

Life of the Spirit

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THE word 'myth' has fallen on evil days so far at least as common speech goes. We say that something is a mere myth, an old wives' tale, or else that it is primitive, interesting enough for the anthropologist, but from the sophisticated point of view only a fable. The word carries with it the suggestion that something untrue is being asserted in a specious and attractive way. A lie is clothed with all the charm of a story for children.

So far as this sense goes we are all, rightly, children of the Enlightenment. The myth story is no substitute for science. The myth is not, in any of its forms, verifiable in the same manner as is the scientific proposition, but it does not follow that mythological statements are untrue or unimportant. To assert this *a priori* is simply to restrict one's notion of verification to an admittedly useful technique, which quite clearly fails to test the whole content of experience.

When the poet wrote 'O my Love's like a red, red rose...' he did not mean to formulate a scientific description, objective and precise. He rather attempts to evoke an image which carries a satisfying analogy. There are literal-minded persons who will persist in stressing the obvious fact that since my love is not a rose, she cannot, etc. In so doing they destroy the image and restrict the subtlety of their own minds. The total content of experience cannot be expressed in terms that are merely tokens for visual or other sensations and/or for strictly defined concepts. Our talking begins in and returns to a demand for supper.

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Editors of Dominican reviews of Spirituality, meeting at Woodchester, Gloucestershire, in July 1952.

Myth is not only a necessary growing-up stage in the development of the individual and the race, it also is a necessary element in all human expression and thought. It stands for the animistic level and element in apprehension. Nature, man and society are seen as parts of a whole which is bound together by an organic tie. Man, to use the current jargon, is confronted by something alive—hostile or friendly. Nature for him is neither the mathematically expressible system of science, nor the remotely barbaric (yet romantic) country of the townsman; it bears in upon him, not in terms of meteorological reports, or scientific hypotheses, but as a person does, intimately. Something of what is being said here can be recalled by those who, alone on a hillside, have suddenly become aware of the silence, full of pressure and sometimes of menace. Or at night when, amid all the tiny rustlings, one suddenly becomes aware of one's back and reverts to that primitive attitude of receptivity in which man is attuned to Nature (the capital is intended to express the distinction of this view from the scientific—though popular science draws on it). Here one is concerned with quite basic experiences, of a type that the modern finds difficult to discuss since they only occur in a distorted form in an artificial civilisation.

Myth is the attempt to express these basic primitive experiences. It is not just pre-scientific babbling; it does express in imaginative language something experienced—call it for the moment the experience of being at one with what is around us. Myth does not attempt to give an answer to scientific questions. Its questions are older and, as far as man is concerned, more fundamental. Its language is spatio-temporal and takes the form of a commentary on something done. It speaks of a drama in which we take part, something in which we share, something done to us which we recognise in the telling. It is first and foremost concerned with the event. Not with the event viewed with scientific detachment, but precisely as it impinges on us. Its spatial language is tinged with emotional colour, its temporal expressions are not abstract measures, but reflect the ebb and flow, rise and fall, birth and death of the rhythm of Nature.

The language of myth is necessary but it is not exhaustive.

It only becomes dangerous when it claims to be total, or is distorted into an escape phantasy. In the former case it swamps the rational and releases uncanalised and destructive forces, in the latter it provides a false release for an imagination discontented with an impersonal and technical world, it is only about a mood and reflects man feeding on himself as he flinches from the real. The true myth is experience 'of'—it expresses not only a mood or emotional reaction, but something known as of value. Its language is inarticulate enough, but it does tell us something.

The myth attempts to bring the human into harmony with the natural, the time tension is resolved by the creation myth, the hunger for life is met by the myth of the dying hero. These are not just day-dreams, for they do involve an attempt to assess the significant elements of a given objective.

This element in human experience is carried over into the expression of the divine answer to human striving. God's Word is not utterly remote, quite ineffable. It is spoken to men, and in its speaking the hero myth is transformed. All the old symbolism is retained, for we do not grow out of the language of the myth, but our understanding of its content is altered, in that by faith we enter into a new dimension of understanding.

The attempt to express in a rigidly conceptual manner the significance of the cosmos and the nature of its basic principles has led to an abstract picture of great critical value, but one that has distorted out of all recognition the total situation. Conceptual analysis both restrains and positions imaginative thought, but it does not, without disaster, destroy it. To speak naïvely we have to use two voices. The critical voice which purges out misconception and corruption from our image, which saves us from idolatry and stresses our ignorance of God. The vacuum it thus creates can only be filled if we speak of God as a subject treated in mythological terms. This is a reference back, for the critical voice must intervene to save us from crude deception. The mythological voice in its turn saves the critical from conceptual staticism or mere nihilism.

The great mythological themes are seen as symbols of

an element in religious life which cannot be otherwise expressed. For example, the philosophic analysis of coming-to-be resolves a concrete given into abstract principles of explanation . . . the mythological statement presents the same situation in dramatic terms and thus invokes what might be called an analogy of personal relations.

This is not just to speak irrationally: it is to say something in basic and primitive terms, something which cannot be said in conceptual terms, which move away progressively from the existent phenomena, but can be suggested by imaginative ones. The problem today is how to revive this mode of speaking for a world for whom traditional imagery is meaningless or dead, and whose mythology is synthetic.



GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

HE was a little below medium height and lightly built, but his erect carriage and fine head made him stand out in company. His complexion was fresh, his hair dark chestnut, his eyes greyish-blue, probably, and very brilliant. The long curved nose, strong jaw and full lips are familiar to us from portraits; not so the charm of expression, the noble grace of bearing and gesture that impressed and attracted his contemporaries. We imagine Savonarola grim; as fierce as his terrible sermons; but his nature, all the evidence shows, was warmly affectionate and even gentle. He won the Florentines, especially the young and the poor, by so evidently loving them. An early writer says that he had about him 'una certa humanità humile et urbana', and dilates on the beauty of his hands, so clear-skinned and spare that the light seemed to show through them. We are told that his rough habit was always neat and—a remarkable thing in that climate—never soiled with sweat. His handwriting, of which a number of specimens remain, is exquisite.

Spiritually what strikes one most in Savonarola is a driving simplicity of purpose. His life shows a clear design. He is all of a piece: his first steps in adult life are already