THE INFLUENCE OF MYTH IN SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS

by Robert H. Wyllie

Ernst Cassirer opens his book, *The Myth of the State,* with a reflection on the new type of political thinking which seems to have emerged in Europe between the two world wars. He says:-

"Problems that had been unknown to political thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came suddenly to the fore. Perhaps the most important and most alarming feature in the development of modern political thought is the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought. The preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our modern political system is obvious . . . . . How can we account for the new phenomenon that so suddenly appeared on our political horizon and in a sense seemed to reverse all our former ideas of the character of our intellectual and social life? ".

Cassirer asks, and endeavours to answer, this question in terms of post-war European political attitudes. In this essay I am concerned with our own much more limited field, which however presents extremely individual and intractable problems.

We are all accustomed to hearing the word "myth" used in everyday speech to signify a fiction, or untrue popular belief. This meaning is given by the Oxford English dictionary, whose definition of myth reads:-

"A purely fictitious narrative, usually involving super-natural persons, actions or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena."

MYTHS ARE "TRUE"

However, a great deal of important research in this century has been devoted to enquiries into the deeper significance of myths, especially in relation to primitive social structures and to primitive people's attitudes towards their environments and the natural phenomena. We have been shown by writers such as Cassirer, whom I have quoted above, Eliade, Gusdorf, Lévi-Strauss and others, that mythic consciousness is a phase of man's interpretation of himself and his world which is "primitive" not only in the historic or prehistoric sense of this word but also in the sense of being primary or fundamental. It becomes evident that mythic orientations are present at all stages of human development. The writers I have mentioned show us in fact that we have to understand myth to understand many current and modern attitudes, as well as attitudes which we would think of as characteristically "primitive." And it seems that the first thing to be understood is that myths are not "false" but "true", at least while they remain myths in the sense in which they were originally understood. This is, of course, because man has different ways of access to truth, and the truths expressed by science, mathematics and logic are not the only truths.

It seems advisable here to recapitulate a little of what has been said by modern writers about the character and structure of myths so that the true meaning of myth can be clearly kept in mind.

In its manifestations in a primitive society or tribe a myth is not so much an "account" as a re-enactment of an exemplary event which is believed to have taken place at some beginning, for instance at the genesis of the natural world or at the first emergence of the tribe itself. The myth has been described as a liturgy of repetition. In its original sense it is a rite whose function as liturgy is to hold in existence the vitally important things upon which the life of the tribe depends, and which, without the performance of the rite, would "fall apart", disintegrate or become lost.

In its most primitive sense a myth is the performance of a rite rather than a narrative. It is in fact an obligatory ritual in a primitive tribe because the duty devolves on the members of the tribe to maintain the tribe itself, and this in turn depends on maintaining its solidarity with its deities, its ancestors and its traditions. The mythic rites express and maihtain whatever is sacred to the society, and in primitive societies the natural order retains its sacred character. Mythic re-enactments therefore include harvest festivals, celebrations of the return of spring, rites connected with human and animal fertility as well as the fertility of the earth, préliminaries to hunting, installations of head-men, initiation of adult members and so on.

I mentioned above that the characteristic of a primitive myth is that is is always *true*. It is also the characteristic of myth that it is believed in with religious ardour, so that not believing in it or neglect of the rituals would be sacrilegious and would lead to disaster, the falling apart of all that the myth holds together. Any doubt cast upon its truth would evoke a militantly defensive reaction from the tribe. For the tribe or clan who live within the reality of a myth the myth is an *absolute* value and doubt of its truth is unthinkable.

SENSE OF SECURITY

Generally speaking when myths become "stories" they are no longer valid as myths, but at the same time there seems to be a sense in which they can be validly understood as embodied in narratives. There are interpretative myths, such as the creation stories in the first two chapters of *Genesis.* The virtue of the narratives is that they interpret deep-seated and apparently unescapable aspects of the nature of man in his relationships to natural world, and in his social and religious orientations. They explain man to himself in a way which no scientific or systematic explanation could accomplish. It seems that for human beings understanding is a primary need, and it is only through understanding that stability and a sense of security can be attained. Myths offer to primitive men a sense of being "at home" and anchored through an understanding of things which would otherwise be inexplicable and uncanny.

We are concerned here with a psychological significance of myths which applies to modern and sophisticated societies as well as to those which we customarily think of as "primitive". In all people, however sophisticated, there are attitudes, emotional states and behaviour patterns which elude rational explanation and which depend on an emotive

power which is present in myths and which is far stronger than any rational argument.

It may be of course that in saying this we are rather naive. It has been quite often said that when we speak of reason and "rational explanation", we are speaking in any case from within the "myth" of modern science, in terms of which Western European man tends to interpret and organise his world. This is the myth that reality itself is rational, and that order is imposed on nature and society by rational procedures. We live in a society which is orientated towards increasing control of nature through scientific knowledge and technical skill. The myth of science functions within the belief that rational explanation yields the key to control. There is a difference, of course, between this and the early myths in that the modern myth of science and technology is secular rather than religious. There is a difference in quality in this respect, but it is arguable that it too is founded on a blind faith.

It is also observable that sometimes a myth of earlier or different origin, which is in conflict with reason, stubbornly refuses to give way to reason, because the people who understand themselves in its terms find something outrageous and sacrilegious in its denial and find their whole security threatened by the possible destruction of a belief in which their tradition is enshrined. To them such a denial would be even more outrageous than a proof that reason does not always yield the true answer. It is here that we encounter the strange but very understandable phenomenon that myths which have lost their validity in a widening context and are no longer "myths" in the primitive sense, are clung to with fanatical tenacity and zeal. We find this exemplified in attitudes to some of the historical events in this country. A victory in war, for example, takes on a sacred character and is celebrated in an annually renewed dedication. A denial on the grounds of history, of the truly heroic qualities of national heroes, might easily give rise to a sense of blasphemy and arouse the militantly defensive type of reaction which was mentioned earlier. In order to transmit the "true" tradition to children being educated it might even seem necessary to re-write history in some of its details so as to bring it into conformity with the pattern of the myth to which the self-image of the nation is related. A primitive clan's continuity and stability is guarded by its own myths rather than by universal patterns of thinking, but here we have a situation in which a rapidly expanding and sophisticated modern nation clings stubbornly to primitive national myths, feeling that on them its identity as a people depends.

MYTHS IN THE MODERN WORLD

The problem with myths in the modern world is that they lose their character, or rather that the quality of their truth changes and their traditional interpretation of the ethos of their people can become disproportionately emphasised. This seems to have happened in this country with the result that the Nationalist myth, instead of an anchor which secures the existence of its people, becomes a fetter which destroys their freedom. Generally, myths of race and origins tend to keep a society rigid in the grip of its traditions and resistant to change. The result is an attempt to preserve the myths, and the national attitudes which the myths hold together, by direct efforts to prevent interaction with other cultures. While free association and social mixing seems good to most people it becomes anathema to those who live within the myth. The measures imposed to preserve the myth become increasingly coercive and repressive.

Before developing more fully the significance of these aspects to our contemporary and local situation I should like to mention one other fundamental characteristic of myth which is certainly not less relevant to this discussion than any of the others that have been mentioned. This is the characteristic that myth and language are closely related and appear to have a common source in that they seem to arise together and are equally possessions of and dimensions of humanity.

The theme of the relationship between myth and language is in itself a very wide and complex one, but sufficient can be said very briefly which will at least point towards its significance.

Most of us are familiar with the religious associations of sacred names, and various misapplications of sacred names which cause deep-seated emotional reactions and are considered in fact to be blasphemous. Other names among certain peoples are taboo and we know that there are holy or ineffable names which in certain religions must not be pronounced.

Again names, like myths, have interpretative significance. We do not know and often do not in fact perceive the objects of our environment until we know their names. We know that it is through language that both our perceptions and emotions can be ordered and understood.

It is mythic thinking which brings about the special relationship between the name of a person and a person himself. A name is clearly far more than a means of identification of any individual person and is more than a possession. It is a symbol of identity which in some way establishes the personal identity itself. We read of the edict of a Chinese emperor of the third Century B.C. whereby a particular pronoun in the first person should be reserved in application to him alone, and, at the other end of the scale, that slaves under Roman law had no legal name because they had no legal standing as persons. To highlight a specifically local social problem, we know that the use of common European first names (which is the way many Europeans know men and women of the black races) is belittling to Bantu races. They are known to themselves by the family names by which they are rooted in society. Again, giving people numbers instead of names, as is done to prisoners, tends to destroy them as persons.

A particular language is built up as the common creation of the community who speak it. It grows with them and is the strongest possible bond between them because it belongs literally to their origin, their environment, their beliefs and their culture. The home language is consequently a very precious possession of any people and has a strong bond of affinity with myths of origin. It seems to be true that both myths and language are very powerfully involved with the feelings of self-identity of peoples and individuals.

EMOTIVE WORDS

Again the close affinity between language and myth is one of the sources of the emotive power of words. Few of us would deny that this power too, in itself, is characteristically human. It gives words poetic life and enables them to reveal truth through what is called "affective" knowledge. It may very well be that it is the power of words which makes all emotional response possible. However, an emotive word can become associated with a minor "myth" in the debased sense of myth in which it becomes a political weapon. We have all been schooled to think of "communism" as menacing and evil even though when we ask each other what it is we are quite surprised to find we do not know.

The difficulty is that there has been a tendency to spread its connotations of evil as a sort of contamination on to other words such as "integration", "liberalism", "protest", "freedom", "human rights", etc. This seems to be done by a combination of threat and association, through the constant close juxtaposition in political speeches of the word "communism" (heavily charged with its threat of illegality, detention without trial, charges of terror, etc.) with the other words which should, in any modern society, represent perfectly respectable attitudes or fields of enquiry. On the other side of the coin we have the tendency of language to make some things sound much better than they are. For instance the "homelands" of the African people are not really homelands as such, although the name refers to land set aside, by the present and earlier governments, for the exclusive occupation of the people concerned. There is a tendency for a pseudo myth to grow up around the euphemistic term. Cassirer points out that the power of mythical thought as a political weapon depends to some extent on the skilful use of propaganda which is made possible by the affinity between myth and language. No doubt it also depends to quite a large extent on simple prejudice and the pseudo myth or "popular idea of natural or historical phenomena" given in the dictionary definition which was quoted earlier.
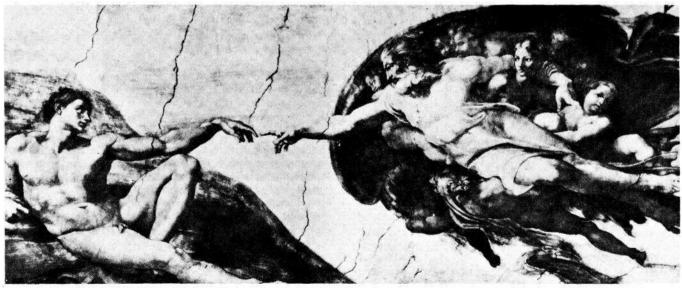
DISORIENTATION AND FLUX

When we look at our present situation in this country from the perspective of the influence of myth on people's thinking and attitudes we are presented with a very confused picture. In some aspects there seems to be an extreme state of discorientation and flux and in others a fixed and fanatical determination to retain traditions. The governing political party are firmly fixed in their conviction that political "good" depends on the retention and maintenance of their own national myth of racial identity, their own language, and their sense of identity with the land which goes with them. This attitude to them is identified with national virtue and closely associated with religious faith, so that any suggestion that it might not in fact be a valid or valuable attitude is met with violent reaction. However, this racial attitude in the governing body of a very heterogeneous community is by no means an unmixed blessing for those who do not belong to the tradition which inspires it. Where for instance the governing body are in control of education they seem to wish everybody else's education to be organised to preserve their tradition. Judging by their own interpretation of what is best for people they insist on

home language education for the benefit even of those who do not want it. Segregation becomes the policy because of the fear that their own tradition might be lost in integration in a mixed society. They decide therefore to make "love for one's own" the first national and religious tenet. And it is no doubt a very splended tenet, so long as it is not applied to restriction of the development of others in a free and open situation where perhaps the first essentials of education are appreciation of the fluid state of affairs, preparedness to change and understanding of the changing world.

In this country we Whites have watched the sad process of detribalization, and the effects of destroying the myths of people whom our forebears, from the standpoint of our western 'civilization", assumed arbitrarily to be barbaric and "uncivilized". Their primitive myths have fallen before others which have proved more dominant, and which have motivated the use of force by people who crudely thought that the possession of technology was identified with civilization.

MORE PRIMITIVE AND FUNDAMENTAL

It would however be a very gross over-simplification to say that the domination by the technically sophisticated over the technically unsophisticated represents at all completely the state of affairs in this country. The Nationalist myth is far more primitive and fundamental than the modern myth of technology, because it is the myth of a people whose national origins and language are rooted in the country and are threatened by other forces within the country. The situation is however complicated by the fact that they also have all the resources of technology at their command together with all the sophisticated weapons and implements of a modern state. But I do not think that the strength of the Afrikaner nationalists lies in either technology or commerce. It is seated in their identification with a particular territory and language, and this has been strong enough to draw together, in the Afrikaans speaking world, all cultural and language organisations, the churches, the schools and universities, the press, the chambers of commerce and industry, the women's organisations, and youth groups, into an incomparably strong formation with the Nationalist party as its centre and the maintenance of the party as the governing party as its central motivation. Once again I feel that from one point of view we feel
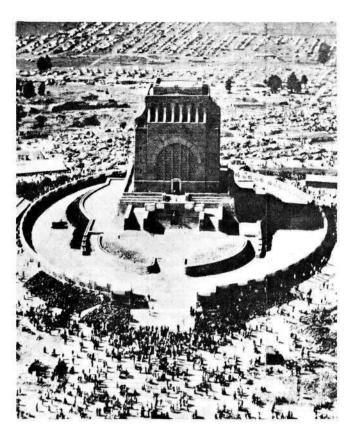

Michaelangelo's "Creation of Man"

bound to express admiration. How could one deny the virtue of such admirable national unity? The feature which is not admirable is that it produces restrictive organisation. It cannot risk a truly out-going policy. It has to control most carefully education and public ideas by rigid censorship and propaganda.

For those of us who are none the less South Africans but who do not subscribe to the Nationalist tradition because our origins are different, so that we do not in fact by birth belong within it, and who moreover *do* subscribe to the principles of free association and enlightened social change, the situation is to say the least, uncomfortable and embarrassing, and in many ways quite absurd. Perhaps we could even laugh at the absurdity, but we can hardly do this in the face of the social injustices which accompany preservation of the myth and which bear so heavily on the social conscience of the whole country.

I do not suggest that social injustice derives from the Nationalist myth as its only or its main source. Obviously there are many elements which contribute to it. Among these of course are the myth of White superiority and the many residual prejudices and exploitation motives of colonialism which haunt our society. What I do suggest is that the Nationalist myth, which is in its effects far more dynamic than any of the other politically emotive influences in this country (at least at present), is at least something which has to be understood before the problems it poses can be squarely faced either by those who live within its tradition or by those who are naturally outside it. The question of whether or not the problems are soluble appears at the moment to be impossible to answer.▢

Voortrekker Monument — Pretoria

NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS -

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF

ITS REVIVAL

by C. Sewpershad.

The revival of the Natal Indian Congress is of significance not only to the Indian community but to South Africa as a whole. It fulfills a need that has existed for some eight years in the political structure of South Africa.

The banning of the African National Congress, the Coloured People's Congress and the Congress of Democrats left the Natal Indian Congress as the only movement to voice the democratic views of the Congress Alliance.

During the early part of the 1960's almost all the leaders of the Congress Alliance were either jailed or banned. This left the way open for opportunists to step in and further their own selfish ends.

The widespread bannings of the leaders of the Natal Indian Congress led to a dangerous situation for the Indian community.

NO ORGANISATION

From about 1962 until the Congress was revived in October 1971 the Indian Community did not have an organisation

through which it could make its grievances felt and its voice heard. The government saw this as a golden opportunity to arrogate to itself the right to appoint Indian leaders. We thus saw the creation of the South African Indian Council.

The emergence of the South African Indian Council resulted in a strange situation for the Indian people. The Indian community now had to contend with the humiliation of having their representatives chosen by the very Government that had always shown them scant, if any, respect. We also had a group of people who were quite prepared to allow themselves to be nominated by an undemocratic government to speak on behalf of the Indian people.

This was a situation which was quite intolerable to our community. People throughout the country expressed their unqualified rejection of the Council. It was obvious that the