

“**Myth**, a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons). Myths 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. The term *mythology* denotes both the study of myth and the body of myths belonging to a particular religious tradition.

As with all religious symbolism, there is no attempt to justify mythic narratives or even to render them plausible. Every myth presents itself as an authoritative, factual account, no matter how much the narrated events are at variance with natural law or ordinary experience. By extension from this primary religious meaning, the word *myth* may also be used more loosely to refer to an ideological belief when that belief is the object of a quasi-religious faith; an example would be the Marxist eschatological myth of the withering away of the state.

While the outline of myths from a past period or from a society other than one’s own can usually be seen quite clearly, to recognize the myths that are dominant in one’s own time and society is always difficult. This is hardly surprising, because a myth has its authority not by proving itself but by presenting itself. In this sense the authority of a myth indeed “goes without saying,” and the myth can be outlined in detail only when its authority is no longer unquestioned but has been rejected or overcome in some manner by another, more comprehensive myth.

The word *myth* derives from the Greek *mythos*, which has a range of meanings from “word,” through “saying” and “story,” to “fiction”; the unquestioned validity of *mythos* can be contrasted with *logos*, the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. Because myths narrate fantastic events with no attempt at proof, it is sometimes assumed that they are simply stories with no factual basis, and the word has become a synonym for falsehood or, at best, misconception. In the study of religion, however, it is important to distinguish between myths and stories that are merely untrue.

Myth has existed in every society. Indeed, it would seem to be a basic constituent of human culture. Because the variety is so great, it is difficult to generalize about the nature of myths. But it is clear that in their general characteristics and in their details a people’s myths reflect, express, and explore the people’s self-image. The study of myth is thus of central importance in the study both of individual societies and of human culture as a whole.

Myth in modern society

Deciding the extent to which there has actually been any secularization of myth involves a problem of definition. If myth is seen as the product of a past era, it is difficult to determine at what actual moment that era ended. Thus, it is virtually impossible to state precisely when a

certain mythical theme becomes a mere literary theme or to determine in general when myths are no longer being created. It is more fruitful to recognize that symbols, myths, and rituals are all subject to change over time. Nor is secularization an irreversible process. It is instead a process that takes place time and again. Secularization movements and movements toward “mythification” of a phenomenon, narrative, or idea are aspects of the same historical processes. There have also been many types of secularization; the one brought about in Western society since the Middle Ages is only a single example. Another instance was the development in Archaic and Classical Greece (sometimes referred to—with great oversimplification—as a movement “from myth to reason”) whereby fundamental questions about the nature of the universe came increasingly to receive answers in terms of philosophical, as opposed to mythical, reasoning.

On the other hand, although the secularization of modern times is not a unique phenomenon, it is a new and complex type, to which many factors have contributed. Scientific, particularly astronomical, discoveries of the late medieval and Renaissance periods were accompanied by a new trust in cosmic laws and an increasingly abstract notion of God. More or less Euhemeristic historical accounts that were common in the Middle Ages and were a symptom of a certain secularization process themselves gave way to history writing, focusing on psychological, social, and economic facts. In philosophy, naturalism of various sorts opposed notions of transcendence that earlier systems had taken for granted. The most common tendency in modern society has been to regard the characters and events in mythical accounts as not real or as by-products of realities that are not transcendent but rather immanent.

This secularization in modern society, like earlier secularization processes, is accompanied by a process whereby new myths .

Demythologization of major religious traditions

Demythologization should be distinguished from secularization. Every living mythology must come to terms with the world in which it is transmitted and to that extent inevitably goes through processes of secularization. Demythologization, however, refers to the conscious efforts people make to purify a religious tradition of its mythological elements. The term *demythologization* (*Entmytho-logisierung*) was coined by Rudolf Bultmann, a German theologian and New Testament scholar. In the strict sense of the word, demythologizing efforts have been limited to theological discussions in 20th-century Christianity.

Even after secularization has taken place, a certain mythological residue may persist. Edward B. Tylor, one of the founders of anthropology as an academic discipline in the 19th century, coined the use of the word *survival* for customs and beliefs that continued to be adhered to long after the context in which they had had their meaning had ceased to exist. Because such customs and beliefs may be regarded as mere superstitions, the word *survival* usually has a

slightly derogatory overtone. There are many survivals of myth in this sense. The myth of “the noble savage,” well known from the 18th-century writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, can be understood as a survival of a paradisiacal mythology: Western man expecting to find evidence of paradise on earth.

The secularization process in modern times has affected symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual, liturgy) and symbolic objects (sacred places) more than myth, however. Nevertheless, commonly accepted forms of mythology in modern society do not permeate all parts of society or fulfill all needs. (In all likelihood, no society has ever been perfectly homogeneous in its myths.) At the same time there exist profound mythological needs in modern society, and some are filled by myths borrowed from submerged or alien traditions. Modern society’s neglect of cosmic symbolism (which in contrast was widespread in archaic tradition) has provoked certain reactions, such as the continuing interest in astrology, which may even be seen as an attempt to present a coherent account of the cosmos. And the huge scientific advances of the 20th century have given rise to a literature, science fiction that resembles myth, even down to an eschatological element.”

By

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