

**Reflection:**

## **MYTH AND FAITH IN HISTORY**

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Myth is a didactic story, attributing supernatural origin to an individual or collective identity, practice or institution. As such, it is meant to perpetuate and perfect that identity, practice or institution to the full realization and manifestation of its potency. Identity is always social or collective and in contrast to another identity or several other identities. As such, every myth contains and sets in motion a social dynamic from the supernatural origin of the identity to its current or present manifestation, and its further or future shape. In terms of its time frame of past, present and future, this dynamic is historical. As such, it affects and effects or makes a history of the identity, practice or institution in view. This means that the history of the practices, institutions and identities will evolve in relative competition and rivalry to one another, and throughout in the name of the sacred as being in competition with bogus claims of others to the same sacred.

Perhaps we should define here the sacred as that which is absolute and necessary, and which necessarily relativizes everything except itself, but which humans have reduced to the status of a device for turning myth into history and history into myth. They do it by relativizing or secularizing the absolute sacred, and absolutizing the secular or the wholly relative. And how, or with what conceptual tools are they able to do it? These tools are the concepts of the whole and the part, on the one hand, and transcendence and immanence of the sacred, on the other. Wholeness or totality is identified as sacred, absolute and necessary to the understanding of all else as part or the incomplete, which is identified as relative and secular. Transcendence means the non-identity of the whole with the part, and immanence means the identity of the whole with the part. Thus, totality and transcendence are correlative and identical with absoluteness, while part and immanence are relative to the whole or

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totality, without being identical to or with the totality. But traditional or authoritarian religiosity relativizes the sacred absolute or totality by identifying the transcendent solely, wholly, and, therefore, exclusively with its own relativity, which it absolutizes by making itself the whole authority there is or there can be because, it claims, God has given it wholly and solely to it, by identifying Himself wholly and solely with it. This is the mythologization or unilaterally invalid transfer of temporal history on to the realm of eternity and of choiceless divine necessity. Because this religiosity sees God or the transcendent as solely, entirely and exclusively identified with and immanent in itself, it denies the divine necessity and legitimation to any and every other kind of religiosity. It demythologizes and thereby desecrates or de-sacralizes their history by denying divine immanence to them, and reducing them solely to human and secular-temporal efforts, claims or presumptions. This has been the banefully deplorable trend of both Aryan and Semitic religiosity. Demythologizing the other has been the established track record of every system, which sought to sacralize and mythologize itself all the more. It has absorbed or assimilated their myths into its history, and thereby declared other histories bereft of the sacred. This is how the Aryan and the Semitic religions have propagated themselves. And it is because the same tactic is involved in their strategy of self-propagation that the dominant Aryan and the Semitic religions come into collision path among themselves. We shall be able to draw attention to this process in the New Testament *vis-a-vis* the Old in appropriate places as we go on with our subject.

As for the making or authorship of myths, it is the perceptively, creatively and poetically endowed individuals in any society, who anonymously formulate them, out of the collective memory of the society's unwritten history. When the history gets to be written, the myths serve not only as the oral tradition of prior or pre-history, but also as the pointers to the direction in which the practice, institution or identity will evolve and, thus, make its further history. So, it is fair to say that history is made with the help of myth. As such, myth is the beginning and prehistory of established societies, institutions and practices. As there is a slant in every myth in favour of one particular practice, institution or identity over another, the history made on the basis of the myth will be slanted in the

same direction as the myth. Thus myth is and has a definitive and determining force on the history as made and as written.

History itself gets written not any time at random, but at a definite stage of a person's, society's or institution's development, when the institution, society or person has won enough self-confidence, public recognition and acceptance as a force to reckon with in the respective sphere of life and action or interaction in the prevalent, dominant identity and institutional system. There are struggles involved in gaining social acceptance and recognition. It is when the struggle has succeeded in winning the public respect and recognition that the struggle itself is recorded as a part of the successful making of history.

So long as the efforts and struggles for winning acceptance and recognition for the identity of a person, group, practice or institution do not attain their goal, that experience is only stored in the emotive memory of the protagonist and the rest of the struggling group. It is committed to writing when the culmination of safe and secure establishment or at least the assurance of it has been reached. The duration of the indecisive struggle would tend to remain clothed in the inner psychic garb of vague and uncertain myth rather than etched on the tapestry of visibly accomplished sacred history. It is the stably instituted establishments, like monarchy, priesthood and schools of prophets, which invite and commission the writing of their successful accomplishments. Myth, by itself, is an emotive psychic record corresponding, volatile and variable with the changing external situation, while historiography is, by and large, an externally objective and verifiable fixed record of a stable state attained by a person, group, practice or institution at any given time.

While these statements or assertions are true of most historic societies, they are particularly true of the Old and New Testament histories. The latter are the historical documents of two distinctly established societies, namely the Jewish and the Christian. But the documents also reflect the stages or phases of the two people's struggles to get themselves established and recognized by others as a force or identity to reckon with. Mythologization has been the process with which these societies have made their respective and competitive histories.

Faith is the history-making virtue or quality of holding on firmly to the myth and its realization, in full readiness to put up with the struggle as long as it lasts. Hence, myth and faith are inseparable from social and even individual history of establishing a distinct identity. Both myth and faith relate the individual or group to a natural and supernatural other that is seen as conferring the distinct identity and calling on the individual or group to prove it in action and passion or suffering for it. Identity is a value for which one is ready and willing to act and to suffer, to do and to die. The perceived source of the identity-conferment is also seen as the energizing power and justifying authority over the action or sacrifice demanded in the challenging historical context. In ancient societies, the perceived source of their identity and its legitimacy was their patriarch, prophet, king, priest or god, or all the five of them together.

In claiming the sacred historical status, the New Testament builds itself on the Old, by treating and taking over Jewish history as the prehistory of Christianity. It roots itself in the myth, which it treats as history, of the call of Abraham, out of his household and country, by the God of heaven and earth, to a land he promised to assign him and his would-be innumerable posterity. It is equally rooted in the myth of the call of Moses on Mount Sinai, by the God of his fathers, to go back to the Pharaoh, to demand from him to let his people go into the desert to worship him. The New Testament closely patterns and parallels Jesus on the pre-historic myths of Abraham and Moses, going into Egypt and returning to the land of Israel, and founding and fashioning a new people or society of the Christian or messianic faith identity, which God is seen as having conferred on Jesus and all his followers. This was, and reflected, the phase when the Christian society had to legitimize itself in the face of the Jewish pre-establishment.

But when once it crossed the threshold of Judaism and reached out to the non-Jewish pagan world, it fell back from Jewish royal messianism to the universal anointing signified by the myth of Adam. In this changed scenario, Jesus, the messianic son of David, turned correspondingly into the suffering, and, eventually, glorified son of man. The gospel of Matthew reflects the Jewish phase of the Christian struggle for identity, while Mark, Luke and John reflect the non-Jewish or 'pagan' phase of the

Church's struggle to establish and win recognition for its distinct social identity.

The struggle for identity always involves conflict, controversy and polemic of a defensive as well as offensive sort. Apologetic is defensive polemic. Question and counter-question are offensive polemic. But it is all legitimized and sublimated in the historical document by mythically incorporating it all as the controversy of its founder of stem-hero. Polemic and apologetic provide a fertile field of mythologisation. This may explain the abundance of myths in the Old and the New Testaments alike. The letters of St. Paul and the book of Revelation abound in defensive myth, while the gospels of Matthew and John abound in offensive myth.

But the basic function of myth, like that of identity itself, is to defend it to the point of establishing it or making it true and come alive. Rituals and sacraments are identity creating, identity-conferring and identity-challenging myths. They continue in symbolic actions what the myths narrate as sacred history of origins of identities.

We generally tend to take, and speak of the gospels, the Acts and the letters and other writings attributed to the apostles, and even the books of the Old Testament, to be truly historical. We acknowledge at once that, strictly speaking, not all the books of the Bible are formal histories, as modern critical historians define history. They are all historical, but not histories the way critical historians define it now. They are histories the way the ancient people saw and received history – facts imaginatively mixed with fiction, or mythologized, exaggerated and super-naturalized with the help of the belief and desire of the authors and their times and contexts, namely to continue and build on what had already been received and initiated. While formally adhering to the characteristic impersonality of narrators of their past times, the authors put themselves and their contemporary historically contextual problems, needs, decisions, deeds, understanding, interpretation and their justification, very much into their past, but informally and indirectly, by placing it all dramatically into the mouth of their heroes or protagonists, about and around whom they wove their collective memories. This was the prophetic and deterministic style and mode of historical narration, which mythically projects or visualizes the future as present, foreseen or pre-determined already in the past.

Such a practice, common to the fatalistic outlook of ancient people and their writings, as well as fiction of all kinds in our own times, makes for absorbingly interesting, and selectively relevant and revealing literature, even if it happens to prejudice one for or against certain stands, understandings and approaches. It appeals to the like-minded or the imaginative and the unimaginative alike in their different moods and states of thought, emotion and experience. In any case, they reveal the authors, their times, concerns and their approach to the needs and problems that they encountered. The question whether their protagonists actually said or did what the authors attributed to them renders their works mythical-historical rather than critically historical.

We are accustomed nowadays to seeing our history under separate heads or classifications such as social, political, economic, cultural, religious and so on. The way we see history reflects the complex nature of our society and of our self-consciousness. It has become so complex, that we are able to grasp it only by compartmentalizing it. We belong to society at so many distinct levels of identity and identification, like gender, age, family, caste, education, occupation, language, region, religion, nationality and what not, that it is indeed difficult simply to unify it all under any single head. We do meet and mingle across the barriers or boundaries of age, gender, caste, race, language, education, status, religion, nationality and politico-economic and cultural systems and ideologies, without wholly being able to integrate it all into or under any one head.

The ancient and biblical worldview was not so complex, because the biblical society was far more isolated from the rest, and almost totally unified within itself, under the aegis or authority of its religious belief and practice. Their religion decided, defined, limited and dictated their identity, education, behaviour, polity, economy, and culture – in fact, everything. Religion and religious leaders or religiously approved leaders wielded almost total or totalitarian power. They decided what was right and wrong, and what was permissible to think, speak or write, even as history.

Biblical and Semitic history was written to preserve the total social identity of the community in that kind of simple-mindedly unified status, wholly under the aegis of religion and the supernatural. Whatever proved helpful to that end was also historical, irrespective of whether it materially



so happened or not, irrespective of whether there were independent or extra-communitarian testimonies to it or not. History was written in order to edify – to build up or preserve the faith-community as it had been and was being shaped. History writings, then, was didactically purposive. It was not undertaken for the sake of, or in the perspective and concern of the critical and scientific historiography of our time and understanding.

The most significant difference between biblical times and our own is with regard to the role of God and religion in the respective societies. God and the supernatural belonged to the primary datum of the ancient and biblical people's self-consciousness. God objectified or made real to the ancient and biblical people the totality of their identity. In the light of the Renaissance exposure of the West to the Greek classics, the Reformation challenge to the old interpretative authority of the papacy over the scriptures, the dawn of the age of reason and modern science, and the formation of the modern Western nation States out of the long unified Holy Roman Empire, made for a challenge to the hold that God and monolithic religion of the Catholic Church had on the thought and behaviour pattern of the Christian West. Nietzsche summarily expressed this challenge or change at his best with his famous phrase of the "death of God" from modern consciousness. If we honestly examine our own consciousness, we should also confess how much of our life is lived in a world wherefrom God died or, at least, is absent since a long time ago. Our becoming rationalistic coincides more and more with our autonomy and responsible freedom from a God, who stands outside and over against us. It is an indirect affirmation of, and demand for a God or the sacred, which is immanent in and nearer to us.

God and the supernatural not being an essential or integral part of our work-a-day self-consciousness, the miracles and supernatural interventions claimed or reported in the New Testament about Jesus, and the wonders of his birth, miracles and resurrection are not as easily credible to our age and contemporaries as they were to the people of a previous generation or to the medieval readers of the New Testament. This is simply a problem of hermeneutics or mode of understanding of the Bible, and not of faith in Christ or the Church. Jesus and his life do not, and would not become less relevant and meaningful to human life and history for not subscribing to the miraculously supernatural interventions attributed to and about him by

the writers of the books of the New Testament. The miraculous or the extraordinary is not the essence or core of the Christian nor of any other faith. Faith is the quality, which sustains life in the humdrum existence, where God seems, as it were, to be absent, as he was when Jesus was hanging on the cross.

This is where faith stands most in need to be alive and enlivened, without the marvelous and the extraordinary interventions from above or from anywhere. But this was not the mode of thought, belief and behaviour of the biblical people or even of the non-Jewish converts to Christianity, for whom most of the New Testament books were written. This is not to say that we are unaffected by experiences of miraculous power that do happen. But reports of events which we have not witnessed at first hand give rise to a search for alternative, rational, scientific and natural explanations, because day-to-day life does not strike us as miraculous. Even if marvels do occur, their impact does not last on the plane of routine life for long. Normal life is one of faith and not of obvious miracles.

As far as our contemporary culture goes, filling the life of Jesus with miracles and extraordinary divine interventions distances him from the rest of us rather than closing the gap between him and us. There is a greater human appeal to our age in an ordinary human being reaching extraordinary heights of favour with God and fellow-humans than in a divinely and virginally begotten child growing to be constituted Son of God at the right hand of the power of God.

What then? Do we, and are we to, dismiss the New Testament or re-write it for our age? There is no hint or suggestion to such an effect here. What is written is, indeed, written. The difference is that what was understandable and sensible to a past age need not be meaningfully intelligible to the modern scientific era, and certainly not on the same terms the past texts and formulas used. There is no suggestion or question here of tampering with texts. They have all to be respected in and with their historicity. Their interpretation and stress have to be different for our contemporaries. Otherwise the course of demand for intellectual sacrifice would only mean loss of more and more people to the Christian faith. We would be making or demanding the sacrifice not for the essential affirmations of the New Testament, which are about and for humans, but the way, style or form of the affirmations. This would expose the failure of



the mechanism of interpretation, bringing more and more disbelief in it than has occurred till now.

The form or style, in which the New Testament makes its dramatic affirmations about Jesus as Christ is mythical. Myth is the induction and assertion of the divine and the supernatural as the agent of a naturally and socially explainable fact or phenomenon. To the extent that the induction denies natural and human cause and effect, it does psychological violence to modern day belief and criteria of credibility, by making faith dependent on an unnatural sacrifice of human intellect. Heaping marvel upon marvel, as a form of hyperbole, is also mythical. The New Testament writers are deeply impressed by Jesus' extraordinary charisma of power in word and deed (Lk 24:19). To impress the readers with it, they heap parable upon parable, discourse upon discourse, and miracle upon miracle. A mere human being could not speak or do as Jesus did. Therefore, his origin, his mission and his life's end had to be divine. The attributed miracles would go to create that faith in those generations, which had not eye-witnessed Jesus for themselves.

Ancient people did not see and understand natural and historical happenings like birth, disease and death, thunderstorm, floods and war with its natural human logic of winners and losers, but in terms of God and his good pleasure or displeasure with the affected person or people. Ours is a scientific mode of individualist perception. Theirs was theologically collective. The scientific mode belongs to our time and its fashion of rational social acceptability. The theological belonged to the fashion or mode of accepted and acceptable rationality of olden times. Therefore, the theological belief and explanation, which came spontaneously to the ancients, seem to our age a folly and a scandal, like *deus ex machina*.

How, then, shall we cope with the genuine and real difficulty, which most of us and our contemporaries feel when faced with the mythical sounding supernatural agencies, messengers and messages, and causes and effects attributed to and with the birth, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus?

Dismissing and ridiculing them are not acts of intelligent human response. Nor does literal belief prove convincing and conducive to contemporary consciousness and rationality. For, we cannot simply

dismiss and ridicule contemporary perception and rationality either, because it would be irrational, unscientific and anti-intellectual. Is there then a *via media* between dismissal of the literal, and surrender in belief to the supernatural? An analogy might throw light on how we do, can and should go about in this state of dilemma. Fairy tales and myths did not and still do not surprise or shock us as long as the duration of our childhood. But childhood does not last for a whole life. Every child grows into adulthood, old age and death. Still the fascination of fairy tales and myths does not cease. They continue to make an appeal and a sense, though the appeal and the sense of adulthood and old age are not the same as the sense and appeal we experience in our childhood. The child's sense of fairy tale and myth is literal. The child surrenders to myth and fairy tale as if it all happened exactly as the story says, and can still happen and be true in its own life and experience.

This was the state of our ancient adults. They believed the stories literally, questioning and suspecting nothing of the intentions, processes or procedures and interests of the storytellers. They were only involved in the interest the story aroused in them, and not in the interest, which motivated the storyteller to narrate the story the way he did it. This is the major difference between the ancient believers and the believers of the day. The former believed implicitly; they trusted implicitly. We do not, and we cannot. For all that, our stand is neither innocent nor irrational, but critically trusting, and only questioning and selectively believing and interpreting as modern day adults. We interpret fairy tales and myths as poetically imaginative, true at the imaginative level, but not at the literal, factual, and historical.

What becomes then of the supernatural interventions we come across in the gospel narratives? They are the author's inventions and products of his imagination, to convey to the reader, what his own meaning, understanding or interpretation of the event and life of the person that he is speaking about, is. The objective medium of dramatic narrative does not allow him to step into it abruptly obtruding on the narration. It permits him to dramatize or objectify himself into a character or actor in the story, assuming even the role of God, to say what the story of Jesus' life and death means to the reader and to all humankind. It need not be unique. It is typical or typological of the reader's own life – at least, potentially. It is

for the reader to actualize that potentiality. The angelic messengers from God at the crib and at the grave of Jesus, then, are the prophets and evangelists themselves objectified.

It is a matter of fact or material truth that Jesus was acclaimed Messiah or Christ at some point of time. The material truth points to the formal truth as well. The question of the formal truth of the messianic proclamation about Jesus relates to the precise time when he was acclaimed Christ. Was he historically acclaimed Christ already at his birth and before, or at some other point or points of time of his life? Whose acclamation could count as historical? Where does the angelic proclamation come in? Is it historical or mythical?

These questions would and should take us to a close reading, identification and examination of the New Testament texts, which refer to Jesus as Christ. The answer to the questions would also demand a differentiation between and definition of historical claims and mythical acclamations. Passages, which treat the name *Jesus* and the title *Christ* as interchangeable synonyms, and, therefore, take the messianic claim for granted, cannot and should not be treated as proven or established claims. This criterion considerably limits the texts to be identified and selected for examination as acclaiming Jesus' messiahship.

But what criterion could differentiate the historical from the mythical acclamations? Insofar as history is the chain of human actions, passions, beliefs and dreams, all human acclamations about Jesus as Christ, might also be considered historical. Insofar as God and other supernatural beings are not a part of empirically verifiable experience of universal and contemporary consciousness, the messianic or Christological claims about Jesus, attributed to God and other supernatural beings, like angels and devils, should probably be treated as ideological and mythical acclamations.

Every human claim is already an assumption and presupposition of something unproved or un-established as already proven and unquestionable. This does not mean that the claim is, in fact, true and unquestionable. Rather, it means that the circle or group, which upholds this claim, does not deem it necessary to prove it. Its reason: it is already believed and treated as established in the group. But on what ground? This

is what I refer to as mythical. God, an angel or a presumed messenger of God, has revealed, or proclaimed Jesus as the Christ or the Messiah. God and angels themselves are prior claims and presuppositions of the messianic circle. The messianic claim is then secondary to and conditioned by belief in the supernatural intervening directly and recognizably in the historical temporal sphere. The argument is that since God and angels, and their power to intervene in history, are unquestionably accepted, their witness or acclamation of Jesus as Christ is also unquestionable, and to be accepted as such. The argument is logically consistent. The only lacuna is to establish that God and angels did indeed intervene and proclaim Jesus as the Christ or messiah in a way that is beyond question or doubt. This is precisely our problem as moderns and post-moderns, which we cannot help being.

Given this cultural gap between the times of the two Testaments and our own, we have to conclude that what the gospels proclaim and take for granted, are myths intended to make or initiate a different kind of history than the one their audiences were accustomed to earlier. This is not to say that the Jews and the then civilized Greco-Roman people of the times were free from the use of myths. They were using old myths to keep old history going, namely myths of system-maintenance. The gospels and the rest of the New Testament were, and introduced, new myths, in order to usher in a new history of, and for the new believers in Jesus as the Christ. Naturally, these were myths of system-change.

Some of the New Testament authors themselves – Peter and Paul, for instance – have introduced a self-contradictory dichotomy between myth and history, opposing their account of the life and message of Jesus as history, against the pagan myths, which they saw as simply fictitious and imaginatively self-created fables (2 Pet 1:16; 1 Tim 1:4; Tit 1:14). They forgot that they had also introduced mythically self-created elements into their historical narratives, and that their purpose was not simply to stop with a narrative or history of the past, but to make future history based on their narrative. For that projected future, the past that they described was as mythical as any that the Jews and the Gentiles were having recourse to. The difference was that the Jews and Gentiles, as established cultural groups, could only have recourse to myths of system-maintenance, while the Christians, as yet contending for their establishment, necessarily

needed new and apocalyptic myths to win and retain belief in the newly won conviction. Myth and history, then, are not mutually exclusive, but complementary and inter-penetrative conceptual categories. All history is made with the help of myths, whether that history is Christian or other than Christian. Faith, again, is not contrastable to myth and history, they being the vehicle and medium in which faith is lived and culturally expressed. Post-Christians, dismissing the gospels, the New Testament and the Bible in general, as a bundle of myths, are labouring under an anti-intellectual dichotomy, not only between faith and reason, but also between myth and history. They do not recognize how they are making the personal history of their lives with the help of the dreams or myths that drive them onward. If they recognize it, they would also recognize the faith that is at work in the myth that makes history. The New Testament, and all great literature, for that matter, employs the same technique, of myth, to share the living faith, which inaugurates, shapes and sustains a new history.