

On "Myths and Multiculturalism": A Comment on Jean Burnet*

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Jean Burnet (1979) has provided us with a very interesting paper. The most important part of the paper concerns the description and analysis of at least four myths (the myth of early arrival, the myth of the thirds, the myth of the third force, and the myth of British villainy) that seem to be widely accepted in Canadian society and perhaps perpetuated by the educational system.

Nevertheless, it seems that the paper suffers from a very serious flaw. One cannot find an explicit definition of "myth" in the whole paper. Since the argument depends upon this concept, it would seem reasonable that the author would provide a clear and concise definition. It would have been useful, for example, if Professor Burnet had told us exactly how we are to distinguish myth from fact. Failing this, it would have been useful if she had told us exactly how *she* distinguished myth from fact.

Without a clear definition of myth, readers must attempt to understand the implicit definition or definitions which are used in the paper. As such, it seems that Professor Burnet is implicitly saying that myths are beliefs which are not factual but which are widely accepted by some groups of people. If this is a correct interpretation, then Burnet has used an inappropriate definition of this concept. Myths have been examined for a very long time in social anthropology and they are defined as being something quite different than widely accepted, but unsubstantiated, beliefs.

It is generally accepted that myths are defined in terms of three inter-related dimensions. First, myths are defined as being about how one state of mankind or nature was transformed into another. They concern how a world in which there were no people was transformed into a world with people; how chaos became cosmos; how immortals became mortals; and other transformations of this type. In the words of Thompson (1946), "By myths I do not, of course, mean *Märchen*, fairy tales, folk tales, Sagen, or legends but sacred narratives telling of sacred beings and of semi-divine heroes and of the origins of all things, usually through the agency of these sacred beings" (p. 9).

* This comment is made on a previously published article by Jean Burnet, "Myths and Multiculturalism," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1979, 4(4), 43-58.

Second, myths are concerned with ontology. That is, myths are about the origin and nature of physical and social reality. Malinowski (1948), for example, describes how myth "as it exists in a . . . community [is] not merely a story told but a reality lived." It is "not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force" (pp. 100-101).

Third, myths refer to how things came to be what they are; they do not refer to mere inventories, rules of behavior, or common beliefs. In this respect, Jung (1953) notes that "the primitive mentality does not invent myths, it experiences them." Myths are "anything but allegories of physical processes. . . . Myths . . . have a vital meaning . . . not merely do they represent, they *are* the mental life of the primitive tribe. . . ." (p. 314).

As such, it seems that Professor Burnet is talking about "legends" or "lies" rather than about myths. To Burnet it seems that myths are something which have been invented or created for specific purposes. The "myth of the third force" and the "myth of the thirds" are two examples. These may be legends or lies but they certainly are not myths as this concept is generally defined. The point is, in a science with any veracity, it is simply not acceptable to have authors define important concepts in any way they want unless they can give very good arguments to support their definition. In this paper Burnet has not provided any rationale for her use, or rather misuse, of the concept *myth*.

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