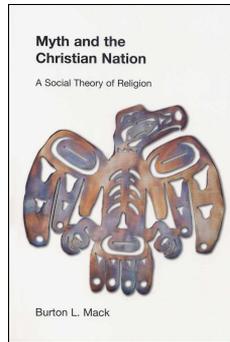


○ REVIEW OF BURTON L. MACK, *MYTH AND THE CHRISTIAN NATION: A SOCIAL THEORY OF RELIGION*

(LONDON: EQUINOX, 2008)

Richard Walsh, Methodist University



Robert Bellah depicted American civil religion as the shared conception and practice of the common good which united Americans and which depended on ideas about the Roman Republic and the Christian Bible. Writing with several collaborators in *Habits of the Heart* in 1985, Bellah lamented the replacement of that civil religion by utilitarian and expressive individualism because neither provided any significant resource for community.

Burton Mack offers a dramatically different story. He sees the popular notion of America's religious (Puritan) roots as being overly redacted and falsely narrow, omitting others from the story and creating a mythic tale of a golden age lost by glossing over huge historical eras when Christianity was simply not politically significant. Moreover, for Mack, the Constitution and the Christian Bible do not cohere. The former supports an experiment in social democracy whose highlights include moments like (Lincoln's public interpretation of) the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. The latter has been used to support a myth of the Christian nation, which stresses American uniqueness, superiority, sovereignty, and global mission and which has engendered the recent 'holy war on terror' and the evangelical rhetoric of the Bush administration. Furthermore, Mack traces the debilitating effects of individualism to the pernicious influence of Christianity itself, which he claims has emphasised the individual since its inception in *voluntary* Jesus associations. Rejecting the socially inadequate Christian myth, Mack calls Americans to embrace reason, to recognise complexity, and to negotiate problems. Mack, that is, calls Americans to a rather different (and more human) (civil) religion than Bellah does (269-70). Mack bases this political appeal on a social theory of religion (part 1 of his book) and a redescription of Christianity from that perspective (part 2).

Mack's social theory of religion depends primarily upon the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, with whom he has worked over several years in the well-known Society of Biblical Literature Seminar on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins (Mack lists other helpful theorists,

see pp. 42-43, and provides a critical review of the development of the academic study of religion in chapter 1). Mack uses Smith's understanding of religion to challenge two popular ideas about religion, both of which rely upon the Christian myth: (1) the idea that religion is a private, personal experience; and (2) the idea that religion is an institution 'devoted to the representation of the spiritual realm in the human world.' As already noted, the first false idea is endemic to Christianity; moreover, it stands in the way of a *social* theory of religion. For Mack, the second idea is equally peculiar to Christianity and depends ultimately upon an idea of religion stemming from medieval Christianity's participatory Mass.

If one looks at religions from a more sociological perspective (chapters 2-4), religion – specifically its myth and ritual – becomes instead critical thinking about everyday matters of social interest, particularly about matters where the community's social and natural world intersect and in which the community acknowledges (social) determinations transcending the everyday. Instead of providing participation in a sacred reality, myth and ritual expand the community's imaginative horizon beyond the everyday with stories of the precedent-setting past, the cosmic and chthonic world, the future, and powerful agents. Following Smith (ptc. *Map is Not Territory*, 1978), Mack claims that this imaginative horizon allows the difference necessary for comparison and, thereby, for critical thought about the everyday: 'Myths can do this by creating a space between the narrative account, set in an imaginary time, and the current situation as the occasion for telling the story. Rituals do it by comparing a customary action of a project with a perfect performance of it as if within the imagined world' (89, cf. 76-89). In sum, this larger, imagined environment provides a society with its mentality, its grammar for thinking (139-43; cf. Bourdieu's *habitus*).

This social description of religion founds Mack's redescription of Christianity (part 2). Not incidentally, the Seminar on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins took such a redescription as its long-term goal. While its detractors have complained that a holistic redescription has not been forthcoming, Mack's work can be seen as such an attempt (*A Myth of Innocence*, 1988; *The Lost Gospel*, 1993; *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 1995; *The Christian Myth*, 2003). This volume popularises that work – for the acknowledged goal of advancing social democracy in America – and sets it in the large context of an overarching theory about religion and an overview of Christian history.

For Mack, the standard view of early Christian origins is not historically demonstrable (148), and early Christian literature is myth-making relatively unconnected to a historical Jesus who offered no social program and had no disciples. The primary concern of this and subsequent Christian myth-making was not to say something about Jesus but to reflect upon the kingdom of God, the cause for which Jesus was eventually imagined as martyr. Compared to the myths of other religions, Christian (kingdom) myth-making is incredibly narrow, for it says little about nature or the social world of the *oikoumene*, partly because it gradually displaces the notion of the kingdom of God both spatially and temporally. Constantine and Nicaea changed this dramatically by creating an imperial Christianity with a creed which included belief in the (imperial) church on a par with belief in God. This creedal emphasis is yet another Christian peculiarity and enervates the playfulness necessary to mythic thinking. The subsequent building of basilicas, especially in the 'Holy Land,' gave Christians both a sense of a homeland and their distinctive notion of a place – soon transplanted to the practice of the Mass in elaborate medieval churches – where worshippers could participate in the sacred. Again, this peculiar Christian notion debilitated

mythic thinking, now by collapsing the sense of space and difference essential to myth (198-99). Finally, the distinctive Christian myth emerged fully in medieval Christianity. Full blown, that mentality – unlike that of other religions – stresses the logic of the singular (i.e., monotheism and creedal orthodoxy), of Manichaeism (i.e., polarised notions of good and evil), and of dramatic, redemptive violence (i.e., focus on miraculous creation, Christ, and eschaton). For Mack, this myth is woefully inadequate, because it makes it difficult to handle human conflict and to imagine a place for the other or for nature (200-15).

As noted previously, Christianity focuses upon the individual. The medieval development of confession exacerbated this emphasis, and the ascension of the modern state, which had little need for Christianity, completed the deployment of Christianity as a purely private affair. In the United States, Christian nation rhetoric in the 1950s and more recent evangelical disenchantment with leaders and policies (primarily on sexual matters) has significantly changed this focus, making the ethically, religiously inadequate Christian myth/mentality a significant participant in politics. For Mack, an awareness of religion's social interests, which one can know only by eschewing Christian bias, and an awareness of the peculiar history creating the peculiar and dangerous Christian myth are necessary for a renewed investment in social democracy. That project might possibly be supported by a less peculiar (civil) religion or, more likely, by a frank recognition of human agency.

In sum, Mack's broad, ambitious work is most helpful on two points. First, it creates a perspective whereby one can challenge the Christian bias still littering the academic study of religion (and the bible). Second, it offers a helpful, ethical evaluation of the Christian myth/mentality from the perspective of the world religions. Of course, the breadth and popular nature (the lack of footnotes is quite frustrating) of the volume invites specialist criticism. With respect to early Christianity, many scholars will challenge Mack's historical skepticism, as well as his views on the relative insignificance of the historical Jesus, the importance of Q and Thomas, the lateness of mythic reflection upon the death of Jesus and the Supper, etc. It is unlikely that either these criticisms or Mack's book will truly better illuminate early Christianity. Both serve rather to position Mack and his interlocutors in the 'cultural wars' in the United States (Does Mack wish to add a coda after the Obama election?) and in the academy more generally (see Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*, 2005). It will be unfortunate if that predictable debate obscures Mack's larger contribution to the academic study of religion (see above).

Nonetheless, two theoretical concerns deserve some attention. First, the attempt to displace Christianity from pride of place may have inadvertently subverted Mack's laudable attempt to rethink religion outside Christianity somewhat. In one regard, Mack's results look like a photographic negative of the academy's Christian bias, which he has long summarised pejoratively as the appeal to the unique and miraculous nature of Christianity. He has replaced that appeal with constant references to the peculiar and inadequate (should one say demonic?) nature of Christianity. Second, despite his review of the historical development of Christianity, he ultimately speaks of Christianity monolithically. In fact, he deliberately and emphatically says that all Christianity is effectively the same (232). Surely, that is mere rhetoric serving his political agenda?