



STATEMENT DC-092

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: The Power of Myth

by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers

One of the surprise best sellers of the late 1980s has been *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell (1904-1987). The book takes the shape of a warm, wide-ranging, engaging dialogue with veteran journalist Bill Moyers and is richly illustrated with examples from world mythology and religion.

The Power of Myth is drawn from a series of interviews done in 1985 and 1986 and first shown on public television in 1988, about six months after Campbell's death. The work serves as a summation of Campbell's thought as a long-time literature professor at Sarah Lawrence College and a prolific writer on mythology and literature. The eight chapters range over such subjects as the role of mythology in the modern world, the journey inward, the hero's adventure, and tales of love and marriage.

Campbell's appeal lies in an encyclopedic grasp of world mythology and religion, winningly presented with a masterful storytelling ability. He was one who, in his own words, "followed his bliss" — and his enthusiasm for the subject can be infectious.

THE POWER OF MYTH

For Campbell, the "power of myth" is the power of metaphor and poetry to capture the imaginations of individuals and societies. Myth supplies a sense of meaning and direction that transcends mundane existence while giving it significance. It has four functions (p. 31): The *mystical function* discloses the world of mystery and awe, making the universe "a holy picture." The *cosmological function* concerns science and the constitution of the universe. The *sociological function* "supports and validates a certain social order." Everyone must try to relate to the *pedagogic function* which tells us "how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances." America, Campbell believes, has lost its collective ethos and must return to a mythic understanding of life "to bring us into a level of consciousness that is spiritual" (p. 14).

Campbell defends the benefits of myths as *literally false* but *metaphorically true* for the broad range of human experience. But certain myths are (at least in part) to be rejected as "out of date," particularly the personal lawgiver God of Jews and Christians. Biblical cosmology, he thinks, does not "accord with our concept of either the universe or

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of the dignity of man. It belongs entirely somewhere else" (p. 31).

Campbell's own mythic commitment is to the "transtheological" notion of an "undefinable, inconceivable mystery, thought of as a power, that is the source and end and supporting ground of all life and being" (*Ibid.*). He rejects the term "pantheism" because it may retain a residue of the personal God of theism. Campbell repeatedly hammers home this notion of an ineffable ground of reality: "God is beyond names and forms. Meister Eckhart said that the ultimate and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God, leaving your notion of God for an experience of that which transcends all notions" (p. 49).

Despite such an epistemological veto on our ability to conceive of anything transcendent, Campbell draws on Carl Jung's theory of a collective unconscious to help explain the common ideas ("archetypes") that recur in the mythologies of divergent cultures worldwide. "All over the world and at different times of human history, these archetypes, or elementary ideas, have appeared in different costumes. The differences in the costumes are the results of environment and historical conditions" (pp. 51-52).

But not all archetypes are created equal. Campbell singles out the notion of sin as especially pernicious because it stifles human potential. If you confess your sins you make yourself a sinner; if you confess your greatness you make yourself great. The "idea of sin puts you in a servile position throughout your life" (p. 56). He later redefines sin as a lack of knowledge, not as an ethical transgression: "Sin is simply a limiting factor that limits your consciousness and fixes it in an inappropriate condition" (p. 57).

It seems, to steal a phrase from Swami Vivekananda, that the only sin is to call someone a sinner. Campbell believes our challenge is to say, "I know the center, and I know that good and evil are simply temporal aberrations and that, in God's view, there is no difference" (p. 66). In fact, "in God's view," you are "God, not in your ego, but in your deepest being, where you are at one with the nondual transcendent" (p. 211).

The thematic richness of this work could occupy several reviews. This review will consider some of the philosophical, religious, and societal issues it raises.

TRANSCENDENTAL MYSTERY

A salient feature of Campbell's world view is a pronounced inconsistency, which — unless flushed out — may remain under the wraps of his winsomeness.

According to Campbell, myth opens us to the realm of transcendental mystery where awe and inspiration energize and permeate our beings. But given Campbell's epistemological veto of any knowledge of the transcendent, we can say nothing concrete of it. It is beyond concepts, names, and thought. It is metaphysically mute. Campbell wants to vindicate myths by saying they are not to be taken concretely, but metaphorically. Yet even metaphors are incorrigibly conceptual; poetry says something. Propositions are pesky things. They are difficult to fumigate. The Hindu myth of a blood-soaked, skull-adorned Mother Kali destroying the world carries the nonmetaphorical meaning that God is as much Destroyer as Creator. That's the theology of it, even when taken as myth and not history.

Campbell himself enthusiastically disregards his epistemological veto by issuing many conceptual statements about that which (supposedly) transcends concepts entirely. He affirms that the ground of all forms is impersonal, not personal. This assumes definite knowledge of the ontology (i.e., mode of being) of divinity. He sees this impersonal source of all being as beyond ethical categories, so we must say Yes to all of life, no matter how degraded. Yet this too assumes definite knowledge of the character of the transcendent as amoral, not moral. The transcendent is also

"nondual" as opposed to dual or triune. All myths, he affirms, point to an invisible world beyond the world of visible form. Further, "we are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness, only we don't know it" (p. 57). (We are, then, not conscious of our divine consciousness.) Again, specific propositions are affirmed, and in quite nonmetaphorical language. Campbell's "transcendental silence" has a habit of speaking out. The explicit epistemological veto is overridden by an implicit theology that welcomes pantheism and filters out theism. Despite his statement that "the person who thinks he has found the ultimate truth is wrong" (p. 55), Campbell repeatedly and dogmatically asserts the ultimate truth of an impersonal and amoral divinity.

Campbell also rejects the idea of God as "Absolutely Other" because, he says, we can have no relationship with that in which we do not participate. Yet, how we — as personal and morally responsible beings — can conceptualize or experience a religious relationship with an impersonal and amoral ground of the universe is less than clear.

LITERALISM ON TRIAL

Campbell is ever at odds with a religious literalism which reifies mythic themes into concrete facts. He refers to the biblical creation story that teaches an actual beginning of the universe as "artificialism" and chides Bill Moyers for considering the resurrection of Christ in historic terms. He says such a view "is a mistake in reading the symbol"; it is to read "the words in terms of prose instead of in terms of poetry," and to read "the metaphor in terms of the denotation instead of the connotation" (p. 57). In fact, Jesus' ascension into heaven, metaphorically interpreted, means that "he has gone inward — not into outer space but into inward space, to...the consciousness that is the source of all things, the kingdom of heaven within" (p. 56).

Given this method of interpretation, Campbell much prefers Gnosticism over orthodoxy. He quotes favorably from *The Gospel of Thomas* where Jesus is portrayed as teaching that "he who drinks from my mouth will become as I am," and properly notes that "this is blasphemy in the normal way of Christian thinking" (p. 57).

Campbell's approach to mythology has the appearance of profundity. He uses it profitably to construct interpretations of a vast body of literature. He likens mistaking a *metaphor* for its *reference* to eating a *menu* instead of the *meal*. Yet when Campbell addresses biblical materials, such as the Gospels or Acts (which were written as history, not poetry or visionary literature), it becomes painfully evident that his metaphoric interpretation is forced at best. Certainly, the significance of the ascension of Christ for Christians is not exhausted by spatial location, yet the physical reference is intrinsic to the significance that Christ is not bound to earth. He has ascended to the "right hand" (this phrase, of course, *is* metaphoric) of the Father where He now reigns. Campbell may not believe the Ascension to be literally true, but the apostles did and the church still does. A more judicious reading would note that a miraculous truth claim is being made, to be either accepted or rejected — not reinterpreted by a mythical hermeneutic. Instead of eating the menu, Campbell misreads it and fancies a meal never mentioned.

The classic Christian text on the historicity of the resurrection of Christ is Paul's insistence to the Corinthian church that if Christ be not raised, Christian faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:14). Moreover, if the Resurrection is factually false, apostolic preaching is futile and misrepresents God, Christians are left in their sin, departed Christians have perished, and Christians are of all people most pitiful (vv. 15-19). Paul had no mere mythic symbol in mind here. Neither would the early Christians have died martyrs' deaths for metaphors. The apostle Peter, in his second epistle (1:16), went so far as to say that "we did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty."

Campbell is pleased with diverse mythic expressions so long as they refer only to the unknowable transcendent. But he strongly rejects the concept of a *fallen* creation in need of *external* redemption made known through an *historically grounded* revelation from a *personal* God. He expresses amazement at the Hebraic commandment "Thou shalt have no

other gods before me." Such militant monotheism curtails the mythic imagination. Campbell chokes on the hard historicity of Christianity, and is not comfortable until he recasts it in metaphorical terms.

MYTH BECOME FACT

Yet evangelicals need not entirely dismiss Campbell's mythic concerns. Christian writers like C. S. Lewis have argued that the world's mythologies present a dim imitation of the redemption made historical through Christ. Mythologies worldwide speak of lost innocence, cosmic conflict, and redemption. In this sense the mythic dimension can be seen as part of general revelation, not in itself salvific, but pointing beyond itself to what Lewis in *God in the Dock* called "myth become fact." "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens — at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by debatable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to an historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate."

Campbell largely dismisses the historicity of Christianity by saying we don't know much about Jesus, given we only have "four contradictory texts that purport to tell us what he said and did" (p. 211). He adds that, despite these supposed contradictions, we know "approximately what Jesus said" (p. 211). If Campbell would have taken seriously the idea of a basic historical record of Jesus' words, he might have been less inclined to recast Christianity in mythic terms. The wealth of historical material provided by the Gospels, while not without some complexities, reveals a concern for historical accuracy and integrity, (see, e.g. Luke's prologue).

MYTHOLOGY AND PUBLIC LIFE

How would this mythic world view describe public life? He expresses concern that hollow rationalism and literalistic religion are inadequate to meet modern needs. Although he doesn't develop a social philosophy, we can infer some clues.

First, Campbell's ethical evaluations remain unrelated to any enduring moral order. He states: "The final secret of myth [is] to teach you how to penetrate the labyrinth of life in such a way that its spiritual values come through" (p. 115). The sociological function of myth is to validate a given social order. Yet these spiritual values are relative to various cultures and historical epochs. Myths are all "true" but some must be adapted to modern needs and realities. Campbell deems unecological the Christian cosmology of the earth as separate from God, and instead opts for a not-yet-fully-developed "planetary mythology" that resacralizes the universe along Buddhist lines.

Given such cosmic amoralism — God as beyond morality — it remains to be seen how any judgment or mythical imperative could be ethically binding or normative. The Good is not based on God's unchanging moral character as a personal being; it is not knowable through His self-disclosure. The transcendent is ineffable and therefore morally as well as metaphysically mute. Any mythic recommendation for people or society is simply an inexplicable archetypal upsurge of the ultimately unknown and unknowable. Campbell's advocacy of a "planetary mythology" is mere vision with no vindication of its value.

Second, Campbell's ethics are further eroded by a tendency toward monism, so often tied to pantheism. In explaining the heroic deed of a policeman to save a man attempting suicide, Campbell invokes Schopenhauer's notion that "you and that other are one, that you are two aspects of the one life, and that your apparent separateness is but an effect of the way we experience forms under the conditions of space and time. Our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life" (p. 110). But if the subject-object distinction is not ultimately real, the very idea of self-giving or self-sacrifice must itself be sacrificed on the monistic altar. Any action could be justified in terms of cosmic selfism. If all is

one, how could we violate others' rights? Social ethics would be rendered sociological solitaire.

Third, the monistic model is at odds with Campbell's praise of the West's positive emphasis on the individual's worth and freedom. Individualism (in the positive sense of the dignity of individuals) can only be praised if one adopts an (nonmonistic) ontology of actual, singular entities (humans and otherwise) and a corresponding ethic that respects the right of individual expression. Individualism historically has not fared well in nations such as India where monism monitors morality.

Fourth, although Campbell has many harsh words for Christian theism — which has served as the foundation for so many Western individual liberties — he reserves judgment on extreme tribal practices such as head-hunting and initiations requiring sexual debauchery and even human sacrifice. He sees these ritual acts simply as enacted mythologies vital to cultural life.

Fifth, in a telltale passage, Campbell contrasts the ancient religion of the Goddess with that of the Bible: "You get a totally different civilization and a totally different way of living according to whether your myth presents nature as fallen or whether nature is in itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit is the revelation of the divinity that is inherent in nature" (p. 99). Campbell clearly chooses the latter and says that "one of the glorious things about Goddess religions" is that "the world is the body of the Goddess, divine in itself, and divinity isn't ruling over a fallen nature." This, in fact, seems to be Campbell's model for society: a social order uninhibited by any supernatural authority or by any recognition of pervasive human fallibility and moral aberration.

Sixth, unlike the historic American ideal, Campbell's mythic world view allows for no appeal to "inalienable rights" granted to all by their creator. That would be too literalistic and absolutistic. Nor could there be violations of human dignity because we have no law above the sociologically functioning mythologies that inspire social order. Instead of a universal Law above human law we simply have the ineffable — in the collective unconsciousness — below the mythological manifestations.

MYTHIC PLURALISM

It might appear at first that Campbell's mythic permissiveness (no one mythic understanding is ultimately true) would serve as a solid platform for pluralism. At one point he says that mythologies are like individual software; if yours works, don't change it. But the classical liberal (not the modern, relativistic liberal) understanding of pluralism is deeper and wider. It assumes truth has nothing to fear from a plurality of perspectives; it can compete with and triumph over error in "the marketplace of ideas" by virtue of its own merit. Western liberty of expression is premised on *the right to be right* and *the right to be wrong* and be proven wrong through dialogue, debate, and discussion. Mythic pluralism assumes no truth to be discovered, debated, or discussed. The merit of any mythology is not its objective veracity but its subjective pull and social power. Mythic pluralism endorses a relativism that ignores the possibility of uncovering the absolute, the universal, or the objective. If the software works, keep it — just so long as you delete any religious literalism.

Campbell may not have countenanced it, but it may befall him to become a posthumous prophet for New Age sentiments. Although more of an academic than a popularizer, his world view is in basic agreement with New Age celebrities like Shirley MacLaine, Werner Erhard, and John Denver. All is one; god is an impersonal and amoral force in which we participate; supernatural revelation and redemption are not needed. Campbell's erudition and sophisticated manner may attract those who are less impressed by the metaphysical glitz of a Shirley MacLaine, the rank superstition of "crystal consciousness," or the cosmic hype of the "Harmonic Convergence."

Campbell is correct: the power of myth in its various functions is potent and pervasive. Human beings need a

comprehensive world view capable of undergirding and integrating individual and social values, engaging the imagination, activating the intellect, and energizing the will. Yet it must also be *true*. Campbell abandoned what he confessed he could not understand — "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" — and affirmed gods many and lords many. One can only hope his readers will harken to the words of another person conversant with the power of myth, G. K. Chesterton. He said in "The Unfinished Temple," "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

—*Reviewed by Douglas Groothuis*