The Interrelationship Of Myth With Religion And Culture

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Myths are the stories of divinity or superhuman beings involved in events transcending human knowledge and sense. They usually originate from unknown sources but have some kind of connection to an event that took place. They are often based on tradition with varying extents of validity. Some have factual origins, while others are fictional. However, there is more to myths than meets the eye, as they are a way of teaching about the world and man's experiences. They are a connecting bridge that helps us to understand the people of the past. Myths may vary from being warnings and signs of despair to being indications of well-being and celebrations. Myths are extremely common when it comes to religion and culture. One can say that these go hand in hand with myths. There are a lot of mysteries regarding religion, and so a lot of myths are involved. Myths are also intertwined with culture, as most myths arise from some sort of tradition. Myths are always narrated to be truthful, even when the stories in them defy everything normal. Since myths usually do not have any kind of proof, they have been synonymized with lies and falsehood. Regardless, it is important to differentiate between outright lies and myths (Dubuisson).

Religion Myth and the Gilgamesh Flood

Religion is a specific belief system that is followed by people and is built on some ethics and philosophy. Although myths and religion are different concepts, some aspects of the two may overlap. Both religion and myths are in some way connected to the supernatural. There are many myths associated with religion and religious rituals. As such, there are many myths regarding religions. To understand myths and religion, exploration of past civilizations is necessary. It is unknown terrain, and the more we explore it, the stranger it gets. One of the strangest phenomena is that many myths of pagan religions bear resemblance to the stories of organized religions (Lang). For instance, the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is a Mesopotamian myth written around 2500 to 2100 BC, has a fascinating resemblance to the story of Noah's ark found in the holy books. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, in the conquest of eternal life, Gilgamesh sets out on a journey and ultimately reaches the end of the world. Here, he comes across a goddess who tells him to search for a man who was awarded immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh sets out and eventually comes across the immortal man Utnapishtim. Curious about how he attained everlasting life, Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim how he had achieved it. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh about how he had been warned by a goddess about a great flood that would wipe out all life. He was ordered to construct a boat and take two of every living thing on

board. Obliging to the goddess, Utnapishtim did as he was instructed, and when the flood hit, the boat rode the flood to safety. When the flood subsided, he released a dove, which returned as it did not find any dry place. He then released a swallow that did the same. The third time, he released a raven, which did not return. Eventually, Utnaphistim reached the shore and offered a sacrifice to the gods. When the gods gathered to partake in the sacrifice, Utnaphistim was awarded immortality by the gods for saving all life. This is similar to the story of Noah and the great flood and how he was instructed to build a boat. All the events that unfold in both stories are similar, so much so that the release of the different birds is also the same (Kovacs).

Differences Between Gilgamesh and Noah

Despite these similarities, there are differences between these events as well. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the flood was sent by a god to end all humanity, and another goddess warns Utnaphistim about the flood; however, in Noah's ark story, God sends the flood as a punishment on the people and orders Noah to save two of every creature. The story of Gilgamesh has many gods in it, while the Holy Books point to the oneness of God.

Immortality Ragnarök and Religious Parallels

Another account that can be taken into consideration is immortality, and Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh how to attain immortality by obtaining a certain fruit growing in the depths of the ocean. The water of life is also part of Roman mythology, in which the Roman God Jupiter turns Juventa, his lover, into a fountain that rejuvenates its users. These are similar to the stories of the fountain of youth found in the Holy Books. As such, it is hard to deny the validity of these so-called myths if there are stories about them in the Holy Books as well. Furthermore, the end of the world, better known as Ragnarok, in Norse mythology, is similar to Armageddon mentioned in the Holy Books. Both tell of the day of judgment with a final battle between the forces of good and evil, leaving nothing but absolute destruction in its wake. Both point to the end of the world with varying similarities (Carloye).

The Moon Goddess and Chinese Festival Tradition

Many religious myths also find their way into the cultural practices of the people who practice these religions. They incorporate these myths into the forms of festivals and rituals that they celebrate to bring good fortune or ward off bad omens. A popular example of this can be found in the legend of the Moon Goddess and the festival celebrated by Chinese people at the advent of the Chinese New Year. The legend of the Moon Goddess named Chang'e is the main reason for the festival. A long time ago, ten suns rose, scorching the Earth. However, an archer shot down nine of those suns and was awarded an elixir of immortality. Not wanting to live alone eternally without his wife, Chang'e, the archer, brought the elixir back. When the archer was out hunting, a man invaded their house in an

attempt to steal the elixir. Chang'e, to prevent this from happening, drank the elixir and flew away, choosing the moon as her home. When the archer found out, he was despondent. He started to pick fruits and make cakes that Chang'e liked as a tribute to her. This story is the basis for the implementation of this festival in Chinese culture, and they celebrate it every year, making mooncakes and offering them to the Moon Goddess Chang'e. A lavish festival is conducted with copious amounts of food that is not eaten because it is offered to the goddess so that she may bless the people conducting the festival with a lot of food that would last them for a whole year. All the generations of the family get together for this festival to worship the goddess Chang'e (Qu Yu).

Gozu Tenno and Kyoto's Gion Matsuri

These festivals are not only common among Chinese people; many festivals are celebrated in Japan as well, and they have a link to some kind of myth. Back in 869, a series of plagues ravaged the city of Kyoto. It was believed that the God of Epidemics, Gozu Tenno, had sent these plagues to the land of Kyoto. The emperor at that time dedicated 66 halberd spears that were prepared, representing the 66 regions of Japan, and ordered prayers and festivities to be carried out. A local boy was also chosen to be a sacred messenger to the gods. All this was done to appease the gods and prevent the plague from destroying the land. Ever since that day, this tradition has continued in the form of Gion Matsuri in Kyoto. As per tradition, a local boy is chosen as a sacred messenger to the gods. This messenger is carried in many elaborate floats, and his feet are not allowed to touch the ground (Richmond). In the example illustrated, the Japanese myth of Gozu Tenno has led to a yearly festival in Japan celebrating the efforts of the emperor in appeasing the gods. The sacred messenger boy is directly represented in the festival, as a local boy is selected to fulfil the duties of the messenger of the people for the gods.

Myth as a Bridge Between Religion and Culture

The relation of myth with religion and culture is intertwined; it runs deep within the historical roots of each culture that it represents, and from a religious point of view, it shows the link between all religions. This means that the organized religions and the pagan religions might not be as different as they are portrayed to be. So, the religious conflict seems unfounded as all religions have the same spirit. The cultural practices in many Asian countries show the way mythology has shaped their cultural practices, especially the celebrations and festivals. The cultural practices bring the families and the community together as they appease the gods once again through food offerings and merry-making. Mythology carries the stories of creatures and deities that the human mind cannot comprehend. However, a deeper study shows that mythology is much more than stories of dragons and fairies. It is a way of life for many cultures and a road map in the evolution of religion.

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