

THE POLITICOCULTURAL FORCE OF MYTHIC SYMBOLS

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Jesus is doing alright with the latest film on him, but Dukakis lost the election when Bush closed his nomination speech with the Pledge of Allegiance.... This Thinksheet muses on the current convergence, in the American psyche, of two mythic symbols. My expression here, "mythic symbol," is itself a convergence: a **symbol** is (etymologically) a "throwing together" of two realities, the more concrete to represent the denotatum, conotata, and resonances of the less concrete--as, eg, the flag symbolizes the USA; a **myth** is a story a community is living (or, in the case of a dead myth, lived). Regardless of the story's purchase on "reality," whatever that is (metaphysics is irrelevant to this Thinksheet); so a **mythic symbol** is any sign (video-, audio-, mnemonic, or other) functioning in a social psyche to signal a story a community is living (or lived).

1. Live mythic symbols have enormous creative, sustaining, and destructive **force**. "Great" leaders know ~~how~~ to move into, inhabit, and use (manipulate, for good or evil) their people's mythic symbols. A community is only as robust as, at a given time, its mythic symbols are: because of the steady erosion of both our spiritual and our national ("patriotic") mythic symbols, America is now in cultural and political decline. And the people's hearts and votes will be won by the party that seems to the people superior in honoring the people's mythic symbols. I'm sad to say that as I write, that is the Republican Party.

2. Mythic symbols are intolerant of reasoning (though not of reason or logic). **Religious** leaders on the right and the left have been--stupidly, it seems to me--condemning the film version of Nikos Kazantzakis' 1955 novel on the basis of reasoning, neglecting its mythic-symbolic importance for the church and even more for the unchurched. Today that highly sophisticated pair of film-reviewers, Siskel and Ebert, gave a wholly favorable review of the film, a review that was also (even more remarkable!) Christian orthodox: it was for us "a great religious experience," making Jesus more real to us than anything ever before in our lives, making us "both...think long and seriously about God and man." The irony is that while "the church" has been fighting politically over the film (censorship? et al), "the world" is making a religious response to it. In academic jargon, what church folk need is more "theology of culture." And what religious leaders need is to give more attention to how church folk and world folk actually are responding to cultural and political events. A pragmatic-control question might be, How does this make God more (to use Siskel and Ebert's word) "available"?

3. Seems everywhere I go these days the people are talking about the two things it used to be taboo to talk about, namely, religion (under "The Temptation" event) and politics (under "The Pledge of Allegiance" event). Wonderful! Thank God and take courage, and jump into the conversations! For both religion and politics are myth lived, lived myth; and there's hope for human advance when a community is attending to its mythic symbols; especially when the forces of religion, education, and politics combine, formally or informally, to inform and inspire this attending in truly human directions.... **Political** leaders Dukakis and Bush are now "Pledge"-embattled. Lawyer Dukakis is honoring a past, 1973, Supreme Court decision; and opportunist Bush is succeeding in his self-presentation as the hero who promises to reinvigorate the nation's mythic symbols, in this case the Pledge--not this nation as God (identity) or for God (agency) but this nation "under God" (subserviency). In the contest between the tyranny of minorities (atheists--pupils and teachers--in the public schools, eg) and the tyranny of the majority, which position (respectively, the Democratic or the Republican) has the more votes? A constructive question: How adjudicate the relative rights of majorities and minorities--in our communities, our nation, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Burundi, et al?