

## The Meaning of Myth (II)

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**A**s we can see, celebrations and rituals—including prayers and meditation—centring on a sacred myth are meant to invoke and make manifest the divine presence that is already within us. As this divine presence is often seen in terms of a myth, the rituals used vary according to the myth as well as the culture that sustains that myth. For instance, the ritual that is used to invoke the myth associated with Black Elk would not be the same as the rituals used to invoke the myths associated with Rāma or Krishna or Christ. The languages and cultural symbology for them are completely different.

Rituals and sacred myths have a close relationship as they are both meant to help us manifest the divine within us. Celebrations and rituals keep the power of the myths alive, and myths give the rituals meaning. And here, by the term ‘ritual’, we can also include the re-enactment and development of myths.

We have seen how St. Francis re-enacted Christ’s life in his own life. This is the highest ideal and is basically the whole point of rituals. We see this also in the lives of Ramakrishna and Chaitanya. Many of Ramakrishna’s sadhanas, in fact, were re-enactments of mythological stories. This was the case with Chaitanya also.

Yet these great souls did more than this. They did not just re-enact myths. Rather, they re-awakened these myths through the power of their spiritual practices, creating

paths for others to follow. Their lives themselves were the stuff of myths. Their re-enactment of myths was on a totally different level than what ordinary people can do. Ramakrishna himself realized this and told his disciples: ‘I’ve done sixteen parts. Now you do one part.’ And for most of the rest of us, we cannot do even one-sixteenth of that one part. But that does not mean we cannot internalize their lives. In fact, when we internalize their lives, we get the benefit of the power from their spiritual practices.

But besides such spiritual practices, there are other ways that myths can be ritualized and developed. Myths are often retold in various ways. In fact, in India it is not enough to have just one story of Rāma. Rather, people rejoice in the many different tellings of Rāma’s life. And no one cares if some stories contradict others. For there will always be a telling that resonates with someone. Writers have even written the whole story from the point of view of Sitā, giving it a whole new perspective.

One can also develop a myth by adding another layer of story to it. For instance, an opera written about 60 years ago by Gian Carlo Menotti called ‘Amahl and the Night Visitors’ develops the story of Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem, and points out the blessing it was for the world. Menotti takes the story of the Three Kings (or Wise Men) from the East and imagines a background incident that takes place on their journey to Bethlehem. In this story the kings stop for a

night at the hut of a poor widow, who has an only child, a son who is crippled. We know that this story is not historical, yet it beautifully imagines a scene that gives human faces to the kings and to people who interact with them. When a myth is developed in this way, people who watch it can identify with the story and feel a relationship with that very person—Jesus—who is never shown in the opera, but whose presence is the very life of the story.

### Myths and culture

As we see all over the world, myths are the very basis of culture. The world's most beautiful music, art, architecture, sculpture, stories, and poetry are inspired by myth and religion. Though some themes are repeated again and again by different poets and artists, we can see that this repetition can even increase the effect of the sacred myth, rather than decrease it.

In Rainer Maria Rilke's set of poems *Das Marienleben* (The Life of Mary), he imagines Mary's joy as well as her apprehension when she learned from the angel that she would give birth to Christ, the Messiah. But Rilke also gives voice to her utter grief at the death of her son. Michelangelo too has depicted this same scene in his beautiful sculpture called 'Pieta'. All of these are ways to develop and celebrate a sacred myth. And in this very celebration, we ourselves can mentally re-enact the myth by visualizing and taking on Mary's emotions.

But how hard it is to stop the rational mind from rejecting all this, especially in this era dominated by science, technology, and consumerism. Regarding this, Joseph Campbell said:

A mythological image is one that evokes and directs psychological energy. It is an energy-

evoking and energy-directing sign. A mythology is a system of affect or emotional images; these representations themselves produce this emotion or affect.

Our own mythology, yours and mine, is our particular heritage of affect images. Look, however, at what has been done to our mythology. On the rational level, the images are said to be absurd and, therefore, to have no meaning. Our rational system thus breaks their connections and makes their energy unavailable to us, in our lives.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the so-called 'rational' mind simply cannot fathom the infinite expanse of the spiritual realm. This is because when it comes to spiritual truths, the whole is always going to be greater than the sum of the parts. The rational mind always tries to add up and calculate those parts—the ones that it can grasp. Yet so much is left out. Above the rational mind there is another state—a state of intuition—that grasps spiritual truths intuitively. That is the realm of sacred myths.

But, as Huston Smith pointed out, our whole educational system nowadays is focused on training the rational aspect of our mind, to the exclusion of all else. Huston Smith himself was brought to MIT to help develop a Humanities program for this very reason—to try to bring a balance to the total absorption in science and technology that was happening there. But it seems Huston did not feel there was much chance of success with that—at least during his time. As he wrote in his book, *Why Religion Matters*, 'When I asked a scientist [at MIT] how he and his colleagues regarded us humanists, he answered affably, "We don't even bother to ignore you guys."<sup>8</sup>

Though the attitude of this MIT scientist may seem startling to us, this was not the only experience like this Huston faced there. Perhaps Huston should have responded, 'But

in years to come, when tragedy strikes, or you are close to death, how will you regard us then?’

Joseph Campbell also pointed this out: ‘For example,’ Campbell said, ‘when disaster strikes, when you meet with a great calamity, what is it that supports you and carries you through? Do you have anything that supports and carries you through? Or does that which you thought was your support now fail you? That is the test of the myth, the building myth, of your life.’<sup>9</sup>

A genuine myth touches our inmost self so deeply that our life gradually becomes centred around it. As Campbell says, in times of difficulties it is what holds our life together.

Swami Siddheswarananda once said: ‘Myth is the very foundation of life. The modern mind’s rejection of mythology as a source of inspiration and faith has deprived it of a great aid to spiritual struggle.’<sup>10</sup>

After all, our ultimate goal is to realize our own divine nature, and myths are meant to take us there. But if we are not aiming so high, then at least we all understand that we have a deep longing to attain true love, joy, and peace. Mythology offers us a myriad of paths to help us in this also. All we need to do is find a path that suits us and follow it to its end.

### **Fountainhead of religion**

Myths are like the fountainhead of religion. The source of the fountain—that is, the ultimate reality of life—lies hidden underground, but how many of us could discover that underground spring without the fountain? This is why we rejoice in having the fountain and celebrate it for its saving grace. And so much the better when we find there are many such fountains of various

tastes—something to suit everyone.

So how do we reverse the modern trend with its total focus on the rational mind? What we need now is to show people how sacred myths are relevant in our lives. As we have seen again and again in recent years, stories of heroes and heroines become especially popular when made into movies. The ‘Star Wars’ movies are a case in point. The heroic personalities of these movies are easily internalized by children and young people.

Now we need to do this with some of the great saints of different religious traditions. It is the lives of great souls that inspire other lives—even more so than their teachings. This is why films make such a great impact. In fact, we can see this in the tremendous impact that Richard Attenborough’s movie on Gandhi made in the 1980s. India has been making such movies and television programmes for many years. But due to the low-budget productions and the strong cultural overtones in these movies Western audiences cannot appreciate them.

In the West several film versions of the life of Jesus were done in the 1960s and 70s, and at least one of them was widely acclaimed. That was Franco Zeffarelli’s ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. A film on St. Francis, ‘Brother Sun, Sister Moon’, was also quite successful—though St. Francis’s life was so romanticized in it that it was barely recognizable. Still, these films had a message for their day.

These were a good start. But now we need new films for a new generation with a message for our time, and with a universal appeal. Though spiritual truths and teachings are timeless and beyond cultural overtones, they still need to be re-presented now and

then—especially in stories of saints. For example, to put emphasis on the harmony of religions, saints and saviours of various religions need to be presented. Moreover, the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda—besides being great exemplars of religious harmony—also bear witness to the reality and necessity of God-

realization. And we should not be shy about presenting them as such.

But most of all, we need to emphasize that all these great souls are paradigms for us. We need to present their lives in such a way that their lives and message can be internalized by everyone. For this is the true meaning of myth. ■

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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| <p>7 <i>Thou Art That</i>, by Joseph Campbell, ed. by Eugene Kennedy (Novato, California: New World Library, 2001), p. 86.</p> <p>8 <i>Why Religion Matters</i>, by Huston Smith (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 67.</p> | <p>9 <i>Thou Art That</i>, p. 24.</p> <p>10 <i>Learning, Listening, Loving, The Life of Swami Siddheswarananda</i>, by Swami Yogeshananda (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 2017), pp. 122-23.</p> |
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The advantages of the digital method are obvious. You may have to worry about losing your rosary, but you never have to worry about losing your fingers. Neither do you have to worry that somebody might steal your fingers. You might leave your rosary at home when you want to use it, but you never have to

worry about leaving your fingers at home.

But the digital method has its own problems. You may find it distracting to keep track of which digit comes next in the sequence. Your guru will tell you which method to use, and show you how to use it, at the time of initiation. ■

(To be concluded)

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REFERENCES

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| <p>1 Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, <i>The Practice of the Presence of God</i>, Translated by John J. Delaney, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p. xxi.</p> <p>2 M., <i>The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna</i>, Translated by Swami Nikhilananda, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1947, p. 312.</p> <p>3 Swami Prabhavananda, <i>The Eternal</i></p> | <p><i>Companion</i>, Vedanta Press, Hollywood, 1947, p. 129.</p> <p>4 Swami Gambhirananda, <i>Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi</i>, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, Fourth Edition, 1986, p. 397. See also Swami Nikhilananda, <i>Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations</i>, Skylight Path Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2004, pp. 25-26.</p> |
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