

Myth, Symbolism, and Worldview

Tales, legends, proverbs, riddles, adages, and myths make up what anthropologists call *folklore*, an important subject for the study of culture. Because of its sacred nature, myth is especially significant in the analysis of comparative religion. Fundamental to the definition of myths are the community's attitudes toward them. Myths are narratives that are held to be sacred and true; thus, they often are core parts of larger ideological systems (Oring 1986: 124). Myths are set outside of historical time, usually at the beginning of time up to the point of human creation, and they frequently account for how the world came to be in its present form. Many of the principal characters are divine or semi-divine; most are not human beings but animals or cultural heroes with human attributes. The place, time, and manner in which a myth is performed may be special, and even the language in which it is expressed may be out of the ordinary. Elliott Oring considers the familiar story of Adam and Eve as an example:

For those who hold the story to be both sacred and true, the activities of this primordial couple, in concert with beguiling serpent and deity, explain fundamental aspects of world order: why the serpent is reviled, why a woman is ruled by her husband and suffers in childbirth, why man must toil to live—and most importantly—how sin entered the world and why man must die. (Ibid.)

To the anthropologist or folklorist, it is of no consequence whether the myth is objectively or scientifically true. What matters is its validity in its own cultural context. All of these characteristics distinguish myth from other forms of folk narrative, such as legend and folktale (Bascom 1965).

Beyond shaping worldview and explaining the origins of human existence, myths also serve as authoritative precedents that validate social norms. One of the founding figures of anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, described myth as a social "charter"—a model for behavior:

[Myth] is a statement of primeval reality which lives in the institutions and pursuits of a community. It justifies by precedent the existing order and it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, of sociological discriminations and burdens and of magical belief. . . . The function of myth is to strengthen tradition and to endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural, and more effective reality of initial events. (1931: 640–41)

Some anthropologists apply a psychological approach to myth analysis and see myths as symbolic expressions of sibling rivalry, male-female tensions, and other themes. Others—structural anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss—view myths as cultural means of resolving critical binary oppositions (life-death, matrilineal-patrilineal, nature-culture) that

serve as models for members of a society (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 280–81). Whether in Judeo-Christian and Muslim cultures, where myths have been transcribed to form the Torah, Bible, and Koran, or in other, less familiar cultures, these sacred narratives still serve their time-honored function for the bulk of humanity as the basis of religious belief. What is important to remember is that myths are considered to be truthful accounts of the past, whether transmitted orally in traditional societies or through the scriptural writings of the so-called great religions.

The scholarly study of myth has been important in the West since the time of the ancient Greeks. To Plato we owe the confusion over the meaning of the word *myth*, as he felt it was synonymous with *falsehood* or *lie*. Indeed, the use of *myth* to mean “fallacy” continues today, in clear contrast to the way anthropologists and other scholars of religion use the term. We can credit the anthropologists of the early 20th century with drawing attention to how myth functions in actual societies, rather than regarding myths as texts from the past. Distinctive to the anthropological approach to myth is an emphasis upon culture-specific meanings. This perspective differs from that of popular myth theorist Joseph Campbell, whose compelling books and television appearances have inspired many in the United States. Influenced greatly by psychologist Carl Jung, Campbell’s goal was to uncover common symbols and themes that lie beneath the mythic traditions of all the world’s cultures. Today, the study of myth remains multidisciplinary, with important contributions continuing in the fields of anthropology, folklore, literary studies, psychology, and religion.

The study of symbolism, too, is vital to the study of religion. In fact, “the human beings who perform the rituals . . . , and those who are ostensibly a ritual’s objects, are themselves representations of concepts and ideas, and therefore symbolic” (La Fontaine 1985: 13). Anthropology has been less than clear in its attempt to define the meaning of this important concept. Minimally, a symbol may be thought of as something that represents something else. The development of culture, for example, was dependent on human beings having the ability to assign symbolic meanings of words—to create and use a language. Religion is also a prime example of humanity’s proclivity to attach symbolic meanings to a variety of behavior and objects. “The object of symbolism,” according to Alfred North Whitehead, “is the enhancement of the importance of what is symbolized” (1927: 63).

That anthropological interest in the topic of symbolism had its start with the study of religious behavior is not surprising, especially in light of the plethora of symbols present in religious objects and ceremonies. Reflect for a moment on any religious service. Immediately on entering the building, be it a church, synagogue, or mosque, one is overwhelmed by symbolic objects—the Christian cross, the Star of David, paintings, statues, tapestries, and assorted ceremonial paraphernalia—each representing a religious principle. Fittingly, Clifford Geertz has noted that a religious system may be viewed as a “cluster of sacred symbols” (1957: 424). Unlike the well-defined symbols in mathematics and the physical sciences, these religious symbols assume many different forms and meanings: witness Turner’s concept of the multivocalic nature of symbols (their capacity to have many meanings).

More than a simple reminder of some remote aspect of a religion’s history, religious symbols are often considered to possess a power or force (*mana*) emanating from the spiritual world itself. The symbols provide people with an emotional and intellectual commitment to their particular belief system, telling them what is important to their society, collectively and individually, and helping them conform to the group’s value system. Durkheim accounted for the universality of symbols by arguing that a society

kept its value system through their use; that is, the symbols stood for the revered values. Without the symbols, the values and, by extension, the society's existence would be threatened.

Myths, symbols, and related activities such as rituals and the arts are forms of human symbolic action. All contribute to communicating and making real a particular view of the world, a view that makes sense and is believable to participants. Anthropologists refer to these frameworks as worldviews: all-encompassing pictures of reality, based on shared assumptions about how the world works (Lavenda and Schultz 2010: 68), and shaped by our social, economic, and political positions. Because worldviews convey deep senses of reality—of what fundamentally is—we can understand that religion involves more than what one “should do” or “ought to do,” those moral requirements that our own cultural biases may lead us to see most clearly. In a classic article included in this chapter, Clifford Geertz distinguishes between these two impulses in religion. He uses the term *ethos* to refer to attitudes, styles, and moral obligations associated with a culture or religion. *Worldview*, on the other hand, is a people's “picture of the way things, in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It conveys their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Geertz 1957: 421–22.) The cosmos, characters, and themes presented in myth, condensed in symbols, and enacted in ritual and the expressive arts contribute to the vivid real-ness and apparent naturalness of worldview.

Using a variety of approaches to the study of myth, symbol, and worldview, the articles selected for this chapter clearly show the importance of these topics to the study of comparative religion. We begin with examples of two contrasting approaches to myth within the field of anthropology. The excerpt by John Beattie illustrates the functionalist approach, with its attention to the close relationship between myth and social organization. In contrast, Kirin Narayan's account of myth as told and understood by a local participant illustrates a deeply ethnographic approach to interpretation.

In the third article, Eric Wolf explores a single, multifaceted, and historically significant symbol from Mexico.

Clifford Geertz's influential 1957 article, “Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” contributed concepts that would shape anthropology for many years to come. The article draws its examples from shadow-puppet theater in Indonesia.

Mary Lee Daugherty's case study of snake-handling congregations in West Virginia, originally written in 1976, shows the integration of myth and symbol in religious practice. Daugherty argues that snake handling is a form of sacrament, a religious ceremony that symbolically expresses the relationship between believers and Jesus.

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