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Myth and Metaphysics

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The very idea of metaphysics in myth

This paper defends the assertion that among the things that religions teach, inculcate, and celebrate are understandings of the world that are metaphysical in scope, and that these metaphysical views are often taught, inculcated, and celebrated through religious myths. Its thesis and recommendation is therefore that the philosophical discipline of metaphysics can be legitimately and fruitfully used to help understand myths.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the assertion that religions typically include metaphysics, and that religions typically express their metaphysical views in their myths, had a certain following. The historians Henri and H. A. Frankfort, for example, approached ancient Near Eastern narratives without separating the expressive function of the stories from their cognitive function.[1] Although they admit that the speculative thought that one might find in myths lacks “detachment”, they argue that “[m]yth is a form of poetry [that] . . . proclaims a truth”; myths provide “a poetic form of truth”.[2] According to the Frankforts, the images that one finds in myths – the representations of cosmic forces as bulls or hawks, gods or heroes – provide the terms with which a culture reflects upon its experience of the world. These reflections concern not only the forces of nature, say, storms or death, but also the abstract categories of causality, space, and time. Mythic thought about what exists is inseparable from images; it is thought through the images. “Myth, then, is to be taken seriously, because it reveals a significant, if unverifiable truth – we might say a metaphysical truth.”[3]

Similarly, Mircea Eliade argues that myth includes an acritical but nevertheless intelligible form of philosophy. As he says, “Obviously, the metaphysical concepts of the archaic world were not always formulated in theoretical language; but the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a complex system of coherent affirmations

about the ultimate reality of things, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics."[4] Myths do not use the language of "being", "becoming", or "nonbeing", but according to Eliade, when myths describe how different features of reality were created *in illud tempus*, they describe not alleged prehistorical events but rather the archetypes that constitute a human world view. In this way, mythic language puts into memorable narrative the structures of "the human condition as such".[5]

Perhaps the most reticulate account of the relation of myth to metaphysics is that of Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, the very definition of religion is that it weds an ethos to a world view, an axiology to a metaphysics. The metaphysical aspect of a religion "objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality."[6] Myths play a crucial part in this wedding. As Geertz says, "meanings can only be 'stored' in symbols: a cross, a crescent, or a feathered serpent. Such religious symbols, dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up, for those for whom they are resonant, what is known about the way the world is, the quality of emotional life it supports, and the way one ought to behave while in it".[7] Geertz goes so far as to say that metaphysics is an essential element in all religions; metaphysics is thus a part of his very definition of religion.[8] This is, in my opinion, a good definition of religion, one whose fruitfulness has not been fully taken advantage of. Nevertheless, my proposal in this paper is not that myths necessarily or essentially include metaphysics, but only that they may include metaphysical insights and that insofar as they do, interpreters of myths need to be open to the possibility of reading myths in this way.

Explicitly metaphysical interpretations like the three above can generate fertile hypotheses for the study of myths. These include important philosophical questions, such as: to what extent can speculative thought be put into narrative form? And, what are the differences between the understandings of reality as such in one culture and those in another? Attention to the metaphysics in myths also points to (and certainly does not hinder one from asking) important sociological questions, such as: are the metaphysical myths used to justify particular social arrangements? And, does the interest in metaphysical myths correspond to different sections of society, or to different types of society?

But although the above writers appeal to the idea that religious myths explicitly or implicitly make metaphysical claims, they do not develop the idea from a philosophical point of view. They do not articulate what it means for a world view to be a metaphysical world view, nor how one might speak of it as true or false. Any philosophical proposal in which one asserts that interpreters should attend to metaphysics when seeking to understand myths must have an understanding of metaphysics that is credible. This is not easy. It is, in my opinion, the general consensus among philosophers in the West since Kant that metaphysics in the sense of inquiry into the character of reality as such is no longer legitimate, either because statements about reality as such are unintelligible or because although they are intelligible, such statements can never be validated and thus metaphysical knowledge

is impossible. Despite their significant differences, this consensus is shared by most Kantians, phenomenologists, critical theorists, analytic philosophers, neopragmatists, and deconstructionists. As a friend told me, seeking to defend metaphysics in a postmodern context when rationality itself is in question is like rearranging the chairs on a sinking ship. His own preferred approach to religious narratives is to read myths as an evocative but noncognitive form of fiction, and his approach is not atypical. There is little attention paid to the cognitive dimension of myths. Perhaps this is the reason that, over the last quarter of a century, the practice of reading myths as explicitly or implicitly making metaphysical claims has fallen out of favor. It is the aim of the paper to recommend a return to this approach.

The metaphysical interpretation of myths

What is meant by saying that a given myth is "metaphysical"? What is a metaphysical interpretation of myths? In a nutshell, this approach says, first, that myths function to provide models and, second, that some of these models are all-inclusive in scope.

In saying that myths provide models, one says that they provide metaphoric images through which one comes to understand diverse aspects of the world. This idea is found famously in Geertz, who argues that myths function simultaneously as models *of* reality (insofar as they represent the structure of what is) and models *for* reality (insofar as they recommend the structure of what ought to be).[9] So far as I know, however, the most helpful discussion of this idea of myths as religious models is that of Ian Barbour.[10] Barbour argues that the religious models found in myths function as interpretative frameworks, drawing one's attention to certain patterns among one's experiences and connecting them to each other in distinctive ways. The types of experience that religious models are typically employed to interpret are experiences of awe and reverence, of mystical union, of moral obligation, of reorientation and reconciliation, of interpersonal experiences, of key historical events, and of order and creativity in the world. In all of these cases, models involve a process that Barbour calls "interpreting as". In the light of a myth, for example, an experience of death is interpreted *as* a punishment. On this account, the religious person does not experience facts that the nonreligious person does not; rather, in the light of myths she interprets the fact differently, namely, as a revelation or manifestation of the sacred that has a certain character.

Some models may be of relatively local interpretive power: they tell their audience, for example, to interpret storms as hostile or to interpret the ruler as a manifestation of the divine. Others may provide patterns of a larger scale. Bultmann thought that religious myths symbolically referred to human existence as a whole; Eliade believed the same. To interpret a myth as metaphysical, however, is to say that the scope of the model is intended to include all reality. That is, to follow Aristotle's definition of metaphysics, a metaphysical myth describes the character that anything has insofar as it exists as anything at all. It seeks to describe what exists not insofar as each thing is a particular thing it is, but rather insofar as it is anything at all. Metaphysical assertions can therefore be put into the form "All concrete realities are X",

where X might mean “ensouled”, or “created by God”, or “formed by karmic energy”. In short, then, to interpret a myth metaphysically is to say that the myth provides a cognitive framework for understanding reality as such.

One should note that this understanding of metaphysics does not necessarily involve reference to the supernatural. When metaphysics is understood in the pre-Kantian sense of inquiry into supernatural, extra-experiential realities, then some religions seem to include metaphysics but others do not. The Analects of Confucius and the Majjhima Nikaya of the Buddha, for example, are famous for being uninterested in this sense of metaphysics. The pre-Kantian understanding of metaphysics is therefore not an appropriate tool for the study of all religions, for some religions are, so to speak, too pragmatic or this-worldly. Another limitation of that understanding of metaphysics is that it seems only appropriate for the study of those religious traditions which include a class of intellectuals (usually leisured and elite) that has an interest in pursuing such theories. On the understanding of metaphysics I intend, however, metaphysics concerns not supernatural entities but, rather, the general character of reality which may or may not include supranatural entities. In short, insofar as a religion includes an understanding that reality has some general character which one should take into account, it has a metaphysics.

People sometimes say that myths cannot include metaphysics because ancient or “primitive” people lacked an interest in or a capacity for pursuing knowledge for its own sake, as distinct from practical knowledge that serves human needs. There is a legitimate distinction to be had between knowledge “in itself” and knowledge “for us” and all religious communities are overwhelmingly interested in the latter, but the distinction should not be overdrawn or else we will not be able to make sense of the presence of metaphysics in any religion. It is true: religions typically show little interest in metaphysical knowledge for its own sake. But they typically do show an interest in the idea of metaphysical knowledge pursued as part of transforming one’s perceptions, affects, and character in order to be in accord with the true nature of things.[11]

The metaphysics one finds in myth is typically in service of this transformation. For example, myths often describe behavior that is presented as an admirable ideal to be emulated or a cautionary example to be avoided. When the behavior is identified as admirable and worthy of imitation because it is in accord with the way things are, or to be avoided because it is not in such accord, then such a text has a metaphysical dimension. Recall those stories whose point is that, despite appearances of wealth or beauty or status, there are more ultimate forces at work (karma, the divine will or plan, the Tao, the mandate of heaven). If these forces are not contingent but aspects of reality as such, then an ethos is being married to metaphysics. The metaphysical dimension of creation myths operates in the same transformative way.[12] That is, myths of creation may describe outright the principles or forces of reality as such, and the performative, ritual context of the myth typically makes clear that the metaphysical knowledge is not presented as solely the answer to an intellectualist question about what exists but rather serves as saving or liberating knowledge with which one can properly orient oneself in the world.

Whether the metaphysics in myths can possibly be true

There may be some who have read to this point who agree with the interpretive claim that at least some myths provide models of the world that are designed to orient one to the character of reality as such, but who would not wish to raise the normative issue whether such metaphysical claims might be true. These are in fact two distinct questions, and I agree with Malinowski that, ultimately, the question whether myths are true or false, whether they successfully reflect the divine, "is a problem of theology or metaphysics" rather than the social sciences: "the anthropologist has done enough when he has shown the value of a phenomenon for social integrity and for the continuity of culture."[13]

Nevertheless, if the Frankforts, Eliade, Geertz, and I are right that at least some myths metaphysical claims, then whether or not metaphysical claims can be true becomes an issue not only for philosophers. All those who study myths – all interpreters – approach their texts with a set of assumptions, and some of these assumptions are philosophical. One of the most basic philosophical assumptions that interpreters bring to the study of myths is whether or not to read them in the cognitive sense as cognitively meaningful or meaningless, that is, as making claims that *might possibly be* true or false or as not making such claims. If one works with the assumption that myths make or imply metaphysical claims that might possibly be true, then one needs at least some implicit understanding of *how* they might be true, i.e., one's interpretation requires some criterion of metaphysical truth.[14] The interpreter need not take the further step of assessing whether the religious metaphysics are in fact true or false (and anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and sociologists of religion may properly choose not to pursue this question) but if one interprets myths as "in some sense true" or "possibly true" then one must have some understanding of how this is so.

To the question whether the metaphysics in myths can be true, of course, many interpreters assert or assume that the answer is no. Some hold that since metaphysical claims cannot be verified or falsified through sense experience, they are by definition not cognitive, neither true not false, and therefore metaphysics cannot be distinguished from poetry. This was the view of the logical positivists, and though few in Religious Studies would describe themselves as members of that discredited movement, the view is still clearly assumed by some who write about myths. It is because they consider the metaphysical claims made by myths to be cognitively empty hat they interpret myths as merely ideology or priestcraft; that is, they seek some sociological or psychological explanation of why people would tell tales that cannot be possibly true or false. Other interpreters answer that metaphysical claims are conceivably true or false, but they can never be known to be true or false. This not unpopular view is held, for example, by Joseph Campbell,[15] Alan Watts,[16] and Eliseo Vivas,[17] and each of its versions can be traced back to Kant's claim that beyond all conceivable human experience there are noumenal realities that can be thought, even though they cannot ever be known. Below I will argue the Kant's idea of noumena is not tenable; therefore the positivist claim

that metaphysical claims are unverifiable and the Kantian claim that they cannot be known to be true are equivalent. But for now it is enough to see that both the positivist and the Kantian approaches to myths reflect a criterion by which the interpreter understands how claims are true, but for both it is a criterion which excludes the possibility of a true metaphysical claim. To show that there is a credible alternative to it is the point of the rest of this section.

For reasons of space, I won't be able to give a full-blooded defense of the possibility of metaphysics.[18] But I think that I can say at least the following. The metaphysician can agree with Kant that knowledge of things as they are in themselves, knowledge of things that cannot be experienced, is not available. Kant is right that any metaphysics that seeks to describe what he calls noumena is not credible. In fact, the metaphysician can go further than Kant, and argue (with Hegel and Nietzsche and Dewey) that the category of noumena is itself unintelligible. The idea of "realities" which are alleged to be conceivable but cannot conceivably be experienced is an incoherent one. Metaphysicians can and should abandon it, and think of the scope of intelligible statements as "limited" to what can conceivably be experienced.[19]

Given this "limitation" of philosophy to what can conceivably be experienced, however, I believe that some interpretations of rational inquiry into the character of reality as such remain tenable. The definition of metaphysics that follows is taken from the works of Charles Hartshorne.[20]

The key distinction that needs to be made in order to appreciate this understanding of metaphysics is between two kinds of existential claims about what there is. There are, according to Hartshorne, two kinds of existential claims: some claims about what exists are restrictive in the sense that they purport to be true only under some conditions; other claims about what exists are nonrestrictive in the sense that they purport to be true under all conditions. The truth of a given claim belonging to the first class of claims is contingent in that the claim could be false. This is because it designates a particular state of affairs that might or might not obtain. This class is relatively unproblematic and includes historical claims, scientific claims, and the overwhelming majority of statements about what exists. "It is raining at a given place and time" is an example. The truth of a claim belonging to the second class of existential claims would be necessary in that, if true, it could not possibly be false. This is because such claims do not designate a particular state of affairs but rather, designate the generic features of all possible states of affairs. Examples include "every possible existent is a substance", "every possible existent is an event", "every possible existent is a product of consciousness", "every possible existent is composed of matter" and so on. On this definition of metaphysics, metaphysical claims seek to describe absolutely all things, or in other words they purport to be true under all conditions. Such claims allege to be necessary and therefore, if they are true, they cannot conceivably be falsified. Because they cannot conceivably be falsified, metaphysics cannot be understood as an empirical inquiry that compares hypotheses to states of affairs. Rather, metaphysics is a form of logical inquiry that argues that some understanding of the nature of reality is logically necessary as the condition for the possibility of the existence of anything whatsoever. Metaphysical claims for the possibility of the existence of anything whatsoever.

Metaphysical claims purport to be about what is always and everywhere the case. Or to repeat, they concern the character of reality under all conditions.

This definition of metaphysics avoids many of the criticisms of metaphysics prevalent in contemporary philosophy. Metaphysical claims on this account assume no "God's eye view," no "view from nowhere," no privileged access or intuition into reality; they are not an attempt to pierce the "veil of ideas." They reject the scientistic claim that all knowledge is empirical, but they do not violate pragmatic or phenomenological criteria of meaning. For this reason, I prefer to describe metaphysics using Aristotle's formulation of metaphysics an inquiry into the character of reality *as such*, rather than Kant's formulation of metaphysics as inquiry into the character of reality "in itself." On this account, metaphysics abandons the idea of reality "in itself" and is not saddled with explaining how one can know the world as it is apart from the categories of human understanding.

From Hartshorne one can draw a criterion for metaphysical truth in myths: the metaphysics is true to the extent that it represents the general character of what is, so that it cannot conceivably be falsified.[21] From this criterion it follows that one might invalidate a metaphysical claim that is alleged to be true in two ways. One might show that it does not hold in every case, that there are exceptions to it, in which case one shows that is a contingent claim rather than a properly metaphysical claim. Or one might argue that what it claims to be the case, when one considers its implications, is incoherent, that it is a self-contradictory claim. Positively put, one can seek to validate a metaphysical model by interpreting more and more areas of experience in terms of it, thereby showing its adequacy to experience. Or one can seek to show that the metaphysical claim, along with its implications, is coherent and that it is the denial of the claim that is self-contradictory.

An illustrative example

Of course, to say that a given myth makes or implies metaphysical claims is not to exhaust the meaning of the myth. A single myth can operate with several levels of reference, each having to do with different aspects of reality. William Doty distinguishes four such levels: the psychological, the sociological, the cosmological, and the metaphysical.[22] On Doty's analysis, the psychological level of reference found in myths provides a paradigm for life stages and roles; the sociological level addresses social divisions of labor, gender, and power; the cosmological renders an image of the universe; and the metaphysical level maps the differences of being, non-being, and becoming.

All four of these levels are important to understand what a given myth means. The cosmological and metaphysical aspects of myths, however, receive less attention and are often confused with each other, often under the catch-all label "world view". According to the definition of metaphysics I introduced above, cosmological models in a myth are empirical rather than metaphysical.[23] They have to do with character of this particular world, whereas properly metaphysical references have to do with the character of any possible world. Another way to put this is to say that cosmological

features of the world might be otherwise – there might have been or might yet be changes to the cosmological character of the world in some previous or future cosmic epoch – but metaphysical features of the world are necessary and not conceivably otherwise. The metaphysical interpretation of myths focuses on a myth's reference to the ineliminable aspects of reality.

Here is an illustration of how attention to metaphysics can add to our understanding of a myth. Consider the Buddhist story of the cyclical evolution of the world as told in the *Aggañña Sutta*.[24] Although not a myth of "creation," since in Buddhism that which is has no ultimate beginning, it is an account of the emergence of the present world. It begins,

> O monks, eventually there comes a time when, after a long period, this world starts to wind down. And as the world is winding down, beings for the most part are reborn out of it, in the Realm of the Radiant Gods. Eventually, after another long period, it happens that this world that has ended begins to reevolve. And as it is reevolving, settling, and becoming established, certain beings, in order to work out their karma, fall from the Realm of the Radian Gods and come to be once again in this world. These beings by nature are self-luminescent and move through the air. They are made of mind, feed on joy, dwell in bliss, and go where they will.

As the Earth begins to settle and solidify, one of the luminous deities, "fickle and greedy by nature", eats of it. Others imitate him, and as they eat, they too become more solid and take on shapes. The beings begin to be able to perceive differences amongst themselves; some are attractive, others less so, and this leads to pride and arrogance. The more they eat, the more substantial they become, until sexes emerge, which leads to carnal thoughts and illicit behavior. The foodstuff they eat also becomes more and more "earthy", until it appears as a rice which is wonderful but must be harvested. Gathering and storing rice, though, leads the lazy to thievery; this then leads to lying about one's guilt and to violence. In this deteriorating state, the beings decide that they need to elect a king to maintain peace and administer justice. The story ends with the installation of the Great Elected One. By the end of the discourse, the world which had "wound down" at the outset has reconstituted itself into the familiar world of conflict, anxiety, and suffering called samsara.

How ought such a story be interpreted? Clearly, at least some of the four levels Doty describes are present. Though the myth does not deal with a hero or savior who might symbolize a mature, healthy psyche, a psychological interpretation might still read the myth as describing the stages of ego development, including therein the emergence of desire, self-image, and sexuality. A sociological interpretation might focus on the social contract theory and the ways in which this story could justify the status of kings even while showing that kingship is not inevitable or natural but rather a socially created institution invented for the sake of the needs of the ruled. A cosmological interpretation could focus on the different realms that exist and the different kinds of beings that emerge.[25]

Does the myth also include metaphysics? At the heart of the story is a continuous cyclical process of evolving and de-evolving. The story makes it clear that this process concerns not just the emergence of human life but rather it is that process through which the world itself emerges. Nor is it solely a cosmological process (like, say, the development of a star) that is independent of humanity. The evolution of the world is wedded to human desires and actions. Seeing this, one might interpret the story, not as an account of creation that is alternative to the Buddhist doctrine of interdependent origination (pratityasamutpada), but rather as a narrative illustration of that doctrine. This doctrine, in its classical formula, says that "When this exists, that exists or comes to be; on the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist or come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases. That is to say: on ignorance depend dispositions; on dispositions depends consciousness; on consciousness depend name and form; on name and form depend the six gateways; on the six gateways depends contact; on contact depends craving; on craving depends grasping; on grasping depends becoming; on becoming depends birth; on birth depend old age and death. In this manner there arises the mass of suffering [samsara]."[26] The myth takes this teaching that there is nothing that does not have an origin, and that nothing originates of its own power, and dramatizes it.

Is the doctrine of interdependent origination a metaphysical teaching? The answer depends on one's definition of metaphysics. In this paper, metaphysics describes the character that anything has insofar as it is anything at all. Interdependent origination seems to fit this description since, in this myth at least, the process of interdependent origination is not limited to human psyches, nor to society, nor even to the physical cosmos. As a nonrestrictive aspect of reality as such, it is present in and through all of these and without it none of them would exist at all. It can be distinguished from cosmology insofar as interdependent origination is allegedly true a priori whereas cosmological truths would be empirical and hence allegedly true a posteriori. For example, that there is an Earth in the cosmos is an empirical claim; that whatever exists in the cosmos originated interdependently is on this interpretation a metaphysical claim; if true, it is true whatever there is.

Let's turn to this question of truth. To repeat what was expressed above, an interpreter need not pursue the question whether or not a myth is true. But if an interpreter wants to say that the myth's depiction of reality as such is neither unitelligible nonsense nor absolutely unknowable – in other words, if the interpreter wants an understanding of how such claims might be held as true claims by those who believe them – then the question of how metaphysical claims might be validated remains relevant.

If one wanted to argue that the cosmology in the myth (in the sense of the empirical explanation of the universe) is true, then one would seek to show that that explanation accounts for the relevant data better than other explanations do. Despite the element of speculation here, this is in essence a scientific question to be settled by physicists. If one wanted to argue that the metaphysics in the myth is true, however, then one would have to show not only that the metaphysical claims meet empirical criteria, in the sense that

there are at least some realities to which they apply. One must also show that the metaphysical claims meet logical criteria, in the sense that there is nothing incoherent in the idea that everything arises interdependently, in the idea that nothing exists independently. One might argue for this view by showing that there is something incoherent in the idea of an entity that exists of its own accord. Conversely, if one wanted to argue that the metaphysics in the myth is not true, then one would argue that there is something incoherent in this view. Or one might argue against this view by showing that there must be an entity that exists of its own accord.[27]

From this example one can see how myths can be read as providing models of reality as such. In fact, I think that one can see how interpreters of such narratives can develop from such myths an explicit, non-narrative metaphysics. This is true whether the interpreter is a member of the religious tradition that recounts the myth or not. The interpretive task of a Thomas Aquinas or a Sankara does not seem different from that of a contemporary academic in this respect, for as I argued in section I, metaphysical issues arise not only for the philosopher interested in assessing truth claims, but also for anyone who simply seeks to understand the myth.

The contribution of the metaphysical interpretation of myths

I hope that it is clear that my recommendation is not that myths be interpreted as metaphysical *rather than*, say, social or psychological or psychological or cosmological, but that the metaphysical interpretation be added to the methodological tool kit used by interpreters of myth. This would mean that those who find that a metaphysical approach illuminates myths could use it and those who do not use it would not exclude it as illegitimate.

To add a metaphysical interpretation to those already being used to interpret myths could make a difference both to the study of myths and to philosophy of religion. Insofar as myths involve metaphysics, any study of myth that excludes metaphysics distorts and truncates its object. Clearly, to assume that myths cannot involve metaphysics blinds one to the possibility that a myth attempts to describe a culture's understanding of reality as such. This blindness in turn blinkers one to other aspects of myths. For example, the metaphysical claims in myths often play a justificatory function in the religion. That is, they often serve to legitimate what the religion considers proper attitudes, practices, and beliefs. They assert or imply that one should conduct oneself in a specified way, because such is the appropriate conduct, given the nature of things. Geertz sees this point clearly when he says that a religious ethos is typically grounded on a religious metaphysics. As he put it,

> The source of [a religion's] moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which is expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerfully coercive "ought" is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual "is," and in such a way religion grounds the most specific requirements of human action in the most general contexts of human existence. . . . The need for such a metaphysical grounding for values seems to vary quite widely in intensity from culture to culture and from individual

> to individual, but the tendency to desire some sort of factual basis for one's commitments seems practically universal; mere conventionalism satisfies few people in any culture.[28]

Reading myths with an attention to metaphysics therefore helps one to take into account the justificatory function of myths: that myths claim to justify a way of life by describing the way the world really is. If one ignores this cognitive dimension, one has a truncated understanding of myths as merely ideology or as just literature. Attention to metaphysics helps to avoid this.

The metaphysical interpretation of myths could also contribute to philosophy of religion, and in particular to the philosophical study of religious metaphysics. In this capacity, it complements the approach to philosophy that has been called "ethnometaphysics."[29] Ethnometaphysics proposes as a working hypothesis the idea that different cultures have different metaphysical views and so a legitimate part of the study of a culture is the study of its cognitive orientation to reality as such. It proceeds under the assumption that understandings of the necessary features of reality are not exclusive to the Western philosophical tradition, or even of the so-called "high cultures." Douglas Rabb and Dennis McPherson have recently sought to articulate the program of ethnometaphysics in a way that does not incur relativism. They argue that philosophers should adopt what they call the "polycentric perspective" that says that all cultures embody particular conceptions of reality which can be accorded validity without assuming reducibility to or commensurability with others.[30] They hold that this perspective undermines the "save-the-savages" view that assumes that the exclusively true meta-physics has already been identified, either in scientific materialism or in Christian theistic metaphysics, and that when we do discover rival metaphysical systems we should try to free their adherents from those beliefs. Neither of those views permits the scholar to take seriously the idea that ethnometaphysical systems might have truth. I think that my proposal of a metaphysical interpretation of myths dovetails with this proposal (though I think that the goals of ethnometaphysics might best be served if it dropped the prefix).

The discipline of philosophy of religion has become mired in the study of religious beliefs abstracted from their cultural context (what Paul Griffiths has called "denaturalized discourse"[31]) to the detriment of other philosophical forms of religious discourse. The study of religious metaphysics also has a too narrow view of what the possibilities are. What is needed is an appreciation of the extent to which speculation on the nature of things is a global phenomenon and of the variety of forms that such speculation takes. What is needed is an understanding of philosophy of religion as an openended inquiry that works in conversation with anthropologists and historians of religion. It is my hope that this essay might contribute in a small way to develop philosophy of religion in that direction.[32]

Notes

1. H. and H.A. Frankfort, “Myth and Reality,” in H. and H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay in Speculative Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 3–27. A similar position is also found in Eric Voegelin’s treatment of Hesiod and Homer. Voegelin writes that “The mythopoetic work of the two poets was a spiritual and intellectual revolution; for inasmuch as it established the types of cosmic and ethical forces, as well as the types of their relations and tensions, it created in the form of the myth, a highly theorized body of knowledge concerning the position of man in his world that could be used by the philosophers as the starting point for metaphysical analysis and differentiation.” See Voegelin, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1957) II: 136–7.

2. H. and H.A. Frankfort, “Myth and Reality,” p. 8.

3. H. and H.A. Frankfort, “Myth and Reality,” p. 7.

4. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 3.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 11; cf. p. 91.

6. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.

7. Geertz, “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 127.

8. Ibid.

9. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” esp. pp. 93–4, 95, 123.

10. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Barbour draws on Ian Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) and his ideas have been put to use by SallieMcFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983) and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), but those authors do not share his and my focus on critical realism. Thomas M. Olshewsky provides some critical reflections on Barbour in his “Between Science and Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 62:3 (July 1982): 242–60.

11. Geertz makes this point as well, saying that “[n]ever merely metaphysics, religion is never merely ethics either.” See his “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” p. 126.

12. Charles H. Long follows Eliade in regarding creation myths as involving a metaphysical dimension. Accounts of creation often describe, in his terms, “a manifestation of reality-as-being” or “the ontological dimension.” See Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1963), pp. 9, 27. Moreover, Eliadeans often treat *all* myths as referring to creation. As Kees Bolle says, “A myth, whether its subject is the acts of deities or other extraordinary events, always takes us back to ‘beginnings of all things’.” Kees Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 10: 262. Cf. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 6.

13. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1948), p.62.

14. As Charles Long concisely puts it, “If myths are true stories, we must ask in what sense they are true.” Long, *Alpha*, p. 12.

15. Basing his view explicitly on Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Joseph Campbell argues that metaphysical entities are “absolutely and forever and from every

conceivable human standpoint, unknowable." See Campbell, "Primitive Man as Metaphysician," in Stanley Diamond, ed., *Culture in History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 387.

16. Citing Campbell, Watts argues that the metaphysics that one finds in myths is a prefactual form of knowledge which theology necessarily distorts, and the idea of metaphysical *concepts* is a contradiction in terms. See Alan Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), pp. 27–28nl, 57–63.

17. Following Carnap (who on this point follows Kant), Eliseo Vivas argues hat since myth organizes experience, it makes possible true and false statements, but is not itself either true nor false. See "Myth: Some Philosophical Problems," *The Southern Review* n.s. 6 (January 1970): 89–103.

18. I offer a typology of three basic anti-metaphysical positions, with a critique of each, in "Problems for a Complete Naturalism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 15:3 (September 1994): 269–92.

19. I understand this point to be in agreement with the metaphysics of Donald Davidson, who writes that "In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course the truth of sentences remains relative to language but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences true and false." Davidson, "One the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries in Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 198; also relevant here is his "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," pp. 199–214.

20. For a concise account of Hartshorne's understanding of the nature of metaphysics, see especially his essays, "What Metaphysics Is" and "Non-restrictive Existential Statements" in *Creative Synthesis and Philosophical Method* (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 19–42, 159–72. Note too that I borrow form Hartshorne here only his understanding of metaphysical inquiry and not his conclusions that reality is social process.

21. Schubert Ogden applies Hartshorne's understanding of metaphysics to the evaluation of the truth of myths in his "Myth and Truth," in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 99–119.

22. William G. Doty, *Mythography* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), pp. 52–56. Cf. Joseph Campbell, *Myths, Dream, and Religion* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 138–75.

23. On the relation of cosmological models to religious myths, see Earl MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (1976); M. R. Wright, "Models, Myths, and Metaphors," in *Cosmology in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 37–55.

24. John Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), pp. 101–4; a translation with extensive commentary can be found in Steven Collins, "The Discourse on What is Primary," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21:4 (1993), pp. 301–393; other English translations can be found in J. J. Jones, *the Mahavastu* (London: Pali Text Society, 1949), 1:285–93; and in T.W. Rhys-Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921) v. 4: pt III.

25. Frank Reynolds interprets this sutra as a rupic (that is, material- or form- producing), devolutionary cosmogony in his "Multiple Cosmogonies and Ethics: The Case of Theravada Buddhism," in Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 203–24; see also *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* translated by Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds (Berkeley: Asia Humanities Press, 1982).

26. This translation is from Reynolds, “Multiple Cosmogonies and Ethics,” p. 206; a slightly different translation can be found in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* second edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 53–4.

27. While I argue that assessing religious metaphysics is possible, I do not want to suggest that it is simple or unproblematic. An insightful discussion of some of the issues to be hurdled in assessing metaphysical systems across cultures can be found inWilliam J.Wainwright, “Doctrinal Schemes,Metaphysics and Proposition Truth,” in Thomas Dean, ed., *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

28. Geertz, “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” pp. 126, 131.

29. The first use of the term “ethno-metaphysics,” I believe, is A. Irving Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View,” in Stanley Diamond, ed., *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin* (New York: Columbia University Press 1960), pp. 19–52; Hallowell takes as his inspiration Paul Radin’s *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York: Dover, 1957). J. Baird Callicott and Thomas Overholt develop the idea in their *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982); and Dennis MacPherson and Douglas Rabb seek to justify the discipline without relativism in their *Indian from the Inside: A Study in Ethno-metaphysics* (Thunder Bay, Ontario: Lakehead University, 1993). Another, less philosophical example can be found in Richard Davis, *Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984).

30. MacPherson and Rabb, *Indian from the Inside*, p. 10.

31. Paul J. Griffiths, “Denaturalizing Discourse: Abhidharmikas, Propositionalists, and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion,” in Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, eds., *Myth and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), pp. 57–91.

32. See also Kevin Schilbrack, ed., *Mythical Thinking: Philosophical Contributions to the Study of Myth* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). I would also like to thank Will Power and Chris Gamwell for their helpful comments on this paper.