

Universal Root Myths

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Before beginning my comments on *Universal Root Myths*, I would like to explain what led me to write this book and how it is related to my previous works. First, the reasons for writing it:

With an intention more like that of the student of social psychology than the student of comparative religion, ethnology, or anthropology, I have delved into the myths of many cultures. I have asked myself, Why not review the most ancient systems of ideation so that, since we are not directly immersed in them, we might as a result of that fresh perspective learn something new about ourselves? Why not penetrate into a world of beliefs that, while it is foreign to us, surely accompanied others' attitudes toward life? Why not stretch ourselves in this way so that we might understand, thanks to these reference points, why it is that our fundamental beliefs are tottering today? These are the concerns that have motivated my survey of the mythic productions of these cultures. It is true that I might have followed the thread presented by the history of institutions, or ideas, or art, in order to try to arrive at the base of beliefs that have operated in these different times and places, but I would almost certainly not have obtained phenomena as pure and direct as those presented by mythology.

My initial plan for the book was to set down the myths of various peoples of the world, accompanying them with brief comments or notes in such a way that this would form neither an interference nor an interpretation. As I began, however, I encountered a number of difficulties. In the first place, I would have to limit the scope of this survey, since I proposed to use texts accepted as historically accurate, discarding those that were compilations of more ancient material or were commentaries on the material itself, and would thus present a number of drawbacks. I found that I could not overcome this problem, even by limiting myself to using the source texts on the basis of which the information of the past has come down to us. Nor could I go to the oral tradition that contemporary researchers have rescued from isolated collectivities.

It was the recognition of certain methodological complications that decided me in this. Let me give an example of these by citing Mircea Eliade from his work *Aspects du mythe*:

In comparison with the myths that narrate the end of the world *in the past*, myths that refer to a *future* end are paradoxically few among primitive peoples. As Lehmann points out, this rarity is due perhaps to the fact that ethnologists have not asked these questions in their surveys. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether the myth concerns a catastrophe in the past or future. According to the testimony of E. H. Man, the Andamans believe that after the end of the world a new humanity will make its appearance, and will live in a paradisaical state; there will be neither illness nor old age nor death. The dead will be born again after the catastrophe. But according to R. Brown, Man probably combined several versions, gathered from different informants. In fact, says Brown, this is a myth that tells of the end and re-creation of the world; but the myth refers to the past, not the future. Since, according to Lehmann's own observations, the Andaman language has no future tense, it is hard to decide whether this is a past or future event.

In Eliade's observations there appear at least three points of disagreement among researchers in regard to a given myth, which are that: (1) there is a possibility that surveys of

these groups of subjects have been poorly formulated or phrased; (2) the sources of information are not homogeneous; and (3) the language in which the information was originally conveyed does not have the tense necessary for us to understand it, especially when what is in question is a temporal myth.

Stumbling blocks of this sort, to which many others might be added, have prevented me from taking advantage of much of the enormous wealth of information provided by researchers in the field. Thus, I have been unable to include the myths of black Africa, Oceania, Polynesia, or even South America in this study.

When I examined the most ancient texts, I found great disparities in the range of documents. For example, the Sumero-Acadian culture left one great poem, *Gilgamesh*, almost complete, with the remaining fragments in no way reaching the same level. On the other hand, the culture of India almost overwhelms us with its vast body of works. To achieve at least a minimum of balance I decided to take from Indian literature a number of brief samples that would be representative of the whole. Thus, taking the Sumero-Acadian and Assyrio-Babylonian cultures as examples, I reduced the overabundance provided by the other cultures, finally setting before the reader's eyes the myths—in my judgment the most significant myths—of ten different cultures.

Having said all this, and while I must acknowledge that this procedure has resulted in a work that is rather incomplete, it is nevertheless a work that in its essentials manages to underscore a key point in the system of historical beliefs. I am referring to what I call the "root myth," which I understand as the *nucleus of mythic ideation*, which—despite any deformation and transformation of the stage upon which its action unfolds, despite variations in the names of the characters and in their secondary attributes—may pass from nation to nation with its central argument preserved more or less intact, thus becoming universal. Moreover, the double character of certain myths, in which they are both "root" and "universal," has allowed me to focus my subject by selecting myths that fulfill both of these conditions. This does not, of course, mean that I do not recognize the existence of other mythic nuclei that are not presented in this summary anthology.

With this, I believe I have answered the question regarding the reasons that led me to write this book, and I've also tried to give some idea of the difficulties I encountered as I attempted to achieve the objectives I originally set for myself.

But there are still a few points to make clear. I refer to the second question that I put forth at the beginning regarding the relationship between this work and my previous works.

No doubt many of you have read *The Inner Look* and possibly *The Internal Landscape* and *The Human Landscape*. You may remember that those three little books, written at different times, were gathered together under the title *Humanize the Earth*. Through the poetic prose of those works, I was able to shift the point of view from one that is oneiric and personal, charged with symbols and allegories, to one that opens outward to the interpersonal, to the social and historical. The conception underlying that work has been further developed in other works that have followed it, though with varying treatments and styles. For instance, in *Guided Experiences*, a series of short tales, I framed or "staged" a variety of scenes that enable the reader to imagine a range of problems from daily life. From the beginning of each story in an "entrance," which is sometimes more realistic and sometimes more unreal, readers are able to move through scenes in which they can, allegorically, come face to face with problems and issues from their own lives. These are presented as literary "knots" or conflicts, which raise the general tension of the scene, followed by a dénouement, and finally an "exit" from the story in a "happy ending."

The central ideas on which these guided experiences are based are these:

1. Just as in dreams there appear images that are the allegorized expression of deep tensions, in daily life there occur similar phenomena, though we do not pay them much attention—these are the daydreams and mental meanderings that, converted into images, carry psychic charges that perform very important functions in our lives.
2. Images are what allow one to move one's body in one direction or another. But images are not only visual—there are images that correspond to each external sense, and they are what allow the consciousness to open outward into the world, mobilizing the body. Of course, since we also have *internal* senses, there are, correspondingly, images whose energy discharges toward the interior, and that in so doing decrease or increase tensions in the intrabody.
3. One's entire biography—that is, one's memory—also acts through images that are associated with the various tensions and affective climates with which they were “recorded.”
4. That biography is constantly acting in every one of us, and therefore we do not *passively* capture the world that is presented to us in each new perception, but rather our biographical images act as a previously constituted “landscape” for that perception. So it is that every day we carry out various activities during which we “cover” the world with our daydreams, compulsions, and deepest aspirations.
5. One's action or inhibition vis-à-vis the world is closely tied to the theme of the image, so that transformations of the image are also important keys to behavioral variation; since it is clearly possible to transform images and transfer their charges, one must therefore infer that changes in behavior do occur in these cases.
6. In dreams and daydreams, in artistic production, and in myths, images appear that correspond to vital tensions and to those “biographies,” whether of the individual or of whole peoples; such images orient behavior (likewise individual or collective, as the case may be).

These six ideas form the foundation of the stories in *Guided Experiences*. In the notes that accompany the text readers will also find material from ancient legends, stories, and myths, although in that work they are applied to the individual reader or those who may read these writings aloud in small groups.

Turning now to my most recent work, *Contributions to Thought*, no one can fail to notice that the style of this book is that of the philosophical essay. The two sections of the book examine, first, “Psychology of the Image” in a quasi-theory of consciousness and, second, the subject of History. While the objects of investigation in these two cases are, it is true, quite different, the themes of “landscape” and the “prepredicates” of an era—that is, its underlying beliefs—are common points in both sections.

As can be seen, *Universal Root Myths* bears a close relationship to these previous works, although it focuses on *collective* rather than individual or personal images, and takes a new turn in its mode of expression. On this latter point, I would add that I do not believe that systematic production with uniformity in style is what is called for in the times we live in. On the contrary, our age demands diversity in order for new ideas to fulfill their destiny.

Universal Root Myths is based on the same ideas as my other works, and I believe that any new book of mine will maintain that ideological continuity, even though it may deal with different subject matter and may vary in its style and genre. Having explained, at least synthetically, my reasons for writing this book, and the relationship it bears to my previous works, let's move on to the root myths themselves.

The word “myth” has been used over time in many different ways. Two and a half millennia ago, Xenophanes began to use the word to reject those statements by Homer and Hesiod that did not refer to proven or acceptable truths. Later, *mythos* gradually came to be contrasted with *logos* and *historia*, both of which indicated that the events they told of or the stories they narrated had actually taken place. Little by little myth became desacralized, and the word began to mean more or less the same as *fable* or *fiction*, even when the stories being told dealt with gods that people still believed in. The Greeks were also the first to try to understand myths in a systematic way. Some used a sort of allegorical interpretive method and sought the truths that underlay the mythic surface. Thus, they came to view these fantastic productions as rudimentary explanations of physical laws or natural phenomena. But by the time of Alexandrian Gnosticism and during the period of patristic Christianity there was also an attempt to understand myths as yet another type of allegorization—explanations not so much of natural phenomena as of phenomena of the soul, or what today would be called the psyche. A second interpretive method tried to find in myths the history that preceded the dawn of civilization. Thus, the gods were but vague memories of ancient heroes, elevated from their mortal state. In the same way, this method viewed mythic events as having originated in much more modest historical events, which were later raised to a heroic level.

These two interpretive paths that were used to try to explain and understand myth (and there were, of course, other methods as well) have continued down to our own day. In both cases, there is an underlying idea of the “distortion” of events and of the delight or enchantment that such distortion produces in the naive mind. It is true that myths were used by the great Greek tragedians and that to some extent the theater derived its productions from mythic events, but in this case the spectator’s enchantment was aesthetic—the spectator was moved by artistic grace, not because he or she believed in those representations. It was in Orphism, Pythagoreanism, and the Neo-Platonic schools that myth took on a new meaning, in which it was attributed the power to transform the spirit of the person who came in contact with it. Thus, in performing mythic scenes, the Orphics sought to achieve a “catharsis,” an inner cleansing that would later allow them to ascend to a greater understanding in the order of emotions and ideas. As can be seen, all of these interpretations have come down to us today and form part of the unexamined ideas espoused by both the public in general and specialists in the field. We should note, however, that for a long period in the West, Greek myth lay hidden, and indeed did not begin to reemerge until the time of the Humanists in the Renaissance and subsequently in the age of the European revolutions. An admiration for the classics made scholars turn once more to the Hellenic sources. The arts, too, were touched by this influence, and in this way Greek mythology has continued to act.

Transforming itself once again, mythology has become fused into the very foundations of the new disciplines that study human behavior. Though subject to the attraction of Romantic irrationalism, Depth Psychology, born in Austria during the decline of Neoclassicism, stands as a particular offshoot of those ancient currents of thought. It is not surprising, then, that the motifs of Oedipus, Elektra, and so on, have been taken from the Greek tragedians and used in explanations of the functioning of the mind, or that cathartic techniques of dramatic re-creation along the lines of Orphic ideas and practices have been applied in various therapies.

I should note that traditionally, myth has been differentiated from legend, saga, story, and fable. In *legend*, history is deformed by tradition; epic literature is rich in examples of this type. With respect to *story*, authors such as de Vries consider that story is distinct from legend, which incorporates folkloric elements with which it colors or modifies the tale. *Saga*, in turn, is similar

to story but almost always ends tragically, whereas a story often has a happy ending. At any rate, desacralized mythic elements are often introduced into both the pessimistic saga and the optimistic story. A very different genre is the *fable*, which hides a moral lesson beneath the mask of fiction.

These elementary distinctions serve our purposes in that they mark the differences between these latter genres and myth as we have been defining it—that is, characterized by the presence of the gods and the actions of the gods, though their actions may be carried out by men, heroes, or demigods. Thus, when we speak of myths we are also referring to an ambit touched by a divine presence that is believed in and that pervades all its constituent elements. It is a very different thing to refer to those same gods but in a desacralized ambit, in which belief has, for example, become converted into a kind of aesthetic enjoyment. This marks a great difference between the presentation of the mythologies currently in vogue (which describe ancient beliefs in an externalized and formal way), and a mythic expression that is treated as sacred from “within” the atmosphere in which the myth was created.

Continuing with the question of what differentiates the present approach, I should explain that I have not attempted to address the living religions that surely accompanied the myth, nor have I dealt with the ritualistic or ceremonial aspects. I have also not included any treatment of Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, but have limited myself to presenting some profound myths of Judaism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism in order to gain an understanding of the powerful influence their images have had on those first three. In this way, the idea of the root, universal myth shared by all peoples of the world has, I believe, been done full justice.

In contemporary times and in common language, however, the word “myth” denotes two quite distinct things. On the one hand, it refers to fantastic tales of the deities of various cultures; on the other, it refers to things in which people believe very strongly but that are in fact false. Clearly, these two meanings have in common the idea that certain beliefs have a strong hold over people and that any rational argument against them finds hard going. Thus, we find it surprising that clear-headed philosophers and thinkers of antiquity could believe in things that today our children listen to as simple bedtime stories. Encountering beliefs in a flat earth or geocentrism brings a tolerant smile to our lips, for we realize that such theories were nothing but explanatory myths for a reality about which scientific thought had yet to formulate definitive answers. And so, when we look today at some of the things that we believed in just a few years ago, we can only blush at our own naiveté—while in the meantime we continue to be drawn in by new myths, without realizing that the same phenomenon is happening to us all over again.

In these times of vertiginous transformations of the world, we have witnessed beliefs that are held as unquestionable truths about the individual and society emerge and disappear over the course of just a few short years. I say “beliefs” instead of “theories” or “doctrines” because I want to underscore the nucleus of prepredicates, those perhaps unseen prejudices that operate prior to the formulation of more or less scientific schemata. Just as technological innovations are greeted with exclamations like “Fabulous!” or “Incredible!”—the equivalent of oral applause—we often hear the same “Incredible” also applied to today’s political changes, the sudden collapse of entire ideologies, the conduct of leaders and opinion-makers, the behavior of societies. But this second “Incredible” is not exactly the same as the emotional state that is manifested in the face of technological wonders; rather, it reflects surprise and disquiet at phenomena that were not believed possible. Simply put, many of our contemporaries believed that things were different and that the future was leading in another direction.

We should, therefore, recognize that there has been a great exposure to myths, and that this has had consequences in our attitudes toward life, in the way that we face existence. I should note that I do not take myths to be absolute falsehoods but, on the contrary, as psychological truths that may or may not coincide with the perception of this world that we find ourselves in. And there is something else: Those beliefs are not just passive schemata or ideas, but correspond to tensions and emotional climates that, taking shape in images, become forces that orient and direct action, both individual and collective. Independent of the ethical or exemplary character they sometimes have, certain beliefs by their very nature possess great referential force. We are aware that beliefs regarding the gods are quite different from strong beliefs of a secular nature; however, even taking those differences into account, we note structures that are common to both.

The weak beliefs with which we move through daily life easily change as soon as we notice that our perception of things was mistaken. On the other hand, when we speak of strongly held beliefs—those beliefs upon which we mount our overall, global interpretation of the world, our most general likes and dislikes, our irrational scale of values—then we are touching the structure of myths that we are not even willing to question deeply because we are so totally committed to it. Moreover, when one of these myths collapses, we are plunged into a profound crisis in which we feel like leaves tossed about by the wind. These myths, private or collective, orient our behavior, though we are generally aware of their profound action only through certain images that guide us in a particular direction.

Every period in history has its own powerful underlying beliefs, its own collective mythic structure, whether sacralized or not. These beliefs facilitate the cohesion of human groups, giving them identity and allowing their participation in a common ambit. Questioning the basic myths of an age opens one up to an irrational reaction whose intensity will vary depending on the force of the critique and how deeply rooted are the beliefs in question. But, of course, one generation follows upon another and the historical moment changes; thus, a belief that was repellent in an earlier time begins to be accepted with a naturalness that makes it seem the most obvious truth.

Today, for instance, if we begin to question the central myth of money, we will most probably elicit a reaction unfavorable to any sort of dialogue. Our interlocutor will rush to the defense, exclaiming, for example, “What do you mean, money is a myth? You have to have money to live!” Or perhaps, “A myth is something that’s false, something you can’t see or touch. But money is a tangible reality—money makes the world go round.” And so on. There is no use in our pointing out the difference between the tangible nature of money and the intangible things that we believe having money can bring us. There is no use our noting the great difference between money as a sign representing the value attributed to things, and the psychological charge that that sign possesses. We will already have become suspect. Immediately our interlocutor will begin to look us coldly up and down, exorcising the heresy as he calculates the price of our clothes—which have, indisputably, cost money. He will reflect on our weight and our daily caloric intake, consider the neighborhood we live in, and so on.

At that moment we might soften our position by saying something like, “But, of course, we have to distinguish between the money that one needs to live and *unnecessary* money...” But that concession comes too late. After all, there are so many banks, credit institutions, money in such a range of different forms—that is, so many “realities” all attesting to an efficacy that we appear to deny. Yet in this picturesque fiction we have not denied the instrumental efficacy of money—in fact, we have endowed it with a tremendous psychological power, for we have seen

that the object “money” is attributed greater magic than it actually has: This tangible thing will bring us intangible happiness and in some way immortality, for it can distract us from our concern with the problem of death.

This secular myth is often found operating not too far from the gods. We all know, for instance, that the word “money” derives from Juno Moneta—Juno “who gives warning,” at whose temple the Romans minted the coins of their realm. People prayed to Juno Moneta for abundance, for wealth—but for those who believed in her, Juno herself was more important than the money that came from her benevolence. True believers today pray to their gods for different things, among which is money; but if they truly believe in their deity, the deity itself remains at the apex of their scale of values.

Money, as a fetish, has undergone great transformations. At least in the West, for a long time money was backed by gold, that mysterious, rare metal whose special qualities have made it so attractive. Medieval alchemists set out to produce it artificially. To gold, still sacred, was attributed the power to multiply itself without limits, to serve as a universal elixir, and to confer long life as well as wealth. Gold thus inspired zealous quests throughout the Americas. But I am referring not only to the so-called “gold fever” that drove adventurers and colonists in the United States, I am also speaking of that El Dorado sought by the conquistadors and associated with minor myths such as the Fountain of Youth.

A deeply rooted myth will pull a whole constellation of minor myths into orbit around it, like a sun. Thus, in our example of money, there are numerous objects that become charged with an aura transferred from the central nucleus. The automobile, which is so useful to us, is also a symbol of money, and may symbolize a status that opens the door to still more money. On this point, Andrew Greeley has the following to say:

All it takes is a visit to the annual car show to recognize a profoundly ritualized religious manifestation. The colors, the lights, the music, the reverence of the worshippers, the presence of the priestesses of the temple (the models), the pomp and luxury, the prodigality of money, the compact mass (in another civilization all this would constitute an authentically liturgical rite). The cult of the sacred automobile has its faithful and its initiates. The Gnostic did not await with any more impatience the revelation of the oracle than the car-worshiper awaits the first rumors of the new models. It is in that moment of the annual periodic cycle that the priests of the cult (the car salesmen) take on new importance, at the same time as an anxious multitude impatiently awaits the advent of a new form of salvation.

While I may not fully agree with the dimensions that this author ascribes to the worship of the fetish automobile, what is interesting is that he has allowed us to see the mythic aspect of a contemporary object. This is, of course, a secular myth, but perhaps we can see in it a structure similar to that of sacred myth, though without its fundamental characteristic of autonomous, conscious, independent force. If the author were to consider rites of annual periodicity, for example, the same description he has given could also be applied to birthday and New Year’s celebrations, the Oscar ceremonies, and other such secular rites, though clearly these rituals tend not to take place in the religious atmosphere proper to sacred myths. It would also be interesting to examine the differences between “myth” and “ceremony,” though that is beyond the scope of the present study. And it would be interesting to examine the differences between the universes of mythic beings entreated by prayers and those of magical forces manipulated by rites of enchantment, but that is also beyond the scope of the present study.

When we examined money as one of the central secular myths of our time, we described it as the nucleus or gravitational center of a whole system of ideation. I suppose that my listeners will probably not have imagined in this context a figure such as the atomic model of Niels Bohr, in which the nucleus is the central mass around which the electrons revolve. But in fact the nucleus of a system of ideation colors with its own particular characteristics a great part of people's lives—their behavior, their ambitions and desires, their fears, are all related to this theme. And there is even more to this: An entire interpretation of the world and the events of that world is connected to this nucleus. In our example, the history of humanity would then take on an *economic* character, and this history will culminate in paradise when conflicts that question the supremacy of money finally cease.

We have taken as our reference one of the central secular myths of our time, in order to illustrate the possible functioning in their own times of the sacred myths presented in this book. There is, however, an enormous distance between these mythic systems, because the numinous, the divine, is completely absent in one of them, and that produces differences that are difficult to ignore. In any case, in today's world things are changing at a tremendous rate, and I believe we can see that one historical moment has closed and another one is opening. We are at a moment in which a new scale of values and a new sensibility seem to be emerging. Nevertheless, I cannot assure you that the gods are once again approaching humankind. Much as Buber experienced it, contemporary theologians feel anguish over the absence of God, an anguish that Nietzsche was unable to overcome following the death of God. It could be that in the ancient myths there was too much of a personal anthropomorphism, and perhaps that which we call "God" expresses itself voicelessly through the Destiny of humanity.

If I should be asked whether I expect the emergence of new myths, I would say that that is precisely what is taking place today. I only hope that those tremendous forces unleashed by History might come to generate a planetary and truly human civilization in which inequality and intolerance are forever abolished. Then, as an old book says, "swords shall be beaten into plowshares."

Thank you.

