

Rescuing Women from American Mythology

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The Damsel in Distress

By

Michael A. Solis

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PREFACE

Oddly, this preface was written at the end and done so out of what I considered a necessity; specifically, as a preamble to what might seem like a chaotic and circuitous roller coaster ride that defies the logic of using a straight line to connect two data points, or the shortest distance between American mythology and misogyny. Instead, I bounce around a complex system like a capricious pinball touching various components with the intention of painting a layered picture with very broad brushstrokes, taking twists and turns whilst retracing some core concepts that warrant reiteration; in some cases, ad nauseum. I struggled with depth of measure, that is, how deep to dive without losing my audience compared to what seems like a series of intuitive observations coupled with anecdotal experiences. A deep dive into the American comic book culture, as a case study of a solitary institution, was impossible. Understanding the confluence of factors that contribute to a complex system that produces very explicable outcomes is imperative if one is to reverse engineer any behavioral phenomenon and answer any questions on the origins or reasons why such a phenomenon exists and how we, humans, interface with the subject matter. Is there a relationship between American Mythology and misogyny? This is the question I shall endeavor to answer.

In order to adequately address the origins and nuances of misogyny, I found it absolutely necessary to explore some of the most powerfully influential institutions in the history of the human world and, more specifically, the American world as it is a very different world, somewhat removed from the rest of the world but it invariably affects the rest of the world. For example, I discuss Jesus, Perseus, and Superman in the same breath as a way to capture the deep mythological seeds of American culture. Religion is an inextricable prerequisite to the study of mythology as they are the same *and* different depending on the expiry date or current state of social relevancy. This juxtaposition is important because the former determines what is mythology while the latter determines what is considered religion and one is considered false while the other is considered true-an idiosyncratic feat only humans can accomplish and one worth exploring. All mythology was religion at some point in time and all religion will become mythology at another point in time. Discussing the two in parallel can be problematic because, regardless of the veracity or incredulity, one is considered an

inconceivable and extremely improbable story while the other is taken literally and commensurately invokes an emotionally defensive reaction to any interrogation; yet, they share the same apocryphal DNA. The conjunction of the two is a cornerstone of any effective analysis of human's proclivity for making sense of the world. According to Hughes, Americans have developed several "myths" that have implicitly shaped both everyday living and national policy and practice throughout the centuries of national development.¹ I submit that our propensity to spiritually catalogue stories becomes problematic and creates intellectual congestion when assimilated into reality *as doctrine* and mandated in behavior by decree, law, or policy. We undermine the value of a good mythological story by taking it literally.

My investigation is hardly exhaustive or comprehensive and should be explored further but within the purview of social sciences so as to make a more robust connection between the producers and willing consumers of mythological material and how it shapes the trajectory of our world. Making connections between historical events for explaining the present is relatively easy but measuring the impact on both the individual and the group as a permanent feature in the psyche is an important component for managing a society through collective or shared laws, rules, regulations, social mores, customs, and traditions. Is the world in which we live constructed by design, that is, human design, or is it a compilation of knee-jerk reactions, unplanned twists and turns, dominant personalities, ulterior motives, or an epic clash between primitive ignorance and modern curiosity? I submit that very little in life is random or truly mysterious but, instead, results are explicable and traceable, emanating from specific conditions. If we can manage to subdue the propensity for projecting our theoretical ideas on others as a reference point for measuring behavior in the form of morality and simply accept each other for who and what we are then we can begin to dismantle many of the crackpot ideas that impede progress and stifle human potential. We must move backward in order to move forward lest we continue moving in the wrong direction-guided by mythological powers that transcend our conscious minds. This is why I am revisiting my childhood career of thumbing through the coarse pages of comic books in the dark hours of night. I have dispensed with consumption of comics and transitioned to a more satisfying state of analysis, slowly undoing some of what comic books did to shape my perspective as a mushy brained sprig. The discomfort and uneasy feelings one gets with deep introspection and the intellectual pursuit of naked curiosity can provide a substantial detour

¹ Pahl, J. (2010). *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*. NYU Press. Loc 277.

from the dark and lonely streets of the unknown. However, we must traverse the disquieting gauntlet of superstition with brave reflection in order to overcome our own unwitting contribution to what sometimes seems like a hopeless tailspin for humanity. I hope you, the reader, experience the same or greater insight as I did while writing and continue on a more precipitous trajectory with even more refined ideas. My seemingly sloppy starting point is yours to finish.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The genesis of this effort started at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey, directly across the river from Philadelphia, and neatly located at the base of the Ben Franklin Bridge. I was pursuing a graduate degree in Liberal Studies and relished the dichotomous relationship between Camden and Philly, especially the snickering jeers when I answered the common question of where I lived. I felt comfortable living on the wrong side of the proverbial train tracks. From the Gotham City feel of Camden to the serene and rustic infrastructure of the Rutgers campus, the dichotomy between an institution of higher learning and the abject poverty and drab feel of its host city seemed like a scene out of a comic book, one that I embraced as an outsider who felt comfortable living with prolific crime, high murder rates, and endemic drug abuse. I lived across the street from the campus and walked up and down Market Street with brazen confidence whilst pondering the vagaries of life. I felt the penetrating sting of winter and the sweltering weight of summer. I traversed broken concrete, rusty train tracks, and the idyllic yards of the Rutgers campus. I spurned the advances of drug users, mendicants, and prostitutes. I lived in an imagined reality, remembering the comic book stories of my childhood and the crime fighting superheroes that lived according to a higher sense of purpose. I mulled over my toxic relationship while roaming the dark and empty streets of the city. Ultimately, I found refuge in an academic topic that took me by surprise, a subject upon which I stumbled but truly and unexpectedly enjoyed pursuing.

After taking a Greek Mythology class and employing a healthy dose of introspection, I quickly realized that I was trying to save my estranged girlfriend and salvage a toxic relationship, just like Perseus with Andromeda and Superman with Lois Lane; unfortunately, my story would end in failure and consequently fall short of the mythological outline that makes a story worth retelling. I can only surmise that my interest in mythological stories and my toxic relationship came from having had a penchant for defending the weak or downtrodden, especially the opposite sex. I wrote a paper on American mythology, its origins, and how it shapes the audience's attitudes towards gender roles, primarily focusing on superheroes and comic books as American mythological canon. I quickly abandoned my manufactured interest in other topics and turned my attention to American mythology and its enduring and powerful influence. During my pursuits, I uncovered a

substantial amount of misogyny, not only in comic books and cartoons but everywhere, television, movies, media, Internet, magazines, religions of the world etc. I used my capstone project to embrace the opportunity and further my exploration of this topic.

After moving to Europe, I returned to Rutgers to present my project. The sense of loss I felt after walking away in the somber rain inspired the current effort as a way to stay connected to the subject and the imagined academic reality that has since become a memory. Finishing such a hearty and meaningful pursuit was dreadfully disappointing; hence, part three and the final culmination. These ideas are nothing more than a snapshot in time and, if writing on a different day, they would probably read much differently. Today's ideas are better than yesterday's ideas and tomorrow's will be better yet. Had I not followed an ex-girlfriend to Rutgers I would never have embarked on this journey. Thank you.

My time abroad was enlightening but not as fruitful for production, as my professional demands relegated this project to a very part-time effort, having to chip away from a very solitary and solipsistic world. I have since found a second or, perhaps, a third wind while being equally professionally engaged, especially while seconded to the United States amidst the COVID pandemic. My journey is worth mentioning because of the accompanying perspective that comes with seeing the United States through the lens of non-Americans, absorbing the assumptions and observations others make during the course of casual or serious conversation. A wider and more objective intellectual aperture has broadened my focus from the quantifiable symptoms of what I consider a social disease to the systemic sources from history to religion-key ingredients in unpacking any nation's personality development. Thus, welcome to the beginning of the end of what has been, hitherto, one of the most intellectually reflecting and eye-opening academic pursuits of my life.

INTRODUCTION

Mythology is arguably the most powerful source of ideology for shaping and influencing society's gender roles and beliefs, among many other perceptual and behavioral nuances. Mythology provides an accurate reflection of society's general attitudes, fears, preoccupations, and gender roles through stories passed down by oral tradition and ultimately collected, organized, and catalogued in tablets, papers, books, cave walls, movies, and any other means of replication for widest ritualistic or entertaining consumption. Masculinity, for example, was glorified by the American superhero in comic books while femininity, as a well-defined attribute remains elusive. Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist, depicts how the veneration of human traits such as aggressiveness, physical strength, and gallantry in American men was glorified at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a product of socioeconomic conditions of the time² while women were left searching for their sense of disambiguation. Mythology provides a source for young boys and girls to learn how to negotiate a complex world of possibilities, as well as manage gender expectations by observing gods, superheroes, and other notable characters found in mythological stories or on the pages of comic books.

American mythology, to include comic books, the superheroes upon which the literature is based, and the associated cartoons, motion pictures, merchandize, and fashion, contributes to an historical foundation of misogynistic entertainment and serves as didactic material for children and adults to perpetuate misogynistic attitudes which, ultimately, shape public policy. From hundreds of thousands of pages of comics, we can analyze the role of women and the social attitudes towards women at the particular point that the story is published.³ The comic book has served as a way to introduce the young reader to adult topics, and yet allow them to retain some sort of

² Majhi, G. (2017). Paradox of Gender Equality in Hollywood Superhero Movies. *Arts & Education International Research Journal*: Volume 4 Issue 2, 7.

³ Dill, S. (2019). Feminist Criticism of Society and Comic Books' Past. The Artifice.

separation from reality;⁴ thereby, making it an insightful medium for revealing simple and complex social dynamics but also, making it the perfect delivery system for both literate readers and illiterate browsers who prefer graphic illustration. Graphically, the cartoon style media is perfect in its appeal to a cross section of ages; it is raw, unfiltered, intense, and emotionally gripping. Adult concepts were understood by adults, introduced to younger audiences, and pictures appealed to the uninformed readership.

The misogynistic nuances of the comic book storyline are not overt attempts at relegating women; instead, the influence is much more subtle and older than American mythology, very similar to other social phenomena such as sexism, racism, and classism—these are bad habits long ago embedded in our DNA over years of historical and cultural inculcation and reinforced or framed as normal. This debilitating and unconscious feature is embedded in our collective social psyche and was imprinted long before we were born. I argue that sexism is rarely overt as much as it is an unconscious malady ingrained somewhere deep in the rusty bowels of society's crockadilian brain, born out of fear, insecurity, and the need to control people. The urge to exert power within a group often reveals itself through a series of subtle, physical cues of which we are unaware;⁵ usually, manifested as misogynistic, sexist, or racist policies that require challenging the zeitgeist in order to raise general awareness to a critical mass level as an impetus to change; thus, I argue that awareness is the first step to remedy this and other social maladies.

Although the first comic book was printed in 1938, American mythology is largely influenced by Greek mythology, a major influence on western civilization and a vestige of many of our systems, policies, and practices. Overt and subtle misogynistic nuances have always existed in the patriarchal narrative of mythology, American, Greek, and beyond but the depth and breadth has never been explored in such a way to rewrite the American playbook and foment changes that transcend shallow gestures and penetrate our collective DNA, as a nation. Regardless of our seemingly independent and arguably snooty sociological and geopolitical image and opinion of ourselves, we are products of our past, undivorced, and chained to antiquity in some way, either directly or indirectly. Our sense of American made freedom is arguably an illusion depending on how deeply

⁴ Scott, C. (2011). Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History From World War II through the Iraq War. *Dissertations*. Paper 74, 3.

⁵ Bargh, J. (2014). Our Unconscious Mind. *Scientific American*. January, 39.

we want to wax philosophical; however, I state categorically that the history and mythology upon which our proud sense of freedom is based is fraught with sociological wounds that continue festering unabated in 2020.

Misogyny, sexism, and inequality have a deeply embedded history in the collective psyche of American society and its Greek antecedents. The seemingly innocuous and largely unconscious inclination to relegate “the fairer sex” is not only historically founded but it is also presently reinforced through our religious practices and their historical foundations. These qualities can be found in comic books from their birth in the early 20th century to present day. Comic books are generally considered lowbrow entertainment and usually reserved for a juvenile audience, but I will demonstrate how comic books can be a powerful tool to rally adults around a cause and reflect political and social opinions and positions-serving as the eyes or window to America’s soul. Comic books have accurately captured American attitudes, values, and most importantly, the roles of men and women in American society. While young boys and girls learn about gender roles, adults’ attitudes are reinforced and reflected in the material; thus, perpetuating a cycle of misogyny, thinly veiled as entertainment but highly influential on gender role development. The typical storyline, characterizations, and seemingly juvenile nature of comic book literature is robust material for perpetuating stereotypical roles and expectations, as well as perpetuating a sexist archetype in the collective mind of American society.

Although some forms of inequality are being rectified by seminal changes in policies, laws, regulations, and even comic books, it could take generations for changes to resonate in our psyche, as our current paradigm was forged over thousands of years of historical belief and practice. A paradigm shifting storyline that attempts to rectify the status quo or natural inclinations of the average consumer is more of a patch or bandage over a symptom of society’s disease instead of a reflection of an equitable reality. Practices are easy to change through legal or social forcing functions; however, beliefs have the insidious ability to perpetuate oppression on various levels. Milestones in history are not the result of changes in mindsets as much as they are the result of demanded changes in practice or policy, which in turn, eventually influence mindsets and ultimately make previous socially acceptable policies unconscionable. Raising awareness is the spark that ignites the flames of change. This is my intention, that is, to raise awareness and provoke thought.

American society is replete with examples of unconscionable social policies that were born from legislative and judicial processes. As forcing functions,

legal instruments can codify or overturn negative or destructive policies or practices. Conversely, by forcing behavior changes through mandates, social problems and inequalities can be rectified by force initially but, at some point, the behavior change becomes the new normal and former policies eventually seem absurd and unimaginable with the passage of time. Can anyone remember when smoking was permitted on flights? This notion seems absurd now but was normal then. Subsequently, each generation grows more accepting of the reality to which they are introduced, mindsets are slowly changed within the majority, and society experiences an enlightening transition to greater social prosperity. How many generations are required until women find solace in an equitable social environment in the United States? How many generations were required for black Americans to achieve legal equality? It can be convincingly argued that they still do not enjoy unfettered social equality. This topic raises a myriad of philosophical questions regarding universal or objectively true principles, such as the principle of equality in cases of sexism, racism, classism etc. For this work, I consider the principle of equality a universally beneficial principle that should be promulgated unflinchingly; however, the agile thinker should realize that this proposed trajectory works in both directions. If laws, rules, and regulations can change behavior to force a change in attitude in one direction then the process can also work in the other direction and attitudes can change behavior as they did in Nazi Germany, Rwanda, and other instances of extreme collective sociopathic behavior. So, then, how do we know if the political and social direction of travel is right or wrong, especially when those in the aforementioned countries thought or believed they were right?

The United States has a very dubious history when considering some of the laws and policies that supported institutional and patent inequality, subjugation, and racism toward women and people who were not manufactured from standard “American” genetic stock, that is, the white male or any variation thereof. When considering the groundbreaking laws in the United States, and their influence on social change, one must wonder about the grade school level of bickering and thinking that surrounded the events. In the year 2020, with all of its trappings of modernity, it seems inconceivable to imagine women being prohibited to vote but when the 19th Amendment was proposed and passed it experienced opposition, as did the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves; as did the Civil Rights Act which mandated civil freedom and social equality. Theoretically, these seminal legal moments should not have even been necessary in the first place. Again, it is inconceivable to imagine a modern country where women are prohibited from voting and people with a particular color of skin are

enslaved but this was reality and probably considered quite normal by the majority until laws were enacted to force a behavior change, which redefined our definition of normal and what is considered fair and equitable. By and large, these changes in laws and policy were successful; realistically, the vestige of antiquity still afflicts our society's psyche and authentic and unencumbered equality still eludes us. When will our attitudes catch up to the legal reality in the United States so that the laws become redundant and their need becomes unfathomable?

Although the United States no longer suffers institutionally from the same inconceivable misogynistic and racist shortfalls on paper, it still suffers from a warped psyche that is infected with the negative residue of historical policies and the debilitating mythological beliefs found in the dominant religion-which will be discussed later. On a more practical note, after reading the news prior to writing this paragraph, I find it telling how, when an offender of some arbitrary violation is a female or non-white male, it is the gender or minority quality that is intuitively recognized as the decisive factor responsible for the offence as well as the descriptive factor in identifying the individual. The opposite is not the case; for example, when a white male violates a law or social order there is no attempt to attribute his action to whiteness as the decisive attribute for folly.

Black men, and black people in general, are overrepresented in news as criminals. When I say overrepresented, that means they are shown as criminals more times than is accurate, that they are actually criminals, based on FBI statistics.⁶

The differences in characterizing individuals usually goes unnoticed precisely because it is unwittingly "normal" behavior. This phenomenon works on our subconscious and reinforces existing stereotypes for both women and minorities. The first black American or female elected to the Supreme Court or any other notable and pioneering achievement is celebrated as their eponymous debut as a minority, as though the achievement in parity with their white male colleagues is such a standard deviation that it is celebrated but truly, unconsciously considered an anomaly. If sexism and racism were not polarizing issues in America then such celebrations would not be necessary.

The purpose of this book is to provide an historical and mythological perspective on how and why we think and behave the way we do in regard to gender scripts and how these qualities are reinforced in the mythology we

⁶ Cyril, M. (2016). 13th.

consume, in the form of comics and superheroes. When I presented my original paper, someone referenced a few exceptions to my assertion that we still suffer from a warped psyche, most of which referenced modernity and the tokenism that is mistakenly considered the demarcation of progress. It is true that comic books, movies, and other sources of entertainment have been forcefully inverted to supplant the androcentric themes and tropes with a female centric theme or twist, an attempt to supplicate a vocal minority. This is often seen as edgy or progressive, but it can also be seen as charity or reparations and therefore undermine the true reflection of greater society's attitudes. This is not an argument for the status quo as much as it is an admonition for token shortcuts that lack genuine merit and creativity. Rectifying social injustices must be accomplished somehow but not at the expense of undermining organic and meritorious works of art and literature. The point of this is that we shouldn't have to thumb through the menagerie of seminal works looking for a potential remake in order to reverse the order of things. If we are to start anew then we should start anew and let our efforts succeed or fail on their merits. There are no shortcuts when imparting impactful change or shaping and influencing the psyche of society for a new and equitable frontier.

Social change through empowerment should be neither bought nor sold. Rewriting or remaking something in order to reverse the misogynistic image still gives credence to the very story that requires the rewriting or remaking. We have a strange idea that organic stories or products in general will not stand on their own merit and therefore we have a tendency to capitalize on existing stories, themes, or tropes. This is either a reflection of a gross lack of creativity or an effort to replace a right with a wrong or a wrong with what we now consider right. Both are wrong, in my opinion. It might be a little of both but, in regard to the latter, I would suggest leaving history behind and starting anew in order to appeal to greater society or the next generation and not one of the many niche movements that might only serve to satisfy one particular movement. Once feminism has been co-opted and used not to empower people, but rather to sell anything and everything, it is inflated rhetoric--empty, meaningless, useless in effecting or inspiring change.⁷ Remaking Hamlet, for example, by using a female king, otherwise known as a queen in most circles, does not shock our psyche into enlightenment as it is intended; instead, it does a disservice to Hamlet, a seminal work of literature that has survived on merit. Rewriting history is a futile task that grows more concerned with the act than the product-which

⁷ Hains, R. (2009). Power Feminism Mediated: Girl Power and the Commercial Politics of Change. *Women's Studies in Communication*. 32 (1), 107.

may or may not be kowtowing to corporate interests for profit. The best way for women to *trump* men is to simply be better. Use intelligence and reason as an antidote to the flagrant brandishing of the fragile male ego.

Exploring sexism, racism, classism, and many of the other inequalities in American mythology, as a reflection of American society, requires a broad examination of American history and some of the most salient institutions and principles upon which America was founded. Her beliefs and behaviors, buoyed up by stalwart institutions, create the political and social systems responsible for the outcomes we have today. Reality in America is anchored in her mythology and found in the pages of comic books. The powerful system of American beliefs serves as the bedrock upon which our geopolitical ambition and rightful position in the world rests. Geopolitics reveals the working machinery of America's leadership and often unites citizens in their beliefs about others; however, when turned inward, the same jingoistic nuances and the flagrant sense of superiority erodes the cohesion and undermines the diverse society which has historically characterized America's social landscape. America is now choking on the same medicine it has used to dominate the world since its inception. An unfiltered understanding of her mythology, juxtaposed against reality, provides a cogent explanation for her behavior as well as good reason to jettison the emotional attachment to an antiquated mindset, in search of a new beginning. To remain competitive, America must modernize and employ its power as a force for good-the same responsibility bestowed upon her most patriotic and altruistic superheroes found in the course pages of comic books or on the big screen.

CHAPTER 1

MYTHOLOGY AND REALITY: DEFINITION, PURPOSE, AND FUNCTION

An examination of mythology should begin with a foundation understanding of the purpose and function of mythology; however, one of the greatest challenges when discussing myth is defining the term and concept beyond its sterile definition and agreeing on a common and functional definition. Beyond the task of defining myth is the challenge of defining the purpose of myth, its utility, and its relevance on a personal and community level. A better starting point might be the examination of how myth is employed as a tool for interpretation or making sense of a mysterious world or for managing people, wittingly and unwittingly, thereby revealing its priceless value as a social or cultural compass upon which many depend for guidance. Most of this chapter will be dedicated to accomplishing these daunting tasks or, at least, engendering enough interest to provoke deeper analysis. My byzantine approach will challenge the value of myth and determine if we would be better off without it. Stewart⁸ provides a succinct snapshot of myth as an opening salvo:

Throughout the world, and throughout recorded human history, myths have formed an important means by which people have understood the world around them. A myth is a story that is somewhat fantastical in nature, usually contains at least one supernatural element, and is told with the intention of explaining a particular phenomenon. The term ‘mythology’ is used either to refer directly to myths shared by a certain group of people, or to the formal study of these stories. Each culture has its own collection of myths.

This definition is important because of three key qualities that are central to the discussion, that is, that myth explains natural phenomenon-this is generally done in the absence of better or more accurate (scientific) information; that myth is shared by a group of people as manifested by the organizational and convening powers of a story-ultimately leading to

⁸ Stewart, M. J. (2017). *History of Religion*. Lean Stone Publishing. Kindle edition.

religion or a cult following; that myth is studied formally-evidence of its elucidating qualities when explaining human behavior or society, writ large. This definition, however, omits the utility of myth as it works on the individual or personal level. The rudimentary definition is easy enough to negotiate but when myth is practically applied to knowledge, behavior, or life, in general, it becomes an evident force that overshadows even the most formidable forces of reason and depends on a foundation of passion and intrigue. Myth resonates deep in the bowels of our core, our primitive past, and ancestral roots. Its power and influence over human agency warrants exploration on many different levels.

At the outset of this literary jaunt, I boldly assert that myth *is* realty. I realize the logical and intuitive absurdity of this statement; however, I am confident in my proof that life, myth, and reality exist in a nebulous interlude somewhere between our epistemological limits and our deceptive and unreliable senses. What is the *real* world and where does it exist? I submit that it is a metaphysical and unpopulated desert, island, or tundra that exists on a plateau far removed from our own worlds. If the elusive quality of objectivity could intervene between our clashing world views, then we could have an accurate and impartial reference point for unfettered escalation of knowledge through discourse and reason. The hard-earned facts that science has uncovered rarely, if ever, factor into the confusing equation we use to make sense of life and our position in the larger existential construct; otherwise, the submission to science would undermine life's thick encyclopedia of superstition and *all* myth would be relegated to similar or equal status. This is not the case, as I will attempt to demonstrate. We are quick to discard scientific facts or laws in support of a personal, suspended instance that takes us far away and into our own world where our intuition is king and mythological doctrine is queen, like Christian Science who reject science-based medicine and, instead, favor spiritual healing. A tremendous amount of power is required to create such an arcane and potentially negative consequential worldview that displaces reason for myth.

We all live in our own worlds that are typically removed from objective reality, although we acknowledge objective reality when convenient, especially when contradicting beliefs that do not coincide with our own. The list of cognitive biases (per Wikipedia) is impressive but this is the price we pay for self-reflection and the ability to autocorrect. When our world is threatened, we employ tactics from which our own world enjoys immunity. We *think* we know and justify what we think by omitting evidence to the contrary. Jerry Coyne, author of *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion*

Are Incompatible describes science and religion as incompatible due to their competing interests with the truth:

If you teach evolution, you're teaching the one form of science that hits Abrahamic religions in the solar plexus. You can teach chemistry and physics and physiology and other forms of science-based inquiry, like archeology and history, and religious people don't have a problem with that. But, for evolution, they do.⁹

Mythological or religious doctrine that supports our positions is quickly absorbed as real, fact, or somehow integral to our existence. My attempt to define and explore myth from different angles will include the impact it has on our lives, the scope of its veracity, how it shapes our knowledge and beliefs of the world, and how it influences and guides our behavior but, most importantly, how myth has survived for so long and still thrives in such an ostensibly advanced and scientific world.

People have an inherent affinity for myth in the form of stories, real or imagined and, although myth is generally associated with the imagined, I assert that the imagined is deeply embedded in the heart of reality just as reality, for most people, is anchored in myth. Myth in today's parlance is equated with falsehood, primitive science and mere stories¹⁰ especially when considered from a non-mystical, linear, Western perspective, but myth transcends and unites societies and people everywhere regardless of its festooned or spartan appearance. The one commonality we share with the most "primitive" cultures and societies is the institution of mythology, although different in appearance but the same in spirit. What one calls "mythology" in the present day, it should be remembered, was the religion of the ancient past.¹¹ Myth is the glue that bonds people into cohesive societies and, at the same time, keeps many of them suspended in a state of passive resignation and submission to a version of truth. Is the definition of myth culturally dependent? Does the myth reveal more about the mythmaker than the myth itself? Does the emotional attachment to the veracity of myth bolster its credibility or undermine its dignity? What does myth tell us about ourselves? What can you learn about me from the story I tell you or the hero I worship? Belief systems are the lens through which we

⁹ Worrall, (2015). In the Age of Science, Is Religion 'Harmful Superstition'? National Geographic.

¹⁰ Dorschel, F. (2011). "Female Identity": Rewritings of Greek and Biblical Myths By Contemporary Women Writers. The Graduate School of Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University, 96.

¹¹ Mark, J. (2018). Mythology. Ancient History Encyclopedia.

can see a person's or society's worldview and their particular mythological persuasion can reveal how they fit into an otherwise confusing and mysterious world, full of choices and options, most of which are rendered inert by the power of mythological persuasion and detailed prescription-this shrinking of the wide scope of life could, arguably, describe the purpose of myth, that is, the scoping of too many options from the inundation of what seems like an excessive amount of information to confusing and competing ideas.

American mythology generally consists of nursery rhymes, short stories, music, movies, jokes, fairy tales, comic books, and cartoons. Any medium designed to teach or entertain is usually inextricably bound to mythological influence; hence, mythology is a useful tool for facilitating didactic storytelling and facilitating a child's transition to adulthood while simultaneously reinforcing adults' attitudes and beliefs. Every group of people has embraced the utility of storytelling for didactic use, imparting historical perspective, and entertainment, which are among only some of the useful aspects of myth. According to Paul Levitz, President and Publisher, DC Comics:

Comic book writers and artists are doing the same thing that story tellers did, drawing pictures on the caves at Lascaux. We are using story to create context for life. On a very, very good day, and we don't have enough of them, that becomes art. On an ordinary day, it becomes escape.¹²

Observing many tribes, Carl Jung noted that the myth can give dignity, meaning, and purpose to life – it has an important and positive role, even if objectively it is not true;¹³ however, we must analyze myth as a driving and influential force of behavior, as purported truth, when it inspires legal or social constraints. Herein, lies the quandary-from the average person's existential paradigm to the politician's imposition of his own through legal frameworks. This is the critical juncture where myth collides with freedom and utility, where laws and beliefs collide. In America and many other religious countries mythology-based belief is usually the driving force behind social policy; not science.

Some social scientists aver that mythology is basically a primitive philosophy and myths are stories that arise as rational attempts of primitive

¹² Levitz, P. (2003). *Comic Book Superheroes, Unmasked*. The History Channel.

¹³ Adamski, A. (2011). Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious of Carl G. Jung in the Light of Quantum Psychology. *NeuroQuantology*. 9(3), 566.

man to make sense of the world in which he is located;¹⁴ interestingly, many of these explanations, however outrageous, have conquered time and show no signs of fatigue whereas defunct philosophical ideas have been relegated to the dusty shelves of our collective memory, only used as a reference point when describing how far we have come scientifically; for example, we no longer think the sun rotates around the earth or that the earth is flat but equally absurd beliefs still persist unregulated and unquestioned, such as the belief in angels or a burning place called Hell. The worst part of this reality is that absurd beliefs impose legal and social constraints and thereby stifle personal and social growth. Leaders of mythology often influence political leaders to save people from themselves by imposing strict rules and regulations based on mythological doctrine or interpretation. Myth can impede progress in a society on a personal, local, and global scale. Copernicus learned this lesson when his scientific, heliocentric discovery collided with the dominant, religion-inspired truth of his day. Consequently, he suffered for scientifically circumventing mythological explanations of the world. The United States witnessed its own collision between science and religion when John T. Scopes, a teacher from Tennessee, taught Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools—a violation of the Butler Act which only supported the Biblical account of creation.

One of the most effective definitions of myth, to include its utility, can be found in Csapo's *Theories of Mythology*, where he states that “myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance.”¹⁵ This definition certainly applies to the social attraction of mythological institutions, such as church groups where the common cohesion is centered around the prescription of detailed beliefs. Myths, tales, and other related stories for children have a significant role in all cultures since they can render the multiplicity of experiences; explain the behavior of the physical universe; and describe human nature and society.¹⁶ The didactic qualities of myth mostly apply to children although the stories are apocryphal at best; nonetheless, there is value in the lessons learned in preparation for adulthood.

¹⁴ Stewart, M. J. (2017). *History of Religion*. Lean Stone Publishing. Kindle edition, 203.

¹⁵ Csapo, E. (2005). *Theories of Mythology*. Blackwell Publishing. Malden Mass, 9.

¹⁶ Marlina, L. (2015). *The Discussion on Female Heroes in Respect of Gender Socialisation of Girls: Retelling Myths of Psyche, Artemis and Katniss*. *Linguistics and Literature Studies*. 3(2), 41.

The didactic value in myth can be useful but if its teachings are counterproductive then myth can only be defined as a useful tool that is unwittingly (or wittingly in some cases) being used for control which will erode society's potential for social prosperity. Myth, as literature, would be a more valuable study for didactic purposes than myth as religion where the freedom to pontificate on the story and extrapolate is largely absent due to the absolute lack of freedom to intellectually maneuver. Practically, mythology in the form of religion has been and is still used as a lever to control women and children; a discussion for later. We are well aware of the irresponsible plundering and hijacking of the power of myth by enterprising opportunists whose interest is to foment insurrection through religious zealotry, to rabble rouse, attack "others," and control the masses—a reflection of the slave-master or consumer-producer relationship, discussed later.

As a field of study, myth:

Interprets sacred tales or fables of a culture or the collection of stories which deal with various aspects of the human condition: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origins; the origin of names, animals, cultural values, and traditions; the meaning of life and death; the afterlife; and the gods or a god.¹⁷

One description of myth describes it as science in a prescientific age. Another description considers myth *ancient* religion, an interesting definition considering the ages of the dominant extant religions, as though they are new, as I constantly ask myself when these institutions will finally expire so we can get on with it. All myth is religion and all religion is myth. Some myths have died while others have endured and the modern choices amount to a lineup of survivors, as well as a few "new" or diverging offshoots from the main bodies. A forensic study in the survival of myth or religion, in the face of so many competitors, will most probably reveal arbitrary or even surprising reasons for their survival, similar to why some businesses succeed and others fail.

Jung described myth as a necessary aspect of the human psyche which needs to find meaning and order in a world which often presents itself as chaotic and meaningless.¹⁸ Myth is inextricably bound to culture and could be geolocated culturally or ethnically. In some cases, myth can be traced to climatic conditions or natural phenomena, the arrival of travelers, or

¹⁷ Mark, J. (2018). Mythology. Ancient History Encyclopedia.

¹⁸ Ibid.

political decisions, even illusions, or anything that captures our attention and then creates a convenient association in our flaccid brains. Some connections are convenient while others are nonsensical. For humans, answers are very alluring while questions are very disquieting. Myth provides answers whereas philosophy provides questions and more questions in the form of answers-an infinite process of inquiry reserved for the most stalwart thinkers and insatiably curious.

At some point, whilst exploring mythology, one might wonder where philosophy fits into the effort, as most of the early philosophers struggled to explain the natural world while others dabbled in morality and other concepts, much of what religion does but with less dogma and more pragmatic and open-minded utility. Philosophy has its origins in antiquity, whose hub was Greek mythology, which formed the cradle of Western civilization, and with that set the foundation to how our modern society has been formed.¹⁹ The plank owners of mythology are guilty of the same curiosity of philosophers but took their story in a completely different direction. Philosophy, similar to myth, attempts to answer questions but one of the key differences is that good philosophy, similar to science, in answering one question, might inspire two more questions, thereby creating a nexus where some ideas merge and others deviate but the philosophical energy continues in perpetuity and the benefits of this methodology are harvested in the form of theories. Good philosophy and good science, as exercises in inquiry, germinate indefinitely whereas religion stops at its inception and has not since experienced growth or evolution. Religion, by definition, cannot grow, change, evolve, or adapt to modernity; as any deviation from doctrine, by definition, can be considered heresy and quickly undermines its divine nature and unduly empowers man with divine revelation-an ungodly act of hubris. Religion is an institution of absolute answers and literal interpretations without room to intellectually maneuver.

Myth and religion provide absolute answers that do not support or engender infinitely open-ended inquiry like science and philosophy. Concerning misogyny, adherents to oppressive religion should either abandon the religion or accept the patriarchal nature and, in order to be consistent, reject the notion of equality altogether. Anything in between is hypocrisy. This is the juncture where mental gymnastics are required, especially by women who adhere to the subjugating principles of religion. I understand men on the giving end but not women on the receiving end. It reminds me of a poignant aphorism I recently read somewhere: "there is nothing wrong with

¹⁹ Shafti, P. The significance of mythology in today's world. Prepublica.

a police state if you are part of the police.” Our incredible ability to square our opposing beliefs is manifested in women who omit the misogyny from their own religion and explain it away as part of the greater benevolent system which, invariably, requires interpretation in the form of rationalization. This is normal behavior but should be acknowledged or admitted as cognitively dissonant and downright incredible. The only other explanation is that they (women) are unaware of their subjugated or inferior position in the patriarchal structure.

When juxtaposing religion, mythology, and philosophy, it is impossible to ignore the arbitrary cultural weight given to three distinct institutions, each having its own values, expectations, politics, and consequences. Our own concept of false narrative depends on our concept of true account, and the opposition false/true narrative is shaped by such other oppositions as myth/science, legend/history, myth or legend/literature.²⁰ Religion is considered organically and institutionally more credible than mythology or philosophy when, realistically, religion and mythology are synonymous while philosophy is an academic and cerebral endeavor that stands on its intrinsic merit and has its own instrumental value. For example, philosophy can be considered an objective search for the truth through contemplative discourse and tentative conclusions. As a precursor to the creation of public policy I would feel more comfortable with philosophy at the helm due to its diligence rather than religion and its unwavering adherence to antiquity and dogmatic absolutes with no room for freewheeling intellectual evolution. Religion could be considered *a* philosophy, but it is not philosophy per se.

In layperson’s terms, myth provides guidance for behavior and the associated expectations for young boys and girls and men and women when faced with the dubious task of fitting into a complex society and surviving in an unpredictable and impersonal world; mostly, by providing meaning and purpose to an otherwise seemingly pointless life. Finding ourselves in a universe that seems bent upon destroying us, we quickly discover, both as individuals and as societies, that it is a good thing to understand the forces arrayed against us.²¹ Myth attempts to make sense of the world by answering the complex and existential questions that accompany the vagaries of life, especially the afterlife; similar to philosophy and science but these two disciplines focus on the physical world and natural phenomena, although philosophy transitioned its inquiry of the physical world to science and then

²⁰ Csapo, E. (2005). *Theories of Mythology*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden Mass, 7.

²¹ Harris, S. (2004). *The End of Faith*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 23.

to life's more abstract concepts, like justice or truth. Myth and religion delve into the metaphysical world of ethics and morality for the purpose of providing guidance for behavior and absolute answers to questions. These institutions also provide rudimentary and highly incredulous explanations for the physical world as an alternative to the cold and impersonal account provided by science. Many of these topics were explored by seminal works of philosophy but have transcended from manmade to divinely inspired concepts and have not yet returned. Not everyone can afford to spend his or her days pondering the origins of life or defining the concept of justice; hence, the attraction to the many varieties of clearing house religions that provide all of the answers or, at least, allay our anxiety for enough time to indulge in other more enjoyable activities.

The answers that mythology provides to dubious existential questions support the specific cultural and social nuances that shape society and help create the social structure needed to live in harmony and minimize conflict between the two sexes. Some advocates for specific faiths maintain that, without spiritually prescriptive guidance, the sexes would be uncontrollably and detrimentally aroused; more specifically, women would be out of control and men would succumb to temptation. It is for this very reason that such faiths, or support for religious institutions, subjugate women with divinely inspired strictures. This will be explored later.

The average definition of myth includes: an idea or story that is believed by many people but that is not true (Merriam-Webster); a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events (Oxford dictionary); an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts (Cambridge dictionary). It is important to note that the definition of myth does not include the utility or futility—a central component for defining mythology through the lens with which we see and integrate into the world, that is, myth an instrument of power. The conventional definition ascribes qualities to the tool but does not explore its utility or social and political or even geopolitical implications. The sterile definitions are easy to digest but the implications require real scrutiny and deliberation. Any large-scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination.²² Employ the myth or religion of your choice when considering its evolutionary purpose and you will quickly

²² Harari, Y. (2011). *Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind*. Vintage. London, 30.