

The Mythos Of the Mission Story

by William G. Johnsson

Like so many other returned missionaries, I have dressed up in native costume to give the mission story. The sight of the Churida pajamas, Nehru coat and brilliant Mysori turban never fails to impress the faithful Sabbath School members. The mission offering on such days reflects this interest.

Also like many other returned missionaries, I have had reservations about putting on such “good shows.” In particular, is an accurate picture of mission work fostered by such “performances”? And is it right to expect that the size of the mission offering will depend on the interest (I hesitate to say “entertainment value”) of the mission story?

After giving many mission stories and listening to a great many more, I propose that the mission story functions as mythos in the corporate worship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Secondly, I raise the question whether the time has come for a breaking of this mythos.

The word mythos is one which may immediately cause hackles to rise. For many Adventists, it

suggests “myth”—a pejorative term, signifying that which is false, a fairy-tale.¹

Of course, “myth” is used quite widely in this sense in our culture. But the word is ambiguous and, in fact, is used at times with a meaning exactly the opposite of the common one—that is, to set forth that which is *most* true rather than that which is *untrue*. The fields of anthropology and religion provide examples of such usage.

I may simply refer to the writings of the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. In writings such as *The Raw and the Cooked* and *Structural Anthropology*,² he shows that the myths of primitive peoples point to deeply rooted “structures” in the subconscious. That is, they verbalize unconscious social patterns.

Turning to religion, I confine my remarks to Paul Tillich. Over and over, he holds that religious language proceeds via *symbols*. These symbols express religious experience with a directness and appropriateness that cannot be captured by any other means. For Tillich, “myth” signifies a cluster of symbols.³

I have given these quick examples merely to illustrate the positive valuation which may be assigned to “myth.” The term, however, continues to lead to misunderstanding, and it is probably better to look for a less ambiguous alternative. Here a less common word, but one

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winning more and more acceptance, may be suggested—*mythos*. My concern is with “myth” in terms of *social function* (rather than as used by Lévi-Strauss or Tillich), and *mythos* is an accurate term. A recent definition calls *mythos* “a pattern of beliefs expressing often symbolically the characteristic or prevalent attitudes in a group or culture.”⁴

The place of *mythos* is now widely recognized. It is accepted, for instance, that traditional ideas of the Pilgrim Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, the South, and Manifest Destiny have shaped the history and culture of the United States.⁵ To raise the historical question (Did it *really* happen like that?) is to miss the point: What we have to do with is a *body of ideas* which are accepted and handed down and which mold the thinking and social patterns of subsequent generations.

The characteristics of *mythos* are:

1. traditional material;
2. repetition—although with countless variations, certain features are always present;
3. function—to reinforce existing social structures by providing a “historical” justification

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and to give direction to future cultural developments (e.g., “maintaining the *American way of life*!”).

The mission story, I suggest, displays such characteristics. Let us analyze it in terms of *form*, *features* and *functions*.

Form: Like every story, the mission story typically is divided into introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction gives information about the writer (“John Doe, B.A., Walla Walla College, 1948, M.A. Andrews University, 1955, President of X mission”) and the country. The “body” gives the story proper. The conclusion

invariably appeals to the hearers for funds and prayers.

Features: three features are almost always to be observed:

1. The leading figure or “character” of the story is the foreign missionary. This is inevitable since most stories are written by missionaries and each story gives a capsule history of the writer. It is not surprising, then, that missionaries usually play the lead role—traveling, holding meetings, giving medical services, helping people in need, and so on.

2. The negative features of the mission lands figure prominently. “Mission lands” are lands of disease and superstition, degradation and poverty, ignorance and wild beasts; against such a backdrop the leading character (the missionary) proceeds with his acts of mercy.

3. The listeners expect to hear of marvelous occurrences. The Sabbath School member, starved for evidences of the miraculous in his own culture, hears of sick people healed, demons cast out, and providential deliverances. But in the mission story such happenings are not surprising: they are *expected*.

Function: We may distinguish immediate and long-range functions in the mission story. The specific purpose is to motivate the hearers to give a generous offering. However, there are long-range purposes also. The mission story brings home the worldwide scope of Adventist concern with an effectiveness probably unmatched by any other denomination. This can lead to a universalistic outlook (the world our parish, all men our brothers) of unrivaled power. At the same time, it conveys a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as the Gospel is seen to be going to more and more places.

It seems undeniable that the mission story functions as a social or cultural *mythos*. It is, indeed, an Adventist tradition, a tradition that has made us unique in scope of outlook and generosity in giving.

But a *mythos* may lose its power. It may simply decay away, as new social conditions show it to be inappropriate. It may be shattered by the work of the historians. It may be replaced by a new *mythos*.

Perhaps the turbulence of American society in the past decade is to be explained on this

basis: a mythos that had shaped and reinforced society for generations was broken with awesome effectiveness. Anyone who has read Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*,⁶ for instance, can only be disgusted at traditional versions of "how the West was won." Moreover, the fact that Vietnam shattered American myths may well be the root cause of the national agony over the war in Vietnam. Since Vietnam, for many Americans life has been life among the pieces—disillusionment at the collapse of old values and skepticism over those that seem to have survived.

What, then, of the mission story? Here, too, is a mythos that, though powerful still, is facing hard times. Statistics in terms of hard cash, for example, are convincing: offerings for missions vis-a-vis giving for local causes shows a steady decline.

What, then are we to do? Shall we try for "bigger and better" mission stories—more excitement, more color and so more "success"?

This would be the wrong course. Indeed, apart from the weakening of the mission story mythos noticed above, we need seriously to call into question the veracity of its principal features. I shall place my remarks in the context of that field in which I have some experience—India; it is my contention that all three features of the mission story as noticed above give a distorted picture.

The role of the missionary: the heroes of the work of India today are the Indian worker and layman, but they are unsung heroes. Because of government policy, the number of missionaries has drastically declined, but the accessions to the church have shown tremendous increases. India each year produces a number of "centurion" evangelists—but they are nationals, not foreigners. Indeed, India's neighbor in the Southern Asia Division, Burma, has been without a single foreign missionary for several years, but the church is prospering.

The denigration of mission lands: It is true that India is a land of poverty, superstition and much filth. But India produces its own jet planes, both for commercial and defense purposes; India has the greatest and possibly the most beautiful mountains of the world; India is a land of color and artistry of the perfection of the Taj Mahal.

We tend to forget that the same missions

quarterly that is produced for the churches of North America is used overseas as well, and many of our fellow Adventists there resent the playing up of the worst features of their country. Every land has both beautiful and ugly aspects—the United States included. And pride of race and country is universal.

Exotic happenings: Now it is true that marvelous occurrences are found in the mission lands. They are also found in North America—

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perhaps in about the same ratio to nonexotic happenings. The real miracle of the Gospel is the change in the life, and this is a miracle that refuses to be bound geographically. For, just as in the homeland, the pastor's prayer may not save the dying child, and tragic accident and death may snatch away some of the rarest of God's jewels.

If what is true for India holds elsewhere in the mission lands, we must question the basic honesty of perpetuating the missions story in its present form, hallowed by tradition though it is.

The *functions* served by the mission story—the providing of funds for foreign work and the fostering of a world outlook—are noble ones and we must strive to produce a vehicle for them. We must break or reshape the old mythos in order that a new one—one with power to perform these functions more effectively—may be constituted.

The "Mission Spotlight" programs might lend themselves to such a new mythos. Some of these programs have indeed not been bound to the stereotype; many, however, have simply perpetuated the features of the old mythos. Certainly, the challenge to rethink the missions story calls for men and women who will face the situation

frankly and move forward with consecrated imagination.

The release of Gottfried Oosterwal's excellent series of essays on missions⁷ is hopefully the first stone cast into the old waters. The church may be ready for the sort of rethinking which we have called forth.

We are able to see a dim outline of a new mythos of the mission story. It will set forth *one* church—a world church; it will emphasize the *brotherhood* of Adventists everywhere; it will dwell upon the richness and diversity of Adventist culture in the lands of earth; it will be *man*,

or Adventist-centered, rather than Western-centered; it will set out over and over the unchanging power of Jesus Christ to transform human lives.

Then perhaps Sabbath School members will give generous offerings not because of a "good show," but rather because *all* Adventists, in every land, are members of the body of Christ. They will give as did the first Christians—because some of their neighbor Christians were poorer than they were, and so the need was simply greater there. And then the kingdom may at last come.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1966) defines "myth" as: "a traditional or legendary story usually concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, esp., a traditional or legendary story that is concerned with deities or demigods and the creation of the world and its inhabitants."

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobsen and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963); *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by John and Doreen Weighting (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

3. See, e.g., the chapter "Symbols of Faith" in Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

4. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1974).

5. The writings of Robert N. Bellah are representative to show the place of mythos in American and other cultures.

6. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

7. Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible; the Challenge of Mission Today* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Ass'n., 1972).