

Introduction: Myths and Misbelieving

Might I suggest that [people doubting religious narratives] use the tactic used by many modern Jews dealing with biblical narratives that defy credulity, from a six-day story of creation to Jonah living inside a large fish. We distinguish between left-brain narratives (meant to convey factual truth) and right-brain narratives (meant to make a point through a story; the message will be true even if the story isn't factually defensible). (Rabbi Harold Kushner (2013))

Two Meanings of “Myth”

This book was inspired by another Wiley Blackwell book, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* by Scott Lilienfeld *et al.* (2010), in which “myth” means a widespread belief that is not well supported by evidence. Some of our myths are like that, such as the beliefs that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and that Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem on December 25. But we also count as myths common beliefs that are questionable for other reasons, such as that they conflict with the teachings of the religions of the believers. Some Muslims (and countless non-Muslims), for example, believe that the Qur’an promises suicide bombers 72 heavenly virgins. In the Qur’an, however, both suicide and terrorism are condemned as grave sins. Many Christians believe that Satan and his devils torture humans in hell, but that actually conflicts with basic Christian teachings. When we call something a “myth,” then, our meaning is close to the dictionary

definition for “misbelief”: a myth is a wrong, false, or unorthodox belief or opinion, especially in religion.

There is a second meaning of “myth” that we should mention, because it is important in the academic field of Religious Studies. When scholars of religion talk about “myths,” they generally mean traditional stories that explain important aspects of life, such as where we came from, why we’re here, who our heroes are and what makes them special, and how we should live. A good example is the story in Genesis about Adam and Eve disobeying God by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then being cast out of the Garden by God. This description of the origin of evil, and stories like it, are often characterized by extraordinary and even supernatural events, and some people believe they are literally true – true in the same way that a traffic report or a medical diagnosis is true. They believe the stories are accurate representations of things that really happened. But many scholars believe that such myths are not to be judged on the basis of historic or scientific accuracy. In fact, these stories generally developed before modern criteria of historical and scientific accuracy. They are often about things in the deep recesses of prehistory, and sometimes about things in the far distant future. As such, they are beyond the realms of history and science. But we cherish them anyway because they help us understand who we are and answer some of the most pressing questions in life, including why bad things happen, who can be trusted, and what might happen next.

As we listen to stories like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we sometimes get a sense that we are in touch with higher reality. We are in the realm of the transcendent, a realm beyond the frailties and limitations that characterize everyday reality. Myths of this kind are commonly transmitted in religions, so much so that many scholars include myths as essential components of religions. Another example of this kind of myth is the Creation Story in the Bible and the Qur’an. According to that story, a single almighty personal God created the earth and everything upon it in just a few days, and provided all that was needed for his most cherished creatures, human beings. Stories like this provide a measure of assurance that things are basically as they should be and there is a reason for us to carry on, even in the most difficult circumstances.

When viewed from this perspective, myths in religion – in their own unique way – can be considered true. They provide context, continuity, and comfort for the communities who share them. They are thus true for the people who believe them. The fourth-century Roman historian Sallustius spoke from this perspective when he said, “Myths are things

that never happened but always are” (Sallustius, 1996). Joseph Campbell, among the twentieth century’s best known mythologists, called myths “the womb of mankind’s initiation into life and death” (1969: 12). The University of Chicago’s Wendy Doniger (1998) presents myths as imaginative expressions of universal human experiences, which allow us to communicate across cultures. British scholar Karen Armstrong (2005: 4) stresses the sacred aspect of myth, saying that myths speak “of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it. Belief in this invisible but more powerful reality, sometimes called the world of the gods, is a basic theme of mythology.” For scholars such as these, myths are very much like what Pablo Picasso said about art: “a lie which makes us realize truth” (Borofsky, 1923).

Other scholars caution against such a romantic view of myth. The University of Chicago’s Bruce Lincoln (2000: 147) describes myths as “*ideology* in narrative form.” As such, like any other ideology, myths establish identity and distinguish “us” from “them.” They also establish and legitimize a group’s internal order. Lincoln is primarily concerned with myths that have condoned and even encouraged exclusivist identities of the type that devalue other groups, such as those promoting Europe’s anti-Semitism. Far from the comfort of sacred planes, the myths discussed by Lincoln have profound – and sometimes disastrous – practical implications.

Writers such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins also advocate a critical approach to religious myths. They are concerned that too many people can’t tell the difference between the “special” or “sacred” kind of truth conveyed in the imaginative stories of mythology, and ordinary truth like that found in newspapers. Too many people can’t distinguish between transcendent myth and literal truth. They fail to recognize the importance of verifying truth claims instead of blindly accepting them on the basis of unaccountable authority. Again, that can lead to serious problems in real life. Take the example of the creation story. It is one thing to find in it assurance that life has a purpose and a goal, but quite another to insist that this story is literally true and that any science that demonstrates otherwise, such as the theory of evolution, must therefore be dismissed as an attack on a higher, unquestionable authority. Yet that seems to be what is happening. A 2012 Gallup Poll indicates that 46% of Americans believe that the description of creation in Genesis is literally true. This figure represents an increase of 2% from 1982, no doubt reflecting a tendency to teach “creationism” instead of – or as a suitable alternative to – science. In 2013, *The New York Times* reported that a survey of more than 900 biology

teachers in the United States revealed that nearly 13% teach various forms of the creation story as “valid scientific alternatives to Darwinian evolutionary theory” (Rich, 2013) – this despite a US Supreme Court ruling prohibiting the teaching of “creation myths” as science (*Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 US 578, [1987]). Similarly, the spread of creationism in Europe prompted the Parliament of the Council of Europe to pass a resolution in 2007 entitled “The Dangers of Creationism in Education.” The resolution warns that denying the science behind the theory of evolution in favor of unquestioning belief in a particular group’s creation myth could undermine the research necessary to deal with the major challenges facing humanity today, such as epidemic disease and environmental disasters.

We recognize and respect the scholarly notion of myths as stories conveying transcendent truths – truths immune from the rigors of scientific method. But for the purposes of this book, we use the skeptical view of myths: widely believed claims that are not well supported by historic or scientific evidence. Our emphasis will be on the major traditions of the West – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But we will include some stories about smaller Western traditions, as well as some Western myths about Eastern traditions. We will also discuss some common misbeliefs about people who lack religious beliefs – atheists and agnostics.

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Where Do Myths Come From?

There are several things about human beings that predispose them to create and circulate myths like the ones in this book. We'll suggest eight. The first, and most flattering to our human self-image, is that, as the ancient philosopher Aristotle said, we are *rational* animals. We are constantly trying to understand the world around us and make sense of what we experience. We want to know why some people are allies and others enemies, how we can be successful, why we failed, and countless other things.

In trying to understand the world, we look for similarities between current experiences and past experiences. We link new things to what we already know, thus creating concepts of types of things, as when we classify a new acquaintance as "a student" or "a Muslim." In thinking this way, we naturally create generalizations about all or most members of a group, based on a certain feature that some members of that group may have. If we have had a negative encounter with someone, for example, we often form a negative stereotype of all members of whatever group that individual represents to us.

A second feature of human beings that leads us to create myths is that we are *social* animals. We are born into groups and are nurtured by them. Our family and community are the initial source of our safety and security. We must therefore be able to identify our own group and learn to live in harmony with them, and be able to distinguish between them and those who might be a threat to us. Early humans lived in tribes, as many still do. Getting along with the rest of one's tribe requires keeping track of who all of them are, how they are related to each other, whether they are cooperative or dangerous, etc. One theory of why the human brain evolved so quickly over the last three million years is that once our ancestors came down from the trees and began living in social groups on the African savannah, they needed to remember more and more information about larger and larger numbers of people. That's why a large part of the human brain today is devoted to recognizing faces and filling in background information on them. It is also why so many myths deal with identifying our own group as distinct from other groups.

We keep up with who is doing what with whom, and to whom, not only by direct observation but also by talking with people about other people who aren't present. That's a third feature of human beings that leads to mythmaking: we are *gossiping* animals.

A fourth feature that makes us mythmakers is that we are *moral* animals. In thinking and talking about people, we assess their honesty, generosity, courage, loyalty to the group, and so on – or their lack of these features. Just as the stories we create about our own group tend to stress its positive points, the stories we tell about outsiders tend to stress the reasons we should not trust them. Indeed, most myths about other groups, like most gossip, put people in a bad light. As we shall see, there are few flattering myths about other people's religions.

The fifth thing about human beings that leads to mythmaking is that we are *storytelling* animals. Around the world, for tens of thousands of years, people have created narratives – to explain events, honor heroes, teach children moral lessons, entertain each other, and for many other purposes. We store information about people mostly as stories about them, and before the invention of writing a few thousand years ago, stories were the basic form in which human beings retained most information about anything at all. That's over 98% of our history, so it's no wonder that we still love to create, tell, and listen to good stories.

And we are not just storytellers, but *imaginative* storytellers, a sixth feature that leads to mythmaking. While stories sometimes convey accurate information, accuracy is not a necessary characteristic of good stories. Humans love storytelling so much that long ago they began creating what we now call "fiction." As Walter Ong (1982) has pointed out in his studies of oral cultures, the more creative a story is, the more likely it is to be remembered. So if we are telling a story about an ancestor whose courage and strength we valorize, descriptions of extraordinary – even superhuman – courage and strength might well be the most likely to be passed on from one generation to the next. Similarly, if we feel threatened by a particular group, we may well exaggerate their negative traits.

This point about heroes to admire and villains to fear brings up a seventh feature of humans that leads to myths: we are *emotional* animals. For a story to grab our interest, be remembered, and get passed on, it helps if it elicits emotions such as admiration for heroes, fear, sexual desire, awe, pride in our group, and hatred of other groups. Some people today complain about all the sex and violence in the media, but sex and violence have always been central to storytelling, starting with the Bible and Greek literature. Think

of the story in Chapter 11 of the Second Book of Samuel of how, after King David impregnated Bathsheba, he arranged to have her husband killed in battle. Think of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. The same part of the brain that processes emotions – the limbic system – also converts short-term memories to long-term memories. Direct experience of an emotionally arousing event is usually the most powerful way to make something impress us and register in our long-term memory, but an emotionally arousing story is probably the second most powerful.

Myths make sense not only of what we experience, but also of what we do. With myths we can provide reasons for our actions. When one group of people persecutes another, for example, negative myths about the target group are often used as justification: those people poison our wells, steal our children, worship devils, perform black magic, and so on. The myths we will examine about Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers, for example, were mostly created by their enemies. We started our list of human features by saying that we are rational animals. But with Sigmund Freud, we can add that we are also *rationalizing* animals. That's our eighth – not as flattering – feature.

In our scientific, technological culture, we may think of ourselves as having grown beyond myths, but an hour reading tabloid newspapers, surfing the web, or watching television shows reveals that these eight human traits and the myths they spawn are still alive and well. We are still gossips who think in ethnic and religious stereotypes. We still love a good story that evokes admiration for heroes, fear, sexual desire, awe, pride in our group, or hatred of other groups. We're still prone to tribalism, as in our allegiance to our country's military forces, and to sports teams. Hero worship flourishes not just in the military and in sports, but in movies and the music industry. And xenophobia – fear of people outside our group – is still rampant, as the persistence of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia shows.

Electronic media have only made the creation and circulation of myths easier and faster. Modern myths are often called "urban myths" or "urban legends," and people have created whole web sites to scrutinize them. Snopes.com, for example, describes itself as "the definitive Internet reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation." The American television show *MythBusters* (Discovery Channel) tests urban myths like the claims that being painted with gold or being hit by a penny dropped from the top of the Empire State Building can be deadly. Many urban legends are about religion, such as the story about geologists drilling in Siberia who accidentally punched through

to hell, or the one about the “Second Coming Project” that is trying to clone Jesus from the DNA of relics, or the claim that some airlines refuse to pair a Christian pilot with a Christian co-pilot because the Rapture might snatch away both of them, leaving the plane to crash. We will leave such myths to snopes.com and *MythBusters*, and focus on a sampling of some of the world’s more persistent myths. They fall into the following general categories:

- Common misbeliefs about religions in general
- Common beliefs about the origins of various religions that have been shown to be questionable in the light of historical research
- Beliefs within religious traditions that are popularly believed but are not part of official doctrine
- False allegations about certain religious communities’ beliefs and practices, held by people outside those communities.

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