

*The Implied Spider*, by Wendy Doniger

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

By Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. (Columbia University Press, 200 pp.)

Not too many years ago theologians and comparative scholars could talk about *the* mythic worldview and *the* nature of the sacred. Whether their evaluation of mythology was positive or negative, many felt confident that its universal patterns and meaning could be understood. Earlier generations of theorists, from Sigmund Freud to Sir James Frazer, from Carl Jung to Mircea Eliade, proposed all-encompassing theories to explain the dynamics of mythology. Meanwhile, theologians sought to make sense of myth in relation to the Bible, either by sharply contrasting the "cyclical" myths of other nations to the "linear" historical narratives of Israel or, as Rudolf Bultmann did, by seeking to extract the New Testament's vision of human existence from an outdated mythical worldview.

More recently, Bill Moyers's 1988 series of television interviews with Joseph Campbell captured the imagination of millions of viewers who never read scholarly studies. Mythology, as Campbell popularized it, was not an outdated worldview consisting only of strange ideas from other, long-ago cultures; it was the central dynamic of such modern epics as the *Star Wars* movies, and it furnished the key to the pattern of every human life.

While popular works on mythology may still show such enthusiasm, in the academic world the time for such confidence has passed. Despite the allure of the broad theories, many scholars have concluded that all the grand schemes have failed. The theorists had forced the variety of myths into a Procrustean bed or reduced them to a single monomyth. Freudian reductionism and Jungian archetypes did not respect the distinctive character of the myths themselves. For Campbell, there is really only one mythic hero, though he wears a thousand faces. All myths can be reduced to a single plot. Even Eliade's more nuanced description of common patterns became suspect.

Critics have charged that the comparative studies of myth went hand in hand with the building of colonial empires: earlier evolutionary theories of religion explained how other cultures, labeled "primitive," led up to the glory of European civilization. In a postmodern age, to impose our categories on another culture or religious tradition seems to be an act of colonial imperialism. What remains is a post-postcolonial approach that combines attention to individual historical contexts with a deep skepticism about any alleged grand narrative that would weave the myths together.

In *The Implied Spider*, Wendy Doniger takes up the challenge of defending the project of comparative mythology. Doniger, the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions and a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, has written extensively on Hinduism and mythology and has translated a number of important Hindu texts. Her earlier book, *Other People's Myths*, inspired by Eliade, explored the transformations that occur in the process of entering into the stories of other religions and cultures.

Renouncing the strategy of deductive universalist theories that start from the top and move down to interpret details, Doniger proposes that we start inductively from the bottom and move up, not arguing that any given myth is universal, but looking for continuities in narrative details in and through the constant variations. Because myths cross boundaries of space and time and because similar stories appear in different cultures and times, Doniger claims that cross-cultural comparison may reveal aspects of myths that historical contextual approaches miss. Comparison is instructive because it defamiliarizes what we take for granted and places it in a broader context.

Doniger seeks to defend the project of comparative mythology through her own performance, somewhat like the celebrated response to the question, "Do you believe in baptism?": "Believe in it, I've seen it done!" Her limited scope is itself a measure of how much the study of myth has shifted. The comparative project that earlier generations eagerly embraced must now be defended in the most cautious of ways.

Chastened by the failures of the grand theorists, Doniger does not posit a universal Jungian unconscious or even Eliade's more modest archetypes. Instead, the "implied spider" of the title is our shared humanity, the experiences that furnish material to mythmakers and comparative scholars alike. If there are no universal archetypes

and there is no monomyth, there nonetheless remain widespread experiences of eating and drinking, sunrise and sunset, love, sexuality and death. But we only find the webs, never the spider itself, and so Doniger posits the experience behind the myths as itself a creature of our imagination. If we believe in the implied spider, then--like Tinker Bell--it exists.

By juxtaposing the details of myths like a pointillist painter arranging dots of color, Doniger hopes to allow a comparative vision of myth to emerge with a minimum of theory. Because her book focuses largely on method, the painting of such a vision itself remains for another day. While Doniger is quite persuasive in arguing that contextual studies need to be complemented by attention to the broader scene, this is in many ways a tragic quest, since Doniger sees myths as teaching so many ways to fail. The reason that there are so many variants of myths is that they repeatedly wrestle with insoluble paradoxes. Unsolved problems, like sand in an oyster, generate one story after another; but no single myth resolves the conundrum of human existence. All we have is a series of limited perspectives on human experiences.