The Sociology of Knowledge Comes to Religious Studies


It is easy to understand why Professor Strenski's book has been honoured with an award from the American Academy of Religion. This study of the professional and cultural contexts shaping the views of myth of Cassirer, Malinowski, Eliade, and Lévi-Strauss exemplifies a "kind" of scholarship emblematic of a growing disciplinary maturity. Strenski provides scholars of religion with an able instance of disciplinary reflexivity, in a largely non-polemical mode. In seeking to understand the nature and interrelationships of theories of myth, he argues that much can be gained from examining these theories in the light of some of the larger cultural projects (what he calls the "external context") and professional debates (i.e., the "internal context") dominant in the lives of their authors. His analysis, that is, moves beyond traditional intellectual history into a form of broader sociology of knowledge. In the process he greatly enriches our understanding of each theory by attempting to answer the questions: Why did the theorist engage the subject of myth? Why did they try to engage it as they did? Specialists may choose to dispute some
of the interpretations rendered and motives imputed. I maintain no pretensions to a capacity to determine such things. But as someone familiar with several of the works of each of the theorists in question I found little reason to take serious exception to Strenski's analysis. It is well-documented and cautiously framed.

On a more general level, Strenski's approach is both dictated by and helps to explain the peculiarly non-cumulative character of the theory of myth as such. Operating with often unacknowledged and hidden prescriptive agendas, Cassirer, Malinowski, Eliade, and Lévi-Strauss have devised their theories of myth in relative independence and neglect of each other. To ameliorate this counter-productive state of affairs, Strenski claims that "some conceptual order" must be imparted to "the construction of ideas of myth". To this end a proper historical awareness of the particular processes conditioning each theory and of all the theories as products of the particular intellectual and social trends of the twentieth century, is essential. Yet like most historians, Strenski is inclined to exaggerate the "explanatory" value, in this regard, of historical analyses alone.

Strenski dedicates a chapter each to Cassirer and Malinowski, while Eliade and Lévi-Strauss are dealt with at greater length in two chapters each. To provide some insight into the virtues and vices of the text I will survey his analyses, then concentrate more of my attention on his treatment of Lévi-Strauss, the most important, I think, of the four figures.

Strenski casts Cassirer's theory of myth against the backdrop of romantic primitivism and "Volkishness" which swept through the intellectual class of Wimar Germany. Both attracted and repelled by elements of this movement, Cassirer is portrayed as attempting "nothing less than [the] reconciliation of romanticism with rationalism, primitivism with modernism, [and] tribalism with cosmopolitanism". The resultant uneasy blend of Lebensphilosophie and idealist philosophical principles produced a theory of myth trapped within too limited a cultural horizon.

Strenski also detects the formative influence of the anti-modernist and anti-rationalist sentiments of the day in the theory of myth presented in Malinowski's early works (e.g., Argonauts of the Western Pacific). But these sentiments were anchored in a strong measure of Durkheimian functionalism, with its complementary emphasis on the role of myth in expressing and reinforcing social solidarity. Only later, Strenski