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Anthropology of the Supernatural

The American Myth

Emile Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things- that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” (Durkheim n.d.) This definition could classify much of the myths and folklore surrounding the United States into its own religion. Not only are there shared faith in these myths, but they have crafted many rituals that people follow and sanctify objects. These myths have united many into shared morals including what is said in the “scripture” “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (Declaration of Independence)

Like many religions, America has its own version of a creation myth. A very common belief is that Christopher Columbus pleaded for money from various royals in order to sail across the ocean to prove that the Earth was round. (Christina M. Desai 2014) However, as it turns out, much of these myths and stories surrounding Columbus are false. Columbus was simply looking for a faster way to India which other members of royalty did not fund because the calculations would show that India was too far of a journey if one were to sail around the other way. (Christina M. Desai 2014) However, what does this myth say of our morals, and how does it influence our morals? A study of picture books showed Columbus portrayed in a few key manners: the academic researching the globe and stars, the holy man who worshipped the god who led him to America, and the friendly explorer, meeting and befriending the Indians as he got to the new land. (Christina M. Desai 2014) These views of our founder translate into values held by the children. As they see Columbus buried in his studies, children are encouraged to work hard in school as well as follow the passions that they have. When Columbus thanks the lord like he does in many depictions (Christina M. Desai 2014), children copy his religious behavior. The savage Indians welcoming Columbus help children believe in the positive impact that Columbus finding America has on the world. Thus, children do not even question colonization. Christopher Columbus as a creation myth imparts morals of hard work and spirituality as well as teaches children that colonization is a positive event.

The American myth also follows various rituals that most Americans are familiar with and do not question. To celebrate the spiritual New Year, July 4, Americans host festivals including displays of fireworks and often featuring songs to celebrate America. Prior to sporting events, one song “The Star-Spangled Banner” is played while the audience turns to face the American flag. After tragic events, this American flag is often flown at half-mast in order to grieve. Many Americans would not consider these acts religious. However, these rituals being so engraved in American culture, the spiritual nature of them would not be questioned even though they seem highly religious.

In fact, it would be difficult to make the argument that the American flag is not sacred. Like sacred objects, they protect the flag from being defiled by uncleanliness. There exists an extensive list of rules in order to protect this symbol from impurity. (USFlag.org: A Website Dedicated to the Flag of the United States of America - United States Code n.d.) However, these rules do not dictate the actions of many Americans. While the flag code does state that one is not to where clothing depicting the flag (USFlag.org: A Website Dedicated to the Flag of the United States of America - United States Code n.d.), many do it anyways. However, to put the flag on the ground, step on it, or burn it is considered to be an unclean act.

Some Americans, however, place their spiritual emphasis on a separate area. They look to the American “scripture” of the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution paying attention to the first amendment forbidding the government to make any laws that entangle with one’s freedom of expression or religion. In fact, many of American morals can be gathered through these articles. The Declaration of Independence focuses on the American desire for self-governance. Freedom is a major value in the American mythology that one can see through this document. The constitution, on the other hand, sets out from the very beginning to “establish justice.” These values of freedom, justice, and liberty shape the morals of Americans.

America follows the definition of religion above, but it lacks any form of magic. While Americans engage in these rituals and hold these beliefs, Americans do not have a particular purpose for these behaviors. Thus, one must wonder why it is that they act in such a way. Perhaps, this is based in a belief in the American Dream where people are to be able to do anything with enough hard work. If they act morally- or patriotically in these cases, people can achieve whatever they wish, but if they act immorally, they are punished by the nonexistent deity.

The American myth is the manner in which moral values are engraved into the fiction and literature surrounding the country. America’s creation is believed by many to be one caused by hard work, holiness, and a right to independence. Americans celebrate these values in the rituals that they engage in, and they preserve the holiness of their symbolic flag.

Works Cited

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