

Myths

Lecture 7

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What are myths?

Myths are defined as tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters.

William Bascom

Types of Myths:

- Origin Myths
- Hero Myths
- Myth of Fall
- Myth of "Eternal Return"

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Kirk: Distinguishing features of myths

1. They exert a narrative force, power or character;
2. Offer an explanation for some important phenomenon or custom;
3. Recording and establishing a useful institution (social structure);
4. Expressing an emotion in some way that satisfies some need in the individual;
5. Reinforcing a religious feeling;
6. Acting as a powerful support or precedent for an established ritual or cult practice.

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Joseph Campbell: Four Functions of myths

1. Myths elicit and support "a sense of awe before the mystery of being." (Eliade: they mediate a religious experience).
2. They render a cosmology, an image of the universe that will support and be supported by this sense of awe ; it is different from scientific explanations.
3. Myths support the current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group. (Eliade: myths demand a certain behaviour – Hero myths).
4. Myths initiate the individual into the order of realities of his own psyche, guiding him toward his own spiritual enrichment and realization.

Campbell, J. (1991). *Occidental Mythology*, pp. 519-21.

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Origin/Cosmogonic Myths

- Every origin myth is a tale of creation: origin myths describe how some new reality came into existence – not only world but also death, etc.
- Creation myths have some patterns: creating ex nihilo; or out of chaos; out of an egg – body of the creator.

Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, (trans. Willard R. Trask) New York: Harper & Row, 1963

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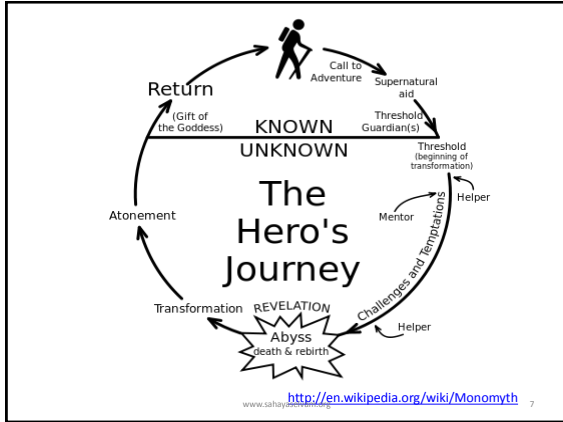
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Hero Myths

- They border between folklore and legends – mythologised history.
- **Elements of Hero Myths** (according to Joseph Campbell): Birth of the hero in difficult circumstances; Call of the Hero; Reluctant Hero; journey of growth - meeting a mentor; Test and trials; final ordeal; Reward (seizing of sword); Return of the Hero; Reinstating!

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Myth of Fall

- Most well known myth of fall is the one found in the Book of Genesis.
- But similar myths are found in other traditions: Mesopotamian, Sumerian and African. In fact, the Judeo-Christian version is adapted from the Sumerian and Mesopotamian stories.

Common elements: early time of perfection (paradise); man's mistake (the fall); suffering and death as consequence of the fall.

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Eternal Return

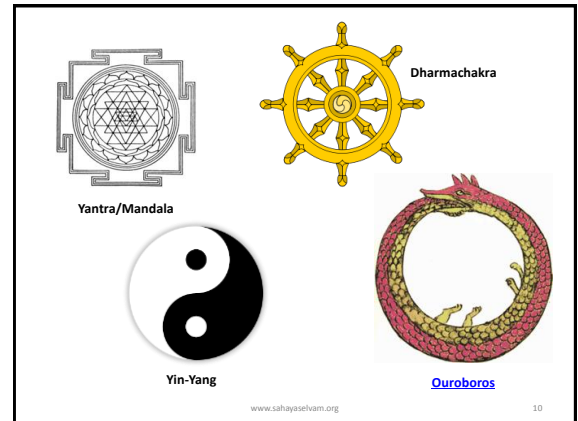
M. Eliade:

- Traditional man attempted escape from the "terror" of linear time by the belief in the "Eternal Return".
- This presupposes a cyclic time!
- The modern man's increased anxiety (angst) could be caused by the loss of mythical thought.

Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (trans. Willard R. Trask) New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p.6

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