MYTH-PLACED PRIORITIES: RELIGION AND THE STUDY OF MYTH

THE MODERN CONSTRUCTION OF MYTH
By Andrew Von Hendy
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002
Pp. 386. $39.95, ISBN 0-253-33996-0.

FROM IKARIA TO THE STARS: CLASSICAL MYTHIFICATION, ANCIENT AND MODERN
By Peter Green
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004
Pp. 324. $55.00, ISBN 0-292-70230-2.

GREEK GODS, HUMAN LIVES: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM MYTHS
By Mary Lefkowitz
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003
Pp. 288. Cloth, $18.90, ISBN 0-300-10145-7;
paper, $12.92, ISBN 0-300-10769-2.

MYTH: A NEW SYMPOSIUM
Edited by Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002
Pp. 262. $49.95, ISBN 0-253-34158-2.

THINKING THROUGH MYTHS: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES
Edited by Kevin Schilbrack
New York: Routledge Press, 2002
Pp. 217. $34.95, ISBN 0-415-25461-2.

MYTH: A HANDBOOK
By William G. Doty
Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004
Pp. 196. $55.00, ISBN 0-313-32696-7.

MYTH
By Laurence Coupe
New York: Routledge Press, 1997
Pp. 219. Cloth, $89.95, ISBN 0-415-13493-5;
paper, $19.95, ISBN 0-415-13494-3.

MYTH: A BIOGRAPHY OF BELIEF
By David Leeming
New York: Oxford University Press, 2002
Pp. 182. $11.95, ISBN 0-195-16105-x.

Reviewer: Lesley A. Northup
Florida International University
Miami, FL 33199

Since 1988, when Joseph Campbell captivated PBS viewers with his smash-hit "Power of Myth" series, bookstore shelves have been groaning under the weight of multiplying volumes on myth. Once the province solely of classicists, authors of children's books, and highly specialized theoreticians, myth became, virtually overnight, the property of pop culture. In addition to perusing innumerable handy compilations of myths of various cultures, you could practice *Shaping a Personal Myth to Live by*, discover *Living Myth: Personal Meaning as a Way of Life*, or read *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. A woman could find her roots in *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths & Stories about the Wild Woman Archetype*, or humiliate her daughter with the suggestions in *Moon Mother, Moon Daughter: Myths and Rituals That Celebrate a Girl's Coming-of-Age*. You might impress your friends with *The Meaning of Herbs: Myth, Language & Lore* or *Gods and Goddesses in Love: Making the Myth a Reality for You*. For the very serious, there were such volumes as Sean Kane's *Wisdom of the Mythtellers* and Stephen Larsen's *The Mythic Imagination*.

While some academic mythographers have never forgiven Campbell for fostering this frenzy of personal myth appropriation, there is no question that the popularization of myth has spawned deepened interest in scholarly as well as self-help circles. The bibliography of serious examinations of myth issued in recent years is extensive, intriguing—and confusing. Many of the works in this area have been reviewed, singly or in lots, establishing their academic merit. To cite just one, a recent review in *RSR* (29:3-17) examined the new series of books on myth theory edited by Robert Segal. Laurence Coupe's review highlighted the extraordinarily interdisciplinary nature of myth studies, as reflected in the roster of scholars covered in the series, including Frazer the classicist, Buber the theologian, Jung the psychoanalyst, Levi-Strauss the structuralist, Frye the literary critic, Eliade the phenomenologist, Cassirer the philosopher, and Campbell the comparative mythologist, among others. To those in Segal's series we could add Girard the anthropologist, Durkheim the sociologist, Müller the linguist, Boas the folklorist, Dardel the ethnologist, and so on, until someone has chimed in from virtually all of the humanities and social sciences.

This plethora of perspective allows any denizen of any discipline to claim myth as the province of her particular field, a problem exacerbated by the relative lack of communication among authors of myth studies. Psychologist Jordan Peterson's *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* relies extensively on mythic analysis, but beyond the use of Eliade, makes barely any reference to myth scholars outside his field. Historian Peter Green, in *From Ikaria to the Stars: Classical Mythification, Ancient and Modern*, mentions myth scholarship in his introduction, only to dismiss it out of hand. Classicist Mary Lefkowitz, in *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from Myths*, does not bother with other scholars at all.

In the 1980s, Ronald Grimes attempted to solve a similar problem among ritual specialists, bringing together the work of disparate authors in the new unitary field of ritual studies. While meeting with mixed success, this effort continues with Grimes's cheerleading and provides a model for a similar cross-fertilization of thought on myth. What benefits would accrue were we to attempt to unify the study of myth—or at least its scholarly products—into an interdisciplinary (or, saints be praised!, *trans*-disciplinary) enterprise devoid of turf wars, a field that intentionally pooled and integrated myth theory?

One benefit would almost certainly be the ability to compare, contrast, and coordinate scholarly thought on the subject without having to scour the bibliographic landscape for possible contributions to the field, the difficulties of which are evident from the list of books in this review alone. Concomitantly, myth theorists might imagine the possibility of transcending disciplinary alle-

giances to weave comprehensive approaches to the material that could penetrate the thickets of conflicting methods. What has Levi-Strauss to say to Jung? What can Bultmann contribute to Northrop Frye? What correctives can Lefkowitz provide for the study of indigenous mythmaking? Even more useful, is there an essential core from which all myth theory extends, a *sine qua non* on which we all agree?

And where is religion in this mix? Like the nascent field of ritual studies and our idealized realm of myth studies, religious studies—the ur-model for this sort of thing—is still struggling for definition and academic acceptance. Michael Scriven once wrote of the juvenile sea squirt that it "wanders through the ocean searching for a suitable rock or hunk of coral to cling to and make its home for life. When it finds its spot and takes root, it doesn't need its brain anymore, so it eats it. It's rather like getting tenure." We might also note that it is rather like scholars of religious studies, who, once they have achieved tenure and feel secure in their employment, are wont to attack their discipline as unnecessary and fantastical. Jonathan Z. Smith, for one, has famously suggested that religion has no existence apart from the academy, an intriguing position for a faculty member of a divinity school.

The question of whether religious studies actually exists calls to mind the old joke about the Baptist minister who was asked whether he believed in infant baptism. "Believe in it?" he responded excitedly. "I've *seen* it!" Assuming for the moment that there is such a thing as religious studies and (dare we say it?) that such a field can make valuable contributions to the advancement of knowledge, we can rather easily defend the claim that included in its portfolio should be the study of myth (no less the study of ritual). Here, of course, the definitional problem once again rears its head, but even the broadest statement of myth as, say, a metaphorical story that expresses and realizes a people's experience of ultimacy—a definition that eschews the usual dependence on supernatural and/or fantastical beings—brings us back to the foundation of lived and related religious belief and practice. Again, if we make any attempt to distinguish myth from epic, fable, fairy tale, urban legend, and simple fiction, we come inevitably to its root in some elemental and ultimate belief system. That places it squarely within the study of religion.

This crucial connection is all too often lost on, or abandoned by, scholars of myth who, besides having to adapt their publications to the tenure demands of their home departments, seem contemptuous of myth's religious roots to the point of ignorance. Even Campbell, a recovering Catholic who loudly eschewed any belief system and saw in myth the revelation of the psyche, gave full weight to the religious (or at least transcendental) impulse that defined and generated it. Yet, unaccountably, religion is the proverbial pony buried somewhere under the muck in the stall of myth theory. In many cases, it takes a good deal of shoveling to dig it out, and sometimes it can hardly be found at all.

A look at recent volumes on myth illuminates this problem. Perhaps the heftiest, both physically and intellectually, is Andrew Von Hendy's *The Modern Construction of Myth*, a wide-ranging biography of myth theory that attempts to untangle the overlaps and crosscurrents of scholarship in the modern era, most specifically the twentieth century, which the author characterizes as "the true century of myth." His project is to limn key turning points in the "genealogy" of myth theory—the shift in understanding from fable to myth; the recognition of the religious significance of myth; the realization that anyone can be a mythmaker; the turn to romanticism that catapulted myth study into what he claims was the focal role in shaping contemporary critical analysis; the emergence of social-scientific folkloristics; the reinvention of classics in the mold of the new anthropology; and the triumph of postmodernism over the remnants of romanticism.

Tracking myth theory from Vico to Schelling to Frazer to Derrida, Von Hendy provides a dense, but coherent and sometimes acrid, guide to myth scholarship that should prove valuable for advanced students and all but the best-read scholar. He organizes his material both chronologically and thematically, positing four concepts of myth into which theorists can be sorted: the romantic, the ideological, the constitutive, and the folkloristic. Like any other framework, his is artificial, but since his primary project is historical, his schema works adequately as a system on which to hang the intersecting strands of theory he uncovers. Along the way, he deflates the credentials of Joyce, Eliot, Jung, Campbell, Frye, and many others.

Given the historical, even chronological, nature of his project, it is all the more surprising that Von Hendy attends so curtly to the place of religion in the development of myth theory. Von Hendy, a literary specialist in modernist fiction, is at his best in charting the progression of the modern mind, using myth as a determinative construct. His literary background might lead to the supposition that he would have a more nuanced approach to the social construction of reality through myth. He dismisses Otto's phenomenology of the holy as internally inconsistent and ultimately apologetic, parochial, hierarchical, and achingly Protestant. He lays many of the same failures at Eliade's doorstep in the process of shredding Eliade's claims for the sacred character of myth. Unlike the heroes of Von Hendy's narrative (Cassirer, Levi-Strauss and, generally, theorists who approach myth linguistically), Eliade is characterized as a naif whose understanding of his own project of analyzing religious symbolism was grievously inadequate and hopelessly romantic. Von Hendy's criticism is especially leveled at Eliade's belief in the "indefeasibility of humanity's religious faculty for apprehending 'the sacred,' " a belief that leads to a "bowdlerized, sentimentalized" understanding of myth that "has tempted religionists across the whole history of the construction of myth" (183).

Notwithstanding the insight in some of these characterizations, Von Hendy's disdainful and very brief dispatch of Otto and Eliade—attacking Eliade is child's play these days—succeeds in belittling any justification for a religious reading of myth, betraying an impoverished understanding on his part of either the essence of myth or the history of its analysis. For him, these seminal figures represent the bad guys in "the struggle between myth and 'suspicion.' " Von Hendy seemingly works from a presupposition that religion has long since been dismissed as a failed intellectual enterprise, dependent as it is on the romanticism that is the antique villain of his book. Religion, even as a category of critical thought, does not appear to have earned a place at Von Hendy's table along with philosophy, philology, and folkloristics. It does not help, from the perspective of religious studies faculties, that Von Hendy's pervasive sarcasm labels Max Müller "a fumbling epigone" and ridicules the very notion that such a thing exists as a field called history of religions. The survey he presents, for all its vast and detailed scope, ultimately offers thin intellectual gruel, insufficiently reflective of the deep cultural and psychological realities at the heart of what is, at root, a religious artifact.

The religious underpinnings of myth are only slightly more evident in Peter Green's *From Ikaria to the Stars*, an aggregation of several previously published essays ostensibly around the general theme of myth, though he specifically rejects the need to present any unifying thesis. The result is a very loose confederation of musings on historiography. Green and Von Hendy share a modernist view that shuns any vestige of the romantic as an error demanding correction. Like Von Hendy, but more obviously, Green skewers what he sees as the absurdity of the postmodern rejection of objectivism and rationality. His position on myth he describes as "private, idiosyncratic, and out of step with current intellectual trends"—an accurate, if heavily understated, assessment. For Green, myth is an irrational "source of fantasy" demanding either allegorical or historical explanation, both of which are ultimately false: "While rationalization trawls for historical reality distorted by misunderstanding," allegory is fraught with "inherent inanities" (13). Indeed, Green has little regard for either myth or myth scholarship, both of which constitute, for him, forms of comfortable but ultimately unacceptable intellectual dishonesty. Although he never clearly defines myth, Green sees it as a contamination of an empirically absolute historical record, resulting from a universal psychological need for explanatory tales. As an example of the power of myth to undermine objective reality, he tastelessly cites the "Holocaust Myth," betraying a profound misunderstanding of the scholarly use of the term myth—not the least of the problems with this reference.

Despite Green's difficulty with the category of myth, he recognizes it—albeit almost in passing—as "an essentially religious phenomenon," taking to task Richard Buxton. The latter, in his *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology* (1994), shied away from acknowledging the religious context of myth, even though, as Green contends, "it is precisely here that we find the archetypal layer of stubborn and irrational belief that formed the living core of Greek myth" (9-10). For Green, religion is a reasonless well of superstition, but at least he acknowledges it as the base of equally unreasonable myth. Green is an equal opportunity skeptic with more than enough disdain for both myth and religion. For him, knowledge—the banisher of superstition—is triumphant; rationality is incontrovertibly the measure of knowledge; and myth and religion (of which it is a relic) are intellectually indefensible.

Both Von Hendy and—to the extent he is even interested in the question—Green trod the well-worn twentieth-century path of positivist myth theory, finding truth in historical recordation and the investigations of the social and natural sciences. In this scenario, myth is susceptible to analysis of various kinds, but has little or no inherent validity. In and of itself, it is simply a cultural artifact, neither a reliable chronicle nor a vehicle of ultimate meaning. Any implication that myth is revelatory of the transcendent, necessary for the development of the self, or an accurate portrayal of the past is, for them, a romantic illusion. To view religion as the invariable source of myth or myth as a necessary dimension of religion is a kind of intellectual distraction.

In contrast, Mary Lefkowitz's *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from the Ancients*, which follows on the heels of her successful debunking of Afrocentrism in *Not Out of Africa*, focuses quite specifically on the religious nature of myth. Indeed, she argues for treating the ancient Greek gods as serious deities, rather than comic rascals à la "Clash of the Titans." Despite their capricious behavior, the gods of ancient Greece are divinities and exemplars, and their stories provide moral instruction and models of justice in a grimly realistic "religion for adults." Though the gods may be unfeeling and indifferent toward mortals, the lessons they teach remain available today, she argues, through the medium of myth.

Combating the casual disregard in which the classical religions have been held, Lefkowitz emphasizes that "we do the Greeks an injustice if we assume that their religion was frivolous" (1). This attempt at rehabilitating the Greek belief system is an intriguing antidote to the increasing tendency to present indigenous myths as somehow more legitimate than those of classical Greece and Rome, itself a corrective to courses that covered nothing but classical material under the heading of mythology. Lefkowitz not only makes a convincing case that the Greek gods presided over a valid and meaningful religion, but also demonstrates that the myths of that culture were rooted in its religious practice and belief.

Lefkowitz's presentation is not a sophisticated entry in the field of myth theory, as she addresses a popular audience. Her understanding of myth as simply "stories about the supernatural in human life," the product of "ancient writers" who aimed to remind "humans of the severe limitations . . . of mortality" (236), does not embrace some of the more complex functions attributed to myth. Also, at times she relies on curiously literalistic readings of the oral stories she treats, applying an almost biblical hermeneutic to word choice but a highly casual approach to context. The book seldom adverts to the technical language of myth theory, and there is little reference to myth theorists; the appended bibliography includes few of their writings. Nonetheless, Lefkowitz argues convincingly that "how we read the myths makes it difficult for us to see that they are essentially stories about religious experience" (ix).

In contrast, David Leeming unrepentantly offers a religious reading of myth in his short *Myth: A Biography of Belief*, a transcription of a lecture series at the Interfaith Center in New York. The book begins with an exploration of the relationship of myth and religion, and is suffused with a sense of the spiritual dimension of myth as religious narrative. Where Von Hendy struggles to see the religious element in myth, Leeming is quick to apologize to believers for calling their sacred stories mythic. Starting, as he does, from a thoroughgoing acceptance of the religious character of myth, Leeming strains to convince his listeners that myth is not only religion but something more, arguing that myths are continually evolving through the imaginations of modern writers, artists, and scientists.

Leeming's world of myth is more inclusive than those of many other scholars, embracing alien incursions and mythic America as well as such classical texts as the *Tao Te Ching* and the Song of Songs. Like Campbell, whom he obviously admires, Leeming stresses that myths must reflect the science of their time. Where he departs from modernism and becomes representative of what Von Hendy would see as a neo-neo-romantic strain in myth scholarship is in viewing science as another idiom for mythic narration, the current language of myth rather than its replacement. For Leeming, scientific knowledge does not supercede the mystical element of myth but, to the contrary, elucidates it.

Between the rather widely disparate poles defined by Leeming and Von Hendy roams a scattered herd of scholarly tomes on myth. Among them are two recent collections. Perhaps the most influential of all collections appeared in 1958: *Myth: A Sympo-*

sium, which contained several groundbreaking essays, inter alia, Claude Levi-Strauss's "The Structural Study of Myth." In *Myth: A New Symposium*, editors Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen have tried to recreate the buzz that the earlier collection occasioned among serious theorists of myth. The new volume, essentially the proceedings of a 1990 conference at Indiana University, engages many of the same themes of its predecessor, but with less of the firepower of some of the earlier writers and fewer startling new insights.

In his introduction, Schrempp acknowledges that both volumes characterize myth as "foundational, primordial, sacred, and theomorphic" (2). Having ceded that two of the four critical elements of myth are directly related to its religious character, however, Schrempp abandons this line of inquiry, focusing on the tensions between myth and history, literalism and symbolism, particulars and universals, myth and poetry, and so on, without any further reference to the religious implications of his subject. This general disinterest in myth as expression of the sacred encounter pervades the volume. Hansen's opening essay summarily rejects attention to the sacred character of myth as a kind of scholarly oversight, left over from early twentieth-century ethnography and "repeated somewhat automatically in discussions published by social scientists" (21). Lefkowitz, among others, would be extremely discomfited by his airy dismissal of Greek myths as essentially barren of ritual expression and thus bereft of religious content.

Hansen's position sets the tone for the rest of the contributors, who occasionally flirt with material that might reference the sacred and theomorphic aspects of myth claimed as central by Schrempp, but pass quickly by. John McDowell, analyzing a predecessor essay by Philip Wheelwright, notes that the latter's key theme is describing the "attitude toward the sacred held by those who nurture mythic narrative" (38), but almost immediately moves to what he evidently regards as more compelling aspects of Wheelwright's work. Barre Toelken notes at the outset that among Native Americans the sacred spills over into all aspects of life, requiring a broad definition of myth for these peoples. He then defines myth as narratives that represent "large cultural and natural issues," which does not exactly embrace the native vision he has just described. Joseph Falaky Nagy's essay on Irish saints seems a promising topic for exploration of the religious nature of myth, but in short order it becomes a comparative exercise that accepts the otherworldly nature of Christian hagiography without commenting substantively on it. Indeed, the opening pages of Henry Glassie's piece on Hindu sculpture are among the only passages in the book that recognize that myths are, in short, "stories of the sacred."

Perhaps this neglect of the religious underpinnings of myth is somewhat understandable, given the origin of the volume. Coming as it does out of Indiana University, it predictably features folklorists and literary critics but few other disciplinary approaches. It also references a limited roster of myth thinkers, leaving the impression that it is somewhat disconnected from mainstream theoretical thought. To have lifted the collection into the rather lofty company of its model, however, would have required both greater depth and greater breadth. To have made it of value to religionists would have required a richer understanding of the root and sap of mythic genesis.

In contrast, Kevin Schilbrack has edited a more modest but more rewarding collection on myth, *Thinking through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*, in which he redresses the absence of contemporary philosophical studies of myth—a paucity he attributes, in part, to myth theorists' distrust of "philosophers who claim to find universal truths in stories from particular cultures" (2). In this he is no doubt correct. The particularists currently hold sway in myth studies, as in other fields, and the universalizing tendencies of philosophers are as out of favor as Campbell's monomyth. Schilbrack successfully argues that philosophy can combat reductionism and help bridge the gap between normative and interpretive approaches in the study of myth.

Schilbrack, a philosopher of religion, has no problem acknowledging the integral relationship of religion and myth. Philosophy has, in his view, examined religion solely from the perspective of Christian theism, leaving myth theory to those who study other religions. But this works both ways: If too few works on myth address its grounding in the sacred, too few analyses of myth emanating from religious studies address the contributions of philosophy. In his introduction, Schilbrack works to redefine the scope of the philosophy of religion, suggesting its proper purview is critical reflection on religious language and practices. This somewhat begs the question of whether religious studies scholars are uncritical about their own subject matter, and Schilbrack's listing of appropriate subjects for philosophical analysis—"rituals, spiritual disciplines, initiations, pilgrimages, and other forms of religious behavior" (4)—could be crassly seen as a kind of disciplinary poaching. But let us not be contentious. His expansion of the field is a welcome step toward the transdisciplinary sharing of insights on myth.

Schilbrack's own essay interweaves the notions of worldview, ethos, and religious symbolism to articulate a philosophical rendering of metaphysics and advance a reading of myth that makes metaphysical claims. Refreshingly, he relies on Geertz and Eliade as well as Kant to investigate the truth claims of myths as models. In doing so, he makes a strong case not only for the religious core of myth but also, importantly, for the cross-fertilization of disciplines in the study of myth.

The contributions to *Thinking through Myths* are, for the most part, of high quality and of particular interest to the discussion of myth and religion. Robert Segal's piece begins with the relationship of myth and philosophy and suggests that science and religion must be linked to the same nexus. To elucidate his point, he focuses on the work of E. B. Tylor, discussing Tylor's conviction that religion is primitive science, while modern religion comprises metaphysics and ethics, and that myth (the marker of primitive religion) has, with the rise of science, gone the way of the dodo. He soon deserts this line of inquiry, however, moving on to a broad discussion of the relationship of philosophy and myth.

William L. Power is so bold as to admit that "it is generally recognized that the primary home of myth is in religion" (68), while outlining the role of pragmatic semantics in relation to myth. His case study is "the Christian epic," his conclusion that authentic faith must embrace a cosmic past, a cosmic future, and a future lived toward "opportunities for good." For Power, myth has both existential and ontological validity, and as such serves to illuminate religious cultural systems. Like Power, James Wetzel looks at biblical myth—in this case, narratives of the fall—to examine the relationship of myth and moral philosophy. He extends his argument to include the moral exemplarity exhibited by Zeus and his cohort, which Lefkowitz would no doubt appreciate.

A few recent volumes are addressed to a student audience—a good thing, since finding appropriate textbooks for undergraduate courses is no small task. William G. Doty's *Myth: A Handbook* is a comprehensive but condensed overview defining and classifying myth, providing examples from numerous cultures, and briefly tracing the trajectory of myth scholarship. Doty, whose previous *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* was full of useful, if eccentrically organized, material on myth, has here produced a well-knit, generously illustrated, and, as he intended, more accessible text. Among its drawbacks are its availability only in a hardback edition and Doty's annoying tendency to promote himself: "My taking up the term *mythography* . . . has now become standard among most academics" (8); "my monster book, *Mythography* . . ." (vii). It also evidences odd, and avoidable, factual lapses, such as the glossary entry claiming that Campbell taught at Morningside College (rather than Sarah Lawrence.) The slim volume provides an updated but substantially abridged version of the useful bibliography that was part of the earlier volume, and the undergraduate will appreciate the inclusion of contemporary cinematic mythic treatments and Doty's sensitivity to gender issues.

Given that Doty is Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, it is a bit surprising that he has produced a text that stresses the folkloristic genesis of myth over its religious roots, more so than in *Mythography*, his signature work. Here, Doty prefers to say that myths are "primary, foundational materials of a social group" (19). Perhaps this can be explained by the earlier volume's emphasis on the connection of myth and ritual. More likely, it reflects the author's growing certainty that he "no longer find[s] the traditional 'religious' definitions of myth of much use" (20). It also serves his intention to focus this book largely on other cultural mythic products designed to interest the general reader, from Elvis Presley to *Lord of the Rings*. Still, he is at least clear that myth is a communal, cultural product, not an "individual mythostory" developed in the interests of self-fulfillment.

Laurence Coupe's small paperback, titled simply *Myth*, deserves mention here although it was published some time ago (1997), because British scholar Coupe is not well known in North America. His introductory text looks at myth primarily from the viewpoint of literary criticism. His scholarly interest in Kenneth Burke (whom he considers a great myth theorist though most would consider him principally a rhetorician), so evident in Coupe's *RSR* review of Segal's myth series, informs this text as well. His emphasis on contemporary thinkers, not a bad thing in itself, does not provide the kind of general inventory of the evolution of mythic thought that Doty does, but Coupe has a different project in mind. He divides his volume under the dual headings "Reading Myth" and "Mythic Reading," suggesting his main theme: myth is not an ancient artifact, but an everchanging product of a continuing process of imaginative reading. Though not groundbreaking in its theory, Coupe's book is a concise, neatly packaged literary introduction to myth, suitable particularly for college students.

This brief overview of recent books on myth serves to highlight the lack of cross-fertilization in myth scholarship and the gauzy but apparently impenetrable barriers that prevent scholars in different fields from productively collating their insights. In his *Theorizing about Myth*, Robert Segal—a religion scholar—addresses the problem of how to effect useful comparisons in the study of myth (1999). His theory is that myth is an "applied subject," and that "theories of myth are always theories of something broader that is applied to the case of myth," such as "the mind, society, culture, literature, and religion" (1). This theory is itself vague to the point of flaccidity, but it leads into his more lucid observation that the disciplinary approach to myth is blurry at best. Segal's project here, outlining the work of major myth theorists, creates an opportunity for him to propose a solution to this problem, but he does not take the bait. Rather than suggesting a broad solution, such as the cross-disciplinary consolidation of myth study, he is content to settle for a comparative methodological schema around which he organizes his book, leaving the problem articulated, but unresolved.

Few academic sojourners in the house of myth seem willing to name the elephant in the living room, the removal of which could facilitate a more collaborative approach: the reluctance of scholars to concede the centrality of religion to the study of myth. The hard boundaries of disciplinary ownership and the harsh realities of tenure and promotion expectations reinforce a defensive disciplinary attitude for all but advanced academics embarking on a rebellious second childhood of research. It does not help that religionists remain unable usefully to define religion, leaving it open to the broadest—and often silliest—possible interpretations. Nor has a rapprochement been effected between the modernist insistence that myth and religion are a-scientific and (essentially) Robert Bellah's postmodern "Sheilaism."

When Grimes first sought to establish a unitary approach to ritual in *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, he started with the observation that students of ritual were isolated from one another in at least fourteen different disciplines, noting that establishing a unitary viewpoint or even a single method was not the goal of ritual studies—or, for that matter, of religious studies (1982; rev. ed., 1995). Still, he argued for the need to sketch the shape of the field. It is worth noting that Grimes's comparison of ritual studies and religious studies took note not only of their likeness as cross-referenced fields, but also of their essential dependence on each other. For Segal, too, religion is a key issue in the study of myth, though not necessarily *the* key issue—even though his own work would suggest it is. The modest suggestion set forth here is that religion, as a fundamental category of culture, language, and psychology, can be—if not brushed aside as just one more issue, as Segal would have it—the common foundation of a sincere, collaborative effort to advance the study of myth.

Where to start? A logical place would be with the establishment of a program unit in the American Academy of Religion for myth study. We can sponsor more interdisciplinary myth conferences—not on how to appropriate your personal myth in some euphoria of contemporary spirituality, but on serious scholarly inquiries into the nature and function of myth. Perhaps we can eschew the urge to publish only our highly individualistic dissertations as monographs and produce more collaborative books with multiple authors from many disciplines, or at least collections incorporating a variety of perspectives.

Booksellers' shelves, in this era of reawakened interest in myth, sag under the weight of the epic adventures of Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins as well as the truly horrid but wildly successful *Left Behind* series. Not far away, other shelves groan under volumes of biblical criticism for general readers and copies of the Baghavad Gita and the Gilgamesh cycle. Whether this betokens a search for mythic meaning in Eliade's soulless modern era, the

rise of yet another wave of neo-romanticism, the individual's need for a spiritual journey, or an irrational religious fundamentalism, there is little question that the stories humans tell about their relationship with ultimate reality resonate as loudly as ever. Interpretations of that relationship and that reality are in constant demand, so we can expect the outpouring of myth analyses to continue, enriching an already fecund field.

What this walk through recent writings reveals is that, if inquirers at all levels are to make sense of this complex phenomenon, the effort to trace a cogent path through the thickets of countless dissociated disciplines and theories must give way to a new paradigm in the study of myth. Perhaps scholars entranced by the beauty and necessity of myth should venture forth from the comfortable isolation of their home disciplines and work to produce an integrated field of myth studies that brings coherence to the field and illumination to the subject.

References

Buxton, Richard
1994 *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Grimes, Ronald L.
1995 *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. Rev. ed. Studies in Comparative Religion. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Peterson, Jordan B.
1999 *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. New York: Routledge.

Segal, Robert A.
1999 *Theorizing about Myth*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.