

Benjamin Abelow, M.D. Abstract of Presentation for “Evolution of Religion II” conference, New Mexico, November 2017.

The Traumatogenic Theory of Myth Formation: Selected Episodes in the Evolutionary History of Religion.

In this talk, I argue that the overarching myths of several important religions were fundamentally shaped during their formative periods as a response to endemic childhood trauma in the cultures where those myths developed. My thesis builds on the empirical observation that the overarching myths of several important religions form thematic parallels with historically documented patterns of childhood trauma. The theory presented here can be termed the “traumatogenic theory of myth formation.” Correspondingly, a myth that thematically parallels a pattern of trauma can be termed a “traumatomorphic myth.”

In some religions, the thematic parallels between trauma (T) and myth (M) are precise, which suggests a causal relationship between T and M. In principle, three broad categories of causation are possible: trauma shaped myth ($T \rightarrow M$), myth shaped trauma ($M \rightarrow T$), and a third factor or set of factors (X) shaped both trauma and myth in parallel ($X \rightarrow T, M$). In the talk, I will show that T preceded M chronologically, eliminating $M \rightarrow T$ as a possibility. I will also show that $X \rightarrow T, M$ is relatively implausible. Therefore, $T \rightarrow M$ is the probable explanation.

In this talk, we will consider Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the metaphysical system of karmic reincarnation that is central to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. We will also consider a number of Greek and Roman myths. For Christianity, as well as for the myth of the rape of Persephone delineated in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (the Greek myth most closely associated with the historically important Eleusinian mystery religion), evidence for the traumatogenic theory is strong. For Judaism, Islam, and the metaphysical system of karmic reincarnation, the evidence is less strong but still suggestive.

The religions discussed in this presentation account for roughly 70 percent of the world’s population, potentially making the traumatogenic theory of considerable importance in the evolution of religions. Further, these religions include those that are extant and extinct, Eastern and Western, and monotheistic and polytheistic; this diversity raises the possibility that the theory may be relevant to some religions not yet considered. Nonetheless, three limitations should be noted. First, only the religions mentioned here by name have so far been examined for traumatomorphism. Second, for those religions that are discussed, the thesis is argued primarily with respect to the overarching myths; the theory does not necessarily apply to the less important, minor myths that, within each religion, are embedded within the matrix of the overarching myth. Third, the theory is not intended to exclude other sources of mythic content or other factors that may have contributed to the shaping of the overarching myths; in fact, a variety of theories can potentially act in concert with the one being presented here.

Keywords: myth, trauma, childhood, punishment, religion