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The Problem of Myth

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I

The problem of myth is one of the fundamental problems in the “science of religion.” In this paper, however, I intend to consider the problem not from the view-point of the “science of religion” in its narrow sense, but rather as a living problem of our time. This is because the problem of religion and science, one of the great problems of our time, can be thought to contain at its root a conflict between the position based on myth and that based on science.

I think that religion can be said to be probably the most basic issue in the present age. We can clearly see this fact in the historical change running through the spirit of our age, the way of thinking, and various aspects of our practical life in modern times. The change is, briefly speaking, a shift of the fundamental spirit of man from the religious spirit—predominant until the end of the medieval period—to the scientific mind.

In the medieval period all aspects of human existence, including the world-view, the view of life, and practical life, private and social, were unified on the base of a religious perspective. The fundamental structure of human life in the medieval period then began to change, and the scientific mind gradually became prevalent in every field of human life science, having made inroads into the integrating position occupied by religion. A struggle for supremacy between religion and science, so to speak, is an occurrence which has been taking place at the base of modern history. The struggle, of course, began not with the modern age, but can be found in ancient times or perhaps even before that; in other words, it probably dates from untraceable antiquity. Entering the modern age, however, science not only became definitely independent from religion and then from philosophy, but moreover, taking their place, came to be the controlling force in many fields of human life; and from this situation, I think, one of the great problems of

modern man has arisen. It is needless to say that, since irrational elements in various fields of human life have been rationalized through the development of science and the scientific way of thinking, this controlling influence of science has contributed a great deal to human life. The struggle between science and religion appeared in the form of an attack against irrational factors contained in one way or other in the mind and life of human beings. In this case, as was seen in the movements of the Enlightenment, positivism, and so forth, religion was seen as the source of all irrational factors, and, moreover, as nothing but mere myth. (Myth in this case was understood as superstition based on fantasy or illusion, or as the primitive way of thinking before the appearance of rational thinking.)

From this standpoint, the criticism on religion has been continued, and rationalism has appeared in the form of an anti-religious movement. This movement had merits and demerits. As I said before, it made a positive contribution to human existence by removing irrationalism and promoting a rational way of thinking in modern life. Judging from the perspective of the present day, however, it has demerits which can be discovered in the contemporary situation of the world. The situation in question may be called a tendency toward the total mechanization of human life. What I mean by this is, first of all, that the world comes to be understood mechanically, and secondly, that human social relations, namely, person-to-person relationships, and even the way of thinking, or the human mind and spirit, come gradually to be mechanized. Such a situation has been pointed out and analyzed by many persons, and it can be seen that a great problem of our time is in the tendency of all living and organically developed things to be gradually fragmented, or at least weakened, by the trend toward mechanization. Taking the example of the problem of man, the introspective way, found in religion, of reflecting inwardly and of deepening the awareness of the ultimate depths of one's being is being gradually forgotten, and thus human life, private and social, is becoming superficial and mechanical. It is needless to cite instances of the above-mentioned tendency which has become more and more obvious, especially after the Industrial Revolution, and has come to be noticed as a great problem by many persons from the latter half of the last century to the present age.

Along with such a trend, on the other hand, another tendency has continued to manifest itself. This is a tendency to recollect the perspective which

is in opposition to science, namely, the perspective of myth, in which a view based on life or organically animated nature appears in its most pristine form. To recollect the perspective of myth in this case is not to consider the myth as a thing of the remote past, but rather to return to the power which is still working at present in the deepest root of our life. It is a recollection in the essential sense of the word. What is called a "recollection" here is taken in a sense similar to the concept of "anamnesis" in Plato's philosophy in which, as is generally known, "recollection" is one of the essential concepts.

In Plato, cognition is thought to be recollection, by means of sense-experience of things in this present world, of an Idea already intuited before birth. In this case, cognition as recollection means, in a sense, that the human soul returns to its own old home, to its fountainhead. It is the soul's return to its original home, a getting away by recollection from its situation in the world of sense in which it is suffering from contradictions and difficulties and is possessed by a variety of illusions. To return to the world of Ideas, after all, means to return to God (the Good Itself), and to return to God means for the soul to return to its own fountainhead. Needless to say, this is what Plato means by calling the way of philosophy the "love of wisdom."

What I call "recollection" in this paper is, of course, different from that of Plato's in its import. It is because the present problem is the problem of historical life, and not that of cognition. What I mean by "recollection" of the perspective of myth is to return to the fountainhead of the present historical and cultural life, in other words, to return to the mythical world as the genesis of every culture, namely, as an origin from which every culture came, as from the mother's womb. Even in this case, however, "recollection" is understood essentially as in Plato's philosophy in the following respect:

As cognition of objects means, in Plato's doctrine of "recollection," that the soul returns to its own origin, in our historical life a return to the genesis of the culture in which we are living is understood as a return in the present to the origin of our own historical life, namely, as a "re-collection" of its origin in the present, or as the rediscovery and opening up of the origin of history in the present. Though I am talking about a return to the origin of history, it does not mean to return to a mere past, but means a return to the beginning of history at the very depths of the present in which we are situated. A "recollection" of myth takes place in this way. I think this sort of

“recollection” has appeared as a reaction against the mechanization increasingly resulting from the dominance of scientific rationalism.

Although I am talking about “recollection” of the mythical, I do not mean such a standpoint as found in German Nazism, which emphasized myth as in Alfred Rosenberg’s book, *The Myth of The Twentieth Century*. Nazism can be said to have been based on a world-view in which life had entirely been mechanized. For instance, the Swiss thinker Max Picard stresses this fact in his *Hitler in Ourselves*. He points out very clearly from various angles that “Hitler” can appear only in the world where everything—such as society, activities of mind, the way of looking at and thinking of the world—is mechanized. That myth was taken up in Nazism, as well as the way it was there treated, is the result of such a mechanized world. The “recollection” of the mythical which I am here considering, however, points to something more fundamental, namely, to the aspiration to overcome the mechanized world in a thoroughgoing way. And yet this problem has become a very difficult task for us today. “Recollection” in the sense mentioned above, namely, a return to the origin of our present historical life, is not so easily possible, because it is an undeniable fact that the position based on myth long ago had its foundation broken by the scientific way of thinking. Generally speaking, the various paths of development of religions can be said to be the process of gradually breaking down, by the perspective of scientific understanding, the position based on myth. While it is true that the position based on myth is still operative in the present time as a basis which should be “recollected” in our historical life, it is also true that we cannot simply return to such a myth-position, because its foundation has already been broken down by the scientific rationalism. And yet it cannot be said that it settles the matter simply to pursue thoroughly the scientific position in all respects. As we follow the scientific position to its logical conclusion, the position based on myth is broken down, and as the scientific position comes to dominate, there appears the great problem of total mechanization which is based on that scientific position. As a reaction to this problem arising from the very root of the scientific position, a trend to “re-collect” ourselves into the mythical is coming forth. This is, I think, a situation in which the mythical and scientific positions are breaking down each other. To speak in an extreme way, this is a situation in which myth and science are fatally stabbing each other at the heart of their respective positions.

Generally viewing history down to the present, if, in a certain period, the scientific position gains power and a trend of total mechanization arises, then as a reaction against it appears a position which emphasizes something irrational or unanalyzable by scientific understanding, for instance, life, emotion, experience or inspiration. The latter usually reaches something which is religious in the last analysis and is connected with something mythical in the broad sense. In the case of religion, the mythical in religion comes to gain power. In this way these two trends are always alternating with each other. Furthermore, at the root of such alternation and strife between these two positions lurks the fact that neither of them alone can support human life. Although it may not be seen, these two positions are engaged in conflict. It seems to me that at this very point is a most serious problem which shows one the most basic feature of the modern mind. In this sense I cannot help saying that this very difficult problem lurks at the root of all the problems of our life and thought in the present day.

Since the second half of the last century, the problem of nihilism arose as a problem of culture and thought. It also, I think, essentially comes from the situation of mutual conflict between myth and science. For instance, in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, we can see that he had from the beginning an intention to grasp something mythical as the most fundamental element of our historical life and culture which I mentioned before. At the same time, also from the beginning, he took account of the problem of scientific and rational understanding, namely, the problem of the destructive power of his so-called "insatiable cognitive drive," as a basic problem. From the beginning, the problem that we cannot easily return to the "*Leben*" which appeared in a mythical form at the deepest root of our life, because of the formation of the mechanical worldview of modern science, was operative as a powerful ferment in the development of his thought. It is, after all, from this point that in Nietzsche the problem of nihilism arose. For instance, he says, in essence, in his *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, that, while the voice of the abyss cannot be heard from modern science as a whole, nowadays the conscience of science itself is an abyss. What Nietzsche calls the "conscience of science" probably means the conscience of the scientist in his "existence" as a human being. It seems to me that these words clearly express the sense in which science itself is to be taken as a problem for us.

Probably the scientist himself usually does not grasp the standpoint of

science within him as an abyss. The same is perhaps true for the scientific rationalists who are not necessarily scientists. However, when the scientist, starting from the scientific world-view which understands the world as a world ruled by natural and necessary laws, carries out thoroughly his world-view to the extent that he regards himself as a being in such a mechanical world, there comes a point in which the ultimate meaning of his own being or life basically becomes a great question. In other words, when he accepts the standpoint of science as his own “personal” problem and tries to carry it out conscientiously, a great destruction and distress must necessarily happen inwardly. He cannot help destroying, for instance, the ground for God, human nature, and morality within himself. This self-destruction, of necessity, causes pain like the tearing of flesh. Scientific thinking can be said to be true only when it causes such pain to the thinker himself. Then, in his own self, an abyss will become manifest. In this sense, the conscience found in science is an abyss.

Nevertheless, people whose standpoint is scientific are generally very optimistic. They think that by science and scientific understanding irrationality will be gradually rationalized and this progress is wrought in history. It is common for them to have an optimistic feeling as if light were continuously shining out of the future. Although they observe the world and society from a scientific standpoint, they do not accept science as a “personal” problem; in other words, they do not engage in science “existentially.” Therefore, they do not take their ground on Nietzsche’s so-called conscience which ought to arise from science, nor is the abyss opened to them. What does it mean that the abyss is opened? It means, for instance, in the case of Western people, to take the position of atheism. When we really take the non-existence of God seriously as our own question and accept it as our own position, it means that the abyss is opened. Perhaps most scientists take the position of atheism. How do they then understand the fundamental meaning of their own being? Probably all cultures may progress unlimitedly, and science itself endlessly, too. Even so, what sense does all make anyway? The whole of the universe and human-activity are in essence, as Nietzsche says, “*Alles umsonst*” (all in vain), aren’t they? This question leads to the appearance of nihilism. When the conscience found in science works thoroughly even to this extent, that is, when scientific thinking reflects as well upon the significance of the scientist’s own being, the abyss must be opened within him.

Nietzsche says, however, through modern science as a whole he cannot hear from it any voice of the abyss. What he means by this is that modern science does not take account of the scientific standpoint in the sense mentioned above. And yet it is one of the contemporary tasks to call science in question in such a basic dimension. Needless to say, I am not saying that science is nonsense. I am just saying that this problem is contained in the scientific position itself.

From this viewpoint, it cannot be thought that religion is able to remain in a position where it does not yet recognize its situation vis-a-vis science, that is, that of mutually destroying the foundations of each other. I think that religion can really express its new potentiality for the future by once penetrating through that place at the ultimate depth of modern history, where religion and science are mutually destroying their foundations, and from where nihilism originates. In this sense, it seems to me that nihilism is one of the most basic problems for contemporary religion. As a problem of our time, nihilism should not be taken as a mere nihilistic feeling, thought or notion. It is something more fundamental, like a sub-marine earthquake, so to speak. While, in our time, critical phenomena appear in various fields of human life and thought, they are just like consequent earthquake or tidal wave experiences on land. Although they are very close and urgent problems for us, they are not really the basic problems. They are the distant extensions of something like a sub-marine earthquake occurring at the depths of the sea. Nihilism is a problem of this nature. Therefore, as long as such a problem is not solved, however much changed other things may be, a basic problem still remains unsolved, and the source of the crisis remains. Even when society becomes very rational as a socialist society, an unsolved problem will still remain at the basis of that society. If in this society such problems do not and need not become an issue, the very fact that such problems do not become an issue may be nothing but a great expression of nihilism. Nihilism is a problem of such a dimension. The solution of this sort of problem, in other words, the solution of the situation I described as the "mutual stabbing at the heart" between religion and science, is, I think, a great task for future religion.

For instance, in the West today the problem of "demythologization" advocated by Rudolf Bultmann creates a stir and raises many serious arguments among not only theologians but also church-people in Europe and

America. The problem springs from the fact that the Bible contains many mythological representations and ideas connected with ancient world-images which are an obstacle for a modern man who approves the world-image made by modern science and is therefore alienated by, and keeps away from, the Bible. Bultmann insists that through reinterpreting these mythological representations by a new method we should reveal the true meaning contained in them. For this purpose he advocated the existential interpretation of the Bible, taking in the position of the existential interpretation of being by Martin Heidegger. In doing so, I think, Bultmann also runs up directly against the fundamental problem occurring between science and myth as he seeks in a new fashion again to accept the revelation of God in the Bible. Although his attitude is very sincere and courageous, I am afraid that even he does not come to approach and confront the problem of nihilism originating in the conflict between science and myth. Even his existential interpretation seems to me also to require further probing into the depths of this problem.

II

It seems to me that it is a very important task for us to investigate more concretely the situation in which science and myth are mutually destroying the foundation of each other, and to inquire as to how a new direction is to be found. I would like here to give briefly my own view on this matter.

I believe that the fundamental problems of religion and philosophy are generally composed in the form of the relations among three basic factors. This is unchanged now as in olden times. One of these basic factors is what is called God, another is the world as the whole of things, and the third is what has been called the soul until now and may rather be called at present, the self, namely, the subjective being. The relation among these three factors is most basic, and every problem can resolve itself into how these relations should be understood. The relation between the self and the world is one of the fundamental problems; the relation between the self and God is also primary; and again so is the relation between God and the world. These three kinds of relationships may be said to be the three basic pillars by which every

system of religion and philosophy (especially the so-called metaphysics) is supported.

Considering from this point of view, the position based on myth is thought, briefly speaking, to come into being on the basis of the *complete and direct* union of these three factors. In the position based on myth, the relation between God and the world is so pervasive that they are, in a sense, thought to be one; namely, there is no clear demarcation between what is called God and what is called the world. The same is true of the relations between God and the self and between the self and the world. Therefore, the mutual relationships among them (God, the self, the world) are pervasive, and even a kind of mobile or dynamic identity among them can be conceived. At least, the relation of these three factors is moving in the direction which results in such a dynamic identity. That myth is based on the dynamic unity of these three factors means that the position of myth is ruled by imagination, namely, a position of thinking by means of images. Imagination here should be understood in this fundamental sense.

Usually, myth is taken as something imaginary or fantastic. It is seen as a product of imagination, which is also commonly understood as a day-dream arbitrarily unfolded in one's consciousness by closing the eyes for a while from the surrounding reality. In such a subjective fantasy, however, the basic function of imagination does not manifest itself. Every being, as it exists, is always found having its own *eidos*. A man is, having the "form" of the man; and a pine tree is, having the "form" of the pine tree. What is called "form" here covers not only a visible form but also an invisible *eidos*, namely, the substance of a thing. So, it includes the forms of things of the natural world and of the various phenomena of the historical and social world, and also, for instance, the form of Deities so far as they are thought to have forms or figures. Whatever the forms of things may be, the function of imagination should be understood as conforming to the actual forms of things, because imagination functions not only in fancying different forms apart from the original forms of real things but also in thinking in close correspondence to the very forms of real things.

In the case of myth, a "thing" is there, which, in its *being*, cannot be distinguished from other various "things," or as what, ontologically speaking, mutually flows into and among other things, so to speak. The world as the world of such mutually interpenetrating "things" is also pervasive in relation

to deities. Again, the self's relation to them (the world and deities) also is pervasive. On the foundation of "things" in this sense, thinking does not part from their real forms. Thinking is rather the self-development of the forms, so to speak, and the free, sometimes completely free, self-development of the forms. It is not a mere fantasy, but can be said to be a way of grasping the "great whole" in which things are related to each other and in which the deities are also related to things. It seems to me that here imagination functions as a basic force.

Imagination working in myth cannot be understood merely as a "faculty" which is thought to be inherent in the consciousness of an individual. Neither can it be thought of as working as "subjective" fantasy. It is because the world of myth is the world of *eidōs*, in which the "great whole" mentioned above is related at a level where such things as the "individual" and its "faculty of self-consciousness" or "subjectivity" do not yet appear; in other words, at the foundation where "thing" and "thing," "thing" and man, and also man and man directly come into relation or interpenetration with each other. At the same time, that world of myth is never separated from acts of ritual, magical or religious. In addition, imagination as the source for such a great factor as the norm for daily life, the social system, and so forth, should be understood from the world of myth. I think that imagination is nothing but a fundamental way of "existence" of man in the world of "things" with *eidōs*. Therefore, it is not sufficient to regard imagination on the basis of a mere faculty of human consciousness as is seen in Ernst Cassirer's study on myth, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. In other words, it is questionable to deal with mythical thinking from the epistemological view-point. It seems to me that the world of myth should be understood more basically, namely, as a fundamental mode of being for man or as a sort of "existential" way of living.

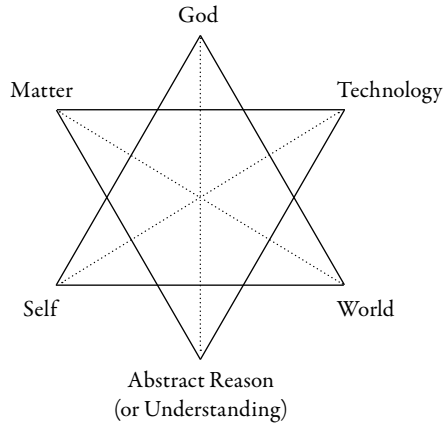
As I said before, however, such a world has been gradually broken down and *logos* has been increasingly awakened against *mythos*. This is the source of what appeared in the form of science in modern times.

The representative process of the awakening of *logos* can be found in the history of Greece. We can see there not a position where deity, man, and things of the world are related to each other by the living force which is mobile without regard to their respective boundaries, but rather a position of looking at the world from within and from perspective of the world itself,

conforming oneself to the world itself, as it were. What I mean by this will now be explained more concretely.

The position mentioned above may be said to begin to appear when Thales said that the *arche* of the world is water. The emergence of such a so-called natural philosophy, by which he grasped a principle to explain the world from within the world itself, means the appearance of the *logos*-perspective. When Thales and Heraclitus supposed water or fire as the *arche* of the universe, the mythical character still remained in their so-called "water" and "fire," and also in their way of thinking. In the atomistic world-image of Democritus, however, we can already see the appearance of a pure scientific way of thinking. At the same time, we see that, in parallel with this, *ethos* comes to the fore against *mythos*. Namely, an ethical consciousness comes into the relation between man and God, and man, being separated from the direct contact with the deity and the world, comes to look at himself in terms of himself from within himself. In the case of the tragic poets of Greece we can see the appearance of the position of *ethos*. In Grecian tragedies, the problems of human guilt and *hybris* clearly arise in the relation between man and God. The moral and ethical mentioned above can be said to be still another perspective which, although it breaks down the *mythos* perspective, is itself a development from the *mythos* perspective.

Setting aside the question of *ethos*, I will consider here only the question of *logos*. First of all, in the position of *logos*, as found in Democritus, since the world comes to be seen mechanically and atomistically, the relation between God and man is cut off. Science appears in a form which breaks down religion as a living relation between God and the self. That the world comes to be seen from within the world itself without a living relation with God and man means that the world is understood as a dead, material world, in which man also becomes a material being, and in which the Deities are denied. This is the position of materialism. Secondly, the life and faculties of human beings take on a technical character by which the living relation between God and the world is cut off. Instead of the idea that the world is sustained and ordered by God, appears the idea that man rules the world by his own power and conquers nature. Such a new position for man, made possible by the development of technology, comes into existence and breaks down the mythical relation between God and the world. Thirdly, the scientific way of thinking, that is understanding, appears as that which breaks down the liv-



ing relation between the world and the self. Understanding seems to have, in essence, a function to separate the self from its living and organic relation with the world. By understanding, man reflects inwardly, and through this reflection he becomes self-conscious as a subjective being. It is by this fact that the self is cut off from the living and direct relation with the world. As Hegel says that understanding is the position of abstract universality or negativity (*Negativität*), understanding is a position in which man becomes conscious of himself as a subject containing universality (and abstract universality at that), and is egocentric. It is a position which, from of old, has been said to pretend to be an aspiration to usurp the throne of God and by which the relation between the world and the self is cut off. In short, a new relation between understanding, technique and the material world breaks down the living relation between God, man and the world, and an entirely new position which takes the place of *mythos* appears. It is, after all, science which has been gradually developing itself until now as such a new position.

Philosophy until now has tried to lay the foundation on which the disunity between the position of *logos* represented by science and the position of *mythos* can be synthesized and reunified basically, and has tried to establish a new world-view on this foundation. The philosophy founded by Plato and Aristotle can be said to have such an intention. As clearly seen in Plato's dialogues, the radically scientific position of those days represented by Democritus gradually gave rise to many crises in Grecian society. In the field of *ethos* also, shifting from Grecian tragedy to the Sophists, the grave and religious struggle in the tragic poets disappears and a view of social scientific

criticism arises strongly, which also causes a crisis. Accordingly, overcoming the positions of the Sophists and the natural philosophers of his time, and again grasping *mythos* in the developed dimensions of *ethos* and *logos*, Plato's philosophy of "Idea" appeared. This philosophy, together with that of Aristotle's, though fairly different from Plato's in character, have continued until modern ages as the foundation of philosophy.

However, in spite of such a philosophical endeavour of the rearrangement of *logos* and *mythos* and the endeavor in all the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle, and succeeding philosophers, dominance by science, through the development of science, has taken place to such an extent that even the philosophical endeavour has broken down. It is from such a situation that the problem of nihilism mentioned above and the problem of "demythologization" in modern Christianity arise. These are the problems to be solved in the future. So far as I am concerned, I should like to consider these problems of our time from a position which cannot be found in the tradition of Western thought, namely, the position in which *śūnyatā* ("vacancy") or nothingness becomes the most fundamental question, as can be glimpsed in the appearance of nihilism in our time. It is the position of *śūnyatā*, traditionally inherited in the Orient, that, in order to attain the "true *śūnyatā*," even *śūnyatā* ("vacancy") is to be negated ("vacated"), and it is by following *śūnyatā* itself up to the true *śūnyatā* that *śūnyatā* as vacancy is to be overcome.

