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Jamie Hildebrand

The University of Western Ontario

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol1/iss1/4
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Keywords
Elvis Presley, pilgrimage, religion, mythology, Graceland

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This article is available in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol1/iss1/4
The Church of Elvis

by Jamie Hildebrand

I have reason to believe
We all will be received
In Graceland

Paul Simon: Graceland

Elvis Presley, the anointed King of rock and roll, died on August 16, 1977. Empirical fact? Many people are undeterred by this trivial piece of information from believing a mythology which seems to be constructing itself on the premise that Elvis lives on. There are two fundamental explanations for a surviving Elvis. Many believe that Elvis' death was a hoax, perpetrated by the star himself to escape the relentless scrutiny of his fans and the media. Still others feel Elvis is among the living in supernatural form, comforting the sick and the troubled as a ghostly and benevolent apparition. Many might well scoff at these beliefs as completely irrational. And yet this phenomena can no longer be relegated to the collective obsession of the lunatic fringe. About 2,000 visitors a day make the pilgrimage to Graceland, 700,000 annually, and the tenth anniversary drew 10,000. There are over 600,000 members of fan clubs in the United States alone; and the nation is petitioning the government for a commemorative postage stamp. Stories of sightings of a live Elvis or a supernatural Elvis are spilling out of supermarkets and into bookstores. Abandoning the standard of rationality and looking at these beliefs as pure myth from the anthropological perspective sheds a great deal of light on how and why a mythology with Elvis Presley as its focus comes into being.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines religion as a "cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith", and myth as a story which serves to unfold part of a world view of a people or explain a practice or belief". According to Edmund Leach "a belief which is factually untrue is a species of religious dogma." Roughly paraphrased, Clifford Geertz' view of religion is of a cultural system reliant on symbols which establish and reflect the world view of a people. For the sake of this discussion the terms religion and mythology are interchangeable and are explored in the aforementioned context, i.e. a system of symbols based on beliefs not reliant on empirical phenomena, that are an expression of the ethos of those who subscribe to its premises. The anthropological study of religion involves an analysis of the "meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper" coupled with the relating of these symbols to social structural and psychological processes".

"All human societies have myths" and certain themes are common to all myths. Religion seeks to resolve binary opposites, life and death being the most compelling example of this opposition. Religion is also concerned with providing a "bridge between man and God". Mythologies must also provide, through symbols, a "template" for social activity and world view; "models of" and "models for" the way in which a people see the world and their relationship to it.

Religion seeks to mediate the binary opposites that are "intrinsic to human thought", The most fundamental example, life and death, is resolved through the creation of a third and special category, that of the supernatural. In order to mediate death, the supernatural category must transcend the confines of mortal life. It should come as no surprise that "non-rationality" is the "very essence of myth". Myth is constructed specifically to function in areas where rationality fails. From this perspective when a girl utters " here comes Elvis" as her dying words from her hospital bed, she is looking to Elvis to mitigate the despair in the finality of death. Elvis returning from the dead is comfort in the reassurance that there is another world beyond the mortal one.

Redundancy, a trait characteristic of all mythology, is well attested to in the sheer bulk of stories regarding Elvis' survival. These stories present themselves in many different versions, another characteristic of myths. In a book entitled Is Elvis Alive?, Gail Brewer-Giogio presents a number of hypotheses, all varying in their specific details, of how Elvis faked his death to escape the destructive adulation of his fans. Dr. Raymond A. Moody Jr., in the book Elvis After Life has chronicled many accounts of posthumous visitations from an Elvis of the spirit world. The infinite variety of conflicting details does not at all affect the credibility of myth since "each alternative version of a myth confirms his (the believers) understanding and reinforces the essential meaning of all the others". The essential
meaning in this example is the mediation of the binary link between life and death.

Redundancy and non-rationality as essential elements of mythology point to an interesting relationship between myth and the supermarket tabloid. Tabloids are completely reliant on sensationalism. Boca Raton, publisher of the National Examiner, goes for the "Hard to believe, the harder to believe the better, because that's what our readers are looking for". According to Edmund Leach, the myth that is the "least probable" is also the one to which is attached the greatest importance." Finding a ready market in the fascination for outrageous stories concerning Elvis Presley provides the incentive for proliferation of material. Proliferation and non-rationality actually lend credibility in fulfilling fundamental criteria of mythology. Proliferation leads to redundancy and non-rationality as overt ordering of different kinds of sexual access". Access to power or wealth is realized in "being the wife of a rich and important man". To be a wife or lover of Elvis would represent access to the ultimate degree in power and prestige. Where sexual access is an accepted form of currency it is to be expected that power and access to wealth will be expressed in terms of Saussurean distance. For women the prophet Elvis mediates a class distinction imposed via sexuality. In a social climate that regards women as "chattels", both men and women must subscribe to this order. The male view expressed in these terms would be unlimited access to women as a consequence of power. Scores of hysterical female fans would certainly bolster this image. If Elvis ever committed a crime in his B movies it was the crime of womanizing, an indiscretion which more often elicits a slap on the back than on the wrist. "Women have come to Memphis to deliver babies, claiming Elvis is the father and that he will come down from heaven when the boy is 16 to anoint him, sort of like Jesus in the Jordan River." Another woman is convinced that her living son is Elvis reincarnated. These stories are another example of a "common structural theme" found in many religions; that "women may sometimes be made pregnant by means other than insemination by a human male". A main task of religion, once it has created the category of the supernatural, is to provide a "bridge between man and God". Rather than the rather foolish literal interpretation advanced by a consensus of theologians which concluded the Virgin Mary was inseminated through the ear, these myths express a theme which attempts to unite man and God in a vital way. Virgin birth, or in the case of Elvis, supernatural insemination, describes a "metaphysical topography of the relationship between gods and men". It provides a route of access to the mystical power of the prophet. The situation which places the emphasis on the physical reincarnation of the prophet will naturally find its expression in the yearning of the more devout that it should be their child.

Perhaps it is tenuous to claim that Elvis can be described as a prophet at all. Prophets are generally associated with specific and articulated teachings. The lack of any formalized message does not present any major stumbling block to the faithful. On the contrary, Rev. Robert D. Martin suggests that the "rise of a new religion", with "Elvis as God and Graceland the shrine" could rely on Elvis' music as the requisite teachings. Although
The religious aspect in "charismatic societies will manifest itself in the "hypnotic expression of an extraordinary personality". Because of this intense expression of what the Elvis audience regards as the nature of man, followers are willing to supply the necessary requisites to authenticate their belief. In *Is Elvis Alive*, a book erroneously touted by its author as investigative journalism, there are several references to Elvis' deeply spiritual nature. He studied at a secluded mountain top spiritual academy and felt he had the power to faith heal.

Elvis subscribed to fundamentalist religious views. From humble truck driver to superstar, Elvis is the classic and so loved rags to riches story which affirms the capitalist ethic. In the land of equal opportunity while it is true that anyone may aspire to the achievements of the wealthy and the powerful, it is also true that the talent which provides access to opportunity is not universally distributed. In an article about Melanesian cargo cults, Peter Worsely relates that for the natives, "completely ignorant of factory production", the "secret of the cargo" represents a knowledge of a decidedly magical dimension. Similarly, the moving experience of witnessing a performance is, for the Elvis fan, completely divorced from the notion of methodical practice or exercises in vocal technique. In the mind of the average factory worker, watching the boss drive home in his Mercedes does not conjure images of diversified mutual funds and income property. The vast majority of the blue-collar contingent find the acquisition of wealth beyond their realm of knowledge. The mysterious aspect of the generation of wealth in a moneyed society is evident in a description of economists by John Kenneth Galbraith likening them to "witch doctors", "cultivating the belief that they are in privileged association with the occult". The parable of Elvis' life expresses the hope and helplessness; it affirms and explains the condition of the working class. If one of them, a humble truck driver, can achieve the ultimate success, access is universal. But that access is granted selectively by virtue of being possessed of special qualities, transcendent of ordinary realities. Just as professional wrestling is a description of "what fans know", that "working hard and doing right" is no guarantee of success, Elvis' story aptly describes the same message. It affirms the truth of inequality that they know and at the same time provides a hero to admire who is one of them. Elvis is the perfect candidate for he "sees in himself all those to whom he speaks, and they see themselves in him—a communion from which charisma is surely born". In the recognition of inequality and at the same moment affirming a
potential mitigation of that inequality by identifying with the prophet, the Elvis myth exhibits another basic function of religion. Religion seeks to recognize "injustice" on "the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole". While pain and suffering may be the immediate reality, mythology seeks to deal with questions of life "in terms of what it takes to be wider, non-hypothetical truths".

In a similar manner as the supernatural Elvis mediating the binary aspect of life and death, the special category of pop star serves to mediate the class distinction. As Elvis travels freely from life to death and back, so he travels freely between classes, transcending the oppositions of economic realities.

The moods produced in religious symbolism are thought of in terms of their source, while motivations are considered in terms of their "consummation". Moods emanate from the "model of" the world perceived, motivations are the formulation of the "model for" the pattern of response to that perception.

The source of the mood which inspires belief in a prophet in the guise of Elvis is seen chiefly in economic terms. Money is the factor which "most frequently" calls for "new assumptions" concerning power. The traditional image of Christ represents less and less the ethic embraced in a modern society. Money, by its very nature "lends itself to non-reciprocal action", reciprocal action being the original foundation upon which systems of moral behavior are based. When any group feels its "original meaning system" to be "ineffective and contradictory" "the resulting state of deprivation often causes members to rebuild their culture along more satisfying lines". The emaciated figure of an unselfish and loving Christ may seem laudable but it does not reflect the activities or aspirations of western civilization. The main component of core Elvis fans has been described as blue-collar. Tabloids as the original purveyors of the faith of Elvis are designed to appeal to the "pink-collar market", "high-school educated, working women with kids". While Christ may not embody the aspirations or activities of the working class, the image of a materially successful prophet undoubtedly would. The source of the mood that turns away from Christ to embrace the image of Elvis is the lack of a traditional belief system to address current realities. The prior moral order is being steadily replaced with a new moral order with money, manifested in commercialism and consumerism, as its focus.

As a society moves away from a traditional value system and abandons a former religion it becomes apparent that some new form of religion must be created. Not only for the application of resolving questions of life and death, not only to solve questions of inequity, religion must function as a "template", to shape the world of men. In this application we find the motivation; its consummation is the shaping and adhering to the created world view. A capitalist society differs from a feudal society in what it requires of its populace. Feudalism demanded strict adherence to an ordered hierarchy, submission and cooperation. Capitalism demands participatory cooperation as well. The consumer lifestyle must be continually sold to the populace. In an economy that assumes scarcity at every turn, opulence and power must provide an unattainable ambition while at the same time giving that ambition the appearance of accessibility. In gravitating to a prophet, the singular expression of achievement, the individual is emphasized. We can empathize with an Elvis and be inspired to succeed on our own. The envisioned lifestyle of the rich and famous is the carrot that propels us around the track of consumerism.

In the words of Clifford Geertz, "human behavior is so loosely determined by intrinsic [instinctive] sources" that we must rely on "extrinsic" cultural ones. Human behavior is so complex and interdependent that a cultural system is absolutely imperative for our "creational viability". Eclipseing the function of providing rules is the task of finding meaning in life. Religion must function in the confines of the current social realities. The image of Elvis is current in what it represents, but it is also current in the fact that it is a highly defined and visible image. Movies and magazines are the stuff that pop stars and movie stars are made of. Worship of media stars is a prime characteristic of the world in which we live. By virtue of publicity Elvis is a demi-god. People see stars as larger than life, inhabitants of the celluloid universe; mystical, eerie, and immortal. Being the subject of media attention lends credibility, both in the relentless access, and the transcendental nature of the special category of media star. To be immortalized in film creates a persona of mythical proportions even before the mythology has been articulated.

Listening to the tape supplied with Is Elvis Alive? is an interesting experience. The familiar drawl is convincing, the noticeable characteristics of the conversation however, is its completely trivial content. It is intentionally vague and aimless. Nothing is affirmed or denied by the prophet, and yet one is caught unawares by the yearning for maybe just maybe...he lives. The mythology finds its focus mainly on style and non-content; on who says it and not what is said. The
style is the message. This is partially due to dependence on a multi-media environment, but it also gives the religious aspect the latitude of infinite flexibility of interpretation. Contemporary religions will of necessity exhibit this trait as they respond to an almost daily change in life patterns as technology accelerates cultural evolution to a breakneck pace.

Using the anthropological approach has provided some insight into the evolving church of Elvis. The seemingly spontaneous creation of a myth system which extensively displays the criteria essential to myth and religion is proof that religion is still a necessary and viable activity of the collective consciousness. The growth of this millenarian tendency with Elvis as the new prophet will be determined by a number of factors. Already mentioned is the snowball effect of a sensationalist media interacting with current mythology. Another important factor is the degree of despair of the adherents. In a United States where statistics soundly indicate more and more money in the hands of fewer and fewer people, the acuteness of inequality will largely determine the reliance on mythology for solace. Just as Melanesian natives have no "notion of the workings of world-commodity markets" and could not comprehend why their economy was collapsing, American auto workers in a recent recession did not understand the reasons for massive lay-offs, reduced wages, and unemployment. The oppressed have "always ready to pour their hopes and fears, their aspirations and frustrations, into dreams of a millennium to come". In a culture of constant bombardment of new ideas via radio, television and magazines, the influx of new ideas is staggering. The concept of religious exclusivity is constantly eroded in a multi-media, multi-cultural environment. As the traditional approaches to religion lose their cultural viability, new ones will be created. New approaches are more than just accurate reflections of prevalent social and psychological conditions. Religion is what we do to describe ourselves collectively and continuously. In finding its expression in the worship of Elvis the pop star, the church of Elvis defines itself as a popularist religion, the

affirmation and description of a popularist culture.

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