

Modern Mythology

Progress, Science, Freedom

As members of a modern, technological society, it is easy for us to look upon ancient mythological religions as primitive superstitions borne of an absence of good, scientific information. There is, after all, a huge difference between a concept of the Sun as a nuclear powered star around which orbits a series of planets, and that of a god who bears this source of light in his chariot to its rising and its setting. Centuries of scientific discovery have thoroughly demythologized the cosmos and the old myths, such as that of Apollo, seem ridiculous.

However, in his small tome *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, Joseph Ratzinger provides a caution against becoming too smug about our superior knowledge. And he does so by uncovering three modern myths; the myths of progress, science and freedom. These are not “myths” in the sense that they are not real. They are all acknowledged to be real, valuable and good. They become “mythological” when they exceed their own categorical boundaries or when they are disconnected from other important values.

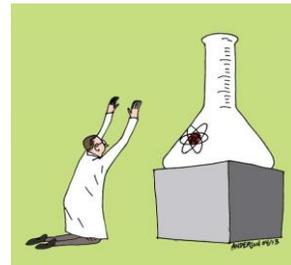
Progress:

We seem to take for granted that human progress is confined to economic, scientific and technological categories. And, for sure, no one can deny the immense progress that has been made in medicine, electronics, standard of living and in so many other areas of life. At the same time, Ratzinger writes, *“the ambivalence of this progress is obvious. Progress is beginning to put Creation---the basis of our existence---at risk; it creates inequality among human beings, and it generates ever new threats to the world and humanity.”* In other words, we seem to rely on a narrowly defined sense of progress to “work its magic” in creating a great future.

Ratzinger notes that this mythological progress *“increasingly became the general object of human hope once hope in life after death had been dismantled.”* This absolutizing of progress effectively forgets the “person” who is its subject. *“Man, precisely as man, remains the same both in primitive and in technologically developed situations. He does not stand on a higher level merely because he has learned to use more highly developed tools.”*

Science:

Similarly, science, for all the immense good it has produced for the world and for humanity, becomes mythologized when it is granted the sole power to explain reality. But, as we know, *“Science can also serve inhumanity! Here we may recall the weapons of mass destruction, medical experiments on human beings, or the treatment of a person merely as a store of usable organs. Accordingly, it must be clear that science too is subject to moral criteria and that its true nature is lost wherever the only criterion to which it adheres is power or commerce---or even merely success---instead of human dignity.”* And, to these sentiments I would add the tendency to reduce all values to waves, particles, matter and energy. This mythology is ‘scientism.’ To paraphrase Flannery O’Connor, if Love is only a chemical reaction or a series of neurons firing in a brain then “to Hell with it!”



Freedom:

It is *“often thought of as something anarchical, something simply opposed to institutions. This makes it an idol, since human freedom can never be anything other than freedom expressed in the right way of living in common---freedom in justice. Otherwise it becomes a lie and leads to slavery.”*

There is a certain obviousness to this mythology: The freedom people so often propose in every day language doesn’t really exist and, if it did, it would probably kill us. There are always constraints, physical, moral and otherwise. And the mythologizing of freedom seems to happen by strictly defining it in terms of a “freedom-from” rules, intrusions, restrictions, etc. Excised from consideration is the whole category of “freedom-for” (righteousness, justice, goodness, etc.)

The former Pope concludes by insisting that “we are continually obliged to undertake a new demythologizing in order that reason may truly come into its own. And faith can contribute to this in the sense that *“faith does not make reason superfluous, but it can contribute evidence of essential values . . . [values which] illuminate and heal reason.”*