

## REDEFINING *MYTH* AND *RELIGION*: INTRODUCTION TO A CONVERSATION

by *Loyal D. Rue*

*Abstract.* Minimally, *myth* means “story,” and *religion* means “that which binds” a community into a coherent unity. Myth and religion are closely associated because a shared myth is the most efficient and effective means for achieving social coherence. Ancient myths were initially formulated in terms of the science of their day. Thus, an integration of science, myth, and religion is essential to a healthy culture. As these elements become disintegrated there arises a need to generate new mythic visions. The question of *our* day is whether science offers resources relevant to the expression of a new myth.

*Keywords:* myth; religion; science; story.

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The question to be addressed here is simply this: Are there some story lines embedded in the vocabularies and perspectives of the sciences that might inform a compelling vision of human origins, human nature, and human fulfillment? For visions of human purpose and fulfillment typically are embedded in story, in narrative, wherever that might be found. One might even say, *in myth*, except that the very word *myth* raises suspicions among persons of a scientific mindset.

And why is that? I think it is because the connotations associated with myth involve the supposition of entities and events to which science has no access—that is, entities and events of a supernatural character.

In fact, the word *myth* literally means “story.” But the standard connotation has limited myth to certain types of stories, namely, stories about supernatural entities and events. In an alternate, pejorative usage, *myth* has meant a story that lacks an element of literal truth. Thus, we commonly speak of the myth of male

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supremacy, the myth of Lamarckian theory, and so on. If one wants to debunk something, one might proceed by simply calling it a myth.

The term *myth*, then, is in need of a rescue operation. It was once a perfectly useful word, meaning simply “story.” It did not necessarily have to do with supernatural realities, and it was not necessarily false in the literal sense. In fact, many stories are true, and some are useful for purposes of instruction.

Let us accept this meaning of the word *myth* and proceed to endow it with additional meaning, as a *story* with a *distinctive characteristic*. We shall mean by *myth* a story of comprehensive scope that concerns itself with cosmic or geologic origins or with the origins, nature, or destiny of life. Myth would then mean a “big-picture” kind of story that is told for the purpose of giving human beings an orientation in the cosmos—an account of where human life fits into the comprehensive scope of things. Now, working with this definition, it is very clear that some myths are wild and fantastic and full of beings and doings that are well beyond the limits of plausible science, but this does not mean that all myths are of necessity wild and fantastic. By our definition, a myth could be literally true and thoroughly naturalistic.

Attention to the larger dimensions of myth leads naturally to a consideration of religion, another phenomenon that raises suspicions among many persons of a scientific bent. Like *myth*, the term *religion* seems to connote supernatural entities and events that are, almost by definition, antithetical to the scientific enterprise. In addition, the term *religion* brings along baggage about institutional hierarchies and liturgical forms and absolute moral codes. In many cases, religion has tried to elevate “belief against the evidence” to the status of a virtue. But again, I say, these connotations are most unfortunate and have little to do with the essence of religion.

A minimalist rendition of the term *religion* would have it like this: *Religion* derives from the Latin *religio*, which simply means to bind together or to tie back. The same root gives us *ligament*. Religion, then, is that which binds together, that which ties a community into a coherent bundle or unity, that which gives identity to a culture. Now, on the minimalist view, that could be almost anything at all, and it certainly does not have to involve the supernatural.

We can define *religion* in this minimalist way: Religion is a cultural mechanism that achieves a sense of solidarity between separate kinship groups. Kinship groups tend to hold together by virtue of

biological mechanisms, but larger, transkin groups must construct extragenetic, symbolic ties that bind.

And this is, of course, how myth and religion come to have such close associations. It seems that the most efficient and effective mechanism for integrating various kin groups is the sharing of a story.

Now we have, I hope, rescued these two terms by restoring them to their minimal meanings. Myth is a “big-picture” story—it could be true, it could be false, it could be fantastic, it could be boring, it might involve the supernatural or it might not. Religion is any mechanism that holds together a variety of kinship groups to form a larger, transkin alliance. It could be something as inefficient as a police state, or as transient as a common enemy, or it could be a shared myth about common origins, nature, and destiny. In all of the stable, coherent cultures we know anything about, the religious mechanism amounts to a shared myth.

There is one more word I want to deal with here, and that is *science*, whose root is the Latin *scientia*, meaning “knowledge.” Science represents, therefore, the most reliable formulation of concepts, categories, models, and metaphors that usefully inform individuals about their world.

Ideally, there should be a comfortable, fluid, organic relationship among science, myth, and religion. That is, in an ideal world, the vocabulary of science would inform the myth that binds together the culture; in fact, when we explore the birth of new cultures, we find that they are generally forged by this very dynamic. Initially, the great stories of traditional cultures were expressed in terms of the vocabulary, concepts, and categories provided by the science of their day, and I would say that any truly coherent culture takes pains to maintain a fluid relationship between its science, its myth, and its religion. If and when these elements become dis-integrated, then the culture is in serious jeopardy of decline.

Well, of course, this happens, doesn't it? New experiences inevitably get formulated in new knowledge, and it is not always the case that the new knowledge is allowed to transform old myths. Myths are highly resistant to change because changing them threatens to “unbind” the social order. In the face of static myth, if science is allowed any license at all, it will begin to drift away from myth and religion until it is perceived to be their enemy.

Under these conditions, a culture might begin fragmenting into three general groups—those who reject the advancement of science, those who reject traditional binding stories, and those who desperately engage in the futile activity of reinterpreting the old

stories to make them appear compatible with the new knowledge. In terms of our own cultural tradition, we are left with the fundamentalists at one extreme, the atheists and agnostics at the other extreme, and a good many anxious and confused people in the middle. This is obviously a caricature, but not one that we fail to recognize.

Now let me take a rather large step and make some general observations about the contemporary world. Several interesting things are going on. For one thing, it appears that many of the traditional cultures of the world are in a state of serious decline for the reason that we have already mentioned—a loss of coherence among science, myth, and religion.

Another important development is that technology has reduced the effective distances between cultural groups. It is increasingly difficult for cultural traditions to resist fundamental change by maintaining isolation. We are all in the same neighborhood. Furthermore, there is emerging a new fabric of economic interdependence that will only exacerbate the difficulties of maintaining the identities of traditional cultures.

Finally, and perhaps most important, all of the peoples of the earth are collectively faced with immense problems that threaten the integrity of the environment—overpopulation; ozone depletion; air, water, and soil pollution; loss of natural habitat and the consequent loss of biodiversity; the possibility of global warming; and, of course, the threat of devastating wars resulting from mounting political tensions. The interdependent global neighborhood now shares a whole set of common problems.

Such developments have made it clear to an increasing number of people that a genuine global culture is now both necessary and feasible. We presently have very little sense for what the new world order will be like, if indeed it can be forged before it is too late. What we have at the moment, and for the foreseeable future, is a lot of confusion and the likelihood that it will continue toward critical limits.

One thing we do know is that the great cultural traditions of the past have all emerged in moments of intense crisis, and, despite the bleakness of the hour, there remains the possibility of creating the conditions for a grand new beginning.

#### A GLOBAL STORY

Global culture calls for a global story. If we are to extend transkin altruism to all the kin groups of the world, emphasizing our traits for cooperation and nurturing rather than our traits for aggression and

deceit, then we must articulate a common story, a narrative of origins, nature, and destiny that can give us a shared orientation in nature and in history.

So whence comes the story that can begin to unify the globe? Not from Islam, not from Judaism, not from Christianity. As universal as these traditions may claim to be, they are, in a sense, provincial because the scope of their reflection encompasses a mere few thousand years of history, beginning in the Middle East. These traditions tell *somebody's* story. We are asking, Whence come the elements for *everybody's* story?

When new cultures emerge, they articulate their narrative orientation in nature and history in terms of the science of the day. For us, a good place to begin is with the science of *our* day. I do not envision any sort of neopositivism, where science itself pretends to function as a religion. I do not propose to elevate Newton or Darwin or Einstein to the status of sainthood. Nor am I hostile to the rich diversity of human cultural traditions. I am simply asking whether science, *as science*, has resources relevant to the expression of a new myth. I would pose to the sciences this question: If a mythmaker came to you requesting some promising material for a global story, what would you suggest?