

Greek myths heighten search for legitimate truth

THE PLATONIC MYTHS

By Josef Pieper

75 pages

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Book Review

Brian Welter

German philosopher Josef Pieper (died 1997) wrote many small, easily accessible books on the major religious and philosophical themes of the West, such as the cardinal virtues, Thomas Aquinas, sin, and Greek philosophy.

His compact work **THE PLATONIC MYTHS** argues that Plato respected the ancient Greek myths and their ability to convey the

truth, because Plato respected Greek tradition.

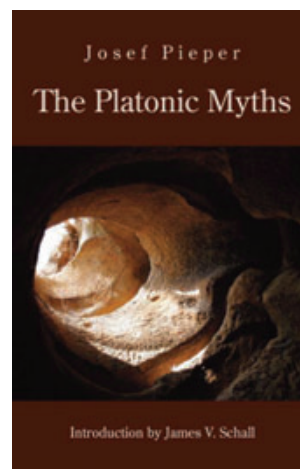
The Platonic Myths introduces readers to some of the main ideas and concerns of the ancient Greeks themselves, such as the meaning of myth and the truth. Such writing is an excellent way to reorient ourselves away from our culture of excess and towards more quiet, serious things.

Pieper, with his deep belief in the Greek tradition

and his Catholic faith, writes in a fuller sense about myth than Joseph Campbell, famous among baby-boomers for his encyclopedic knowledge of myth.

Pieper writes: “The events [in myth] take place outside the historical world that we can understand – in the here and now. For this reason it is only possible to use the language of symbol – not for the sake of some kind of literary device but because there is no other possibility.”

In other words, Pieper sees myth as the legitimate search for the truth. This is the same search on which



he, as a Catholic, embarked. While Joseph Campbell or Carl Jung considered myth as largely a part of humanity and its inner psychological state, Pieper is prophetic for

our age in that he believes in truth’s timeless nature.

He focuses on the truth itself, including how it relates to God and humans, and rejects the idea that myth is simply an outgrowth of human psychology.

Pieper’s determination to understand the truth counters the current culture of death, which habitually hides and runs from the truth. He seeks the truth rather than subjective opinion or feelings. It’s not surprising Pieper emphasizes the humility of the truth-seeker, who stands before the truth of God:

“You are right, he [Socrates] says, symbolic

speech is a makeshift. It is not the real way to express the truth. But what if the real way is not available to us? This is the solution we find ourselves in.”

Thus Pieper remains close to the very best of western civilization, the humble, God-seeking culture that used Scripture, science, and philosophy to understand the truth better.

Pieper is a genuine Catholic thinker: he respects tradition, seeks the truth, and yet is not frozen in the past. He embraced sociology, the social science of the new age, and undoubtedly would have contributed greatly to the discipline if Nazism hadn’t interrupted his work in the social sciences.

Pieper’s philosophical genuineness originates in his constant return to the sources, in his case a return to the Greeks. Thus **The Platonic Myths** uncovers the rich tapestry of Plato’s thought.

Pieper demonstrates how in sync Plato and Christian theology sometimes are with each other. For Plato, he writes, “the existence of man is such that its ultimate success (and also its ultimate failure) is only revealed ‘beyond.’”

Much of ancient Greek philosophy shared the Christian concern for the good life, and how this good life holds eternal importance, especially in the “beyond.”

Reading Pieper is like reading a church father: the simple wisdom and truth-telling can be a north star for contemporary readers. □