

CAVES, CATHEDRALS AND COURTHOUSES: The Mythic Enterprise

Some years ago my eldest son was sworn in as a lawyer by a federal judge in Los Angeles. The interesting thing was that, while official, it was not a public ceremony. However, the judge was fully vested. The bailiff and court reporter were present and the ceremony was handled in a very complete and dignified manner, even though only his mother and I were present with him in the courtroom. It was a very powerful experience for us. Because of the work I do, I must admit I have some familiarity with powerful “mythic” experiences.

For the past three decades I have functioned as a professional liturgist in a variety of Roman Catholic churches in Southern California. Essentially I make my living dealing with the symbols, myths and rituals of religious experience of Catholic congregations on a weekly basis. While the context of my work is religious, I was acutely aware of the same elements at work in the secular setting of the courtroom. Symbols of justice, courtroom rituals and participation in the public myth system of the United States in regard to law and order were quite evident. At the time I wondered about the similarity.

In the film series, *Millennium* the anthropologist David Mabry Lewis suggests that there are three questions common to all human beings: 1) Who am I? 2) Where do I come from? 3) Where am I going? These are essentially mythic questions that focus on identity, origins and destiny—themes which seem to echo throughout the ages of humankind. My thought is that these three questions form the basis of what can be thought of as a “Mythic Enterprise”. If there is such an enterprise, how do we go about connecting to it? Is what I experienced in the courtroom and what I experience on Sunday part of that same enterprise? That’s what I hope to explore in this paper.

The Mythic Enterprise

My understanding of the nature of mythology is that myths are ubiquitous to humans throughout the world. Therefore, based on readings of Eliade, Campbell and others we can conclude in a Popperian sense that all cultures have myths. If all cultures have myths, then all humans have myths, whether or not they consciously engage those myths or mythic systems. In a phenomenological sense we can assume that one of the aspects of culture or of being human is the creation and transmission of myths. Interestingly, cultures seem to define and express themselves through the myths they have created and conversely, myths seem to create the cultures they define and express. In some respects it seems to be a chicken/egg phenomena.

So, as part of a culture, myths are conveyed via the media of stories, symbols and rituals. These media for transmitting mythic patterns and elements (Mythic Media) are distinguishable but interchangeable aspects of the same process. Stories can exist without rituals, and rituals can exist without stories but together stories, rituals and symbols form a powerful matrix that has impacted many people throughout the ages. I’m going to assume that the idea of a story is self-evident, and because defining symbols and rituals is so complex I’m merely going to suggest that they are means of conveying and participating in myths or mythic systems. For more details on ritual, see Catherine Bell and for more detail on symbols and mythology see D. Stephenson Bond

Because of their symbolic content, myths usually incorporate archetypal patterns, and archetypes often suggest myths. Another aspect of culture is to provide one or more means by which members of a social group can engage the myths and archetypes of that culture. Within this context I am labeling the means by which people encounter, respond and participate in their mythic traditions “Mythogenic Interfaces”.

As I understand them, Mythogenic Interfaces are often very subtle, so members of a culture are not always conscious of engaging a “Mythogenic Interface.” Oftentimes people will engage in a particular type of activity, such as going to church or other activities which are built around a particular Mythogenic Interface but call it something else. For instance, in my experience a Eucharistic Liturgy is a “Mythogenic Interface”. After encountering such an interface participants may be impacted on some level but may not be attuned to the subtle nature of the overall experience because of the limits of human perception. To suggest to some people that they are participating in a myth seems to denigrate the activity in their estimation. They don’t understand the true nature or the power of the mythic encounter. Because they have come to think of myth as something “unreal”, they certainly don’t want to see themselves as being part of a Mythic Enterprise.

Doty quotes the often repeated statement that “myths are cultural dreams” (83). Within the context of this discussion, the working definition of a myth or mythic system that I have developed is: *a multi-dimensional psycho-linguistic phenomena that synthesizes the Cosmogenic, Ontogenic, and Anthrogenic* awareness of a particular people expressed via a culturally intelligible paradigm transmitted via Mythic Media* (see above). Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the entire Mythic Enterprise.

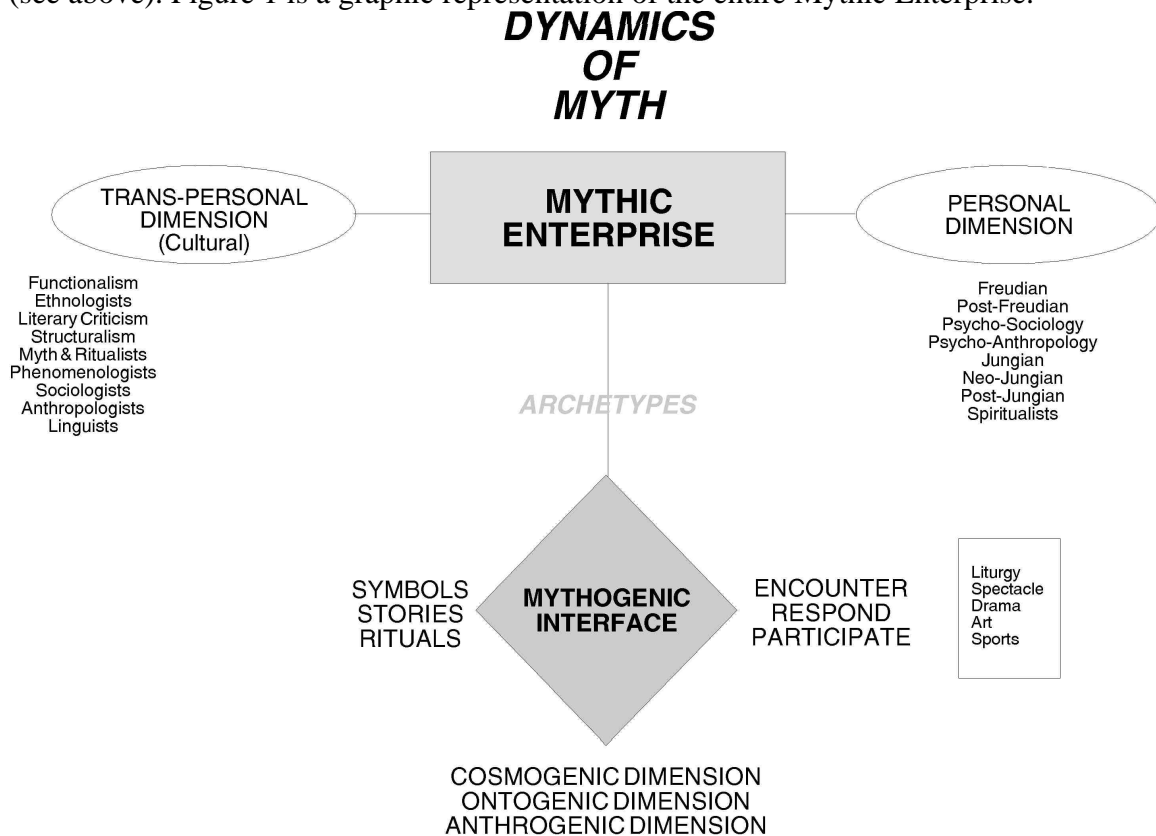


Figure 1

Now I realize this is a very brief definition. William Doty takes several chapters to develop a working definition, as do others. Because of the limitations of this paper I can only refer the reader to Doty and other sources for more comprehensive or more widely accepted definitions—none of which have received an overall consensus. Mine is merely a suggestive definition, not an exhaustive one, but I feel it conveys some of the complexity and importance of the Mythic Enterprise.

Perhaps we should “un-pack” my definition a bit to see how it relates to the class for which I’m writing this paper—Modern Approaches to the Study of Myth. First of all, I really think the multi-dimensional part is extremely important for the study of myth. Trying to reduce any myth to merely one dimension can be problematic, as Hillman points out in his discussion of “Oedipus Revisited”. While Freud’s use of the Oedipus myth is powerful, in his monomythic approach he unfortunately ignores some of the dimensions that Hillman points out. So, I believe allowing for multi-dimensionality is fundamentally important in any approach to the study of myth.

Secondly, there are so many different approaches to the study of myth that one is reminded of the famous Adolph Saxe poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” I believe this is accounted for in my definition by the idea of myth being a “synthesis” of fundamentally important aspects of the human journey. I realize that Eliade calls creation myths “Cosmogonic”, but I’ve adapted the terminology a bit to Cosmogenic. “Genic” is a suffix derived from the Greek (genesis/generate) that denotes creation of or created by something, e.g. Carcinogenic (cancer creating) etc. “Cosmo” is the prefix for the phenomenal world, “onto” is the prefix for denoting aspects of self-being, and “anthro” denotes that which makes us human or traits we share with others.

In figure 1 I have positioned some of the approaches to the study of myth on the chart to see how they are related to one another and to my definition. I’ve included structuralist, phenomenologists, literary criticism, psychological schools and others within this model. Furthermore, I think this model and my definition includes some of the criteria that Doty signified as important for a definition of myth:

A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important, (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind’s roles and relative statuses within it.

Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for subsequent story, such as a folk tale, historical legend, novella or prophecy. (33)

In my definition I felt it was necessary to include the idea of myth being a “psycho-linguistic” phenomena. This arises from my awareness of human consciousness and how myth has been a part of the language of being human since the dawn of civilization. I share the idea with others that consciousness is a psycho-linguistic phenomena and that myth is an aspect of human consciousness. In that context, myth is a fundamentally important part of who we moderns are—and that we are not all that different from those who walked before us.

Unfortunately, many have fallen into an “evolutionary trap” thinking that the Mythic Enterprise is no longer a valid aspect of being human. “Evolution” is a judgmental term implying a certain form of “cultural chauvinism”. The “facts” of natural selection (change and adaptation) are observable phenomena—“Evolution” is an opinion about those facts. It is my contention that humans haven’t “evolved” in the past 40,000 years, we’ve only changed and adapted to different circumstances. Those characteristics which made us human in the Upper Paleolithic are essentially the same things which make us human now. For a fuller discussion of the complex dimensions of the “Evolutionary Trap” I suggest reading *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond.

The recent history of the twentieth century may in fact indicate strongly that instead of “evolving” humans may be sliding into cultural entropy or seemingly inhuman behavior on an unprecedented scale. The decline of mythology or the development of “toxic mythologies” may be large factors in that decline.

It is my contention that the Mythic Enterprise has been a fundamentally important aspect of being human since the dawn of humanity until the present day. I cannot prove this thesis, but I can provide some evidence that suggests this is a plausible assumption. My intention is to discuss human consciousness as it is presently understood, and then apply that understanding to Upper Paleolithic culture. My hope is to demonstrate that there is really no distinction between humans of then and now in terms of engaging the Mythic Enterprise. Rather than dispensing with mythology as some suggest, my contention is that we need to be developing new and better Mythogenic Interfaces in order to survive on this planet. The Mythic Enterprise is needed now more than ever in my estimation.

Consciousness and Mythogenic Interfaces

As far as I know the only person to indicate that human consciousness has fundamentally changed in the last 40,000 years is Julian Jaynes. While provocative and stimulating, his thesis of a recent change in human consciousness has not been widely endorsed. By reviewing some of the more widely accepted contemporary understandings of consciousness, we can project that understanding backward in time without too much concern for contradiction. So, what is the contemporary understanding of consciousness?

Once again we are faced with a conundrum. As Robert Pico says in his recent book on consciousness:

We do not completely understand the underlying calculations of even the smallest of brain nuclei. Likewise, we do not completely understand the way in which the simplest bacterium orders the energy flux through its system to achieve its ongoing living existence. *Consciousness in Four Dimensions* (121)

While echoing the same situation there are some fascinating approaches to understanding the complexity of human consciousness. For instance, in his book *The Quantum Brain*, Jeffrey Satinover suggests that consciousness may exist at a quantum level and expand upward through the various biological, physiological levels of the nervous system and brain (211). Ornstein, Dennett and others have differing models as to how consciousness actually works, but in the end the mechanics are simply unknown. A wonderful book chronicling many of the contemporary approaches to consciousness is *Maps of the Mind* by Hampden-Turner..

Without accepting the premise of a change in human consciousness, I share the notion with Julian Jaynes that consciousness is essentially a psycho-linguistic phenomena, a position echoed by Korszyski, Dilts and others involved in neuro linguistic programming. Again, this cannot be proven, but Jaynes puts forth some important evidence to back up his assumption, and until something more compelling is presented I am inclined to accept his approach to this complex subject. So for Jaynes, the features of of consciousness are: 1) Spatialization, (Dealing with things in space and time, what Korszyski would call Time-binding, 2) Excerption (We excerpt from the collection of possible attentions, 3) The Analog "I", 4) The Metaphor "Me", 5) Narratization (Seeing ourselves as the main figures in the stories of our lives), 6) Conciliation (Making things fit our pre-conceived models).

It's the fifth element of Jaynes' features of conscioiusness (narratization) that has the most direct connection with what I'm referring to as the Mythogenic Interface. So then, what is a Mythogenic Interface?

A Mythogenic Interface has two aspects: one is an aspect of consciousness as indicated in number four above and the second is a spatial-temporal system that allows people to encounter, respond to and participate in the symbols, rituals and stories of the particular Mythic Enterprise of their culture. In other words, it's a time, place and set of actions that enable people to deal with the questions of their identity, origins and destiny. A Mythogenic Interface allows us to enter into those deeper spaces of our psyche and explore important questions about life, often on a subconscious level. I believe that's what the evidence indicates they were doing in those caves 40,000 years ago.

Return To The Caves

Whatever definition one uses for myth, when you encounter the images in the caves of Lascaux in France or Altamira in Spain you know you have entered a world that can only be described as mythic. The images are powerful and evocative. One is surprised at how "contemporary" they seem although many were painted 35,000 years ago. I think of the words of Carl Jung describing "primitive man" and wonder at the blindness of such a gifted mind.

Primitive mentality differs from the civilized chiefly in that the conscious mind is far less developed in scope and intensity. Functions such as thinking, willing, etc. are not yet differentiated; they are pre-conscious, and in the case of thinking for instance, this shows itself in the circumstances that the primitive does not think *consciously*, but that

thoughts *appear*. The primitive cannot assert that he thinks; it is rather that “something thinks in him.”(72)

The artistry of genius was evident so very long ago, but the cultural chauvinism remarked on earlier has obscured contributions of giants from the past. In his book on Lost Civilizations of the Stone Age, Rudgley makes the case that these were fully conscious humans like us in every way, not just art. These Stone Age people were developing writing, surgery, technology, mining, music, and problem solving as we are today. They were not inferior to us and we are not superior to them—though some would have us believe we are. So why would those people long ago descend into the darkness of those caves to paint their images and tell their stories?

In his book, *The Mind in the Cave*, David Lewis-Williams goes to some length discussing altered states of consciousness as one hypothesis (Chapter 4). Others see the caves as ceremonial chambers where rituals of initiation were enacted. No one knows for sure, and perhaps they were not always used for the same purposes over the thousands of years of their use. Whatever functional use one wishes to ascribe to those caves, I posit that the artists and their communities were engaged in creating some of the first “Mythogenic Interfaces”—places where they could engage their stories, symbols and rituals, allowing them to connect to the world of nature, themselves and one another. This was communion long before the concepts of “sacrifice” in the liturgies of later civilizations.

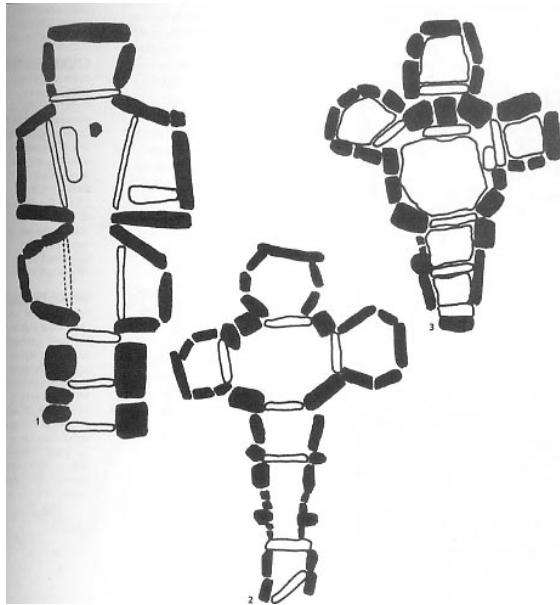


Figure 2

In those caves, the paradigms for all future generations were established. Maria Gimbutus has noted, based on a 6,000 year old tomb at Carrowkeel in County Sligo in Ireland, there is a definite anthropomorphic shape that pre-figures the cruciform churches and cathedrals of medieval Europe (153). (See figure 2). The patterns of our humanity were set long ago and still reflect a long extinct world.

While some experts speculate on the “meaning” of various images, most recognize the futility of such “interpretations.” We can only “impose” meanings on them—which is basically what moderns have been doing since Frazer. I personally don’t

believe we can recover the “original” meaning of any myth from former ages and foreign cultures. The best I think we can do is recognize the nature of various Mythogenic Interfaces and consider what their possible messages could mean to us. However, Levi-Strauss (ch. 11) and others have developed systems that they feel enable them to recover some of those meanings. I have my doubts.

However, in the light of Mythogenic Interfaces, I believe we can see the pyramids, ziggurats, temples, cathedrals and other monumental constructions throughout the ages as essentially part of the same process that began back in those caves. The arduous nature of sliding down those dark narrow passages of the caves, with only candlelight to create their acts of artistry and devotion, is but a different versions of artists laying on scaffolding to paint the Sistine Chapel in a much later era. We can be scandalized at the human sacrifices and other practices that have been associated with various Mythogenic Interfaces throughout various cultures, while realizing those were specific cultural adaptations of processes that existed long before and may be a fundamental part of our human consciousness.

Return To The Present

In recapitulation, I’m suggesting that the caves at Altamira, Lascaux and elsewhere were early Mythogenic Interfaces that allowed those fully human people of the Stone Age to encounter, respond and participate in the Mythic Enterprise of their culture— creating and transmitting their myths. Furthermore, I contend that subsequent peoples have followed that same pattern, not in caves per se, but in “artificial” caves, such as churches, cathedrals and even courthouses.

Recent evidence has indicated that the dating of the entire human enterprise may be considerably older than the current model suggests. In their book *Forbidden Archaeology*, Cremona and Thompson assert that instead of the earliest humans appearing 100,000 years ago, that date could possibly be pushed back as far as 5 million years ago. If that were the case, and my contention of the Mythic Enterprise was valid, we would also find evidence of human consciousness as far back in the past as that.

In regard to human consciousness, Jung said in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*,

We do not know how far the process of coming to consciousness can extend, or where it will lead. It is a new element in the story of creation, and there are no parallels we can look to. We therefore cannot know what potentialities are inherent in it. Neither can we know the prospects for the species *Homo sapiens*. “...The need for mythic statements is satisfied when we frame a view of the world which adequately explains the meaning of human existence in the cosmos, a view which springs from our psychic wholeness, from the co-operation between conscious and unconscious....Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything. (340)

With those words in mind, I find it to be a great privilege to have even a tiny part in the overall mythic enterprise of humanity. Hopefully the concept of Mythogenic Interfaces can be a useful tool for application to the Modern Approaches To Myth.

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