In every human society since the beginning of time, there has been some system or manner of dealing with the questions which puzzle and fascinate man. Ever since thunder has rumbled across a darkening sky, or lightning has flashed from horizon to horizon, or the sun or moon has temporarily disappeared during an eclipse, man has been aware that he is not supreme in the universe. His powerlessness against the forces of nature, his inadequacy in shaping his own destiny and his utter dependence on the weather for survival soon convinced man that there were powers and forces quite beyond him. For his own security and well being man had to come to grips with these forces and somehow understand them and his own relation to them. Thus religion and its attendant myths came into being. There were the means of acknowledging and understanding those things outside the realm of human experience.

From the beginning, religion and likewise philosophy have been obsessed with certain questions: What is God? What is Man? What is the relationship between them? What is Life? What is Death? Philosophy tried to answer these rationally and thus came up with the complex systems of the various philosophical schools which some of you have studied. Religion, however, did not restrict its answers to reason only but included emotion, superstition, fear, faith and the whole range of human feeling along with its rational answers. Every religion, then, has had its attendant mythology—that body of stories and beliefs that lie behind and partially explain the tenets of the religion itself.

In this course, we will examine several mythological systems of the western world in an attempt to understand the ways in which of them dealt with the eternal questions and what this tells us of the people who formed the systems. We will not spend that much time on any system but rather attempt to look at what they had in common and where these commonalities came from. Our approach will be a Socratic one, that is, right at the beginning, I will pose some questions which it will be our task to try to answer throughout the class. Parts of the answers will be found in the texts, more be brought out in class, while the final answer (if we come up with one) will hopefully come from you after your examination of the material.

The first of the questions is “What is mythology?” There can be no pat answer to this. Webster will give you a nice straightforward statement that mythology is “the collection of myths describing the gods of a people, their relationships, deeds, and powers” but it is not sufficient. Each of the texts will also present its own definition, but for our purposes, the question involves a much larger issue which we must look at throughout the course, for it is at the very heart of our consideration.

“Why does man mythologize?” To get us going on this question, Erich Von Daniken’s Chariots of the Gods will be used. He presents a very complex theory which we will
examine from all sides. Behind it, however, lies the basic need of man to attempt to understand what is humanly nonunderstandable which gives us the direction for attempting to answer this question.

"Where do myths come from?" This is, perhaps, the most fascinating of our questions. As will become increasingly evident to you, there is a great deal of material which is common to all the mythological systems. There will be variations and differences in approach and treatment, but the basic stories are the same. Donna Rosenberg's World Mythology calls this material the "proto-myths" and we will use her theories on them as a point of departure for our consideration of this material, where it came from and how it got so widely dispersed.

"How does man mythologize?" We will spend most of the course on this question as it brings us to a study of the mythological systems themselves. First, we will be using Campbell & Moyer's The Power of Myth while for the Greek and Roman we will be using Edith Hamilton's Mythology.

"What is man's role in mythology?" You will quickly note the dominance of human figures in the myths we will be concerned with. After all, the myths were shaped by man as an attempt to arrive at a knowledge of his place in the cosmological system. Thus the concept of "the hero" early became an integral part of mythology and was worked out in great detail. Nowhere is this more evident then in the mythologies of the Norse in which human heroes were inducted into the company of the gods in great numbers so that they would be able to help in the final defense of the heavenly regions against the attacks of the giants and other evil spirits. This fascinating aspect of mythology will be covered in H.R. Ellis Davidson's Gods and Myths of Northern Europe.

"What is the significance of mythology to modern man and what does it tell us of ourselves and our world?" Around us today are many remnants and traces of the ancient systems we are studying. But are they mere relics of a lost era worth only a passing curiosity? Or are they indications of a continuing part of man which is as much with us today (albeit in a different form) as in the past? Do we not still mythologize? Do we not still accept fanciful explanations of what we do not fully understand? This should be stressed from the beginning. To the ancients, these systems we are studying were not fairy tales. They were the tenets of their religion as much as the incarnation, resurrection and ascension are the tenets of Christianity.

We will not, of course, be able to answer all of these questions completely, but in considering them, we will hopefully provide a means to answering them in our own words and time. In coming to grips with them and their implications, the following work will be required:

A quiz weekly – usually at the beginning - 150 points
16 quizzes will be given - lowest score will be dropped.
2 reflection papers – a presentation of your opinions on the questions we have asked and other matters arising from the material we will cover. - 75 points

3 hour exams - 1 in the fifth week, 1 in the tenth week and the other during finals week. Each will cover only material considered up until the time of the exam. The third exam will not be comprehensive. 100 points each = 300 points

1 term project-to be discussed in individual conferences. - 150 points

1 oral report - on assigned topics - 50 points

Several impromptu oral reports-on days reading - 25 points

Class participation - the amount of class participation and individual contribution to discussion will be a part of the grade - 75 points

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