Common as it may be to define religion by reference to belief in God, gods, etc. (a procedure which runs up against troubles in any case in regard to, for example, Theravada Buddhism), there may be merit in looking at the Focus or Foci of religious activity through the medium of the mythic, that is, in a context where such entities are acting, not just so to say quietly existing. It is also useful to achieve as much clarity as is at present possible on the nature of the mythic in view of the many debates about the functions, existential, social, and so forth of myths. To some extent my procedure will be prescriptive, that is, defining myth in a manner suiting my argument.

The first thing that needs repeating is, of course, that to categorise something as a myth is not to assert that it is false. It is unfortunate that in the English language (and others) the word has attracted the meaning of ‘false story’ or more broadly ‘false account’. We have in part to thank the Greeks for this development, in part too the Church – for early apologists could contrast the true story of God’s saving work in Israel and in Christ with the ‘myths’ of the pagans. It is of course easy to think that one’s own myth is a true story, the other man’s myth is a myth. It is, then, vitally important to rid our minds of any suggestion that the mythic is qua mythic false or merely fanciful. It may turn out that all myths are false, but on the usage adopted here this is contingent, for the usage leaves open the possibility of speaking of true myths.

Crudely, the distinction I wish to draw between a myth and a doctrine is that the latter has to do with the constitution of the world, of the transcendent, etc., while the former has to do with a moving picture of the sacred. This crude distinction will no doubt have to be heavily qualified in due course, but I wish to bring out the first major characteristic of myth,
namely that it is a form of story. It belongs in a genus which includes also novels, jokes, fairy-stories, historical narratives, though as will be seen there can be overlaps between the species (for instance, some myths are historical narratives).

But how does one, broadly, differentiate myths from other kinds of stories? Is it, for instance, in terms of their material reference, to God or gods, for example? This will not quite do, for the story of the Buddha’s conquest of Mara in the Pali canon concerns two persons, the Buddha and Mara, neither of whom are strictly gods. To define myths materially, it would be necessary to expand the list of beings with which they typically deal: God, gods, evil spirits, culture heroes, primeval men, sacred eggs. But maybe the list could be simplified by taking into account two points.

First, sacred and numinous beings typically split into two forms, good and evil, holy and ‘ unholy ’ (I do not use the term to refer to the profane or the non-holy, but the threatening type of mysterium tremendum, to use Otto’s terminology). I shall return in a moment to elaborate this point. Meanwhile, second, myths typically have to do with the relationship between the transcendent, the supernatural, etc. (but these terms are inadequate) on the one hand and man and the world on the other. Thus although a culture hero or a primeval man may appear in a myth, he does so in a way related to the sacred.

Unfortunately, there are troubles of a terminological kind in trying to find a generic term to cover the holy and the ‘ unholy ’ beings referred to just now. Indeed the situation is fairly complicated in terms of the good–evil split. For with regard to a being of this kind, either he is the object of worship or, oppositely, he is dreaded but renounced, as with the Devil in the Christian tradition. (Also some gods can become otiose, no longer figuring significantly in the cultus, but let us leave this point on one side.) But it is not necessarily the case that the sacred splits into accepted and renounced beings, since it is also possible for the good–evil dichotomy to be preserved within the substance of a being who is worshipped, as with Kali. Further a god may have, so to say, offshoots, not directly objects of worship but partaking in some of the holy power of their originator, like angels in the Christian tradition; likewise