WHAT IS "MYTHIC REALITY"?

by Robert A. Segal

Abstract. The topic of the March 2011 symposium in *Zygon* is "The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual." Yet few of the contributors even discuss "mythic reality." Of the ones who do, most cavalierly use "myth" dismissively, as simply a false belief. Rather than reconciling myth with reality, they oppose myth to reality. Their view of myth is by no means unfamiliar or unwarranted, but they need to recognize other views of myth and to defend their own. Above all, they need to appreciate the grip that any belief aptly labelled myth has—a grip that holds at least as much for a false belief as for a true one.

Keywords: autonomous individual; belief; myth; reality

When I received my copy of the March 2011 issue of the *Zygon*, I was delighted to discover that most of the issue is devoted to papers from the 2009 summer Institute for Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS) conference on "The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual." I was less delighted to discover that, of the eight articles and the "editorial overview," few even mention the word "myth," and the few that do typically use the term amateurishly. Not one reference to scholarship on myth appears.

I am not an evangelist for myth, the way C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell are. I take no offense at a pejorative use of the term, such as is largely found in the symposium. I presume no authority on the proper use of the term. But, I do presume to know the disparate ways that the term has been used, and I do take offense at any facile, uninformed usage.

The theme of the symposium is the tenuousness of the concept of the "autonomous individual." The contributors find that concept not only faulty but even deleterious. Human beings, the contributors insist, do not exist autonomously. Humans are not like Robinson Crusoe. They exist in relationships—with families and with communities. The very pitting of the individual against the community wrongly presupposes an autonomous individual.

The issue of the relationship of the individual to the group is not new, and there is more than one position on it. The *locus classicus* for the view

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that there is a natural fit between the individual and society is, of course, Plato's *Republic*. The opposite view is that of Rousseau. Emile Durkheim, the founding father of sociology, sets sociology, as the study of the group, against psychology, which for him is the study of the individual. Seeking to subsume psychology under sociology, he goes as far as to argue that individualism is itself the product of society. By contrast, Max Weber, the other founding father of sociology, begins with the individual and works from the individual to society. Still, for him, once society arises, it shapes the individual, who fits snugly within it. To make their case, the participants in the symposium cite psychology but could have enlisted sociology or anthropology.

Of the participants who use the term myth, Phillip Cary uses it in the tamest fashion—to refer to the stories Plato tells, such as the Myth of the Cave and the Myth of Er: "what the soul is, what makes the human soul different from the beasts, and what happens to it after death was a matter for myth, speculation, and disagreement" (Cary 2011, 123). For Plato, myth is metaphysics in story form, as it is for the literary theorist of myth Kenneth Burke and for the anthropological theorist Paul Radin.

In his introduction to the set, John Teske explains that "concepts of individual autonomy and responsibility" are "shot through with complexity and contradiction." The "creative tension" in the title of the symposium "rests on the ambiguity of the phrase 'mythic reality'" (Teske 2011, 105). Teske does not unravel the ambiguity of the phrase but doubtless means by it the juxtaposition of apparent opposites: myth and reality.

But in the history of the study of myth there have been many theorists for whom "mythic reality" is not a "creative tension" or a contradiction in terms. For Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, Henri Frankfort, and Jung, myth *constitutes* reality rather than *distorts* it. For them, myth is a worldview. Mythic reality is not the same as scientific reality but is not thereby false, as it is for the contributors to the forum. Other theorists, to be sure, reject myth as false. For E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, myth is incompatible with science. But even they seek to explain how a belief so conspicuously false arises and lasts. For them, the falsity must be explained and not merely assumed. Overall, the touted relationship between myth and reality varies from theory to theory. And the reality can be physical, metaphysical, psychological, or sociological.

Instead of unravelling his own chosen ambiguity, by which he really means ambivalence, Teske simply notes one sense of the term myth: myth as false or "fictional." He then notes another, milder sense: myth as constructed. Both senses make "mythic reality" an oxymoron.

Teske asserts that "mythic reality" is an apt phrase because autonomy exists and has effects on the one hand but changes in nature on the other: "while not a fiction, since human autonomy has clear and very real

implications and consequences, . . . neither does it have an unchanging reality" (Teske 2011, 106). For Teske, the myth is the belief in an unchanging conception of autonomy. Far from reconciling myth with reality, Teske is thereby opposing myth to reality, for the mythic aspect of the phrase means the false one.

The other contributors who use the term "myth" also mean by it a false belief. Lene Jensen declares that "to a lot of psychologists, autonomy has not been a myth but rather a reality" (Jensen 2011, 152). That Jensen disagrees with these psychologists is not relevant; that she herself sets myth against reality is. Steven Winter writes that "today, it is increasingly apparent that the modern conception of the individual as a rational, self-directing agent operates as a mythology that organizes and distorts science, economics, politics, and religion" (Winter 2011, 225). Myth is supposedly responsible for the distortion found in many domains—the distortion that the individual is autonomous. Hence the "myth of the autonomous individual" is blamed for the "commodification" of religion in contemporary American society (Winter 2011, 226).

A common distinction in the study of atheism is that between English and German atheism. English atheism, epitomized by Bertrand Russell, seeks simply to refute religious belief. German atheism, epitomized by Ludwig Feuerbach and even more by Marx, seeks to explain why humanity becomes religious, and especially in light of the obvious falsity of religious belief. English atheism is the province of philosophers; German atheism, the province of social scientists.

The contributors to the present symposium are like English atheists. For them, the goal is simply to expose the falsity of myth. Why people accept and retain a myth is of no interest to them. For me, by contrast, myth can be true as well as false, but explaining the tenacity with which myth is held counts even more. Myth does not hold a tighter grip when true than when false. If anything, the grip is tighter when myth is false, for adherence to the myth flies in the proverbial face of the evidence against it.

Still, the "power of myth," to use Campbell's celebrated phrase, is key. Myth is not simply any belief. The belief that I have ten pounds in my pocket when I only have five is not a myth. For ordinarily, nothing rests on the belief, which I would readily be prepared to abandon. The notion of "individual autonomy" is a myth because it is so firmly embedded in modernity rather than because it is false, if false it even is.

Myth usually takes the form of a story, though the story can exemplify a myth rather than constitute it. The "rags to riches" myth is the conviction that America offers opportunity for all. Accompanying the myth were, above all, stories galore by the nineteenth-century author Horatio Alger. But the myth stands independent of these stories. For most theorists of myth, by contrast, myth is a story—or, put pretentiously, a narrative. Theorists differ over the content of the story.

By the strictest usage, which is found especially in the fields of folklore and anthropology, the characters in myth must be gods, the story must take place in the past, and the event must be the creation of the world. By a looser usage, the characters in myth can also be humans and even animals, the story can alternatively take place in the present or the future, and the event can be the creation of anything or of nothing. And the event can take place in the social world and not just in the physical world. By the strictest usage, the Bible, for example, contains only three myths: the two creation stories (Genesis 1–2.4a and 2.4b–3.24) plus the Flood story (Genesis 6–9). All other biblical stories would be classified as legends or fairy tales, which means folktales. By a looser usage, all biblical stories would qualify as myths, at least in part. By the strictest usage, only Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* would qualify as myths in classical mythology. By a looser usage, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the tragedies would also qualify as myths, at least in part.

Nineteenth-century theorists saw myth as the "primitive" counterpart to natural science. For Tylor, myth was the exact counterpart to scientific theory. For Frazer, it was the exact counterpart to applied science. For both, myth was false because it was incompatible with science, which was assumed to be true. Myth was part of religion, and the mythic explanation of events was a decision by a god rather than the effect of an impersonal process. Moderns, who by definition were scientific, could not consistently explain events both mythically and scientifically. But the choice had already been made for them. They had to give up myth.

One argument made by twentieth-century theorists against their predecessors was the stubborn persistence of myth. If myth was conspicuously incompatible with science, why was it still around, whether or not moderns called it myth? Why were events still attributed to direct intervention by God? The answer could hardly be that most moderns are merely inconsistent. The answer had to be that myth is in fact other than the counterpart to science. Twentieth-century theorists, who include Bronislaw Malinowski, Eliade, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Jonas, and Freud and Jung, maintained that myth either is not about the physical world or is not an explanation of the physical world. Myth could now be about society (Malinowski, Eliade), about the human mind (Freud, Jung), or even about the place of humans in the physical world (Bultmann, Jonas). Myth could now be ideology (Malinowski), as the contributors to the symposium might have taken individual autonomy to be. Even if myth was still about the physical world, it now served to do more or other than explain that world (Malinowski, Eliade).

More boldly, myth was now neither about the physical world nor an explanation of whatever its subject was (Freud, Jung). The function of myth could now be anything as long as it was not the same as that of science. Myth was no longer tied to religion, so that there could now

be secular myths (Freud, Jung). And myth could now be true when taken symbolically (Bultmann, Jonas, Freud, Jung) and false only when still taken literally.[1]

In short, there is more to myth than falsity, and even when myth is false.

Note

1. For surveys of modern theories of myth, see Segal (1999, 2004, 2007).

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