

## Chapter 2

# Mythos and Logos

The distinction between what Karen Armstrong (following earlier scholars) currently refers to as *mythos* and *logos* is more familiar in other guises such as ‘art versus science’, ‘spirituality versus worldliness’ and ‘values versus facts’ (Armstrong, 1993). These, however, all lack quite the generality required, referring to facets of the polarity in question rather than the polarity itself. For current purposes the two may be characterised as follows: *Mythos* refers to those broad frameworks of value and meaning in terms of which we conduct and evaluate our lives and experience the universe as a whole. A *mythos* is not a body of empirical propositions but a way of being and experiencing. It is what gives life its *point*. The dominant *mythos* of a culture is expressed in its arts, literature, values, aspirations and rituals, providing individuals with the resources for interpreting and expressing their emotional lives and relationships with others. It is their articulation of *mythos* which can provide written texts such as sacred scriptures, poetry, drama and novels with such an enduring appeal, sometimes millennia after their creation. And insofar as they fail to articulate it, they become unread except by a handful of academic specialists. *Logos* on the other hand refers to our practical and problem-solving understanding of how the world works, our grasps both of physical cause–effect relationships and how to exercise social power over others. *Logos* is about means not ends. The texts which *logos* yields are inherently transient in general appeal unless leavened with a yeast of *mythos*.<sup>1</sup> We care not for the wheat transactions recorded on cuneiform clay tablets, but the Epic of Gilgamesh remains fascinating; the Shakespeare industry prospers as ever, but Tudor works on church administration remain under the dust awaiting a Ph.D. student. And pre-1980 runs of specialist science journals remain unconsulted by students and lecturers alike, while English students can still delightedly rediscover Jane Austen and TV script-writers ransack Charles Dickens yet again. Even the most devout largely ignore the biblical Book of Numbers, yet the Gospel according to St. John remains required reading for anyone with pretensions to being educated, Christian or not.

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<sup>1</sup> This may take the form of visual illustrations which gives them enduring artistic or aesthetic appeal, especially in books on medicine, technology and the life-sciences in general.

When politics focuses on matters of economics, social cohesion, public health, controlling crime and defence against external threat it is in the service of *logos*. But when rulers come to believe a *mythos* is all they require, that, for example, as instruments of God's will their success is guaranteed and *logos*-based practical expertise irrelevant, the consequences are, as Karen Armstrong observes, usually disastrous. The eternal political problem is balancing *mythos*-rooted values and *logos*-known practicality. *Mythos* alone cannot tell you how to solve practical real-world problems. *Logos* alone cannot guide you on the morality of the solutions it enables you to identify.

To get down to brass tacks: Over the last century and a half Christianity has witnessed the steady disproof of the Bible's empirical *logos* content as stating literal truths. At the same time Psychology has forever writhed in a cleft stick between its *logos*-like scientific aspirations and the centrality of *mythos* to its own subject matter—which is in turn the very thing which is producing it. The cliché that Psychology in general has replaced (or wants to replace) religion is, we will see, quite misleading. What is truer perhaps is that western societies at large have *wanted* it to do so. As an aspiring natural science, Psychology is in the service of *logos*, and, insofar as it succeeds in fulfilling this aspiration, can do no such thing. But there is a vicious twist. The staggering success of the natural sciences for a long time held out such promise that only an expertise on human nature that sailed under its banner could hope for cultural credibility (see Mary Midgley's 1992 *Science as Salvation* for an insightful review of the general topic of science's *mythos* aspirations, although this is not a term she uses). Psychologists themselves could only flourish if they were able to offer 'scientific' accounts of mental distress, techniques of education and child-rearing, as well as demarcations between the normal and abnormal, the healthy and pathological, in all areas of human behaviour and character. Many strove to promote 'holism' or appreciation of individual uniqueness to counter the analytical and reductionist approaches of their more hard-headedly scientifically orthodox colleagues. But the more these tactics were employed the more they shifted into the territory of *mythos*, Psychoanalysis perhaps being the paradigm example.

It is worth recalling at this point that late nineteenth century science had produced its own science-rooted *mythos*. It did this by converting the Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary images into a creation myth of a more conventional kind. The Christian 'Fall' was replaced by an evolutionary 'Rise', and white ruling-class Europeans were the highest and finest achievement of evolution itself. This evolutionary *mythos*, when allowed to guide practical affairs, had consequences no less disastrous than those which ensue when a religious *mythos* occupies the policy-making saddle; eugenics, degenerationism and scientific racism being cast as direct applications of scientific knowledge. Even the usual ethical evaluations of compassion (good) and ruthless competition (bad) were at times stood on their heads by exponents of the evolutionary *mythos*.

By the 1920s most psychologists had rejected this kind of use of evolutionary theory, but the inevitability of Psychology being infused with *mythos* elements and connotations has remained inescapable. It is, in fact, in providing these with a comforting 'scientific' ratification, that Psychology's task is popularly understood to lie.

*Mythos* is, to reiterate, not about generating empirically testable propositions. It is about generating stories, images and symbols which can provide our emotions and life-experiences with meaning, value and structure. *Logos* is about identifying the causal principles by which the world operates and generating methods for controlling these. This includes, in the case of the social world, the formulation of laws and regulations which ensure that society runs smoothly and consistently with the values which it ultimately derives from *mythos*. But the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' rarely, prior to the mid-twentieth century, seriously inhibited Christian societies from including capital punishment in the Statute Book (let alone going to war).

What we are in effect exploring in this work therefore are some of the vicissitudes in how both Psychology and mainstream Christianity have managed this tension. When Psychology fails to pay *mythos* its due it always risks becoming dehumanisingly reductionistic and severing itself from one of its principle sources. Conversely, when Christianity fails to pay *logos* its due it always risks becoming absurd. I am not, I should stress, arguing here that the *mythos/logos* distinction is synonymous with that between religion and science. All that is being indicated is that these are the territories, so to speak, which they respectively inhabit. But Psychology exists at the point where they encounter each other and demand integration, for the continent of which they are territories is a single one; the psyche itself. One might say that Psychology is a cultural expression of the psyche's efforts at finding and articulating such an integration. It has not, alas, done very well so far.

A first move in rectifying the received image of inherent opposition between the two parties is to examine the historical roles of religion in the origins of modern Psychology.



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