The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture

Edited by
Lisle W. Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur,
and Richard J. Callahan, Jr.

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17 What We Know

Myths and Sacred Texts

Today the word "myth" seems to convey a variety of meanings. To many, it suggests something that is not true: "the Tooth Fairy is a myth," one might hear on the playground, or "Slenderman is a myth." The assertion that either of these characters is a myth suggests not only that there may still be those who believe they are real—small children, young teens—and thus in need of refutation (or, possibly, reassurance) but also that the continued belief in them is childish, foolish, or dangerous. Similarly, to others the word "myth" suggests a story from the past, from those ill-defined yet fondly recalled "days of yore" when life was simpler and morality was less ambiguous. As the character "K" says to Det. James Edwards—a New York City cop who has just learned of the presence of extra-terrestrials—in the 1997 film *Men in Black*,

> Fifteen hundred years ago, everybody *knew* that the earth was the center of the universe. Five hundred years ago everybody *knew* that the earth was flat. And fifteen minutes ago, you *knew* that humans were alone on this planet. Imagine what you'll *know* tomorrow.

This connotation suggests a different kind of maturation, a presumption that the people (or peoples) who believed "those" myths were naive and less sophisticated than today's modern citizens, but maybe also blissfully less encumbered by the complications of today's reality. Lastly, and often unconsciously, some people use "myth" as a cultural marker to distinguish their own narratives—that God revealed sacred scripture to a man in Israel—which they know to be true, from the narratives of others—that God revealed sacred scripture to a man in upstate New York—which they know to be untrue. Unless you are a Mormon.

Therein lies the dilemma: if we use the term "myth" to distinguish falsehood in the search for truth, then it is almost always going to be true to those who believe it to be true, and false to those who believe it to be false. In this sense, it is a bit like Schrödinger's cat, both true and false, and yet also neither true nor false. This is why those who work in the academic study of religion (along with other fields who take seriously the category of "myth" in human understanding) prefer to disregard entirely the question of whether or not myths are true and instead think about them as multifaceted reflections of the people who tell them. And retell them. As religion scholar Mircea Eliade points out, "Today . . . the word [myth] is employed both in the sense of 'fiction' or 'illusion' and in that [sense] familiar especially to ethnologists, sociologists, and historians of religions, the sense of 'sacred tradition, primordial revelation, exemplary model'" (Eliade 1963: 1). This may be a bit melodramatic; rather, let us just say that myths are narrative patterns that seek to explain the world or some part of it. If they can

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do that for the people who tell them (and, just as importantly, for the people who hear them), then we can say that they "work"; if they can't, they don't.

This may be why we think of the narratives of Scandinavia as Norse myths, and also why there are more Lutherans in Sweden and Norway than there are pagans. To most Westerners they represent tales of a bygone age but are also narrative patterns that do not "work" for people like they used to. And yet, these same Norse myths do continue to be of great meaning and significance, both formally for those who believe them to be true—paganism is still a viable spiritual expression (see Pike 2001)—and informally for those who use them as the scaffolding to tell refurbished, similar, or even creatively inventive new narratives. One need only read Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* (2001) to see this at work.

In this sense, then, myths are the foundation for all that we know of the world. We are taught (and, with luck, retain) facts and figures, raw data that contribute to our search for explanations for the world or its constituent parts. But it is myths that organize that data into useful and meaning-filled systems by which to make sense of it all. Robert Burton (2019) argues that we tell and retell stories (myths) so that, in a very real sense, we don't go crazy when confronted by situations that call for a learned reaction (such as seeing a lion). Elena Renken (2020) points to brain studies that reveal how we physically and emotionally connect with one another through the very act of telling stories. As we read in Section II of this volume, Peter Berger (1967) identifies these world-explaining narratives as the "sacred canopy" that maintains a culture's stability in times of crisis. French philosopher Georges Bataille (1989: 19) writes that animals live in the world like water in water, meaning that only humans distinguish themselves from their own world. In so doing, we require explanations to make sense of it all. These are the foundations for storytelling; by retelling myths, we have both established and maintained ourselves in the cosmos.

In 1956, anthropologist Horace Miner published an article in which he analyzed the hygiene rituals of a community he identified as the Nacirema. In the article he describes with an anthropologist's eye the various rituals in which these people engage, describing their ablutions and their ritual spaces in great detail. By the end of the article, it is clear that the "Nacirema" he describes are actually just everyday Americans ("Nacirema" spelled backwards). One of Miner's goals was to de-exoticize the study of ritual. By making the exotic seem mundane and by making the mundane seem exotic, Miner was showing his readers that everyone—from the shaman of a small-scale preindustrial society to you and the people next door—engage in ritualized activities. We could find detailed and meaning-filled rituals all around us, if we only removed our biases and took a look around.

By doing the same thing with myth—and maintaining our rejection of a search for "Truth"—we can broaden the focus of myth from "the ancients" to the contemporary. As with the Norse myths, other ancient myths continue to reverberate meaningfully in the way we tell stories. One can read the epic of Gilgamesh—one of the Western world's oldest written narratives—and see the "buddy narrative" at work in the stories of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Batman and Robin, and maybe even Thelma and Louise. If we describe a narrative in which a being with powers to heal and return the dead to life brings a new knowledge to the innocent is pursued by an evil government who wants to silence him, and ultimately leaves but promises to return, we could be discussing the Jesus narrative as related in the Gospels, or the plot of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). If we describe a man of simple birth, who is drawn into a cosmic conflict between good and evil, is told of his role in the cosmos, initially rejects it but, in the end, accepts

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his destiny, again we could be describing the Jesus narrative, or the plot of *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977). Our goal here is not to belittle the Gospel narrative; as should be clear by now, those who believe it to be true believe it to be universally and unimpeachably true. But as we have discussed earlier in this volume, whether it is the "monomyth," the "American monomyth," or the "buddy narrative"—or one of the other narrative patterns common in our culture (or others)—it is the pattern that is the key. Maybe the two films (and others) adopt the narrative structure they do because they are familiar patterns that facilitate storytelling. But why should we exclude the consideration of a community's sacred scripture just because it is that community's sacred scripture? And why should we exclude today's stories—novels, films, television shows, and more—just because they are not?

Authority

If it is best not to ask whether or not a myth is true—or rather, if we ask but quickly learn that the answer does not really get us anywhere—what can we ask about myth? Robert Segal points out that, when it comes to investigating myths, there are "three main questions": "origin, function, and subject matter" (2004: 2). Because myth is not just the story told but also the pattern replicated in the story, the answers to all three of these questions operate on a variety of levels. In terms of subject, the myth may be about something—a little girl who wears a red riding garment, who while taking goodies to her grandmother encounters a wolf, who then threatens her life (and that of her grandmother) until they are rescued by a noble woodsman—but it may also be about something else: childhood, femininity, masculinity, virginity, sexuality, and more. In terms of origin, a narrative about a global flood may have first been told in the account of Noah starting in the sixth chapter of the book of Genesis, or it may have appeared 1,000 years earlier in the epic of Gilgamesh, or (according to William Ryan and Walter Pitman, 1998) it may even have been spawned from actual events that took place 3,000 or 4,000 years before that: the rapid flooding of the Black Sea by the surging waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Like the questions of origin and subject matter, "function" also works on two levels and requires us to consider not only how the myth works as a narrative but also for whom it works, and how. This, then, connects us (and myth) to the question that is at the heart of many of the more recent writers we have considered in this collection: the question of authority.

In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)—a comic satire of the "quest" myth—King Arthur seeks to obtain some basic information from peasants he encounters who are working in the fields. When they refuse to help him, he demands their respect based upon the fact that (unbeknownst to them) he is their king. One of the peasants asks how he became king, and Arthur responds by recounting his encounter with the Lady of the Lake, the spirit figure who "held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. That," he concludes, "is why I am your king." Another peasant ("Dennis") is unconvinced: "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government." The peasants very clearly reject the authority of the king because they reject the purported source of his authority.

Historian of religion Bruce Lincoln defines authority as "the capacity to make a consequential pronouncement" which commands "not just the attention but the confidence,

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respect, and trust" of the audience. He distinguishes it from coercion (which implies force) on the one hand, and persuasion (which implies argumentation) on the other, comparing it to the parent who responds to a child's objection to complete a task with "Because I said so" (1994: 3–5). In the legends recounted by Sir Thomas Mallory in his fifteenth-century work *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Arthur's authority as king is accepted because the retelling of his encounter with the Lady in the Lake (and its meaning) is accepted. In the film version, Arthur has no claim of authority over the peasants. At the very idea, Dennis argues that "Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony!" Arthur, realizing that his authority has not been accepted on its face, and that he has not been able to convince the peasant, exercises his only remaining option (coercion) and threatens Dennis.

Much like the subjects of King Arthur—in the legendary version, *not* the Monty Python version—almost by definition members of a religious community accept the authority of their God (or gods) and their sacred writings as truth. For the benefit of members (but also for outsiders looking in), divine authority is often stated directly in the sacred texts of the community, providing a second, more textually grounded source. The Hebrew word *kabbalah*—a term that may be familiar even to non-Jews as a school of Jewish mysticism—comes from the word-root meaning "receiving." This suggests that this form of mysticism establishes its authority in having been received from God. The same is true for all sacred texts. Those who understand Jewish sacred text (Torah) to be authoritative do so not only because they believe it to be so but also because the text declares itself to be so (see *parsha* Yitro, roughly comparable to Exodus 18–20). Likewise, Christian sacred text, in the New Testament (see John 1; 2 Timothy 3). Likewise, Muslim sacred text, in the Qur'an (see Sura 3).[1] Likewise, Mormonism, in the Book of Mormon (see, for example, I Nephi 14:25-26), the Doctrine and Covenants (see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 20:1-4), and so on. Of course, the Jew does not see Christian text as sacred, and the Christian does not see Muslim text as sacred. While the assertion of authority may make it true for its believers, simply saying it is true is not enough for nonbelievers. The dilemma of seeking "truth" in myth is grounded not only in content, then, but in the authority of that content as well.

Myth also builds and sustains its authority through its provenance, or transmission history. This provides the sacred text's pedigree, proving that what is in front of the community is the genuine text from the original source. For example, the Mishnah (a commentary on Jewish sacred texts) specifically lays out the provenance of Jewish sacred text:

> Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders [who Moses had installed to assist in running the community], and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. (Pirkei Avot 1:1)

This takes the text from Moses receiving the sacred text from God (Exodus 20) through the remainder of the Tanakh (Hebrew scripture) to the historical moments after the establishment of the rebuilt ("Second") Holy Temple in Jerusalem in the sixth century before the Common Era; in other words, from "myth" to history. Working in a slightly different mode, the followers of Jesus (soon to be called Christians) established apostolic succession—the transference not just of oversight authority for particular geographic areas (bishoprics) but also of religious

[1]Thanks to Tom Ellis, Loren Lybarger, and Craig Wansink for their assistance in identifying appropriate texts.

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charisma and authority within that area as a representative of the original followers (apostles) of Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 1:21-26).

As a narrative form, myth also asserts authority by association, often based on the person credited with transmitting it—the "narrator"—not just the most recent person relating the myth but the person in whose "voice" the myth is told. For example, even though the Hebrew scriptures are understood to be (in part or in whole) a revelation from God, there are numerous clues suggesting that it is the product of later narrators. The traditional Jewish notion of Torah—in its entirety, from the first words of Genesis to the last words of Deuteronomy—having been given by God to Moses and the Hebrew people at the base of Mt. Sinai, is challenged by elements within the narrative. Moses—had been prohibited by God from entering the Promised Land (see Num. 20:12; Deut. 1:37; Deut. 34:4)—speaks his last words in the land of Moab "on the other side of the Jordan" (Deut. 1:1) from the person relating the event, where he dies (Deut. 34:5). Moses—who receives the Torah in its entirety—dies before the end of its telling, and the "narrator" notes that "no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deut. 34:6) and that "never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses" (Deut. 34:10). All of this suggests the passage of time between the events described and the telling of them. The fact that the community that considers this text sacred and its various sources authoritative—from God to Moses and from there through the chain of transmission—indicates either that the "narrator" is God (who, as an omniscient Being, would know events to take place after the text's transmission) or is trusted as if he were. It also ensures the authority of those whose job it is to teach and interpret the text.

The acceptance of sages—here understood not only as those who transmit the text as "narrators" but also those who in some substantial way control its use—is yet another source of a text's authority. We believe the text not just because it demands to be believed, and not just because it comes from proper sources, but because we have respect (or devotion) to the figures at the heart of its retelling. "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 20:2); "Call me Ishmael" (Melville 1851); "Call me Hi" (*Raising Arizona* 1987); the authority of all narratives relies on those retelling them.

Not surprisingly, most often those in authority—the transmitters or the sages—are men. There are important women in Western scriptures—Deborah comes to mind as the most respected (Judges 4)—but most of time the women function in conjunction with important men (Miriam and Moses, Esther and Mordecai). Many are represented either as non-entities (Noah's wife, who goes unnamed) or as the cause of trouble (Eve, or her predecessor Lilith, the first female of Gen. 1:7, who also goes unnamed in scripture but is labeled in Jewish folklore). In his 1990 work, literary critic Harold Bloom argues that the "Book of J"—one of the "documents" understood by some biblical scholars to be a constituent part of the first six books of the Christian Old Testament—likely had been written by a woman. But for the majority of Western history—from scripture to literature to film—storytelling (and the authority implied or transmitted therein) has been the domain of men.

Women of Authority

The development of feminist theory, Orientalism, and other cultural criticisms of power have shown that there is a strong link between the presence of people from historically

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marginalized communities with the authority to transmit narratives of meaning on the one hand and their presence in those stories on the other. It stands to reason that, if you're not in the story, you're not behind the story either. Put another way, as Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren has often said, "If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu" (Oh 2014). Historically, members of various historically marginalized communities have not had a seat at the storytelling "table," and therefore have been "on the menu" in the sense that they have been mere commodities to be consumed rather than nuanced, integrated participants in the narrative, but also in the sense that they have been almost entirely without authority, either to be in the story or to tell it.

Graphic artist Alison Bechdel is credited for creating a formula for evaluating the representation of women in film and, by extension, other cultural products (1985). In a strip for *Dykes to Watch Out For*, one of the characters notes that she will only go to see a film if there are two (or more) female characters whose names are known and who have a conversation about something other than men. What Bechdel initially called "The Rule" has since come to be known as the "Bechdel-Wallace Test," in recognition of the contribution of one of Bechdel's friends. Bechdel also has pointed out that something similar to it can be found in author Virginia Woolf's analysis of the work of Jane Austen (Garber 2015; see also Woolf 1935: 124).

The beauty of the "Bechdel-Wallace Test" is its flexibility for measuring the treatment of any number of groups, subcultures, or otherwise marginalized peoples and, whether intended or not, versions of it have been used to test the content for more than the gender equality of characters in narratives. Alaya Johnson created what she calls the "POC!Bechdel Test," a test for how people of color are represented in a narrative: Does it have two named characters who are people of color and who talk to each other about something other than a white person (Johnson 2009)? Members of other traditionally underrepresented groups also have used it to gauge representation of their own members: Are characters portrayed as one-dimensional foils for the more central straight characters? How are Africans or Asians (as well as African Americans or Asian Americans) represented? Are they absent, presented as stereotypes—like the "magical Negro" or the "Oriental Monk," mystical characters who can solve everyone else's problems (see Glenn and Cunningham 2009; Iwamura 2000)—or as complex, nuanced characters who just happen to be visually different from the more traditional white, straight characters? What about characters on the LGBTQ+ spectrum?

Ironically (for a profit-driven mode of myth-telling like modern film), a film's "failure" of the Bechdel-Wallace Test has financial repercussions. An informal study of nearly 2,000 films released between 1970 and 2013 revealed that only half "passed" the Bechdel-Wallace Test: they had "at least one scene in which [two or more named] women talked to each other about something other than a man." Not surprisingly, between 1990 and 2013, films that passed the Bechdel-Wallace Test had smaller budgets than those in which (1) women characters only talked about men, or in which (2) there were fewer than two named women characters. Interestingly, all three of these categories had smaller budgets than films that had named women characters, but those women didn't talk to each other, suggesting that studio financiers were most willing to fund films in which women characters were visually present but silent or dependent on male characters for dialogue—seen but not heard, as it were, or speaking when spoken to—likely because of the overwhelmingly teen male film target audience. And yet, those well-financed films did not provide as high a return on the

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investment dollar as films in which named female characters only talked about men, which themselves earned even less (per dollar invested) than films that "passed" the Test (Hickey 2014). Put another way, the film industry was more likely to provide more money to those involved in the making of the film but did so with films that provided a better investment for those putting up the money. One wonders if the same is true for films that undergo a cognate of the Bechdel-Wallace Test, for African Americans, for example, or for people of color.

Myths at Work

Of course, myths can also explain authority already established in a past or present situation. For example, the earliest American settlers understood themselves to be reliving the Exodus narrative: they were the ancient Hebrews, escaping their own Pharaoh (the King of England), crossing their own Red Sea (the Atlantic Ocean) to get to a land promised to them by God (North America) (Dow 1890). This explains not only the various sermons to be found during this time but also the history of the organizing myth some historians of religion in America have used to interpret American religious history. In one of the better known early works—Puritan minister Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* ("The Glorious Works of Christ in America"; 1702)—every bountiful harvest or ship's sinking revealed God's hand. Over a century later, the subtitle to Reverend Robert Baird's *Religion in the United States of America* (1844)—"an account of the origin, progress, relations to the state, and present condition of the evangelical churches in the united states, with notices of unevangelical denominations"—made clear the work's emphasis. Even Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People* (1972) divided American history into Puritan and "Post-Puritan" periods—the latter of which started after the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, and 850 pages of text, and despite the fact that Catholicism has been the single largest religious denomination in the United States since Baird's time.

Similarly, historians of religion and film have used myth—consciously or not—to interpret the battle over the content of American film. On the one hand, that same myth of the pious Puritan was clearly operating behind the efforts of leaders in the American Catholic community who, fearing for the souls of their own parishioners and the nation, sought to control the product of the American film industry. On the other hand, the myth of the American entrepreneur—the "Protestant work ethic," where anyone can "make it big" with enough hard work—clearly animated the Jews who, evading the monopoly Thomas Edison retained on his film technologies, left the East Coast and established not just the modern studio film industry in California but also "Hollywood" and the images of an America where (in the later words of radio storyteller Garrison Keillor) "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average," and where the biggest problems could be solved by having a show in a barn. These two myths come into direct conflict over the "Hollywood Production Code" that established what could and what could not be shown on screen from the decade or so before the Second World War to the decade or so after its conclusion. Interestingly, the government and institutional Protestantism played very little part in the resolution and remained on the sidelines while the two groups struggled with the other to determine how best to be "American."

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Most recently, new myths—or unambiguously newer presentations of older myths—have provided meaning for groups of people to make sense of the universe in which they live. Practitioners of what scholars have identified as "fake" (Chidester 2005), "invented" (Cusack 2010), or even "joke" (Simpson 2011) religions have presented a new frontier for the exploration of myth and its authority in the modern world. Jediists (*not* Jedis) derive authority from the myths embedded in the various *Star Wars* films, Matrixists from the *Matrix* films, Dudeists from *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (also known as "Pastafarians") have developed ex nihilo a myth system detailing the creation of the universe, the origin of humanity, and the path to salvation. While many observers might minimize the import of these groups (see "Connections: Barth and Religion as Critique" in this volume), all of them (in some way or another) engage in activities that are traditionally reserved for religious communities: some offer ordination for members to perform wedding ceremonies, others have challenged successfully various government allowances granted to religious groups but restricted to nonmembers (wearing a hat in a government identification photo, for example). But all of them identify specific, world-explaining myths at their core, and most exert energy maintaining the authentic and differentiating it from that which is (to use the term of many of them) "non-canonical."

It makes perfect sense that myth would not only animate our past but explain our current world as well, particularly if, as Neil Gabler and others have argued (1998), the lives we live today have become much like the movies we watch, or we expect them to be. We constantly construct our universe in story, and we rely on those stories to both explain and govern our lives. In the modern world of instant story production through popular culture—first in analog then in digital video processes—we should not be surprised to find myths constantly, everywhere, and not only in texts of an ancient (and often, foreign) past.

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