

The Word as True Myth, by Gary Dorrien

reviewed by [William C. Placher](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

*By Gary Dorrien, The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology.
(Westminster John Knox, 287 pp.)*

Purchasers of this volume get three books for the price of one. Unfortunately, Gary Dorrien fully develops none of the three, and never gets to the book for which I was hoping. That's too bad. He is a gifted guide to theology: this volume is full of well-researched, well-written, nonpolemical accounts of a variety of positions. But Dorrien lacks a strong enough voice of his own to tie these wide-ranging accounts into a coherent whole. As he admits near the end, "Perhaps the most significant realization to come upon me while writing this book was that nearly all of the theologies I was describing appeal to me in some way as plausible religious perspectives."

The basic issue he addresses is a familiar one. Christianity (and other religions too, for that matter) comes to us at least in part expressed in the language of myth--stories about the sacred dimension of things that don't seem intended to be taken literally and that many of us find impossible to believe if they are taken literally. But if we simply discard the myths, we seem to throw the baby out with the bath water. What's left doesn't look like Christianity anymore--and doesn't look very interesting either.

In what I would call the first book, Dorrien surveys a good bit of modern theology from Schleiermacher to the "twilight of neo-orthodoxy" around 1960. Chapter one traces liberalism's critique of myth from Schleiermacher through Strauss, Ritschl, Harnack and early 20th-century American liberalism. Chapter two shows how Barth, Bultmann, Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr struggled, in the midst of a crisis that undercut liberalism's optimism, to recover aspects of the power and insight of the Christian tradition while not falling back into literalistic interpretations of myth. Dorrien keeps the narrative flowing while covering a lot of ground, but his account would be obviously incomplete if taken as a history of 150 years of theology. No Kierkegaard. No Catholics. Reinhold Niebuhr, but not H. Richard. And so on. This section is too broad to be just his own argument, but too narrow to be a comprehensive survey.

The second book-within-a-book (the best part of the volume) devotes two chapters to the theology of Langdon Gilkey, whom Dorrien sees as the key transitional figure between “neo-orthodoxy” and postmodern theologies. He reminds us of just how good a theologian Gilkey has been and how many theological threads he ties together. He is a student of Tillich who learned from process thought without ever becoming a process theologian; a “neo-orthodox” theologian who offered a devastating critique of the Biblical Theology movement; one of the few contemporary writers who has really wrestled with the question of providence; a former prisoner of war who devoted his life to academic theology without ever ceasing to care passionately about justice. We need a good book about this fascinating man, and one wishes that Dorrien had written it.

The third book I see between these covers examines contemporary theological attitudes toward myth. Schubert Ogden and John Cobb want to get rid of myth, Jungians want to recover it, postmodernists want to deconstruct it, and feminists (some of them, at least) want to replace old myths with new ones. Dorrien sees the fundamental divide as lying between “theological liberalism and its spiritual descendants,” who advocate “a thoroughgoing program of demythologizing,” and “Tillich, Niebuhr, Gilkey, McFague and the Jungians,” who think that “myth is intrinsic to theology” and therefore “theologians should use mythical language in as creative and compelling a manner as possible.” Dorrien comes down on the second side, and singles out McFague for special praise. Since she critiques myths but doesn’t want to give up mythical language, “her remythologization of Christianity . . . comes closer than any other theology to mediating the disagreement over absolute presuppositions that has divided modern theology.”

But then in a final ten pages it’s back to Barth, who “perceived the bankruptcy of modernism while most theologians were seeking to accommodate theology to it.” Barth found scripture communicating truth to us through all sorts of genres, and resisted imposing any external set of rules on how they work. Saga, myth, history-like narrative, whatever--let each speak in its own way. Don’t throw out the nonliteral, but don’t interpret it literally either. Along these lines, Dorrien says, he plans to develop his own “postmodern dialectic of Word and Spirit.” He sees problems in Barth, and he wants to develop his own constructive position (which will also draw on C. S. Lewis’s more positive view of myth), but he says “my case . . . must be reserved for a later work.” That’s the book I want to read.

The issues are important. “Myth” means so many different things to different people that I’d be reluctant to make it as central a category as Dorrien does. But somewhere in the territory between scientific truth and inspirational fiction we do need categories for interpreting all sorts of biblical stories. Gary Dorrien may yet give us some help, but he didn’t this time out.