

CREATING A MYTHOLOGY FOR THE FUTURE

This was written in 1988, and has needed ruthless editing, but it is interesting to see what effect the intervening 25 years has made. Negative aspects of the world situation just touched on here have intensified, with some unforeseen developments. Awareness of 'myth' in general has grown with the explosion of writing and publishing on mythic/spiritual/consciousness themes, but I think the mythologizing emphasis has mostly been on the micro (quantum) thrust of ground-breaking, paradigm-shifting science, and it is salient to be reminded of the macro. Overall, I think the argument stands.

Mythology affects us all, whether or not we are even familiar with the word. Many people equate mythology with charming antique fables, but it is far more important than that. The deepest values of a culture have always originated in its religious/mythological traditions, from which ethical and moral values have been derived, and may still be supported.

It's a fact that we profoundly lack a mythology which matches and is capable of sustaining our global culture, and which is capable of taking us into the future. I hope to suggest a way in which such a mythology might be born, or at least suggest the areas in which to look.

First of all, what do I mean by myth? "Mythology", in its original meaning, refers to the imagery, symbols, symbolic events or narratives by which sacred teachings are communicated and passed down. Myths are usually in the form of stories about gods and heroes, or stories which explain profound events like the creation of the world, or narratives which apparently support and justify social and religious rituals or customs. There has never been a society simple or sophisticated, without some form of mythology. Each body of myth has particular flavour, which is partly cultural and partly to do with the aspects of life and values they emphasize. For example, Celtic, Sumerian, Polynesian, Hindu, Christian mythologies are all different in their imagery and reference, but at the same time it is possible to find concepts, symbols and narrative structures which are similar or even the same. One mythology cannot be directly translated into another, but they often seem to be dealing with the same things.

Some traditional children's stories and fairy-tales touch on the mythic. They can be recognised by their power to suggest other levels of meaning, and sometimes by their obscurity. They are passed down the generations and even across cultures. By comparison, many beautifully illustrated and presented stories composed specifically for the entertainment of children merely entertain.

All the great religions have a mythic structure, the story behind the message. Religious mythologies are not necessarily at odds with history, but it is often difficult to say where history ends and myth begins, and vice versa. Sometimes real "history" is mythicized, or myth presented as history. It is a minefield, which scholars and anthropologists do not always respect.

For instance mythic narrative is not proof of historical events. Likewise geographical references in myth may be referring to physical locations, or not. A reference to three rivers in an ancient Central Asian myth, could be evidence of location near the Nile, Euphrates and Oxus, or referencing something else for which these are convenient symbols. Myth-makers

tend to use what is around them as symbols, but primarily myth is concerned with psychological realities, with eternal truths, with meaning.

Levels of Meaning

Meaning is multi-layered, multi-dimensional. Any interpretation and understanding are based on having the relevant experience to appreciate the subtleties of a communication, particularly if it is 'coded'. With mythic writings there is a traditional structure of four levels of subtlety: Literal, Allegorical, Metaphysical (moral/tropological), and Mystical (anagogical).

These terms are taken from medieval hermeneutics, but the same fourfold hierarchy of understanding is universally acknowledged in mythic interpretation. They are modes of knowing, of deepening perception and understanding.

Literal takes a narrative at face value, as history, as physical actuality. Great for a police report, but inappropriate and profoundly dangerous if the material is mythic. An *allegorical* interpretation will translate the overt details of a narrative into other terms, a hidden parallel significance, to convey a second level of meaning eg. masking political or social statements under the guise of an innocent story.

The third level is sometimes called *tropological*, which derives from the word 'tropos' or turning. It requires an engagement which turns the meaning back onto oneself (hence Moral), connecting your own life and behaviour with the meaning of the narrative or events. This can occur as a sudden revelation of significance, a so-called esoteric understanding of what is hidden. Eg. In Greek myth Chronos ate his children. A metaphysical interpretation might acknowledge that Time eats all our productions, or that Impermanence is a law we can and must acknowledge and learn to act accordingly etc. Many other lessons can be drawn.

And the fourth *mystical* level embraces all the preceding to form a union of perception and understanding which lifts the meaning into a sphere truly sacred, profound, spiritual; the kind for which there is no adequate discursive means of communicating such as non-ordinary states of consciousness. A multi-valent symbolic narrative may convey a lot to the initiated.

The problem is that the experiential background of such myth may make it impenetrable to those for whom the experience described is unfamiliar. It is a system of meta-symbolic language building upon the conventions of ordinary language (all words are essentially symbols, standing in for the actuality.) The default position is to stick with the literal.

Symbols are rich by a wealth of associations. However, the appeal of much poetry and literature is emotional. It touches upon the mythic only when something timeless, of universal validity is evoked. Myth may not stir or manipulate our emotions in any obvious way, but the psyche seems to possess a faculty of working with symbol which is Mythopoeic, myth-making, to communicate many levels of truth.

The Mythopoeic Faculty: the missing link

Ordinary thinking is primarily associative: one idea leads to another, which leads to another, and then to another, and so on: the stream of consciousness. To organize the stream you

resort to a higher level, 'meaning', to connect those associations and relate to previous experience, values etc. Together the associative and meaning aspects constitute the normal daily exercise of "thinking", and skill in making good connections can be practised and improved.

Creativity often functions with sudden insight, leaps of imagination, out-of-the-blue perception, and is then sustained and developed. More than mental agility or rational connectivity, it could be said that intellectual power has an emotional base and two modes of operation which are identifiable in experience. One is a sort of active mulling over, turning round and round like a big wheel, until insight breaks through. The other is more like a process of gestation, when something is left lodged at the back of the mind, and emerges when it is ready.

A Mythopoeic approach tries to give form to glimpses of higher orders of truth, those insights which arise, usually under conditions of stress or tension, or effort, and are forgotten, or are too difficult to grasp and stash away into the filing system with which you run everyday life. Fantasy writers utilise it too, with the most enduring success related to how well they awaken mythopoeic awareness in their readers by evoking universal themes with a touch of the sacred.

Myth and the Sacred

In all world cultures, whether a small scale and technologically simple society or or a great civilization, mythic stories are carefully preserved and handed down, preserving intimations of the sacred. Some are transmitted through a religious hierarchy or established guardians of the sacred dimension; some through story-telling, visual imagery in art and decoration, theatrical representations, even cultural rituals which have lost their overt religious significance: eg, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, Well Dressing in Derbyshire villages, and ceremonies which are pale versions of ancient rituals.

When a powerful culture supersedes an earlier, the traditions of both may carry on simultaneously or they are mixed and transformed. For instance, the Christian mythology took over many older forms in Britain, but the Celtic heritage still survives and is itself built upon a still older lore. The cultural life which we treasure and the Art we consider its finest flowering, reflect an admixture of mythic values. Renaissance painters loved to depict scenes from the life of Christ, but they also delighted in the birth of Venus or Leda and the Swan . King Lear is based on an ancient pre-Celtic god or king, Llyr, who may be pure myth or an archaic historical king. It is difficult to say.

Each mythic tradition arises within a particular culture which reaches its zenith at a particular time, and is eclipsed, assimilated, or still continues. The rich Hindu mythological tradition is a living reality for millions of people, waning only where western Secular/Materialistic values are in the ascendant, Mythic Islam is undoubtedly still alive and well although political Islam may transpose its values for ends other than mythic.

If we acknowledge the historical importance of religious/mythological tradition in binding a culture into a strong and coherent entity, providing a basis for ethical and moral values, and thereby giving it a heart we may well look around us and wonder:

What is the mythology of our current global culture?

We clearly are in the birth-throes of a new culture which is gradually and painfully taking over the heritage of many races and societies. It is potentially a culture based upon the conception of 'one earth - one people', and a common set of values is already evident wherever communications have reached, albeit these are currently materialistic. At the same time, and very much as a reaction, a re-awakened form of tribalism is asserting separateness and cultural customs as a basis for values. Unfortunately, when mythic understanding disintegrates into literalism, the inevitable result is fundamentalism.

The new culture is both multi-religious and non-religious. In addition to adherence to traditional religions and religious mythologies, we see the arising of a plethora of wisdom teachers designing frameworks more or less individualistic and mythic depending upon their degree of understanding. Outside these, a large and increasing proportion of people do not accept any religious/ethical framework. They are basically living without mythology, that is, without a means of giving form to the sacred dimension, or to a sense of the meaningfulness of life and creation. However, it not necessarily lack of awareness. For many, the restlessness and sense of something missing is a genuine suffering, propelling a lifelong search to fill what is apprehended as a vacuum, not just in feeling, but in expression.

The Arts are often preoccupied by self-expression and career ambition. In some areas of the sciences a lively curiosity can still flourish, a zeal to know more, to work without immediate or certain reward, and with dedication and enthusiasm. The result emerges later in the form of technology, continually breaking new ground.

However if technology has taken over the creative thrust of humanity at the present time, it is largely without the sacred dimension, without an over-arching framework to which individuals can look for guidance in living their lives. The absence of this framework at a global level is at the heart of much of the conflict, violence and unease in global society.

We still revere the mythologies of the past. Indeed we are now in a position to know mythologies from all over the world, both past and present, and many people's personal search for meaning takes them to the exploration of all kinds of symbolic systems in an attempt to extract the wisdom contained in them.

Issues of principle are coming at us from all quarters. Ecology is only the first stage of realising a global identity. What is needed is a conceptual and mythological leap equivalent to the scientific realization that the sun and stars do not revolve around the earth, a view which served psychologically for many millennia. In the previous Ptolemaic world view our, psychological centre (represented by the earth) was sure and familiar. Copernicus shifted the balance. Not earth, but the Sun was the centre of events, and earth was merely one of several planets revolving about it. The paradigm shift was a mythological event.

Subsequently it became clear that our solar system is an insignificant unit in a vast collection of similar systems making up the body of our galaxy, and revolving about its centre, and furthermore the Milky way is one among millions in relationship to another centre, that of the universe, and our universe is very likely part of the Multiverse of creation.

All this awakens the mythopoeic faculty, and a thirst to understand the mystery of creation: the meaning of such ordered immensity, and how it bears upon the ordinary lives of men and

women. It does have a relationship to our ordinary lives. We are actually living in a different universe from our ancestors three hundred years ago. Our mythopoeic vision has failed to keep pace with the shifts, leaving us psychologically without a world-view or structure for identity, both as individuals and as a race.

Increasing fragmentation of stable institutions, flux and change, conflict and chaos of values, fear of ourselves and our own destructive tendencies, fear of the future, and despair reflect the situation back to us. Instead of passing on to our children a wholesome framework to use in forging a sense of individual identity, many parents pass on their own fear and negativity.

Youth is inherently hopeful. The young do not naturally fear the future. In my view, the cruellest thing it is possible to do to the young of our species is to destroy natural hope, to systematically condition them, in the name of "education, ecological awareness, climate change" etc., into the belief that they may not even have a future. If anything threatens the health and viability of the human race, it may be this -- unrelenting imagery of despair, fear, and a constricted small vision of human possibilities flooding children's growing minds and vision of the future. Such a thing is only possible from a mythological void.

Perhaps through mythology, there are some keys to opening the doors in the psyche of Humanity which have become stuck probably about the time Earth lost its status as symbolically central in our world view.

Claiming a greater Identity

A larger order of allegiance can over-ride a smaller, without devaluing it. Our first view of Earth from space was a fundamental shift: the potential extended family extended a whole lot further. While there is almost certainly no equivalent level of conscious life in our solar system, it is unlikely that among the 200 billion stars of our galaxy, there are no others with planets seeded with conscious life. We haven't met them yet, but these other beings are our neighbours. What we will have in common is that we are all members of the family of this Galaxy, and there is a level of identity here to which we can just about reach. The Milky Way galaxy is ours: our larger home.

If this concept should seem too emotionally stretching you have only to stand on a hill on a clear black night and gaze up at the Galaxy stretching across the sky in a river of stars. It is your galaxy, and mine; not some theoretical concoction of scientists, but awesomely visible to the naked eye; a constant background, loved and contemplated by all races since the advent of man on this planet.

Now that we know more about its structure, we are enabled and entitled to think of ourselves as men and women of the Galaxy. It has come very much within our everyday frame of reference. The imagery is familiar, even to a six year old. Mythologically, the galactic is now a comfortable level of identity. As the number of neurons in the human brain is almost equal to the number of stars in the Milky Way, over 15 billion, psycho-logically, the relationship couldn't be much closer or more fundamental !

In the creation of a meaningful new mythology, I suggest that we should look to such newly apprehended symbols which have power to move and extend the heart. These are the images which can clothe the Divine for us and be meaningful to all earth races and cultures. Then, when the time comes, what we will have in common with the other planetary races in the

greater galaxy will be a mythological language we can all understand; images of God which will not be alien to other Beings with physical constitutions and history very different from ours.

If the thrust of creativity has been most visible in the sciences in recent centuries, let us use what has been perceived to extend our emotional life: to establish a sense or scale against which to decide what is meaningful, what our values are, and where we are going. It may look like oblivion, but it is a leap, a jump across space - literally, allegorically, morally and mystically.
