

Religion as Myth

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, you will look at the idea of myth and what role it plays in religion and religious life. You will also examine how myth might inform the understanding of religious and/or secular life today.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Value of Myth
2. Archetypes
3. Extra-Rational Truth

1. The Value of Myth

You may have heard the term **myth** used to refer to something that's just not true or is fantastical. The phrase "it's just a myth" is synonymous with "it's not true."

Consider Groundhog Day as an example of folklore—as a myth. If the groundhog emerges from his hole and sees his shadow, he heads back in. This predicts six more weeks of winter. This is a commonly held tradition that has little empirical data to support it. It is not **rational**, but still has importance in some cultures.

Likewise, many beliefs are a part of the spiritual and religious realm that are not provable in the usual empirical scientific sense and could be considered **irrational**. They have more to do with collective knowledge and collective wisdom based on traditions and stories. **Non-rational** or even **extra-rational beliefs** of this sort often form the ground and the justification for engaging with myth.

So how are these justified then? The short answer is by tradition. They gain acceptance as more than just myth by common agreements among cultures and religious groups and by the experience of their value in the lives of these groups and their individuals.

IN CONTEXT

Take the example of one of the teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, to illustrate this point. There's a story among Zen Buddhists that is attributed to the origin of Zen Buddhism itself. It's called

the Flower Sermon. The story goes that, having gathered everyone silently together and sitting for a short time in silence, the Buddha simply held up a white flower. A disciple, named Mahakasyapa, gazed at the flower and simply smiled. No one else except for Mahakasyapa understood the message of this deep wisdom, or prajna, something that was directly communicated without words.

From that day forward Zen Buddhism carried with it this story, or myth. It is a powerful story because it links each sentient human being to the possibility and potentiality of inhabiting wisdom.

Science cannot prove the wisdom that was present and transmitted in the exchange between the Buddha, the flower, and the disciple. Wisdom functions in a collective human consciousness as an archetype, as a conscious and unconscious image of something essential. It is something universally true, present, and given value.



TERMS TO KNOW

Myth

A claim or narrative that is psychologically, anthropologically, or sociologically “true” despite the absence of empirical data or other rational support for it.

Rational

Based in logical cognition and reason; calculating.

Non-rational

Making little to no use of logic, cognition, or reason.

Irrational

Violating known and accepted rules and standards of logic, cognition, or reason.

Extra-rational

Beyond the limits of human logic, cognition, or reason—typical of the divine.

2. Archetypes

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychoanalyst, identified scores of archetypes that are active in the unconscious realms of individuals and societies, such as death, power, motherhood, the sun, and rings. These archetypes exist as pure forms to be filled or inhabited with stories and experiences. This gives them life. In a way, you could say that this is the project of religion: to link the conscious realm of experience and sensation with the deep forms of these essential truths.

Many of these archetypes, when they are linked together, become myths. They are foundational stories with metaphorical references all guiding the religious adherent through the maze of conscious and unconscious truths. While these truths are not provable, they are nevertheless true from an anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspective.

3. Extra-Rational Truth

Many commonly held beliefs, things considered to be rational without much question or doubt, could be said to have originated from certain myths of religion and religious belief systems. One of the most obvious is time. Religious traditions have accounts, stories, and myths about the beginning of time. Many also have myths and explanations about how to be in time, present, with responsibility and obedience.

Some traditions have myths involving the end of time. The myth of time then, as an archetype, is an extra-rational truth that functions to link it essentially to the divine and transcendent realm. People then adapt it to their conscious experience and use of time. Religions do this through things such as holidays, feasts, rituals, and sacred objects.



SUMMARY

Many people use the term myth to refer to the idea that something is untrue. However, **the value of myth** can be seen in the context of religion. These stories do hold some truths. The justification for this can be seen in the example the flower sermon demonstrates, that there are certain **archetypes** in our unconscious. These become manifest through stories and then become an **extra-rational truth** that is accepted and has validation among certain academic disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

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