

questions for Myth and Theology seminar, 10/9/75

Eliade says that the sky, earth, sea, trees, men and moon can be used mythically. Is there any major ingredient in nature that primitive humankind did not use mythically?

Presupposing that myth is the symbolic objectification of the lived meaning of the myth, an objectification which articulates the meaning without, however, distinguishing subject and object (objectification without objectifying); and that consciousness of the sacred is the result of the emergence of distinction within mythic consciousness, viz., the distinction between me and the gods, a distinction which shows itself also in differentiation between the sacred and the profane: there is a step from pure mythic consciousness to sacred awareness, and this step involves an act of understanding resulting in a distinction. What makes this distinction arise? how does it arise? are there social or personal situations which likely occasion it?

Could we presume that there was an actual historical period during which "people" lived with only the pure mythic consciousness? Would these "people" be human, homo sapiens, animal rationale?

The distinction between the sacred and the profane would set up two realms of meaning: mythic consciousness relating to the realm of the sacred and a common sense consciousness relating to every-day practicality of the profane. The two would intermingle with the sacred giving the organizing and explanatory principle of the profane. Then, the move to theory (Socrates' asking for definitions) must represent another step and presuppose a further differentiation. What is the difference and relationship between the first step of distinguishing and the next of defining?

If the above exposition is correct, is the movement not more complicated than simply from myth to theory because of the intervening stage of distinction-making?

How is it that myth can present an objectification of meaning through language without introducing distinctions between subject and object, i.e., how do we get non-objectifying objectifications?

A proposed example of mythic consciousness: in the experience of a football game there is the experience of oneness among team and fans, i.e., there is no subject-object distinction operative as reason is eclipsed in the enthusiasm of the spectacle. The cheers shouted by the fans are the myth, for they act as an immediate verbal objectification of the ritual being enacted without introducing a distinction between team and fans. All are living the same experience; and the fans, in cheering, are supporting themselves as well as the team, for they do not experience themselves as distinct. (Thusfar we have pure mythic consciousness.) For very ardent fans: the awareness of distinction arises when the game is over and the team has lost and the fans realize they need not be so depressed since they themselves did not really lose but only the team (unless they had money bet on the game!). (Here the distinction between sacred and profane, football world and every-day world arises.) Comment on this example. And what about the question of language: the fans were able to articulate their myth because they had a language at their disposal, but at the origins of human mind no words were already available to become expressions of the mythic meaning...?

Questions on Ellade. W. Grant

I can't formulate my questions with the precision of ascholastic thesis. But I candistinguish three related areas where I feel a need for clarification.

1. What is this "thirst for being, for the really real"? Is "being" here equivalent to "meaning"? And just whatis "meaning"? A try: Meaning is a symbolic representation of human experience such that ~~which~~ ^{it} renders this experience cognitively coherent, morally just, and emotionally ~~balanced~~, ^{vital} ~~which~~ ^{it} In particular/has the property that the world order appears as a paradigm for moral justness, and that moral justice and ~~emotional~~ appropriate-ness of feelings appear as inevitable responses to the world order. Besides the great complexity of the "meaning" of "symbol", this definition labors under the difficulty that it shifts the problem to the need and to the meaning of "coherence", "justice", and "vitality". Animals seem to have no such problems -- ~~which~~ they behave meaningfully and their world seems to have a genetically prescribed meaning for hem -- without having to struggle for their meaning, without having options with respect to this meaning, and without the need for a comprehensivd symbol system. What is there about man that he gets picked on in this way? Is there any non-circular way to talk about meaning? Every ~~statements~~ about meanigg has a meaning and is intelligible only in virtue of its meaning, and so simply raises an alternate need for explication.

2. The sacred and the profane. At first this seems rather clear: The sacred is the "holy" (R. Otto) and the ~~xxxxxx~~ profane is the practical and secular. But Ellade seems to go a step further and seems to ascribe to the sacred, as opposed to the profane, the power to integrate experience, go confer "meaning" upon an otherwise chaotic world. Now I wonder if this isxx really so, and whether a scientific or aesthetic or political or economic (shades of Adam Smith) Weltanschauung can't be "meaningful" in the sense adumbrated above. On the othe hadn, if it is so, then clearly man can never ever live without

the "sacred", because it is impossible to carry out a meaningless existence. ~~There~~
* The world would be completely opaque and action would be utterly without
motive -- after all even ⁱⁿ the mystical dark night there is Faith. If the
power to confer meaning is identified with the sacred, then a desacralized world
must be one of depression so mammoth as to be beyond the nightmares of even
trained psychiatrists. It seems clear that either we must say that the
profane is quite capable of conferring "meaning" or we must say that the sacred
is ^{radically} never/absent, though it may undergo ~~some~~ transformations. These two
views are, of course, not exclusive, and personally I believe that both are true.

3. With respect to the modern world: During the period of Enlightenment,
Science, and Liberalism, say roughly 1700-1900, the world seems to have been
a pretty meaningful AND profane place. The underlying symbol ~~is~~ was that of
self-contained but interacting particles -- and this model was applied with
great meaningfulness to the physical world, the moral world, the political
world, the economic world. All this is basically over, and consequently
there is a sense of cultural vertigo. The problem with the 20th century is
not that it is desacralized but that it is de-profaneized. I think it
is characterized by 1) indeed a general sense of depression and meaninglessness,
2) some vestiges of former faiths, some religious but most of them
secular, 3) a powerful and driving sense of MAGIC, wherein technology is
homologized, if not to the sacred, certainly to the preternatural, to the
cosmic savior or the cosmic seducer depending on your point of view. (B Fuller
vs. J. Ellul). I think that ~~the~~ Eliade misses 1) the integrative power
of ~~the~~ profane, 2) the mythological power of technology (which I regard as
virtually a world religion).