

# **Mythology v. History**

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History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end product, myth. E. L. Doctorow

## Introduction

It is often said that Mormonism is one of the few religions to which history is of foundational importance, or even that in Mormonism history and theology are the same thing. Hence, for Mormons the issues raised by historical analysis are essential.

Most people do not understand how mythology and history (or science for that matter - See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.what%20the%20bleep%20do%20we%20know.pdf> for an example) often intertwine. And since the word "mythology" is mostly used these days in a pejorative sense, let me define my terms and then consider the confusion that often occurs between mythology and history, and to what extent Mormonism operates on the basis of one or the other.

## What is Mythology?

Joseph Campbell, the great comparative mythologist, said with tongue only partly in cheek that mythology is other people's religious beliefs. He defined mythology's primary function to be answering our existential and social questions in a way that makes sense in light of our perception of reality, and so as to support the social structure of the group within which the mythology is used. The existential questions relate to issues like: where did we come from?, why do we suffer?, and what happens after death? The social questions include things like "why should I obey the king (priest, lord, etc.)?", why do I live in a hovel while others live in palaces?, etc.

Campbell says that a mythology does not have to be true to work well - it has to be "comfortable", meaning that it must provide plausible answers within its place, time and information environment. For example, most people are no longer prepared to believe that the Earth was literally created in seven days, or that it is less than 10,000 years old. Until recently, these beliefs were widely accepted because they were part of an important mythology and there was no credible evidence that contradicted them.

Mythologies are full of dogmas – ideas that are difficult or impossible to disprove – such as that Christ was born of a virgin or the King is appointed directly by God. And ironically, enlightening metaphoric truth often lies hidden beneath dogmatic literalism. As literal belief comes under pressure as a result of scientific and historical research, those metaphors tend to come to the fore.

Mythology is often based on big claims regarding facts that can't be proven, and the more important the fact the less likely it is to be questioned by those whose lives are supported by the mythology in question. The most foundational things within a mythology have taboos built around them so that they are the least likely to be questioned. The concept of something being "sacred" is little more than this (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.what%20is%20sacred.pdf>). In the US and Canada today, for example, the importance of democracy and the "equality" (in some very hard to define way) of all human beings is the closest thing we have to a secular value that is sacred in this sense. Try suggesting to a few friends that democracy and the equality of human beings are problematic in some way, and see what happens.

The important point for purposes of this discussion is that mythologies are not history. Their purpose is not to discover "what happened", but to support a social order and provide a sense of meaning to those who believe. In fact, many mythologies that have been studied seem to have evolved in a manner that is quite independent from the "reality" they attempt to describe. The content of mythologies tend to be functional instead of descriptive. That is, the mythology will say what is required to get the job done - to support the social order in question, provide the sense of meaning the people need, etc. Whatever works in that regard will tend to find its way into the mythology.

### **What is History?**

History, on the other hand, is supposed to be about "what happened", while most of its best practitioners recognize how ephemeral that idea is. The noted historian Gerda Lerner indicates that:

"The often repeated saying that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them has a lot of truth in it. But what are 'the lessons of history'? The very attempt at definition furnishes ground for new conflicts. History is not a recipe book; past events are never replicated in the present in quite the same way. Historical events are infinitely variable and their interpretations are a constantly shifting process. There are no certainties to be found in the past."

The journalist Ambrose Bierce says something similar by in earthier terms: "HISTORY, n. An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools."

Karen Armstrong describes the crucial change in human mental processes that occurred as man emerged from the age governed largely by mythologies of the type I am here attempting to describe and became "scientific" in orientation. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 5 for a discussion of this issue. Today we live in a world where there is continual tension between these two modes of thought - the mythic and the rational (including historic and scientific thought).

So, what is history? In its simplest sense, it is an attempt to find out what happened. But, historians regularly drift over the line into explaining reality in a way that smacks a little of mythology in the sense just indicated. See <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/> for an accessible summary of some of the issues in this regard. For an interesting treatment of many issues related to this topic from a Mormon point of view, see "The New Mormon History" edited by Michael Quinn, "American Apocrypha" edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, or "Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History" edited by George Smith.

## **The Intertwining of Mythology and History**

A simple historical question might be "Did JFK die?" There is a lot of data on which we could rely to conclude with a high degree of probability that he did. So, "When did JFK die?" Again, we have a lot of data from witnesses etc. relative to that question, and can pin point the date with a high degree of accuracy. How about "What kind of weapon was used to kill JFK?" Once again, we are dealing with a question that seems to have a pretty clear answer. So, "Who killed JFK?" Despite there being a lot of evidence relevant to this question and a criminal conviction, books are still being written on this subject. Or, "Why was JFK killed?" The answers being posed to the later two questions often border on mythology of the type described above.

Or, how about the historical record regarding events that are important to the foundations of nations, or their self-perception? Since we are getting close to the sacred, in the sense indicated above, we find a lot more mythology masquerading as history in this neighbourhood than is typically the case with less emotionally important material. For example, it is more difficult than one would expect to tease apart the threads of myth and history related to the founders of America. There is a huge amount of credible history that has been written in this regard, but how many religious

Americans understand that many of their founders ranged somewhere between deism (close to agnosticism for practical purposes) and atheism? (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>) The popular conception of more than a few important chapters in American history is more mythology than real history (see <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060972610/002-5993148-9340821> and in particular the list of related books). Or, how about the theories that abound in some corners of American culture regarding the OJ Simpson murder trial? Many people believe that the whole thing was staged by white law enforcement officials and/or politicians in order to humiliate a black hero. Yet others believe in another form of conspiracy that allowed OJ to improbably escape conviction. We see mythology in these conspiracy theories in that they support ideas with regard to the "reality" of the American social order.

Thinking about OJ reminded me of how trials work. A trial is an exercise in historical analysis that is governed by somewhat odd rules of evidence. But, the point in a trial is to find out "what happened". That is, trials are not exercises in mythology. Let me use a trial analogy to help highlight the distinction between history and mythology.

For example, imagine that:

- A huge explosion at an oil refinery was an important part of the foundation of a religious movement because something miraculous was alleged to have occurred as a result of it.
- The explosion had enormous financial implications because of the loss of property it caused.
- There was only one eye witness to the events that led to the explosion as well as a host of circumstantial evidence.
- This witness was known to have lied on many occasions with regard to other important matters.
- The witness told eight radically different stories to different people about the explosion within a short time after it happened, and only the last version supplied what was needed to support the religious movement. So, that is the only version told by the religious movement, and it has become foundational to a mythology that both gives meaning to individual lives by answering questions related to where man came from, why suffering occurs, what happens after death etc., and it supports a large social order within which some people give orders and others follow them.

- The last version of the witness' story was less consistent with the circumstantial evidence than earlier versions, and none of those versions is entirely consistent with such evidence.

A person who believes in the religious movement in question likely uses the story about the explosion as part of his mythology, and so will want to know as little as possible about the story teller's history of deception, prior versions of the story and contradictory circumstantial evidence. To the extent that the believer becomes aware of these things, he may dismiss them out of hand as "impossible" or "lies" or rationalize them on a basis that only his co-religionists/mythologists find persuasive.

A court, or historian, will of course deal quite differently with the same facts. Each version of the story and the circumstances of its telling will be carefully dissected for clues as to why it was told; the evolution from one story to another will be analyzed as well as the related factors that may have motivated the different tellings; the generally faulty nature of human memory and perception will be carefully considered; each version of the story will be measured against the circumstantial evidence to see to what extent any of the stories tie into that and may corroborate it; the credibility of the witness will be tested in light of his other proven cases of unreliable memory, and this may result in the complete rejection of each version of his story to the extent that it conflicts with the circumstantial evidence; etc.

It is interesting to observe the manner in which history and mythology both spring from the same events. In many cases, good history written is written about an event while it at the same time supports a mythology. Generally speaking, people who know about both the history and the mythology and do not depend on the mythology in a material way can tell the two apart. At the same time, there are many who are unaware of the history, and for whom the mythology continues to perform at least some of the mythological function noted above. For these people the history is irrelevant and they generally are protected by their social order from the pain that learning the real history would inflict. And in some cases, we find people who are aware of the history but depend upon the mythology for important of their personal or social stability, and so reject the history even though to do so radically contradicts many of their mental habits in other aspects life. An unhealthy conception of faith is often invoked for this purpose that justifies belief against the odds dictated by the evidence produced by historical research (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf>).

So, we often can find the same event perceived in radically different ways as a result of the differing machinations of the historical and mythological processes. And we often find that the same event will spawn many different

mythologies. For a fascinating study in that regard, see "American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon" by Stephen Prothero (a book review can be found at [http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/american\\_jesus/](http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/american_jesus/)). Among other things, Prothero describes the various ways in which Mormons have used Jesus in iconic fashion, and how Jesus has come to mean many different and often contradictory things in different religiously oriented communities within America. In this regard, the functional analysis mentioned above is perhaps the most useful. How Jesus will be understood in a given community is best predicted by what the dominant mythology needs him to do. If the people feel the need to be liberated, Jesus will be a liberator. If the people feel the need to be governed in order to avoid the chaos that has recently threatened to engulf them (according to their perception), Jesus will be a benevolent governor. Etc.

Another interesting collision between mythology and history occurred a few years ago when the American historian John Paxton uncovered a chapter of French history related to the Second World War that showed much more French sympathy and cooperation with the Nazis than the French has hitherto acknowledged as part of what has become in many ways a mythology of the French Resistance. There was an academic and popular firestorm over that one, but eventually most of the best informed people who were involved in that debate acknowledged that Paxton was more or less right. However, this chapter of French history can be counted on not to be at the forefront of French consciousness, at least until it is useful to those in power for it to be there. That is, when real history is useful for the creation of a mythology, it will be used for that purpose.

### **Mormon "History" or Mormon "Mythology"?**

So, we come to Mormon history. I discuss this in more general terms at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%200mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 12. Let's consider the confusion between mythology and history, as discussed above, within Mormon culture.

Mormons make a big deal of their history. The missionary discussions are based on it. Lessons and sermons in Mormon meetings each week are full of it. Mormon testimonies are based on it. This is because Mormonism is founded on a few alleged historical facts, such as that Joseph Smith (JS) had various face to face meetings with God and other Celestial beings and most importantly, that JS received from God the exclusive authority to act in his name on Earth thus making the Mormon Church God's one and only true church on the face of the Earth. Big claims. Solid evidence should be expected to confirm them if they are history. If they are mythology, we would expect the facts to be questioned as little as possible. And, we might expect to find that the key events have spawned some historical analysis



that would be ignored by the community within which the alleged facts perform the function of mythology. What do we find in this regard?

Within Mormonism, the idea that JS spoke with and was authorized by God in the manner indicated above is part of the sacred foundation of the faith, and so can't be questioned. This, in and of itself, puts it into the realm of mythology instead of history. But since mythology presented as such does not sell well these days whereas history does, Mormonism is required to pretend that these events are history, and try to ensure that they are not questioned. This is where "faithful history" comes in, which as its title suggests combines a belief against the evidence with history. This is a classic oxymoron of "military intelligence", "Hell's angel" quality. That is, "faithful history" is expressly designed to produce mythology. This is the kind of history Hegel likely had in mind when he hyperbolized, "What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles."

Faithful history is the program used by Mormon leaders to restrain the circulation of information that may make Mormons ask questions about the foundation of their faith. For the most part, this is accomplished by selectively telling the story of Mormonism. That is, the facts recounted are usually correct. For example, JS did tell a certain story about how he received God's exclusive authority. That is the story Mormonism tells in that regard. However, by neglecting to describe all of the other versions of the same story JS told, JS's history of deception or inaccurate communication with respect to various other matters and other important circumstantial evidence relevant to the story, the version of this story told by Mormonism is highly misleading. I am here reminded that Aleksander Solynitzen said that in some cases, to remain silent is to lie (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/come%20clean.pdf> for my views in that regard).

## **Mythology Test**

In conclusion, here is a simple test we can use to help determine whether the persons with whom we deal believe in a mythology or want to learn the history regarding any particular set of alleged prior events in which we are interested. There is a spectrum in this regard between two poles, not an either/or choice.

First, we would find out how interested they are in knowing all there is to know about the event in question. History is continually being re-written because more data is continually coming available or new ways to parse old data are being invented, and so those who are interested in history acknowledge that they will never know for sure many things about what

happened in the past. People who are certain that they know what happened and believe that no new information could possibly contradict their belief are generally speaking governed by a mythology instead of interested in history. Remember the explosion example above.

Second, we would find out in general terms how much the real historians already know about the events in question, and how much the people we are questioning know. Those governed by a mythology generally know only a small fraction of what the real historians know, and generally are certain they know all that is important to know.

Third, we would find out if they believe there is any chance that they are wrong in their understanding of the historical events in question. Those governed by mythology generally admit of almost no possibility in that regard.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that having a workable mythology is critical (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> starting at page 36 and particularly the section starting at page 50), and that we should choose a mythology that will help us accomplish the things that are important to us. However, I think that it is crucial that we learn to distinguish between the things that are likely real and those that are likely mythic, metaphoric or symbolic in our lives.

Those who confuse mythology with reality are dangerous, in my view. They are responsible for things like 9/11, the broader problems in the Middle East, the conflict in Northern Ireland and the Holocaust, for example. They do things like kidnap and "marry" young girls (Elizabeth Smart - see <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/West/03/12/smart.kidnapping/> or Joseph Smith's various marital/sexual escapades with teenagers), and kill people who do not agree with their religious views (see [http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/under\\_the\\_banner\\_of\\_heaven/](http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/under_the_banner_of_heaven/)). They are also responsible at least in part for a host of less outrageous but still significant ills in our society such as continuing racial prejudice, and the continuing resistance to the acceptance of well establishment scientific principles related to things like the age of the Earth and biological evolution. And, they tend to worsen the burdens placed on people who differ from them in terms of sexual orientation or attitude with regard to the role of men and women in society.

It is my view that the more of us are able to distinguish between mythology and history/science, and begin to choose mythologies designed to accomplish the things that matter most to us, the better off we will all be.