

# Mythologies—true or false?

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By Philip Hunt

## That violence solves conflict is a deep belief. It's wrong

PHILIP HUNT

When the sheriff rides into town and shoots the rustlers, everyone doesn't live happily ever after.

Kids are media critics today. My 14-year-old son took exception when a reviewer described J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of The Rings*, as a "writer".

"What rubbish!" said the teenager. "Tolkien's great achievement is as a linguist. He invented Elvish, after all."

"More," I suggested. "He created a whole world of people, places and language. His crowning achievement was to articulate an English mythology."

It is not surprising that most of us consider the story the most interesting part of Tolkien's imagination. Given that it is an unfortunately fascist morality with the idea of a self-proclaimed Good committing genocide on races they define as Bad, this is perhaps the least meritorious among Tolkien's many worthy legacies.

It is also surely no coincidence that in 2003, when fear is being promoted, when everyone has to be on the lookout for people behaving suspiciously, when our Australian way of life is under threat, the simple idea of massacring those who threaten us is appealing.

We overlook that it is an appeal to a mythical way of solving conflict.

Deep in the heart of humans lies this idea that violence brings peace. That when the sheriff rides into town, shoots the rustlers and robbers, everyone lives happily ever after. That stopping the Communists in Korea or Vietnam leads to world peace.

Tolkien's great achievement was that what he wrote resonated deep in the soul of every English person, and many more besides. His story tapped into our mythological beliefs. It touched something deep. We recognised it as our own.

But why? The answer to this question is not found in Tolkien. We must look to the work of a Frenchman who, a little like Tolkien, developed an interest in mythology from a linguistics beginning. René Girard, of Stanford University, has provided the key to unlock this mystery.

Girard's work shows that all human societies have mythologies. The most common is variously described as the victimage mechanism or scapegoating. Societies based on this mythology form when someone is accused as a scapegoat for the conflict that exists in society. Guilt is incidental.

Girard suggests that modern societies, too, are based on mythologies. The many symbols of nationalism — cheering the president, singing the anthem, waving the flag, and taboos and penalties against those who don't cheer, sing or wave loudly enough — all these are typical of mythologies in other societies.

The problem we have is that we do not think so.

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When some wild Arab spokesman describes America as the "Great Satan" we know immediately that he is appealing to a myth. But when President Bush puts Iraq and North Korea on the "axis of evil" we react as if he is stating a fact. Are we incapable of seeing in ourselves that which we see in others?

Once upon a time, I worked for World Vision. One of the many things we did was drill wells for water. Our crews followed scientific principles to find water. When we asked the local villagers how they traditionally found wells, they said they consulted the local soothsayer, who killed a chicken, said some words, and then took them to a place where they should dig.

After a year we reviewed our

program. Sure enough, our scientific method proved more effective in finding water than the dead-chicken method. Even so, our crew of Western-educated drilling technicians was surprised that the dead-chicken method worked as well as it did.

"It's just a myth," they told me. "You can't find water by killing a chicken and saying an incantation. Our method is scientific and proven." The villagers followed myths, whereas the crew did not.

When we asked the villagers what they thought about our superior results, they responded, "Your soothsayers are better than ours!"

For many years I interpreted this as a confirmation that science triumphs over mythology. Now, through the lens of René Girard's work, it is possible simply to agree with the villagers that one mythology might have been better than another in finding water.

Delusions about finding water may be serious, but delusions about finding world peace are more important and far-reaching.

The world has lurched from crisis to crisis from time immemorial. Periods of horrid conflict have been followed by times of peace. Then things start to fall apart, the middle cannot hold. War breaks out again.

There are two ways to respond to this: We accept that this is the way the world is, make a scapegoat of whomever we consider to blame, and kill them, however costly the conflict. Or, we find another way.

There will be many who are convinced that the first way is the only way. That humankind was made for this — to live, murder as required, and die. There will be others who are convinced that there is another way. A way of reconciliation and forgiveness. René Girard certainly does.

Philip Hunt is a Melbourne writer, and a former chief executive of World Vision Australia.

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