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Myth of the Divine Mediating Hero

Here, “hero” means both masculine and feminine, both “hero” and “heroine”.

In other writing, I stressed this maxim: Don’t judge an idea by where it came from. Judge an idea by how true it is and how useful. It doesn’t matter if the idea came from an evolved ability, old spouses, children, drug-addled ex-hippies, the selfish “me” generation, or even academics.

I confess to one case where I violate my own maxim. I do not offer an excuse. I want to set the record straight. I don’t think my hypocrisy in this case hurt my work. This deviation did lead me to “go easy” on some real life heroes such as Jesus and Mohammad, on some made-up heroes such as avatars and bodhisattvas, and on the religions that promote them. I would not change that now. I would rather err on the side of politeness.

I dislike the idea of a hero-savior divine-or-semi-divine half-human-half-god who is the embodiment of the best ideas ever and who created the world. My dislike led me not to think enough about whether there might really be such a hero-savior. I discounted as false every case of it, including the Christian case of Jesus. I did not assess the idea on merits but discounted it generally and in all instances. I still do think this idea is false and is more harmful than useful but I did not present the idea in an objective manner, and so I apologize.

At least since state societies, about 5000 years ago, people have looked for a hero-savior. People want the hero-savior to be human and to participate in the divine, be divine and participate in the human, and to merge human and divine. They want the savior-hero as a mediator between the good people on Earth and God. This hero is much more than a regular hero, more even than mythical heroes such as Gilgamesh or the demigods of Greek myths such as Heracles. Imaginary examples of this hero are the heroes of Gnosticism, Dionysius, Hindu avatars, and Mahayana bodhisattvas.

It is less obvious but just as sure that people use real humans as a savior-hero even when the human says clearly that he-she is merely human and should not be seen as divine. Examples include Abraham, Moses, David, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, Jesus, and Mohammad. I include Jesus because I am not an orthodox Trinitarian Christian and I differ from Christians who hold Jesus as God equal to God the Father; I think Jesus would dislike that we see him that way. People are happy to violate one of the highest commands of the hero whose commands that they say they follow.

The hero-savior embodies one-or-more cosmic principles, for example Love, Compassion, Truth, Life, Perfection, Masculinity, Femininity, Equality, Justice, and Goodness. The hero-savior is an “embodied cosmic archetype(s)”. It is easier to see this effect on a qualitatively lesser scale with saints and how

they attend particular ideas, things, situations, or classes of people such as mercy, polio, travelers, or sailors. It is harder to think of the hero-savior embodying a grand totalizing idea such as Truth or Justice but that embodiment is one of the most appealing aspects of the hero-savior, so try to get that. Usually you can get it in your own religion but not for other religions. The cosmic hero is the Idea come to Life in the Flesh. If you are a fan of sci-fi on TV, in the show "Andromeda" starring Kevin Sorbo, the hero, Dylan Hunt (?), was an archetype. I am not sure of what he was the archetype; maybe the world having fun, entertaining itself, saving itself, and always making sure good prevailed. I enjoyed it.

The hero-savior often participates in creating the world (universe) or is the sole creator of this world. The clearest examples come from what I call "emanation" and "descent" (I did not originate the terms but I don't recall who did), and the clearest examples come in Gnosticism. Unfortunately, Gnosticism is not familiar to most readers and other examples are not as obvious to Western readers. I will explain but the explanation does not get across the power of the idea. To Westerners, the clearest example is Jesus. I return to him after some explanation.

For a taste of this hero-savior, think of Aslan the Lion from the Narnia stories. Aslan is a small version of Jesus as cosmic savior-hero creator of the world archetypal embodiment of all good ideas and virtue. Aslan also is very powerful physically.

-In Gnosticism and similar religions, the root God ("godhead" or "ur god") is perfect and does not need anything, so he-she does not sully his-her hands with creation directly. The root God creates a first sub-god that is almost as good and powerful but is interested in creation. In classical Greek thought, this is the "demi-urge"; see Plato and Aristotle. That first sub-god creates the world.

-In Gnosticism, the root God might create more gods, or the first sub-god might create more gods. In any case, there is a hierarchy of beings going from divine to high angel to human to moderate angel to beasts and plants to minor demons to great demons. Some of the creations are friends of humans, some are our enemies. Until recently, Westerners saw this sequence as "the Great Chain of Being" – read the book of that title by Arthur Lovejoy.

-The sequence is an "emanation" from the first sub-god (or the root God) and is a "descent" because each step is less ethereal and less perfect. Usually each step is also less of light, truth, goodness, life, and spirituality, and is more dark, material, false, deceptive, deathly, and physical.

-The Devil (Satan) fits easily into this progression. Originally he ranks close below the first sub-god, the major creator of the world, but then falls to the bottom. In versions of Christianity, one of the Devil's names is "Lucifer Morningstar" where "Lucifer" means "bearer of the Light". In versions of emanation and descent, the first sub-god and the Devil were created almost at once, or were created at once, and are about equally powerful, yet still fight; "in the end, there can be only one". (To be clear: in standard Christianity, the Devil absolutely definitely is not equal to Jesus. Jesus ranks qualitatively far above the Devil and qualitatively far above any mere archangel or angel. If there is a creature equivalent to the Devil, that creature might be Michael, Gabriel, or a mix of the two. This is one way in which Christianity

modified itself so as to be distinct from Gnosticism but still have the appeal of the hero-savior creator mediator cosmic archetype.)

-The task of humans is to get back as close to the highest divine to which we can practically ascend, to the first sub-god, the Creator. We seek the divine, avoid the merely material, seek the light, and avoid darkness. The first sub-god, the Creator, either makes other sub-gods to help, such as Wisdom, or other sub-gods take up that task on their own. See below.

-Some unusually lucky and-or adept people can merge with the creator sub-god or merge with the root God to become one. These people usually feel the overarching superior joy of being and the goodness of this world despite all the apparent badness.

-Because humans can jump from the middle of the hierarchy directly to the first sub-god, although humans appear to lie in the middle of the pack as average creations, really humans rank next in the hierarchy below the sub-god, above even all angels. In Buddhism, only humans can fully awaken (reach enlightenment or Nirvana) and so humans rank above even the highest gods. In Christianity and Islam, the fallen angels (demons) were jealous of this leapfrog by humans, and that is one big reason why they rebelled and fell.

-As some humans ascend and return, they also gain the power to help those who remain, like the saints in heaven praying for the people remaining on Earth.

-The root god, or the creator first sub-god, either sends down one particular hero to help humans, or the first sub-god comes down himself. People like it when the first sub-god himself comes down to help. Whoever comes down, he, she, or they become a mix of both the physical and divine, but, unlike other creatures at this lower level, the divine fully controls the physical: "thy Will be done". This is the hero-savior half-god-half-human mediator creator of the world bundle of archetypes embodied. Just because people like it if the first sub-god creator of the world etc. comes himself does not mean there are not other high divine creatures such as angels to help out. Always there are.

-Until recently, almost always the first sub-god creator of the world mediator embodied archetypes has been a male. I think recently some modern people have tried to make him a woman, as with versions of Gaia and Wisdom. I don't know how well that worked out. Often some of the highest creatures, barely less than the first sub-god, were female, that is, women. For example, in some Gnosticism, one of the highest creatures, hardly below the first sub-god creator etc. was Wisdom, a woman. It is possible that female Wisdom was the first sub-god creator of the world etc in some versions of Gnosticism but I don't know much about those variants.

-Usually, after a long time, every human ascends enough to avoid the clutches of darkness, materialism, lies, and the Devil. Every human is saved. In some versions, all demons are saved too. Those versions tend to think of the world as God forgetting himself to play the world, as in versions of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism.

In Sanskrit, “vat(a)” or “avat(a)” meant something like “cross a boundary from one thing to another”. I am not a Sanskrit scholar. An “avatar” is a being that goes from the divine realm to the human realm, and often back again (the “r” at the end of the word means “being who does this” much as in English we make “miller” from “mill”). An avatar is a high being who descends and-or emanates, usually to help people in particular tasks and toward particular understandings. Sometimes the high being is the whole sub-god Creator him-herself but usually the avatar is a few aspects combined into a particular character for a particular situation. The avatar is still the sub-god but not quite the whole sub-god all at once. The most famous avatar in Hinduism is Krishna, the charioteer and teacher of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita poem, part of the greater epic poem the Mahabharata. Krishna was an avatar of the god Vishnu (one of the three highest gods in Hinduism, who together act like the creator first sub-god and like the Devil from Christianity and Islam).

To Hindus, Jesus is an avatar. I am not entirely sure of what Jesus is an avatar, and, I think, most Hindus do not specify because they don’t care that much and it is not necessary that they be specific about Jesus as avatar. As a guess, Jesus is an avatar of Vishnu and perhaps Brahman as Creator. The Devil might be one particular limited avatar of Shiva (another god in the triumvirate) or might be a version of Maya the Seducer who holds us in this World and-or or Mara the Resistor and the god of Badness.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva takes a role like the avatar, like the half-human-half divine hero-savior maker of the world embodiment of cosmic archetypes. The bodhisattva is originally human in this lifetime, could reach perfect enlightenment if he-she wished, and so could transcend the mere physical and mere human realm if he-she wished. Instead, he-she chooses to remain a mere human until all other sentient beings are saved. In so choosing, the bodhisattva straddles the line, with a foot firmly on both sides, fully human and fully holy; and the bodhisattva takes the best qualities of human and divine. Particular bodhisattvas embody particular ideals such as hearing pleas. The Mahayana sutra (important religious text) “The Lankhavatara Sutra” relates how the root God or first sub-god (“Mind” and-or “Emptiness”) descended down the holy mountain Lankha to make this world and to make this world interesting, and tell us how to get back. Note “avatara” coupled with “Lankha”; in this case, the compound means “crossing over (descending and emanating) down the high holy to this world”.

In Islam, officially Mohammad is only human, but he also ascends to heaven for a while, learns a lot, and returns to Earth to teach us mere humans ever more and ever more perfectly. While officially Muslims know Mohammad is only human, in practice Muslims treat him (and some successors) as a semi-divine hero-savior. They treat his books the Koran and Hadith also as semi-divine, mediators, hero-saviors, almost alive, greatest Truth, and archetype of Truth. Much the same can be said for Paul and his letters in Christianity. Paul was a mere physical human, an enemy of Christianity, until the Holy Spirit visited him, and he went to heaven for several days, where he learned much. He returned to teach and help. After he returned, although he remained a mere body, his spirit fought to overpower the body, and gradually succeeded in doing so. Although Christians officially know that Jesus is the only hero-savior and all humans are mere humans, Christians tend to treat Paul as a hero-savior much as Muslims treat

Mohammad. Paul's letters are holy and almost alive, and, for many Christians, function as the single greatest source of salvation, like the Koran for Muslims.

In Judaism and Christianity (not sure about Islam), the ideas of Life, Life versus Death, Truth, and Truth versus Lies, are important. God and the sub-god are Life. The Devil is Death. God and the sub-god are Truth. The Devil is the father of all Lies and cannot speak without also lying on the whole even if part of what he says is true.

Despite crystal clarity and granite solidity on the ideas that there is only one God and no human can be God, even Jews err with the hero-savior. Jews vary in ideas of the Messiah. Still, as far as I can tell, the Messiah is a hero-savior who mediates between God and humans, and embodies ideas such as Truth, Justice, Life, Blood Ties, Sacrifice, Leadership, and the Covenant. Jews talk of him (always a man) with the same reverence that Christians use for Jesus and Muslims for Mohammad.

In Christianity, as the ideas apply to Jesus and flower in Jesus, the best way to see the mediator divine-human creator archetype Light Life Truth, is to read the Gospel of John, especially the first chapter. It is almost a textbook presentation of the ideas. Jesus is the real creator of the world. While Jesus had a human body, and could feel, and die, it is important to know he is also fully divine. He mediates the human and divine, and, thus, saves us. In John, Jesus is not quite on a par with God the Father, that is, the first sub-god (Jesus) is not quite on a par with the root God. But in later Christian works, Jesus is fully equal to God – below I explain why this happened. Jesus is Light. Jesus is flesh and spirit but the spirit fully controls the flesh. After we die and are resurrected, our bodies too will be redone so that our flesh will be under the control of our spirits and under control of the central spirit, that is, Jesus. Jesus is no longer a man or even a common god. Jesus has become the cosmic principle and the embodiment of the cosmic principle and of all cosmic principles. Jesus is the archetype of all good qualities in the world, especially Truth, Light, and Good (I am the Way, Life, Truth, and Light). We can get to the root God only by going through Jesus. In going through Jesus we ascend. The original humans were good (Adam and Eve) but fell into sin, darkness, and death through the Devil's cunning. In going through Jesus to ascend and return to God, Jesus reverses what Adam, Eve, and Satan did to return us to Light and Life.

At the time of the early Christian Church, Gnosticism presented these ideas of a hero-savior in a package and it did so quite well. Gnosticism threatened to absorb Christianity. Before converting to Christianity, Saint Augustine of Hippo was a type of Gnostic. To fight Gnosticism, the Church adopted a modified weaker form of Gnosticism that still preserved the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. The Church got a small case of Gnosticism to prevent the full-blown disease, like getting an inoculation or getting cow pox to prevent smallpox. The Christian church viewed Jesus as hero-savior, mediator, creator, and embodied archetype. The Christian view differs in that the first sub-god, Jesus, is not a mere sub-god but is equally and fully God - even though Jesus says he is not. The early Church did not want a cosmology-and-theology of emanation and descent, and did not want a theology of white-and-black, dualism, light and dark, etc. So it had to do something to stop these ideas from taking over Christianity. It made sure Jesus could not be seen as the typical first sub-god and first in a series of emanations and

descends but could be seen as another first god in a similar cosmic drama. In succeeding in its fight against Gnosticism, the early Church created other problems but those are not at issue here.

The early Christian Church used appealing aspects of the hero-savior mediator myth because these traits “work”. Apart from practical issues such as help finding a job, this is what gets people into a church and keeps them in a church. Of course, the Church also wanted the Truth. To the Church, it just happened that the Truth included what would make the Church attractive AND the Truth did not allow the usual form of the hero-savior mediator or the Gnostic version of the myth to take over Jesus and Christianity. You can make of this convenient resolution what you will but I do not go after it here.

Why do people want to believe all this? Why do people in state societies want to believe this? I don’t have a good answer. I do have opinions but not a good answer. Because I do not have a good answer, I did not, in previous writing, fully face the issue of whether this idea-complex is true and useful. Because I did not fully face this issue, I did not give as good an account of religions as I should have.

I still don’t have a good answer but I had better give my opinion on the truth and usefulness of this set of ideas anyway.

These ideas about hero-saviors are wrong and they are more harmful than useful. Ideas about a first sub-god, emanation, descent, light and dark, ascent, archetypes, and embodied archetypes, are all wrong. Ideas about the first sub-god also being the primary creator are wrong. Ideas about needing mediation between humans and God are wrong. They are all more harmful than useful. There is not much more that I can say than that although I will.

There was no Fall, no descent. We do not re-ascend to God although we do work to get better and to make our world better. I doubt Jesus made this world. I doubt Jesus is fully equal to God. I doubt Jesus is the embodied archetype of Good, Light, Truth, and non-material Spirit. Jesus does help us – a lot – to know what is good and right, and to do good for the right reasons, to do good for the sake of good. Jesus helps us to know what to do and how to do it. Jesus helps us to actually think and actually do. Jesus helps us get ideas straighter and clearer such as the need to treat every person as a person and to forgive. Jesus teaches us to work hard to make the world better. In all these ways, Jesus mediates between us and God and so helps us get back to God. But Jesus is not the divine hero-savior mediator that people want. Thinking Jesus is the divine mediator hero-savior allows people not to do as Jesus taught and instead to merely worship Jesus as God – something that likely makes God the Father really uneasy. If you see in Jesus the traits of the mythological divine mediator hero-savior listed above, and you can use this view to get away from made-up Jesus, to get away from merely worshipping Jesus, and to do as he taught, then that result is much better.

Much the same comments apply to all hero-saviors in all other religions, and apply to other hero-saviors in Christianity such as Paul, Saint Augustine, Luther, etc.

There are no divine or semi-divine mediator hero-saviors. We are not on our own and we can get in touch with the Big God directly. We do “have a friend in Jesus”. We can learn from him, follow his ideas, and, if it helps, talk to him. We don’t have to go through Jesus to get to God although that is a good way to do it, perhaps the best way. But there is nobody who can do it all for us. We should get over that mistake. There was no first sub-god, the creator, and no string of next gods and next creations going down in a hierarchy through humans and demons. There are no embodiments of divine cosmic archetypes. There is no inherent pervasive conflict between material and spiritual. There is no sloughing off the material body to ascend to the spiritual and to return to the first sub-God, the creator. We have to consider the best words of all the religious teachers and figure out what to do.

To think in terms of a divine (or semi-divine) mediator hero-savior is to seek diversion so you don’t have to see the world as it is, don’t have to think hard about real problems such as global climate change and the fact that many people are too inept to find a job, and don’t have to work hard to make the world better. It is like voting for a demagogue in politics so you don’t have to think.

To follow my maxim of assessing ideas according to merit rather than source, I should be able to give some reasons, and to provide a reasoned assessment. I can’t do that well.

There is no scientific argument that could bear directly on these questions, so forget that.

To the extent any scientific argument might bear on these issues, I think it offers evidence that there is no such cosmic scheme. At the same time, I think science does suggest God. So I am not a neutral critic. I want science to support my ideas of God while not supporting (or attacking) the cosmic hero-savior archetype embodied cosmic principles version of God and of how the world works.

What kind of argument could be used to decide whether ideas of a hero-savior mediator archetype are true or false? Even if there were an arena of discourse about mythic ideas, with its rules for argument, I don’t see how this issue could be decided.

Even if you think there is a hero-savior like this (or will be), which do you choose? What criteria make the cosmic Mahayana Buddha a better hero-savior than Jesus or Mohammad?

I decided that these ideas were false, not often useful, and often harmful, because:

-They do not go along of my idea of a single God with whom I can have a direct relation.

-Jesus did not talk about himself in these terms.

-These ideas fit their times, and so likely were adopted more because of that than because they are true.

-These ideas fit a yearning of people in state societies, and so more likely were adopted because of that yearning than because they are true.

-These ideas lead people to misunderstand Jesus and his mission.

-These ideas lead people to misunderstand the ideas and mission of all other leaders of major religions.

-These ideas enable people to avoid hard thinking and hard work.

Every time I see an instance of the hero-savior, I automatically discount that episode as mythical and ridiculous, and I suspect the characters involved and the religion that sustains it. Rather than such curt dismissal, I need to be calmer and more objective. I do not wish to reject Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad, and Confucius, or their great teachings, just because some of their followers twisted their stories to fit the hero-savior mediator archetype.

In the Christian view (and in the view of every religion about other religions), the Christian version of these ideas is correct while the versions in other religions are a distortion from the correct Christian view, sometimes simply a confusion and sometimes a deliberate lie in the guise of the truth aimed at seducing humans from light to darkness. What about this claim? Is it true that Jesus is the one cosmic hero-savior creator embodied archetype of all goodness while others are false pretenders? The simple objective rational answer is "no". If the idea fails in general then it also fails for Jesus and Christianity. Christians did not invent these ideas. They took the ideas over from other religions, in particular from Gnosticism. So Christians cannot claim they are correct because they invented the ideas while others are wrong because they incorrectly copied Christians. Christians have to claim that they found the core of truth in previous wrong ideas. This is possible but not likely. I really do understand the deep need to make Jesus into the hero-savior but simply because we have the need does not mean the solution is true. I have to reject the claim for Jesus and Christianity too. I do not here repeat my reasons for this particular case. It was not easy to go against childhood training, deep desires, all the reinforcement I got from watching religious channels on TV, and all the reinforcement I got from reading Christian sources while learning about religion. But I think I gained much more in being able to see Jesus more clearly and so focusing on his ideas.

Would people have adopted Christianity and followed the ideas of Jesus if they did not think of Jesus as hero-savior, mediator, divine-and-human, creator of the world, archetype of such ideas as Love, and the champion of Light? Likely not. I find that outcome sad. Apparently naturally evolved limited humans need more than plain simple human Jesus, messenger from God, so that we can be decent people. The same is true of the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mohammad, etc.

What if we tried to stop people believing in a hero-savior mediator, and insisted they believe in only one personal God without need of any mediator, as that God has been explained to use through a variety of prophets? People won't do it. They need their hero-savior mediator. To try to stop people believing in this is like trying to stop them from drinking booze or having sex outside of marriage.

So, on one pole, we have the purity of no mediator while, on the other pole, we have full Gnosticism and jungles of idol worship. On one pole we have strict numb robotic iconoclasts while on the other pole we have a herd of Golden Calves. How do we find a happy middle and how do we keep people there? If one pole or the other is the truth, why don't we force as many people as can handle the truth to find the truth, and let the other rot in monistic hell or pluralistic idolatrous hell?

I don't like forcing people to believe what I think is the Truth even when I really think it is the Truth and even when I think not accepting the Truth clouds their minds and enables bad thinking and bad acts. I have learned that forcing people to think some good thoughts usually makes them think other worse bad thoughts and makes them all around worse people. You can think out for yourself why God might have made most of us like this.

So the best thing is to let people have their hero-savior mediator yet couple it with good ethics and a good religion otherwise. Hopefully we can still get people to do good things and to do the right thing for mostly the right reasons most of the time. We can keep the Truth "out there". When we come across people who are likely to benefit from something closer to the Truth, we can direct them towards books about the Truth.

It might help to know that most major religions do this. Most compromise with the needs of people even when those needs do not conform to the absolute pure Truth as the various religions see it. Most religions aim to have people act well regardless of dogma. Most aim to allow people their foibles while bringing people ever close to what each religion sees as the ultimate full Truth. Believe it or not, for the most part, for most people, major religions succeed. Only very few sects of major religions actually foster bad people such as terrorists. No major religions do so.

I have another dilemma that arises out of all this. I am not a professional student of religion. I don't read religion with the idea of writing books. I read to understand. I am writing now to get it all out of my system and to help anybody who might benefit. When I get done with my current spate of writing about religion, I don't want to go back to the topic. But, still, (1) I do write about religion, and do try to explain it. Also, (2) I am an anthropologist. I do not make my living in a formal school setting through anthropology but I still think of myself as a dedicated student of humans and human social life. As an explainer of religion, and an anthropologist, I should be able to have sympathy with, and have empathy for, the people, feelings, needs, longings, and ideas that I understand and explain. I should feel for the people to which I offer explanations. I should be able to put myself in the shoes of the people that I explain and in the shoes of the people that I explain to. I am happily amazed that I have been able to do so for a variety of people, ideas, mindsets, occupations, classes, genders, and ways of life. Yet, for this particular mindset, I cannot. I do feel the appeal of heroes; I admire scientists, mathematicians, artists, politicians, and athletes. I feel the need for a hero who bridges gaps and is the embodiment of cosmic ideas. I feel how other people feel. But I reject the feelings because they are so wrong and misleading. This mindset annoys me. I don't like it. It is a bad kind of idolatry. My annoyance prevents me from sharing in the feelings of others as I should. Because I react against the divine hero-savior complex, I cannot assess it properly. Ironically, because I cannot fully accept irrational feelings, I cannot also assess

with the full objectivity that I seek. I cannot assess religions that use this complex of ideas along the lines of my maxim: assess ideas not according to the source of the ideas in the mindset but according to whether this instance of the ideas might be true and might be useful. I try but I know that my ability to assess properly is limited by my attitude. I have no more to add. As long as I am honest and keep trying, that is about all I can do.