p. 17)

Where myth differs from science (I am tempted to say, “at odds with science” but that would be inaccurate inasmuch as the conflict is merely perceived), is in practice. Science, by way of empirical evidence tested by experimentation, can and does produce hypotheses for future predictions. Myths provide no such hypotheses, hence no future predictions, and yet myths, by means of their abstract nature, can and do answer existential questions of life not answered by the world’s greatest empirical minds.

Let’s consider a mythical example that shows how myth works in conjunction, not in conflict, with science. This is important to establish because of the laborious efforts on the part of some Christian theologians to use science as proof of religious truth, hence, proof of myth.

According to Levi-Strauss (1978) there is a myth from Western Canada about the skate (a large, flat fish of the family of rays) and its successful attempt to master or control the South Wind. It takes place at a time when humans and animals were not distinct from each other, in other words there were still half-human, half-animal creatures roaming the earth. Both were extremely irritated by the fact that the winds would blow constantly. This made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to fish and gather shellfish on the beaches. It was decided by all

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2 I would be inclined to replace the word illusion with Chimera. In medicine, Chimera is an organism or part consisting of two or more tissues of genetic composition, produced as the result of grafting. In Greek mythology, Chimera is a composite monster—a fire breathing she-monster made up of the front of a lion, the middle parts of a goat, and the tail of a snake. Illusion carries the connotation of misrepresentation, false perception. Whereas, Chimera blends different components to create a composite, in this instance, the scientific and the mythological understanding of the universe.
that they would have to fight against the winds to compel them to act more decently. There was then an expedition formed that included the skate, who would play the very important role of capturing the South Wind. The skate released the South Wind only after it promised not to blow all the time, but only at certain periods. The South Wind promised and it is since that time that the South Wind only blows one day out of two and that allows mankind to accomplish its activities.

As opposed to dismissing this as merely myth, an impossible story, let’s take it seriously enough to ask: why the skate and why the South Wind? I find myself in agreement with the analysis of this Canadian myth by noted anthropologist Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss (1978) contends that the skate is chosen here because of its distinct physical characteristics common in all flat fish, namely smooth and slippery underneath and rough on top, and it appears large from above and below, and very thin from either side. If an adversary were to aim an arrow at the skate, it would only have to suddenly change its position showing its profile below, and very thin from either side. If an adversary were to aim an arrow at the skate, it would only have to suddenly change its position showing its profile which is all but impossible to target, thus causing more harm than good.

Even though it is impossible, from an empirical point of view, for a fish to fight and capture a wind, logically we can see how experiences could lead to the use of practical images. This is how mythical thinking originated, playing the part of conceptual thinking. It is made even clearer when we read how Levi-Strauss (1978) enunciates it:

An animal which can be used as what I call a binary operator can have, from a logical point of view, a relationship with a problem which is also a binary problem. If the South Wind blows every day of the year, then life is impossible for mankind. But if it blows only one out of two—‘yes’ one day, ‘no’ the other day, and so on—then a kind of compromise becomes possible between the needs of mankind and the conditions prevailing in the natural world. (p. 22)

Though the story is not true from an empirical point of view, our present day study of cybernetics provides us with the understanding of, for instance, binary operations. Current scientific thought, then, helps us understand the contents of this myth. Even though, since the advent of science in the seventeenth century, mythology has been rejected and imputed to primitives and the superstitious, there really should be no divorce or parting of the ways between mythological and scientific thought.

True, we are the mythical creature with a need for mythic answers to questions outside of nature. Yet, there are those who continue to miss myth’s explanation of these questions by waiting for scientific proof and/or historical verification. This seems to be the fallacy of some Christian theologians, whose efforts may be noble, but result in consequences that may be causing more harm than good.

Prior to expanding this point of Christian theologians and scientific verification, it may be of benefit to glossary a few additional terms as they relate to types of knowledge and our discussion. I agree with Watts (1968, p. 63), and his definitions of the following terms:

- **science**: historical record of facts, parts of experience, wherein the reality of realities it discusses remain ultimately undefined. Since Hilbert, science accepts the fact that it has to work with a series of basic unknowns.

- **metaphysic**: the indefinable basis of knowledge, realization. A consciousness of life where the mind is not trying to grasp or define what it knows.

- **metaphysics**: (Greek and Western) highly abstract thought, dealing with concepts such as essence, being, matter, and form and treating them as though they were facts on a higher level of objectivity than sensually perceptive things.

- **theology**: an interpretation of combined myth and metaphysics in which both are treated as objective facts of the historical and scientific order.

Theologians today laboriously attempt to make God a thing, a fact (albeit the first thing and the first fact). Watts (1968) felt that such theological language and analysis destroys myth. He relates:

In spite of the vital power of its myth, Christianity began to die the moment when theologians began to treat the divine story as history—when they mistook the story of God, of the Creation, and the Fall for a record of facts in the historical past. (p. 67)

This line of thought helps us to appreciate that once these theologians started to explain God, they began to lose all contact with him. Their obvious mistake was in regard to language. They looked upon the language of myth as the language of fact. When one attempts to label or rationalize God, it degrades Him to the level of a dead3, fixed thing or fact. Eminent scholar and orientalist Ananda Coomaraswamy

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3 I refer to dead here as does Watts (1968) when he explains “…all things are past, inhabiting only the world of memory.” (p. 70)
(1977) makes this comment with respect to the metaphorical language of mythology and metaphysics,

Its 'worlds' and 'gods' are levels of reference and symbolic entities which are neither places nor individuals but states of being realizable within you. (pp. 6-7)

The language of myth, then, should not be exacted, even in interpretation, as literal. When Henrich Zimmer (as cited in Campbell, 2002) made the statement "The best things can't be told and the second best are misunderstood" (p. xxiii), it moved noted mythologist Campbell to make this reference to the misleading effects of using myth's language as fact:

The second best are misunderstood because, as metaphors poetically of that which cannot be told, they are misunderstood prosaically as referring to tangible facts. The connotated messages are thus lost in the symbols, the elementary ideas in local 'ethnic' inflections. (p. xxiii)

From its early beginnings, Christianity has insisted that the divine revelation be scientific rather than metaphysical or mythical. True, this could have been due to the time period during which Christianity began its rise. This was during the Graeco/Roman era, when all, even the Hebrew culture, was extremely preoccupied with personal salvation and immortality.

Taking the language of myth as the language of fact, only serves to confuse and alienate, and sets science above mythology, and empirical proof above faith. With the power of a living, working myth being replaced by the need for scientific evidence, a person could find himself relying on archaeologists, for example, to find for them the Shroud of Turin to prove that Jesus existed. Can that be classified as true faith? The myth then ceases to be a vibrant, grounding connection to the person's place in the metaphysical scheme of things—the very foundations of human life. In this view, then, it can be concluded that theology, by means of its reliance on science and empirical evidence, takes a staungh stand in opposition to myths and the good they serve.

Misuse of Myth

To find physical proofs of Christian doctrine, to substantiate or validate one's faith may be an honest endeavor. On the other hand, the insistence on such proven facts can be intentionally misleading and self-serving. For instance, Christian theologians are insistent on a literal interpretation of the myth of "God the Father." Such adamant adherence can be interpreted as manipulation (whether intentional or innocuous) in order to genderize God as male.

What purpose and whose interests would be served by such an application of the myth of "God the Father?" Those who would attempt to perpetuate the subversent and inferior position of the female in the male dominated hierarchy of a patriarchal society. Those same self-serving individuals might point to the theological language of the Bible to prove man's dominant position, highlighting the order of creation, in Genesis 1:27, (American Bible Society, 1976) "So God created human beings... male and female." And Genesis 2:18 "... I will make a suitable companion to help him," or Genesis 2:21-22,

Then the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of the man's ribs...formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to the man.

In both passages, the interpretation is rendered as justification of genderfication. To those individuals adhering to the myth of "God the Father" uncritically, without thinking it forward, the preceding interpretation allows for manipulation of ideals, and in some instances, control of behavior by those perpetuating the myth.

Another example of the use of myth as an authoritarian control mechanism is passivity in the face of violent persecution (turn the other cheek). Horrendous barbaric butchery and bondage have been heaped upon entire races of people while they consciously and unconsciously adhered to the language of Christian scripture. These people were made to view their persecution as either a test of their faithful adherence, or as purification, as with fire, of the quality of their faith (American Bible Society, 1976, Matthew 5:38-42).

At this juncture, it may still be difficult for some to see a myth as being misused or misapplied. For clarification assistance, I turn again to the scholar who spent his entire life extensively studying myths worldwide, Joseph Campbell. He reiterates the point that these myths are not to be promoted as fact, and I say, thereby cannot literally be misused or misapplied to propagandize a particular ideology. Campbell (2002) writes:

For some reason which I have not yet found anywhere explained, the popular, unenlightened practice of prosaic reification of metaphoric imagery has been the fundamental method of the most
influential exegetes of the whole Judeo-Christian-Islamic mythic complex. The Virgin Birth, for example is argued as historical fact, where as in practically every mythology of the world instances have appeared of this elementary idea. American Indian mythologies abound in virgin births. Therefore, the intended reference of the archetypal image cannot possibly have been to a supposed occurrence in the Near East in the first century B.C. (p. xxiv)

Does this not give body and substance to myth as something that can indeed be misused, the power of which can be manipulated? I think so. Especially in that one of the intentions of myth is to bring a community together, to encapsulate it. This research contends that if given an intelligent chance, myths can accomplish just that. One effort that would assist myths in accomplishing this goal would be their modification.

The Need for New Myths
In today's intelligent thought, myths are not used as effective narratives for relating to and coping with modern problems. At the outset we established that “myths are significant in explaining those existential questions of life.” This is not the case in today's society. Not due to the loss of the power of myths, but due to the lack of conscious use of myths in our daily lives. May (1991) expounds on the condition of myths in our present day:

We in the twentieth century are in a similar situation as the classical Greeks of the third and second centuries, of ‘aching hearts’ and ‘repining.’ Our myths no longer serve their function of making sense of existence, the citizens of our day are left without direction or purpose in life, and people are at a loss to control their anxiety. (p. 16)

Part of the “aching of hearts” is reflected in statistics on suicide in America. The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) tracks and records suicides in the United States. The figures are alarming: 31,655 individuals decided that life was not worth living in 2002; 12% of those were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Kochanek, 2004, p. 53). What would make our young people, a historical indicator of the health and mental state of our society, feel so lost and hopeless? May (1991) paraphrases a student speaker at Stanford University:

…the student speaker described his class as not knowing how it relates to the past or the future, having little sense of the present, no life-sustaining beliefs, secular or religious, and as consequently having no goal and no path of effective action. (p. 21)

Even at this time, this dilemma was not new. As curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Ananda Coomaraswamy extensively researched mythological and anthropological thought in his time. In Am I my Brother's Keeper? (1947), he helped us to appreciate that such thought had outgrown the provincialism of the nineteenth century and had ceased to equate wisdom, progress, and culture with the peculiar abnormalities and agitations of the modern West. He showed that extremely sophisticated and profound cultures have existed quite apart from the apparatus that we think are essential—such as writing, building in brick or stone, or the employment of machinery. These cultures, and here is the point I wish to make, did not pursue or attain the life/goals which we consider important. They would have ‘other goals out of all relation to the peculiar desires and ‘goods' of modern man” (Coomaraswamy, p. 8). This modern man, in effect, confesses that he has no life/goal. Progress, as conceived by him, is dedicated to the “frantic pursuit of a tomorrow that never comes” (Coomaraswamy, p. 8). Coomaraswamy (as cited in Watts, 1968, p. 14) pointed out that in this respect our Western culture is historically abnormal. His work provided vast documentation of the fact that in almost every other culture there has existed a unanimous, common, and perennial philosophy of man's nature and destiny—differing from place to place only in terminology and points of emphasis and technique. We, on the other hand, as the Stanford student alluded to, are without goals or a clear path of effective action. This is the mythless situation we find ourselves in today.

Without myths, which express lessons for life, belief systems, and moral education, there will be depression and “aching hearts,” evident by the climbing suicide rate. Where there is no mythological thought, there can be no mythological communication to begin to address such issues. As long as the ultimate goal is making money, as long as we teach practically no ethics by example in home and government, as long as the role models and heroes are sports, movie, and music celebrities, as long as there is no inspiration to subscribe to a higher philosophy of life, and there are no mentors in learning to love, we will see the continual rise of those seeking psychological help and those “repining” and giving up.

Suicide is not the only indicator of a society searching for answers. The recent resurgence in cult activity is also indicative of a need to have questions answered and a need to belong. The International Cultic Studies Association, according to Rudin (1991), is calling for help in stemming the tide of “cult recruitment on college and university campuses in the United States” (Introduction). The lure of any group
is that it can promise bliss and love and some inside information on god and what the future holds. The mass suicide of 980 followers of Jim Jones in Guyana, simply because he told them to, is evidence that people can be lead and controlled if they are desperate to belong and be loved.

What, then, can be done? Are we here advocating such a tremendous task be assigned to mythmaking? Campbell (2002) alludes to new myths as a start:

In the new mythology, which is to be of the whole human race, the old Near Eastern desacralization of nature by way of the doctrine of the Fall will be rejected; so that any such limiting sentiment as that expressed in 2 Kings 5: 15, “There is no God in all the earth but in Israel,” will be (to use a biblical term) an abomination. The image of the universe will no longer be the old Sumero-Babylonian, locally centered, three-layer affair, of a heaven above and abyss below, with an ocean encircled bit of earth between…. (p. xxi)

Rather than new myths, this research introduces a concept that has already begun to be employed, I refer to it as modified myth adoption.

Modified Myth Adoption
This concept, in as simple a term as possible, is the mythologization of the histories, stories, and folklore of various cultures for the sake of understanding, harmony, and peaceful co-existence.

According to Dr. Raphael Israeli (2001) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, there is a very exciting undertaking at work today in China to accomplish just such harmony. Because of the large population of Muslims in China and the past resistance to Islam, the peaceful people of various regions found it necessary to commence an effort that would eventually lead to harmonious cohabitation. In Chinese society, memory depends on the wisdom passed down through generations by the sages. In the Islamic tradition, one has to either relate to divine revelation via the Prophet as outlined in the Holy Qur’an or to the Prophet’s own doings and utterances. As related by Israeli, it was decided to use memory and history to “collaborate, to inspire one another, and to justify and sustain each other by the power of myth” (p. 185). Israeli acknowledges the difficulty, but persistence of the task at hand:

To be sure, the past few centuries of Muslim rebellion and Chinese repression were not particularly conducive to memory building for the construction of solace and rapprochement, the bricks being too venomous and porous. Nonetheless, the process of myth-creating, as a reinforcement of collective memory, continues. (p. 185)

By way of example, let us examine one of the modified myths as described by Israeli (2001). Here, the creation myths of both the Chinese and the Muslims are intertwined, using characters from both cultures and slightly modifying some events so as to include aspects of each. When the world was created, there was only Allah but no human beings. Later, the Lord created a human being with fire-colored earth, named Adan. The Lord decreed that Adan could only lay down but never stand up. One day, when the Lord was not around, Adan tried to stand up, but as soon as he did, his head cracked and from it sprung precious metals and animal species, and ultimately, also Eve from his rib. (p. 179)

The difference persists, however, in that Allah made him from earth while the Chinese version of creation does not specify his origin. Also, while the Chinese creation is immanent in Pan Gu, in the case of Adam (A-dan in Chinese), the Muslim legend wants the creation to happen by accident, not by the design of the Lord, when Adam took advantage of the fact that the Lord “was not around” (again, a cute Muslim concession to the Chinese regarding the omnipotence and omnipresence of God), in order to produce precious metals and animal species, and ultimately, also Eve from his rib. (p. 179)

There are many other similarities, concessions, and name changes throughout this and other stories and yet, they all agree upon and consistently maintain the universal message of both cultures.
The Chinese and the Muslims have also been able to graft myth onto history. Though admittedly shaky at times, says Israeli, when it comes to the firmer ground of history, myth-making persists and even gains momentum to the point that these combined myths are now solidly anchored in well-known and universally accepted events, names, and places and, therefore, gain more historical credibility. This is true modified myth adoption at work.

Conclusion
It can be said that myths are significant in explaining the existential questions of life and that they have the power to ground us and connect us to the universe around us. It can also be said that we sometimes unconsciously adhere to various myths in our daily lives. However, of the many points of discussion concerning myths and their origin, their effect on our relationships, and how they are viewed by certain elements of our society, I would stress the following three points more than any others.

Firstly, the definition of myth is more correctly intended as deep numinous narratives that figuratively express the very foundations of human life, as possessing life lessons and moral education, and personal truth to be extracted upon critical reflection. Secondly, there is a need to be more critical and aware of the myths we do adopt. By thinking the myths forward, we can stall those efforts to mislead us due to lack of knowledge. And finally, we need myths. We need to continue to discuss their relevance in today’s world community and how, if modified to suit our lives today, they can be a binding and uniting force universally. As extolled by Max Muller (1873) over 130 years ago:

Mythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language….Mythology, no doubt, breaks out more fiercely during the earlier periods of human thought, but it never disappears altogether. Depend on it, there is mythology now as it was in the time of Homer, only we do not perceive it, and because we all shrink from the full meridian of light of truth…mythology, in the highest sense, is power exercised by language on thought in every possible sphere of mental activity. (p. 353)

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References


Additional References


