

Myth-Making and the Holy Orders: An Appraisal of the Power of Homiletics and Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts

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Researches on myths, center on stories that cannot be determined in rational terms if or when their events actually took place; but for the sheer aura or ‘spirit’ of the tales, successive generations are compelled to read, study, enjoy and receive guidance from them. Now, the question this paper seeks to answer is what gives the Scriptural texts, their power over generations of people over different ages, and even our own contemporary age? Having given the question some serious thought, the answer for us, simplistic as it may sound is, ‘proclamation and interpretation’. These two activities are in the domain of preachers and teachers.

In academic and theological terms, the two activities are called Hermeneutics and Homiletics. The understanding of these two arts will afford us the knowledge of the powers that preachers and teachers of religious truths wield over the devout of any faith. Anthony Maas defines Hermeneutics in this way:

...derived from a Greek word connected with the name of the god Hermes, the reputed messenger and interpreter of the gods. It would be wrong to infer from this that the word denotes the interpretation or exegesis of Sacred Scripture. Usage has restricted the meaning of hermeneutics to the science of Biblical exegesis, that is, to the collection of rules which govern the right interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Exegesis is therefore related to hermeneutics, as language is to grammar, or as reasoning is to logic. (Maas)

The above definition implies that there are rules which govern the interpretation of sacred scripture. Teachers of the Bible are trained according to the principles of these rules. A skilled and knowledgeable teacher can use a biblical text to toy with, or twist the belief, imagination, and life of the faithful, to suit his whims and caprices.

The Greek Dictionary of the New Testament contained in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (1890) refers to the word “teacher” as “didaskalos” which means “An instructor, Doctor, Master, Teacher” (1320), whereas *didaskalia* refers to the “function of the *didaskal*’s – doctrine, learning, teaching” (1319). These titles and functions convey the sense of an authority figure. Just like the poet can invoke poetic license to use words

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sometimes in an unorthodox way, so is the teacher licensed, so to speak, to stretch his doctrinal imagination to convey prodigious truths. Sometimes, in the exercise of the skill of interpretation, myths are created that are not part of the original text that is being expounded. This fact, I believe, has been amply demonstrated by the numerous Jewish extra-biblical and Gnostic readings of the Old Testament materials (cf. Zohar, Kaballa, Gnosticism).

The second term Homiletics has been defined by the *New Advent* as:

the science that treats the composition and delivery of a sermon or other religious discourse. It includes all forms of preaching, viz., the sermon, homily, and catechetical instruction. Since the nineteenth century, homiletics has taken its place, especially in Germany, as a branch of pastoral theology. The “Standard Dictionary” defines Homiletics as ‘that branch of rhetoric that treats of the composition and delivery of sermons or homilies’. Many differ from this definition, and maintain that homiletics as a science is distinct from rhetoric. (Maas)

It implies that homily delivery, or sermonising, or preaching is a specialised activity that equally requires skill and some element of rhetoric. ‘Preach’ in Greek is called “κῆρυξ” which means “to herald (as a public crier), especially divine truth (the gospel):- preach (-er), proclaim, publish” (Stong 2784). This word broadens into the derivative “κῆρυγμα” which is “proclamation, preaching, of the gospel” (2782). The gospel itself is called κῆρυγμα because of its oral nature. Scientia gives us a more elaborate meaning of κῆρυγμα that appeals to our discussion here:

There is no one-word translation that really carries the meaning of kerugma. It could be translated as any of the following: utterance containing the essence of Christ; Christ-filled proclamation; impartation of Christ through proclamation. While kerugma is often translated as preach, this doesn’t really get at the meaning of the word. Vines say: ‘The substance of what is preached as distinct from the act of preaching.’ Strong says: ‘(1) that which is proclaimed by a herald or public crier, a proclamation by herald (2) in the NT the message or proclamation of the heralds of God or Christ’ these come closer to the meaning. (Scientia)

The idea of a herald or public crier here appears a little off from the activity of preaching, but this seems to be the actual calling of preachers: to proclaim or pronounce the presence, glory, power and majesty of the king or deity under whose service the herald or preacher is enlisted. This calls to mind the function of the Town criers in our different communities, with skill and oratory they

convey the message and directives of the king or the community council to natives of the town or community. Their practiced skill of annunciation commands and compels the attention of the people.

The word 'myth' from which 'myth-making' is derived is a very broad term. Myths are universally seen as messages in cipher about human existence as it relates to the world of spirits and the supernatural. A great number of myths are essentially reservoirs of archetypes, motifs, metaphors, riddles, types, and parables. Myths are narratives of a high and lofty structure in terms of themes and rhythm, often somewhat poetic and yet prosaic; tending to stretch the imagination of readers and listeners from the mundane to the mystical. In the words of Abrams and Harpham:

In classical Greek, "mythos" signified every story or plot, whether true or false. In its central modern significance, a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which seemed to explain (in terms of intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, as well as establish the rationale for social customs and observance and the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (109)

The definition above definitely constitutes the very elementary and basic understanding of myth. A more in-depth and elaborate study into the tenets of myth will no doubt demand an expansion of paradigms of meaning. Suffice it, however, for the purpose of this study, to make do with the definition thus given.

Myth-making, a derivative term from myth, pre-supposes that myths are not mystically self-existing; they are created. This fact is a propelling force for the literary study of myth. The creativity involved in the making of myth is of great interest to literary scholars, especially of the oral sect. Through the Parry-Lord model of 'oral-formulaic theory', scholars for years have held that oral literary forms are composed in performance through the composer-performer's drawing from the store of formulae inherent in the traditional pool. The word "mythopoeia" or "mythopoesis" has been used in some places as "myth-making". The terms are derived from Greek words that denote the idea of building or creating myths. In contemporary times these words are often applied to literary genres that involve narratives or films where imaginary or simulated mythology is contrived by the writer of prosaic forms or other narratives.

It was actually Tolkien's use of the word as the title of his poem in the 1930s that foisted this meaning on the word Mythopoeia. Authors who experiment

with this genre incorporate cultural allegories into their themes and employ archetypal motifs to create fiction. Notable mythopoeic authors include J. R. R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, William Blake, H.P. Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, George R. R. Martin, Mervyn Peake and George McDonald. Mythopoesis equally describes the process and craft of fabricating mythologies. A number of creative works of literature may have themes with mythic imperative; nevertheless, just a negligible number comes close to being studded with a density of codes, symbols and archetypes that are reminiscent of mythopoeia. Mythopoeia is artistically manufactured mythology. It is not derivative of age-long myths and tales of centuries of oral tradition. They are real time inspired creation or imaginations and scrawls of a gifted author or a group of writers.

Mythopoeia and Mythopoesis capture our perceived myth-making craft of modern preachers and teachers of religious truth. These men in holy orders are gifted and trained in the art of proclamation and elucidation; they wield these natural and acquired endowments to exude unimaginable creativity in mythic structures, far-reaching in their influence of the lives of individuals and groups.

Myth-Making and Modern Preachers and Teachers

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), the characters of Elesin Oba and his personal Praise Singer fundamentally capture the personality of the *Kerux* or the Herald. While Elesin Oba whose life and death are tied to Oba's fate, heralds the greatness of his king, his own praise singer in turn pours adulations on him who is destined by tradition to commit suicide at the event of the Oba's death. While their assignments are not exactly the same with those of modern preachers, their function of heralding the greatness of their masters and God respectively, is typical of the art of preaching.

The importance and power of preaching is underscored by the effect on the psyche of the hearers. *Britannica* reports that it is the rhetorical prowess of Jim Jones, the American Evangelist turned cult leader that persuaded over 900 members of his group to join him in committing mass suicide ("Biography of Jim-Jones"). Jones' story becomes reminiscent of the character of Ayesha, the butterfly goddess in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), who leads the villagers to drown in the sea as they attempt to walk through it, under the belief that God will part the water for the pilgrims on Hajj. The irony present in the character of Ayesha is that four distinct characters are bearing that same name in the novel, and all can be seen as Mahmoud's "alter ego". The first Ayesha is the Empress, the mortal enemy of the Imam, the second and third are Mahmoud's favourite wife and her prostitute alter ego, and the fourth is the butterfly goddess. For us, these characters can stand as the different sides to religious rhetoric,

depending on the intention and purpose of the user; preachers can use the art of proclaiming religious truth to edify or mortify. Whichever he chooses, mythic idioms, archetypes and motifs are usually employed to create meanings that can affect the psyche of devotees. Scientia further underscores the power of *kerugma* in these words:

Note that Strong does not say, “heralds of thoughts about God or Christ”. He says: “heralds of God or Christ”. That is, the essence of God, the essence of Christ, is contained in the utterance. By the context of how *kerugma* is used in the New Testament, we can see that this is not a kind of preaching that proceeds from human reasoning. It is the Utterance of Christ that is spoken by the Holy Spirit and contains the Power and Presence of Christ Himself – “A message that is preached about Jesus Christ comes from a man’s intellect and contains man’s precepts and opinions about Him. That kind of preaching brings very little or no spiritual change at all to the listener. The *kerugma*, on the other hand, is a proclamation that carries with it the life and attributes of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by it hearers can experience His life. The Gospel, then, is not a message about Jesus Christ, but an impartation of Him to the hearer.” (Scientia)

The very nature of the New Testament *kęrugma* following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ was prone to mythic accoutrements, since it was transmitted by oral tradition for scores of years after resurrection before being written down. There is a modern agreement that Jesus should be understood as a real Jew who existed in a Jewish environment (Voorst 5-9). In scholar Ehrman’s view, Jesus had a very firm root in his own era and location as a first-century Palestinian Jew – with his ancient Jewish understanding of humanity, and God – that he is not easily assimilated into a modern idiom. Ehrman emphasises that Jesus was brought up in a Jewish home in the Jewish village of Nazareth. He was raised in the Jewish traditions, embraced Jewish customs and subsequently grew to be a Jewish teacher, who, alongside other Jewish teachers of the era, disputed on the Law of Moses orally (13, 86, 276). Dunn is of the view that:

Early Christians sustained these teachings of Jesus orally. Rabbis or teachers in every generation were raised and trained to deliver this oral tradition accurately. It consisted of two parts: the Jesus tradition (i.e., logia or sayings of Jesus) and inspired opinion. The distinction is one of authority: where the earthly Jesus has spoken on a subject that word is to be regarded as an instruction or command. (Dunn 19-55)

Furthermore, Dunn exerts that:

Prior to the reliability of the printing press, the oral tradition was considered more trustworthy than written texts. The accuracy of the oral gospel tradition was insured by the community designating certain learned individuals to bear the main responsibility for retaining the gospel message of Jesus. The prominence of teachers in the earliest communities such as the Jerusalem Church is best explained by the communities' reliance on them as repositories of oral tradition. (Dunn 55)

A remarkable feature that has emerged from a recent study is the "amazing consistency" of the record of the tradition, "which gave birth to the NT. The core and basic thrust of the oral tradition was painstakingly maintained. The core was established and did not vary in its fundamental character at any time of the history of the New Testament" (Dunn 55).

An important fact in a review of Richard Bauckham's book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006) states that "The common wisdom in the academy is that stories and sayings of Jesus circulated for decades, undergoing countless retellings and embellishments before being finally set down in writing" (cf. Hahn et al 225). This fact is not in the least pejorative; rather it merely highlights the myth-making process of preachers and teachers. The circulation of the stories and sayings of Jesus was done by disciples of Jesus carrying out the great commission of their master to preach and teach the world his word (*Revised Standard Version*, Mtt.28:18-20; Mk.16:15-17). The assignment of telling and re-telling the gospel truth or preaching and teaching from other texts of Scripture involves interpretation and proclamation, which in themselves make room for aesthetic and doctrinal embellishment. Therein lies the myth-making power of Preachers and Teachers.

Sacred texts, whether of the Bible, the Koran, or the Vedic texts, are given power by the interpretations and proclamations of their preachers and teachers. One may feel tempted to suggest that the texts then lie in the power of human or mundane interpretation and imagination. This may not be the case if the *kerux* (Preacher) and the *didaskal*'s (Teacher) are devout and trained. If anything, the *kerux* and the *didaskal*'s are the ones that lie in the power of the *kerugma*. We believe that this has something to do with Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." The Preacher and the Teacher become servants not of the letters of the texts, but of the spirit behind the text. Jesus himself as a preacher and teacher, submitted to the spirit of the texts, and was able to make living myths out of the Old

Testament texts – myths that are true. Thus, he said to his disciples, “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (*King James Version*, Jn.6:63).

We seem not to have a defined practice of preaching and teaching in the corpus of African traditional religions and lore, but some practices can strike one as proclamations and mythopoeic in nature. Some of these practices also serve as forms of preserving history, and have their different expressions in different ancient cultures, some of which have survived into the modern times. Among the Igbos of Bende, Item, Abam, Ohafia, and Abiriba peoples of present day Abia State, Nigeria, the war dance troupes preserve great deeds of bravery and valor with their talking drums (Igba). Initiates of the war cult of these areas understand the language of the drums as events of ancient wars and warriors are recounted by the rhythms and sounds. It has been said that in ancient times the sounding of these drums and the underlying tales they recount, together with the invocation of war gods of the land, spur warriors into dare-devil and unusual feats during inter-tribal wars.

The use of Igba or the talking drum is not exclusive to these tribal communities of the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. It can be found among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria, and the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria. Similarly, in Nri, Enugu-Ukwu, Ogbunike, Onitsha and some other parts of Anambra State, of Eastern Nigeria, the Oja flute serves virtually the same function as the Igba; with it, the awesome rituals of the masquerade cults are announced, the lofty deeds of the founders of the tribe are recounted. One wonders what a great reading it will make if the tales hidden in the Igba and the Oja are creatively transmitted into texts for the public. The strange idioms, mysteries and rituals, together with the gruesome and ghastly deeds of valiant warriors of these tribal societies will no doubt inspire awe in the minds of modern readers. But then, to the initiates and members of these tribal communities, it will be a faithful mediation of their spiritual and cultural realities. Consequently, the Igba drummers and the Oja flutists, can represent preachers and teachers of traditional and ritual doctrines of their communities, and therefore myth-makers in their tribal milieu.

C.S. Lewis without apology, but with an unrivaled insight into the nature of Christianity has identified the religion as a myth that is however true. Lewis believes that most of the classical and ancient archetypes of life and atonement find their consummate fulfillment in the story of Christ the complete sacrifice - the myth that is true. He writes:

Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of

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legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens - at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Orsis, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. (141)

The fact that Lewis presents to us is the fact that centuries of orthodox Christianity has failed to perceive or receive. Yet regularly, from the churches, the preachers and teachers of Scripture in such imaginative and inspired artistry, present and re-present this myth that is a fact. Without much ado, we dare say that Lewis himself was a lay *kerux* and *didaskal*'s, for he was a Christian apologetic. He further asserts, "to be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other" (141). The myth consists of the various imaginative and creative ways, the preacher and teacher re-enacts in words the fundamental truths of the Christian doctrine.

This artistic and creative activity of preachers and teachers has been on for ages. The Old Testament high priests, the prophets, the Rabbis, The Zohar, Kabballa, and Gnostic instructors are all myth-makers as they perform the functions of interpreting and proclaiming sacred truths to meet certain needs and suit certain occasions. In the words of Klaus Koch:

The biblical word has proved to be not truth in a fossilised, unchanging sense, but truth which is constantly adapting itself to the circumstances of the time. Anyone active in the church today is faced with a peculiar problem concerning the interpretation of biblical texts in sermons or teaching ... If the preacher or catechist wishes to translate a text with a long tradition into modern terms he is faced with decision as to which stage of transmission must be considered the binding, and therefore the canonical one. For it is the church's lot to use the Bible as canon, as a model for life and teaching. (100-101)

The above analysis may be correct of Koch's modern period. In our own contemporary era, with the proliferation of churches and ministries, with preachers and teachers from different backgrounds, and many with little training, little attention is often paid to what stage of transmission a text may be in. Our contemporary preachers and teachers are often emotionally and circumstantially driven in their scriptural exegesis and application. This tendency makes even more ample room for myth-making. Surprisingly, this approach seems to be

more efficacious in reaching down to virtually all levels of worshippers in a given worship session, because the preacher or teacher seems to oscillate between the text, his emotion and those of the faithful, and the circumstantial needs of the hour. Our contemporary preachers are masters in this conscious myth-making. Lewis concludes his essay “Myth Became Facts” (1994) in the following words:

This is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child, and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher. (142)

The Place of Myth-Making in Societies

Despite the seeming averse disposition of modern sensibilities to myths and legends, myths and myth-making are constantly with us in contemporary time. Consciously or unconsciously, we rely on and make myths to explain life’s perplexities and soothe our jarred psyches. According to Birzer, “Myth holds an estranged place in the modern world. But this is the modern world’s fault, not myth’s. Indeed, myth might just save the modern world from its innumerable follies.”

Several scholars in the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries have employed myth to explain and deal with contemporary issues. Freud used myth to explain his theory of the subconscious, and clinical psychological approaches have been developed based on his theories in the explication of the subconscious mind in relation to certain aberrant human behaviours. Jung has emphasised the theory of the ‘collective unconscious’ indicated by archetypes manifesting as universal mythic idioms. This is a theory that has ruled out the supernatural while promoting the ‘psychonatural’. Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, J. R. R. Tolkien, and some others have brought an immense awareness of myths and their numerous operations to our attention.

The place of myth-making in contemporary times cannot be overemphasised. While religious instructions are generated by myth-making, societal world-views are shaped and reshaped through the same. To elucidate our assertion here, we will refer to two particular world-views that are widespread around the globe: ‘Terrorism’ and ‘the Conspiracy Theory of a Global Control Plan’. Terrorism has made the world full of uncertainties and worries over senseless destruction of life and property.

Often, people wonder what terrorists gain by destroying the lives of others, and sometimes blowing themselves up as suicide bombers; the answer I dare

say is not far-fetched: one can see it in the pervasive influence of dangerous myth-making. ISIS wants to establish an Islamic State run only by Islamic laws (Sharia) and principles. To achieve this end, the myth of gaining heaven by slaying an infidel is invoked in the doctrinal instructions of clerics, and so a large-scale slaughter of innocent people ensues. In the same way, Boko Haram, the third most deadly terrorist organisation in the world, in search of Islamic Republic of Northern Nigeria, created a myth that 'Western Education is Dangerous.' This myth has seen the massacre of thousands of innocent people in the West African sub-region.

In the wake of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, a myriad of explanations have been adduced as to the origin of the ravaging virus. However, it is instructive that a film *Contagion*, directed by Steven Soderbergh in 2011, as it were, foreshadows large-scale devastation by a virus from Asia. A fictional book also by the title *Contagion* published much earlier in 1996 by Robin Cook, though with a different setting from the film, equally has as its subject matter an invasion of an unleashed virus upon the society. This recurrent imagery in fiction and film-making can best be described as 'Mythopoeia', albeit dressed in the garb of 'conspiracy theory'.

Prominent among these myth-making forms is the one arising from the production of a Vaccine for COVID-19, and the fear of a forced vaccination that pervade the world. Need I say that the Media is awash with the fever of this 'conspiracy theory' about a planned microchip implantation via a world-wide vaccination programme being orchestrated by the elite globalists like the Rockefeller family of America, the Rothschilds of Europe, Henry Kissinger, and Gates, through Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other allied corporations with an agenda of world depopulation (Gate, "Bill Gates's Depopulation Initiative [U.N. Agenda 21" 0.00 - 3.01]).

Now, one wonders what could have planted this ingrained suspicion on the communal psyche of society, so to speak, an investigation will reveal that the most vocal of the proponents of these 'Conspiracy Theories' is Evangelical Christianity. The fodder for the fire of this narrative is the myth of 'The Mark of the Beast' in the Biblical book of Revelation which runs thus:

15 He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. 16 He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, 17 and that no one may buy or sell except one who has [a]the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name 18 Here is wisdom. Let him who

has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666. (*New King James Version*, Rev. 13:15-18).

These few verses of the Christian Scripture have given vent to several Mythopoeic interpretations, the kernel of which is that a world-wide ruler will arise who will seek to be worshipped, and will want to place his mark upon the right hand or forehead of all his subjects, and that mark will be the access code for financial activities in the world. The Mythopoeia around this scripture is that all proponents of One World Government and implanted Electronic IDs are emissaries of this coming despot called 'The Anti-Christ'. If myth-making can affect society this much, one cannot rule out its power as an instrument of social guidance and change.

Conclusion

The myth-making propensity is quite high with modern preachers and teachers, what with the complexities of contemporary societies where every day life's realities are strained and stressed. People seek answers to the absurdities of the modern world. Myths are created by custodians of scriptural truth, as its age long precepts are applied to the intricacies of our 'jet age'. The political and educational systems of civil societies are yet to come to terms with the enormous power of myth-making, as a veritable tool of psychological orientation of the individual and the re-orientation of the communal psyche.

When you hear such evangelistic crusades of the American miracle evangelist Benny Hinn captioned 'Atmosphere for Miracles', and some 'fabulous' stories of miraculous occurrences at such gatherings; Nigerian Bishop David Oyedepo's book title *Exploits of Faith* (2005), and great prosperity that has characterised the lives of adherents to faith principles espoused in the book; Nigerian Pastor Enoch Adebayo's announcement of healing and deliverance of demonised persons; Evangelist Reinhard Bonke's Healing crusades with 'too good to be real' testimonies of miraculous encounters; when Ayesha in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* through her indoctrination leads a multitude to mass suicide by drowning in the sea, with the hope of paradise; or men and women all too willing to blow themselves up in preparation for a celestial reception in some paradise, you are dealing with preachers and teachers making myths – myths that are facts. Interpretation of texts and its proclamation give rise to unimaginable solutions, explanations and motivation to the various lives' circumstances of devotees, whether to the positive or negative.

The interpretations of certain portions of scripture by some preachers and teachers have been known to influence adversely or favourably the lifestyle or conduct of their listeners and members. For instance, people's dress codes,

eating habits and diverse religious observances have been known to be influenced by certain interpretations of given texts proffered by teachers and preachers. And this goes to underscore the efficacy of the myth-making power of teachers and preachers, especially in modern times.

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