

Sacred Mythology and the Bahá'í Faith

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Abstract

Myths are metaphors that convey truth about the indescribable through powerful images and experiences. The mythological models synthesized by Joseph Campbell, such as the monomyth with its attendant metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological purposes, underscore the fundamental unity of human spiritual experience. The Bahá'í Faith employs three significant spiritual verities to fulfil the purposes of myth and to open for all Bahá'í the full depth and range of the world's mythologies: The unknowable nature of the Ultimate Mystery; the relativity of religious/mythological truth; and the necessity of science and investigation of reality. The Bahá'í Faith also possesses a sacred drama—history as myth—from which the Bahá'í community takes its signposts for individual and collective development. All of these aspects of Bahá'í mythology are the basis for a coherent mythological landscape through which each human being must travel. The mythological universe created by Bahá'u'lláh frees the soul to experience and understand all mythologies, to explore and be awed by the physical universe understood by science and reason, and to undertake the universal adventure through which all may become fully human.

Résumé

Les mythes sont des métaphores qui véhiculent des vérités au sujet de "l'indescriptible" par le moyen d'images et d'expériences fortes. Les modèles mythologiques synthétisés par Joseph Campbell, tel le monomythe avec ses buts métaphysiques, cosmologiques, sociologiques et psychologiques, soulignent l'unité fondamentale de l'expérience spirituelle humaine. La foi bahá'íe emploie trois vérités spirituelles importantes pour rendre compte du mythe et ouvrir à tous les bahá'ís l'éventail et la profondeur des mythologies du monde: la nature inconnaissable du Mystère Ultime; la relativité de la vérité religieuse ou mythologique; la nécessité de la science et de la recherche de la réalité. La foi bahá'íe possède aussi un drame sacré—l'histoire comme mythe—d'où la communauté bahá'íe tire ses points de repère pour le développement individuel et collectif. Tous ces aspects de la mythologie bahá'íe constituent la base d'un paysage mythologique cohérent que chaque être humain doit traverser. L'univers mythologique créé par Bahá'u'lláh libère l'âme et lui permet de vivre et de comprendre toutes les mythologies, d'explorer et d'admirer l'univers physique tel qu'expliqué par la science et la raison, et d'entreprendre l'aventure universelle par laquelle tous peuvent devenir pleinement humains.

Resumen

Los mitos son metáforas que acarrear verdades acerca de lo indescriptible mediante imágenes y experiencias poderosas. Los modelos mitológicos sintetizados por Joseph Campbell, tales como el monomito con sus acompañantes propósitos metafísicos, cosmológicos, sociológicos, y psicológicos subrayan la unidad fundamental de la experiencia espiritual humana. La Fe Bahá'í se vale de tres verdades espirituales para realizar los propósitos del mito y para dar a conocer a todos los bahá'ís la entera profundidad y alcance de las mitologías del mundo: El carácter inconocible de aquel Último Misterio; la relatividad de la verdad religiosa/mitológica; y la necesidad de la ciencia y la investigación de la realidad. La Fe Bahá'í también posee un drama sagrado—la historia como mito—desde el cual la comunidad bahá'í consigue su norte para el desarrollo individual y colectivo. Todos estos aspectos de la mitología bahá'í forman la base de un panorama mitológico coherente por el cual todo ser humano debe de atravesar. El universo mitológico creado por Bahá'u'lláh libra el alma para experimentar y comprender todas las mitologías, explorar y sentir admiración reverente por el universo físico comprendido por la ciencia y la razón, y llevar a cabo la aventura universal mediante la cual todos puedan hacerse completamente humanos.

Mythology is something all of us know, although we may only dimly perceive that we have such knowledge. In this essay we will go on a quest. What we will find on the journey may be taken by some as merely one model, among other models, by which we can systematize our knowledge of human social and cultural

development; or the quest may result in some new appreciation of the varieties of spiritual expression; or it may invest some of us with a profound sense of the wondrous nature of life and with the awareness that the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is a part of a magnificent unfoldment of humanity's capacities that stretches back into the dim reaches of human evolution, ahead into the future, outward toward the infinite macrocosm of the universe, and inward to the infinite microcosm of the human heart.

Humanity's cultural and spiritual history exhibits a striking unity at the level of its recurring motifs: fire, theft, flood, virgin birth, angels, demons, and resurrected heroes. These themes have a worldwide distribution, appealing in modified form in accordance with the sociocultural context, while remaining always variations on a few major elements. Such elemental myths may be told for entertainment, in a spirit of play, but with an underlying serious educative and psychological purpose (*cf.* Bettelheim). They may also become manifest "in religious contexts, where they are accepted not only as factually true, but even as revelations of the verities to which the whole culture is a living witness" (Campbell, *Primitive* 3). Men and women have continually lived and clung to these motifs in mysticism, liturgy, poetry, art, philosophy, music, song, and ecstatic experience (Campbell, *Primitive* 3–4).

What is Mythology?

Myths are metaphors that convey truth by making such truth a vivid image and living experience which can be incorporated into traditional personal and social behavior or that may transform or even overthrow the existing order through the power (if not the shock) of the image. Why are metaphors necessary to the conveyance of truth, rather than the simple statement that such-and-such is so? To experience life fully, to understand one's place in the universe, it is necessary to have some grasp of the reality of the ultimate mysteries of the universe (one among which we may call God, or Brahman, or simply the Uncreated, or even "the void"). This mystery is not describable in direct language: in Aquinas's words "for then alone do we know God truly, when we believe that He is far above all that man can possibly think of God" (*Summa contra Gentiles* 1:5). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that outward forms and symbols must be used to convey intellectual conceptions. He says that there are two kinds of knowledge: "...the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses" and "knowledge [that] is intellectual [which]...has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses" (*Some Answered Questions* 83). For the intellectual, spiritual, metaphorical reality to be made clear, we must use material things and sense perception to convey inner significance.

Before proceeding further, there are two *caveats* to issue. First, there is a distinction between myth and human fancy. Mythology and its associated rites "supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence" of emotional problems in our societies "follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid" (Campbell, *Hero* 11). The enduring myths, with their attendant symbols and emotions, are capable of effecting personal transformation and obtaining group cohesion, rather than stranding the individual in a personal quagmire and leaving society with the care of damaged psyches. Second, the mythological point of view—that is, the way to obtain truth from the myth—requires that we not confuse the vehicle with the message. In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh provides humankind with a perspective from which to understand mythological ideas from previous sacred scriptures. All believers, of whatever religion, tend to read their own myths as facts. Bahá'u'lláh cautions us frequently about this tendency that Campbell calls the "positivistic...represented, on the one hand, by religious experiences of the literal sort, where the impact of the daemon,¹ rising to the plane of consciousness from its place of birth on the level of the sentiments, is taken to be objectively real, and on the other, by science and political economy, for which only measurable facts are objectively real...[W]henver a myth has been taken literally its sense has been perverted...[and] whenever it has been dismissed as a mere priestly fraud or sign of inferior intelligence, truth has slipped out the other door" (*Oriental* 27).

Whence come our myths? Human beings are, in a very real sense, physical bodies in a material universe. Yet human beings are also endowed with minds that grasp concepts and make connections between things and what those things signify: John Hatcher has dealt at length in two works ("Metaphorical," *Purpose*) with physical creation as a vehicle for conveying truths beyond those physical things themselves. I would also include among the realities that are metaphorical, the relationships among people (especially family members), and the emotions that we feel. Carl Jung spoke of "archetypal images" that are ingrained on human experience through the mind's need to resolve the individual's place in the family, in society, in the universe, and within the self.

Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in dream, the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all

mankind. (Campbell, *Hero* 19)

There appears to be some support for this in the Bahá'í writings, where Bahá'u'lláh discusses the sleeping state as “the most mysterious of the signs of God amongst men...” and writes that the world of dream “hath neither beginning nor end,” is “within thy proper self and is wrapped up within thee” and yet may also be “hidden in the innermost reality of this world” (*Gleanings* 152). We may also say that the myths and fables of the world are the product of revelation, as the majority of such metaphors are enshrined in the sacred literature of all the world's tribal, national, and universal religions. Without stretching the point too far, we may even ask whether the process of revelation itself is not a form of dream while awake, and dream itself a form of revelation while asleep.

Mythological Models

Joseph Campbell brilliantly synthesized a number of models in his works on comparative mythology and in his examination of personal transformation. These frameworks are of particular interest in studying Bahá'í sacred mythology.

Humanity developed through two major early stages in mythological thinking, associated with the two primary ways in which people obtained their livelihood. The first, the “forest” mythology, was the mythology of the hunter and gatherer, who operated within a very small social group and who functioned primarily as an individual facing the mystery of the natural world. In this mythology, the mythological symbols were the animals and natural forces, power over which ensured food, clothing, and safe shelter in the yearly migratory cycle. The “village” mythology related to the universe perceived by the cultivator, where the seasonal cycles and fructification of the earth became the center of ritual, and in which the individual had a place in a larger society in which the individual's wilder impulses had to be subjected to the needs of the group.

Both of these types of mythology had four main purposes: first, to “reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is”—a mystical and metaphysical prospect; second, to give an overall view of this universal mystery in a cosmological scheme; third, to enforce moral order by molding the individual to the requirements of his or her social, temporal, and geographical conditions—the sociological prospect; and fourth, but most crucial, the psychological prospect, wherein is nurtured the “centering and unfolding of the individual, in integrity, in accord with...himself (the microcosm), ... his culture (the mesocosm),... the universe (the macrocosm), and...that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things” (Campbell, *Creative* 4–6, 609–24).

How mythology fulfilled these purposes lay in the formulation of ritual and cyclical reenactment of mythological events, and in the telling and retelling of inspiring stories that acted as signposts along the road of inner development. It is no accident that we find repetition of such themes as the god or heavenly messenger who is killed, then planted or eaten, and then resurrected or returned whole in a new form: the Greek legend of Dionysos, god of bread and wine, twice-born son of God (first prematurely from his mother so that he might be preserved from the wrath of jealous Hera, and then again from the side of great Zeus himself), who was symbolically killed and eaten at harvest time, descended into Hades, and was resurrected in the spring; or the Ojibway legend of the origin of maize, when the boy Wunzh, seeking his spirit vision, wrestled a heavenly messenger who then instructed Wunzh to kill him and plant his body, out of which the corn grew; or the Christian story of Jesus, Son of God, who shared—metaphorically—his body (bread) and blood (wine), was killed, descended into hell, and rose on the third day, in springtime, from the dead. The cycle of life—the mystery of death and rebirth and of triumph over death—is, in its mythical richness, the enlivener of our experience of the universe.

Beyond the ritual observance of myth, however, is this “centering and unfolding of the individual” of which Campbell writes. This is where we come to the heart of inner life, to the hero quest, and to a model that Campbell calls the “monomyth”—that is, the model or single myth of which all hero myths and inward quests are simply the multiple forms. In the fairy tale of the frog prince, a king had several beautiful daughters, of whom the youngest was dazzling. The princess used to play near a spring in the dark forest near the castle. She would toss her favorite plaything—a golden ball—into the air, but one day it bounced into the spring and sank to the bottom. As she cried over her lost toy, she heard a voice ask her what was the matter. When she looked up, the princess saw a frog holding its ugly head out of the water. Once the princess had explained her dilemma, the frog offered his assistance; but with a catch: he wanted the princess to agree to care for him and be his companion. The princess, thinking that a frog would never really have any interest in a human being, agreed. The frog gleefully retrieved the ball, whereupon the heedless princess scampered away while the frog croaked loudly after her. I need not remind you that the story does not end there, and the princess finds herself in a dilemma when the frog arrives at the palace door. Likewise, recall Bahá'u'lláh's recounting in *The Seven Valleys* (13–14) of the “lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved,” who so despaired of ever reaching the goal of his beloved that he decided that

he could no longer live and made for the marketplace where he would end his life. By chance he was espied by a watchman who followed after him, and when the lover began to run, other watchmen appeared to bar the way, until, in a last desperate attempt to escape, the lover leapt over a wall and found himself in the garden of his beloved. These are typical examples of how a quest in the direction of the inner self begins: a blunder, the merest seeming chance, brings us face to face with forces not rightly understood, and off we go. But this is not mere accident; it is the operation of those deepest spiritual and psychological forces that represent the perennial working out of our destinies. This is “the Call,” the beginning of the hero quest that is our way toward fulfillment of our potential as fully spiritual human beings. The Call is followed by supernatural assistance from “the Helper” or “the Guide,” who offers some protection or direction toward the “Threshold of adventure,” at which there may occur battles with dragons or an evil brother or an alter-ego, dismemberment, crucifixion, abduction, sea journeys, night journeys, or descent into the belly of a great fish. The passing of this threshold, for those who make it, is followed by “tests” that must be passed before the winning of the prize. Psyche, in her search for lost Cupid, was forced by Venus to perform several impossible tasks, which Psyche managed to perform with the aid of lowly helpers; and Heracles had to perform twelve labors to be allowed to return to his home. The hero or heroine who has managed to pass the tests finally reaches “the Goal,” at which he/she enters a sacred marriage, attains atonement, undergoes apotheosis (becomes divine), or steals elixir for humankind. The hero then undergoes “the Flight” back across the Threshold of adventure, either by resurrection, rescue, return, or further battles. Returned to the daylight conscious world, the hero/heroine brings some boon, some contribution, to humankind, as did Prometheus with the fire he stole from the gods (Campbell, *Hero* 245).

Bahá’í Myth

How does this apply to the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh? I mentioned earlier that mythology has four main purposes—mystical/metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological. It is a revealing exercise to ponder the mythological, rather than the doctrinal or administrative, significance of the Bahá’í texts, and there are some fascinating, though tentative, conclusions.

The Ultimate Mystery Unknowable

The Ultimate Mystery of the universe—the Divine Reality—however we name It, is neither describable nor knowable. What we see in the material universe, the moment it exists, enters the world of names and becomes multiple rather than unitary. The fundamental mystic quest of all religions, including the Bahá’í Faith, is to become aware of and to experience the unitary nondual reality behind the mask of the physical universe, as well as of the way that Ultimate Reality manifests Itself and acts in the world of perceptible forms. The purpose is to reach that stage at which the “true believer...refuseth to allow any notion of multiplicity to becloud his conception of the singleness of God, who will regard the Divine Being as One Who, by His very nature, transcendeth the limitations of numbers” (*Gleanings* 166–67), to know that Reality to be exalted above words and attributes and not subject to the kingdom of names. No direct intercourse is possible with this Divine Reality, which describes Itself as both manifest and hidden, and which our minds cannot encompass because of essential human limitations. I stress the unknowability of God as the fundamental mythological principle of the Bahá’í approach to mysticism and cosmology for three reasons. First, this is the first time that any Manifestation has, to my knowledge, boldly stated this as a key concept, and as with all such radical departures from past tendency, it stands out and must have vast significance for how we see things. The second reason is that the very fundamental realization that God is not knowable directly frees everyone from the tyranny of a single myth about God. One of the most pernicious problems in religious history has been the tendency of religions, when coming face to face with each other or confronting new problems, to try to make new truths and discoveries fit the Procrustean bed of some ancient and localized God-myth. Myths, being vehicles, ought not to be confused with the truth they are intended to convey; there is nothing more damaging, nor more desirable to be freed from, than a myth—religious, social, or personal—too literally and too solidly believed. The third reason is that an Unknowable Ultimate Reality can still be *experienced* by people from any mythological tradition and indeed inspire that mystic awe which is the engenderer of true humility.

Relativity of Religious/Mythological Truth

Though the inability to know God directly now frees humanity from subjection to a single myth, this occurs in concert with a seemingly contradictory principle: that the Ultimate Reality periodically and progressively manifests Itself through a divine Hero-Figure and a new myth, of necessity appearing in history and within a cultural context. Bahá’u’lláh qualifies God’s unknowability by noting that God does not therefore leave humankind in a state of spiritual and mythological anarchy or conflict. He sends his Manifestations—perfect beings who both convey and embody divine teachings for the time in which they appear. To know these divine beings, these sacred heroes, is to

know the Unknowable Reality by its attributes, provided we recognize the Manifestation for our own time. Not to recognize the theophany of our time is not really to understand the earlier theophanies and the larger schema of which they are a part. By extension, not to enter into the sacred myth in its current expression is to find oneself divorced from the full intent of the sacred mythologies of the past. This process of revelation of the Divine Mystery is viewed in Bahá'í thought as progressive both in time and in metaphorical complexity and sophistication. Each appearance is composed of (1) an eternal, mythologically relevant portion, and (2) everyday social practices and customs geared to the requirements of the time. The former is not itself static but is subject to humanity's growing ability to understand relative meaning and analogical structure. Likewise, the latter is not merely a culturally—and temporally—determined package of customs but rather a set of pointers back toward the mythological prospects, the metaphorical meanings, of the system.

Therefore, the second revolutionary and mythologically significant wellspring of the Bahá'í Faith is the idea that “religious truth is not absolute but relative...” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 58). The importance of the idea of relativism is covered at length in Moojan Momen's excellent essay on the subject (“Relativism,” *Studies* 185–217). The major point that can be made, with considerable support from the Bahá'í writings, is that monism (where no difference is seen between the human self and the Absolute) and dualism (where the Absolute is totally different, separate, and other than humans) are not mutually contradictory, but represent two legitimate ways of seeing a reality that transcends both. We are told that to know ourselves is to know God. This is not because we *are* God, but rather because our essence—the human heart—is a mirror to the attributes of the Ultimate Reality. The mirror and the things it reflects are and are not identical. As in Bahá'u'lláh's analogy of the sun and the mirror, to say that the sun and the mirror are identical does not encompass the reality of the system. Yet it is also incorrect to say that the sun is not in the mirror, inasmuch as we clearly see it reflected there. Another analogy, still more pointed in its paradoxical nature, can be derived from physics. Light has been found to exhibit attributes both of particles and of waves. The reality of light is that light is above and beyond these constructs, whereas the study and measurement of light requires the choice of one or the other of these two states at the given moment when human scientific observation occurs. When we see the light with our own eyes, however, we know its reality by its attributes and effects, separately from any consideration of whether it is particle or wave. Thus, while Bahá'u'lláh writes of God as being so exalted that no direct intercourse is possible, He also states in *The Hidden Words*, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting” (7). To explain either of these statements using Aristotelian logic is likely to do a disservice to the mystic profundity of Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

Science and the Investigation of Reality

A third linchpin in the Bahá'í mythological system is the independent investigation of reality and the relationship of religion to science. If you search the Bahá'í writings (particularly the expositions by 'Abdu'l-Bahá), you will find that the study of reality is enjoined upon every mind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá extols the power of the human mind to understand the laws of nature, whereby humanity is able to make use of those laws; he calls this power “supernatural” (*Promulgation* 50). If the human species is endowed with such powers of penetration into physical reality, then religion (and therefore the cosmological prospect of mythology) must be in accord with this supernatural endowment's discoveries. “Every religion which is not in accordance with established science is superstition,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá says (63); and Shoghi Effendi writes that “we are a religion and not qualified to pass on scientific matters...” (30 Sept. 1950, *Selections from Writings on Health*). These statements about the relation between religion and science mean that the investigation of physical reality is not to be made subordinate to mythological images that have been taken literally; the specific topics of study and the theories consequent on scientific study of the nature of the physical universe are not the appropriate sphere into which religion may be permitted to introduce questions of heresy.² In some sense, every mythological system of the past has been in accord with the science of its time. One reason that we have seen this debilitating conflict between science and religion during recent centuries is that we have—for example, in the case of Judaeo-Christian myths about creation—the “science” of more than four millennia ago conflicting with the science of today. We know human evolution to have taken place, not because it is confirmed in the Bahá'í writings, but because it has been shown by careful scientific investigation over many years, much of it before 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually voiced the Bahá'í confirmation. Nor is it because 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the meaning of the myth of Jesus Christ's resurrection that we understand that it did not take place literally; our minds already understood that such an occurrence was not in accord with long-observed scientific fact. What the Bahá'í formulation teaches us is the *meaning* of the fact of evolution and the *significance* of the resurrection story. Scientific knowledge has not lessened the need for spiritual frameworks in life, nor has it robbed us of a cosmology that inspires awe and reverence.

...as far as the HERE and NOW is concerned (and, my friends, we are still here), the first function of a mythology—to waken a sense of awe, humility and respect. before that ultimate mystery, transcending names and forms “from which...words turn back”—has been capitably served by everyone of these sciences of the second function: the rendition of a cosmology, an image of this universe of wonder, whether regarded in its temporal, physical, or biological aspect. (Campbell. *Creative* 620)

I would therefore suggest that, while the Bahá'í Faith does have a spiritual cosmology that serves a metaphorical function, Bahá'u'lláh has freed humanity from slavery to myth as a literal scientific explanation of the universe's operation and has opened the door to unimagined progress on the material plane and to wonder at its strange and magnificent beauty. When scientists speak of the creation of all the elements within the hearts of the stars; when they say our planet and we who live here are composed of “star stuff” making us “children of the stars”; when they discuss the peculiar possibilities of black holes in which enormous quantities of matter are squeezed so infinitely small that they no longer occupy space, yet exert gravitational force of enormous magnitude; or when they discover that all space, time, and matter were enfolded within an infinitely small point some fifteen billion years ago—it becomes clear to what an extent all scientific investigation, now and into the future, will stimulate, awe, and inspire us with a cosmology that is still mythological precisely because we have submitted ourselves to the majestic metaphor that is the reality of the universe itself.

History as Myth

Many people from Judaeo-Christian-Islamic backgrounds, upon entering the Bahá'í Faith, are confused by its sacred texts because the Writings do not operate on the same level of myth as do the Bible and Qur'án, where we are inspired by a panoply of stories, quests, miracles, and the like. History in a spiritual context needs to have the power to move people to action. When I first read *The Dawn-Breakers*, it became clear to me that our sacred drama was played out similarly to that of the Jewish kings and prophets, of Jesus and his disciples, or of Muhammad and his companions; but rather than being incorporated into sacred texts, *The Dawn-Breakers* was written as a separate nonscriptural narrative. The historical facts, for Bahá'ís, as for early Christians and Muslims, took on archetypal significances and an aura that can only be called mythological. This is obvious from the moment that we open to the first page of Nabil's narrative and read: “At a time when the shining reality of the Faith of Muhammad had been obscured by the ignorance, the fanaticism, and perversity of the contending sects into which it had fallen, there appeared above the horizon of the East that luminous Star of Divine guidance, Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í” (*The Dawn-Breakers* 1). We know from the symbolism that there is mythological adventure lurking in this volume, not merely a statement of cold fact.

The Dawn-Breakers is a setting for mythological themes that I have already mentioned. The most important is the hero quest, where Mullá Husayn, for instance, is unexpectedly and suddenly entrusted by Siyyid Kázim with the mission of delivering a message to the foremost ecclesiastical leader in Mashhad, whereupon the adventure begins. Mullá Husayn undertakes a fast of forty days, is helped by the Báb's servant, enters the home of the Báb where, during an entire night, he undergoes tests that lead to his obtaining the prize of knowing the Promised One. He returns to the world, forbidden to speak the Promised One's name, set to endure the trials necessary on the crossing back into the conscious world where the boon of faith is to be delivered. Mullá Husayn's battles are many against the forces of darkness, but the power of truth makes it possible for him to triumph over them all, as most graphically and mythologically depicted in his ability, with one swipe of his sword, to cut in two a tree, a musket, and a man.

A second element of history as myth is the acting out of sacred drama. We are dealing here, not with ordinary human situations about which we can consult and make decisions. We are witnessing, rather, the living intervention of archetypal realities in the realm of human action. For the Letters of the Living and others of the Báb's disciples, the main actors in this drama were not Mullá Husayn, Quddús, and Táhirih. The Báb created a mythological hierarchy in which those mid-nineteenth century Iranians were the incarnation of figures once present on the stage of early Islamic and Shi'ih sacred history. The Letters of the Living *were* the return of the Shi'ih pleroma—the Prophet, Fátimih, the twelve Imams, and the four Gates: Quddús *was* Muhammad, Táhirih *was* Fátimih (MacEoin, “Hierarchy” 106, 108).

When we understand a history such as *The Dawn-Breakers* in its mythological context, then its social and psychological value as a guideline to our own life's quests and our participation in a sacred drama become evident. It is clear why Shoghi Effendi placed such stress on the study of *The Dawn-Breakers* and went so far as to define our modern status as “spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers” (*Advent* 7). There is an ancient myth regarding the importance of knowing the name of something: it becomes possible to partake of the power and the qualities of that named thing. By knowing the dawn-breakers' stories and by being called their descendants, we partake of their

power, their qualities, their drama.

Poetic Imagery and the Mythological Landscape

In searching for a sacred mythology in the Bahá'í Faith, I sifted through the images in the corpus of Bahá'í literature and looked for patterns. What I found confirms that Bahá'ís have a coherent poetic myth—one that goes about the process of educating Bahá'ís in a profoundly new and full way. The central images of the Bahá'í experience are scattered, seemingly haphazardly, throughout the sacred texts, yet they coalesce in a profound wholeness and complete spiritual geography.

The Bahá'í myth is a universe, with constantly varying topography that extends into the past and future of eternity, out into the macrocosm of the physical universe and into the microcosm of that most spiritual of all universes—our own hearts and minds. This universe has its origin in the First Will, the primal “Be!” that created all things—a creation always in existence yet created from nothing (*Tablets* 140). When that creative syllable was uttered, the idea of language and the Word took potential shape, just as the Qur’án is enfolded within the first *súra*, and that *súra* enfolded within the “*bismi’lláh*,” and that formula enclosed within the “*bá*” at its beginning, and that “*bá*” contained in the point beneath it. Humankind evolved as one species from a common origin, physically through evolution and spiritually in the dynamic locale of “that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise” where “awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts...” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words* 27–28).

From that metaphorical place, that mythological locale, we have entered a world of deserts (of search, oneness, nothingness, and separation) where winds (of doubt, certitude, the will of God, and despair) blow; in which we tread roads leading unto God (or the other way) and paths (that are straight, of perfection, justice, holiness, knowledge, or of perdition, dissension, oppression). These parallel or cross rivers (of mercy, immortality, everlasting life, life-giving waters), and streams (of fellowship, grace, and mystic holiness). These rivers and streams empty into seas and oceans (of renunciation, and of God’s utterance, of his presence, words, unity, knowledge, bounty, revelation, good-pleasure); and into the Most Great Ocean whose waters refresh, and along which are shores (of true understanding, of God’s grace, nearness, eternity, presence, and transcendent mercy). Round about is a countryside where hills (of faithfulness) and mountains (sacred, immovable, or even iniquitous) tower above valleys (of arrogance and pride, of corrupt desires, of self and of the shadow; or seven or four valleys that are themselves a separate and solitary journey within the wider pastoral milieu). In these heights are mines (of humankind, of their own selves, of true understanding, and of all knowledge). We enter gardens in which doves (of truth, of eternity, of longing), nightingales (of holiness, of affection, of desire), and phoenixes (of the realm above and of the undying fire) sing their melodies, die, and are reborn, while ravens and crows croak nearby. Fountains (of living waters, of wisdom, of God’s laws, of fairmindedness, and of camphor) burble amid forests and their trees (of being, of life, of justice, of affirmation and denial, of humility and divine revelation), blossoms (of knowledge and certitude), and incorruptible mystic flowers.

Through this countryside we make our pilgrimage to the city (of God and his justice, wisdom, presence, nearness and names; of certitude, immortality and of human hearts), in which are paths leading through gates (barred and unbarred, of truth and of piety, and of the heart’s citadel) into courts (of God’s bounteousness, mercy, presence, singleness, glory, grace, and everlasting fellowship). This world is peopled with the angelic hosts of the supreme concourse, maids of heaven (one of whom was herself the vehicle of revelation to Bahá’u’lláh), and holy souls who constitute the “animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest” (*Gleanings* 157). Into the future human spiritual progress shall continue, into a golden age and on into a cycle of half a million years where the City of God is ever renewed through the creative life and holy myth emanating from the Mouthpieces of an Unknowable Being and Universal Mystery.

Into this geography of archetypal qualities embodied in natural entities (the “forest” mythology) and civilized images (the “village” mythology) Bahá’u’lláh inserts symbols and stories from the mythological background that his listeners knew: Sinai and the Burning Bush, the Kaaba and its rites, stories of Jesus, Moses, and Joseph. He ornamented this background with the verse of Háfíz, Sa’dí, and Attár. What emerges from this vast landscape is a sense that it is a world for voyages and discovery in which every human being is perforce located. Bahá’u’lláh, by placing in this world selected mythological tableaux from Abrahamic, Mosaic, Zoroastrian, Christian, and Islamic sources, is hinting that the Bahá’í mythology encompasses an infinite horizon in which we will come to recognize that all mythologies are true and available to us for finding the signposts on our journey and for experiencing amazement at its endless variety and tutorial possibilities. We are not now the children of one localized mythology, but of all mythologies, which are one at the level of metaphorical meaning. With the

quotations from poets, Bahá'u'lláh frees the artist to praise, sing, paint, sculpt, and dramatize personal experience of mythological life in response to the surrounding dramatic physical world and to the shared yet individual visionary world within.

The worlds through which we travel here are not places of comfortable sedentary contemplation and the avoidance of painful contradictions. The vision inspired by Bahá'u'lláh is a progression of images that is intended to heighten the experience of the paradoxical in a succession of contrasting yet related imageries, provoke a crisis of understanding, inspire the leap to new knowledge and to that fruit of mature experience which is the acknowledgement of one's own powerlessness, ignorance, and poverty. With that acknowledgement, the power, knowledge, and riches of the Reality behind the universe's mask becomes instantly and irrevocably ours (*cf.* Nakhjavani).

Spiritual/Mythological Unity

Across the millennia, despite the primitiveness of humanity at some stages of its development, no culture has been able to maintain complete isolation from the rest of the world. As we enter our own time, however, the barriers between cultures and their attendant mythologies have fallen ever faster before the wholesale interpenetration of worldviews and the onslaught of science. Shoghi Effendi has written of the divine impulses tearing down all such barriers and bringing us to a united world. Joseph Campbell, after finishing his series entitled *The Masks of God*, wrote:

I find that its main result for me has been its confirmation of a thought I have long and faithfully entertained: of the unity of the race of man, not only in its biology but also in its spiritual history, which has everywhere unfolded in the manner of a single symphony, with its themes announced, developed, reasserted, and, today, in a grand *fortissimo* of all sections sounding together, irresistibly advancing to some kind of mighty climax, out of which the next great movement will emerge. And I can see no reason why anyone should suppose that in the future the same motifs already heard will not be sounding still-in new relationships indeed, but ever the same motifs. (*Creative xx*)

Conclusion

Mythology is about the freedom to experience the full impact of life and to unfold our full potential—in harmony with the Unknowable Essence that we, for the sake of convenience, call God; with the reality of the universe; with our culture and fellow human beings; and with ourselves. It is also about submission to the reality of the universe as it is. In the Bahá'í mythological architecture, the myth of the Unknowable God removes the authority of god-myths from the local group and moves them to the farthest reaches of mythological space, while the recognition of this God in his contemporary Manifestation and the relativity of religious truth universalizes all mythologies, thus freeing all the world's sacred myths to be donned or cast off as necessary in our collective and individual spiritual development. The cosmology arising from independent investigation of reality and the harmony of religion with established science permits us to find sacred awe in the face of the universe that is discovered by the faculties of reason and investigation; and it frees the spirit from the shackles of literal interpretation, permitting once again the discovery of mythological truth in those too literally held myths whose purveyors thought them to be scientific and historical fact. The inner landscape of the heart is open to all mythology (including the inspired actors in our own most recent sacred drama) and to every form of artistic expression—a fertile scene for hunting, gathering, planting, and harvesting; for creating, planning, and building; a place of births, deaths, rebirths, and resurrections; and an arena of adventure for the hero and heroine, where “We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time” (Eliot, *Collected* 222).

Notes

1. DAEMON: in Greek mythology, a lesser deity intermediate between gods and humans. Campbell here is referring to the inner spiritual experience of a metaphorical reality.
2. Ethics is another matter; it is obvious that religion has legitimate concerns with moral questions.

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