

# Awakening the Myth-Maker

## Joseph Campbell and the Experience of Myth

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Religious pluralism seems to receive its fair share of attention in modern secular institutions, which often seek to devise methodologies of understanding and relating the varied branches of the religious life. As dominant paradigms change, so do the methodologies. For many studies then, and especially the epic ones, this would make them seem to decrease in relevance over time; except insofar as they become objects of critical analysis themselves. The works of Joseph Campbell, a popular professor in comparative mythology, span across the second half of the twentieth century – from modernity well into postmodernity. However, his views on religion are not so much academic as a challenge to the way religious pluralism is approached; a challenge to individuals and society to derive meaningful experience from the topics we bring together.

Campbell's knowledge seems to have been exhaustive; his writings, dense with eclectic references. Basing himself in modern psychology, he presented his middle-aged, intellectual audience with a unitary vision of world mythologies, metaphysics, religions, and philosophies.

As a significant authority engaged with pluralism, he offers his own narrative of the causes, effects, and uses of the modern pluralist society. This engagement is foremost a wedding of intellect and experience: the changing philosophies and methodologies, like the changing patterns of mythology, are not to be studied with complete objectivity, but absorbed through deep insight. The history of mythology, says Campbell, is the record of the development of human consciousness. Therefore, by opening up in a spiritual way to the world's mythologies, a true understanding and a depth of community can be achieved. This method of self-discovery, encouraged by ancient and modern texts on mystical experience, differentiates Campbell from modernism, postmodernism and the academic norm, as well as the New Age movement. In his own philosophy, Campbell falls outside of these categories; they are merely the most recent development of a teleological process towards true pluralism.

As it stands, individuals share little depth of community. However, by "opening up one's own truth and depth to the truth and depth of another, an authentic community of existence is created," and the problems of cross-cultural communication are more or less solved.<sup>1</sup> It would seem then that Campbell believes that universalism – where all (religious) symbols are recognized by their transcendental meaning – is needed for a true pluralistic community.

Campbell's resolution of the tension between secular pluralism and the individual psyche seems to have been comprehended by few commentators. So how accessible is his ideal of an engaged intellectual? Campbell purports to have rediscovered an oft-neglected part of the Western psyche,<sup>2</sup> *myth-making consciousness*, and presents it as a panacea for the social realities with which he was dissatisfied. In Campbell's panacea, which was neatly packaged for an intellectual audience, there is much at stake: institutional changes and the future of religion are offered. Important questions however have gone unanswered – Can a universal mythology be institutionalized? What does a deep understanding of mythology and religious symbols contribute to pluralism? Could spiritual experience or higher consciousness (e.g. in revised models of ancient initiation) play a role in secular Western education?

### An Overview

Campbell's argument, gleaned from analytical psychology, is that if you look at the development of myth – especially in Europe and America, melting-pots of ancient and modern mythologies – you

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<sup>1</sup> Creative, p.84

<sup>2</sup> Hero, p.39

see the development of the mind and the ways we have learned to use it. As we collect new and better stories, the human individual has become more complex. Even by studying the knowledge of others, we learn more about ourselves. Therefore, the more we learn as individuals, the more influence and control we have in using our mind. Like an artist – a myth-maker – we learn new ways to understand, experience, and create reality.

Mythology then, seen historically, is the story of our developing consciousness. It is the recording of our connection to reality, the meaning we gave it then and give it now. So whatever is written down, in literature, myth, poetry, science, etc, is the story of us; it's the mythology that we've created about ourselves. Most people, and this includes the strict scientist and the religious believer, are not in tune with the sense that we are constantly creating a new mythology; they take words as facts, and believe in them, worship their 'one and only' meaning, and deny that they have a deeper, personal meaning at all. They think they are only reading, not writing the story of their life.

To genuinely experience the different parts of the story, and our role in contributing to it, we have to begin with religious awe. We need a sensation of mystery and amazement, centered in the now, where we realize that we, the individual, are not only what connects, but what creates the known story. Religious symbols and metaphors are to be lived out in one's mind – such as in Campbell's *dream awake*,<sup>3</sup> or Jung's active imagination – so that the individual generates their own meaning. This so-called religious, spiritual, or mystical experience is the key to becoming the open-minded and self-realized individual that is pointed to in mythology.

Campbell's story about “*the*” story is thus pedagogical, and can be tied in to learning and education in quite a radical way. Campbell suggests a revamped system of initiation – modern rituals for altering consciousness – and exposure to all of the mythologies in the modern plurality of symbols (religious, national, corporate, etc). Modern individuals should learn to recognize the symbols as referring to *the same thing*: that they all emanate from and point to the unconscious. The deeper connection to the symbolic systems is thus what unites humanity. The question is, can and will such a realization be achieved on a social scale?

### Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was a renowned mythologist from New York, who, long before the popularization of his work in the 1980s, was an influential marginal in the worlds of literature, art, comparative religion and mythology. Born an Irish Catholic, he dropped out of his religion and then out of his graduate program in literature, giving up forever the aim of earning a doctorate. However, his works on comparative mythology and religion have become widely-read and standard texts in the field, bringing a deeply psychological approach to the understanding of human myth-making – the fictionalizing mind – and its relation to social and cultural realities. Campbell applied Jungian psychology to a universally human perspective; he collected and discussed the grand narratives (or 'monomyths') of human nature and existence in a comparative, integrative, and idiosyncratic compendium. He often approaches social science, as the compatibility of modern society – including science as a myth-constructing tool – and its myths is addressed.

Campbell's work in mythology was aimed at extracting the true meaning of religious metaphor for the modern age. He wrote neither as a scientist nor as a theologian; while there is a metaphysical thread woven throughout his interpretations, its scholarly rendering in the language of contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Creative, p.671

psychology is mostly opportunistic.<sup>4</sup> As such it is difficult to ascertain whether his study of the myriad religions of the world (necessarily from a Western perspective) was retroactively fitted to his idea of “Mankind’s one great story”<sup>5</sup> or that he had adhered to this idea all along. We know that he was a recluse during the Great Depression, was exposed to the pluralistic writings of Thomas Mann and James Joyce (from whom he extracted the term *monomyth*),<sup>6</sup> the psychology of Freud and Jung, and had befriended Jiddu Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher. From Jung, for example, he had learned that “myth is the revelation of a divine life in man.”<sup>7</sup> But, whatever the source of his convictions, Campbell’s unitary vision is present throughout his oeuvre.

His popularity has been attributed to an affinity with the times. William Dinges, associate professor of religion at The Catholic University of America, states that Campbell’s idiosyncratic interpretation of mythology played a part in what he calls the “movements of counter-secularity that aim to reenchant the universe.” Campbell’s readers are the affluent cosmopolitans who experiment with religion and spirituality; for them Campbell’s message, emphasizing the experiential power of myth, was “emerging as a public spiritual idiom.”<sup>8</sup> As such, even though he expressed disapproval for them, Campbell can be tied to hippie and New Age cultures,<sup>9</sup> and, in the words of Lefkowitz, can be seen not as a professor, historian, or critic of religion, but rather “a priest of a new and appealing hero-cult – the religion of self-development.”<sup>10</sup>

### Myth as Guide

The guiding role of religious myth is well established; its primordial origin, however, is not. Campbell enumerates four stages of development in mythology. First, ‘primitive’ myths were intended to involve the community in a sense of awe at the mystery of being, and to say yes to life in spite of its hardships.<sup>11</sup> After that, around 3200BC, mythological interpretations of the cosmic order arose; this was also the beginning of society, as the cosmic order described in myth was reflected in the order of human life.<sup>12</sup> In the next development, myths validated a moral code in the field of a certain culture. In the fourth step, myths were conceived to guide the individual through the developmental stages of life. Briefly then, through the four functions of myth, life is reconciled to the ultimate mystery, the cosmos, the culture, and the self.<sup>13</sup> Unless these realms are spiritualized through myth, they remain secular and alienating.<sup>14</sup>

Not unlike Hayden White’s theory of Metahistory, where historians are said to impose a narrative theme (such as comedy, tragedy, irony) on the story of the past, Campbell sees society as operating according to the specific narratives of its mythology. The archetypal narrative of most

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<sup>4</sup> And open to revision, as Campbell himself implies in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p.vii

<sup>5</sup> *Thou*, p.ix

<sup>6</sup> *Hero*, p.30

<sup>7</sup> *Creative*, p.645

<sup>8</sup> Dinges. For more on reenchantment, see Owen, Alex

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Lefkowitz, p.429

<sup>11</sup> This, as Felser has noted (417), is a major break with postmodernism. For Richard Rorty, for example, secularization implies the lack of awe, whereas to Campbell, who supports secularization, the absence of awe means the “coming of the wasteland.”

<sup>12</sup> *Thou* p.3

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

Western countries, which is dualistic and exclusivist, originates in semitic tribal monotheisms.<sup>15</sup> But continuous developments such as science offer new narratives: as Campbell muses, “I should think that a quiet Sunday morning spent at home in controlled meditation on a picture book of the galaxies might be an auspicious start for the voyage [towards experiencing religious awe].”<sup>16</sup>

### Myth as Metaphor

The first task in understanding religion, according to Campbell, is to interpret it not as historical fact, but as metaphor. Metaphors are neither historical fact nor fanciful fiction; in their spiritual form, they point to the deeper, intuited truth beyond categories.<sup>17</sup> Failing to perceive religious text as metaphor, one either believes in it as fact or dismisses it as meaningless. Either way, the deeper truths are missed. Campbell's adherence to metaphor goes against traditional theology as well as conventional science; it is loosely based on poetic hermeneutics and depth psychology, and seems to depend on a personal familiarity with world mythologies.

Critics aligned with the literalism and realism that Campbell seeks to dethrone are often incapable of grasping the notion of metaphor. Most are blocked by dualisms of true-false, rational-irrational. Johnson, professor of philosophy from Indiana State, for instance queries “How much does 'truth' depend on correctly hearing the myth?”<sup>18</sup> As we will see further on, Campbell's idea of the relationship between individual and metaphor is personal, if not artistic; “truth” is mostly subjective and experiential. Independent or objective standards are not given, unlike in traditional institutions, because Campbell places the responsibility of hearing the 'correct' or 'rational' interpretation in the hands of the individual. As in postmodernism and elsewhere, a true, or universal meaning is simply rejected in Campbell's philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

Following William of Occam, Campbell psychologizes myth and the metaphysical; ideas, names, forms, and metaphors are in the mind, making them open to personal study *and* interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Theological and academic seminars are often stymied by the paradoxical subjectivity of universal symbols; discussions remain sectarian. The challenge is to open one's eyes through direct experience so that one may, like Campbell, “take the myths and religion of every culture with equal seriousness.”<sup>21</sup> Although they speak *for* an entire culture, they speak *to* each individual.

Campbell tirelessly repeats the importance of metaphor. In religious metaphor, the connotation – not the denotation – is the real meaning: “Metaphors only seem to describe the outer world of time and space. Their real universe is the spiritual realm of the inner life.”<sup>22</sup> In this sense, most of conventional religion becomes a “popular misunderstanding of mythology.”<sup>23</sup> By historicizing the teachings, its symbols are rendered inert. As Campbell writes, “The images must point past themselves to that ultimate truth which must be told: that life does not have any one absolutely fixed meaning.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, metaphors transcend duality. This to Campbell is a glaring problem for institutions: as

<sup>15</sup> This charge and others has instigated claims of anti-semitism by Campbell's detractors; *see* Segal

<sup>16</sup> *Creative*, p.614

<sup>17</sup> *Thou*, p.xiv

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, p.410

<sup>19</sup> Felser

<sup>20</sup> *Creative*, p.583

<sup>21</sup> Lefkowitz, p.429

<sup>22</sup> *Thou* p.7

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9

fixed entities, they cannot be sustained by open metaphors. They dialectically enforce certain objective structures of truth as against that of other claimants, which dissociates them from the function of myth.<sup>25</sup> And when their truth is challenged (as it always has been), the people are left alienated.<sup>26</sup>

In one of his first publications, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell's interpretation of metaphor serves to differentiate him from postmodernism. "The symbols of myth," he writes, "are not manufactured. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche."<sup>27</sup> Words are thus not simply words, related to other words and therefore basically empty, but emanations from the absolute. As Felser, assistant professor of philosophy notes, anything we say about the absolute (i.e. words and symbols) is not absolute: the absolute is an experience which can only be *evoked*. Whereas to postmodernism the world beyond words is a void, to Campbell it is a void that is not a void.<sup>28</sup> "The only open question," Felser concludes, "is whether one is *consciously aware* [my italics]" of our limitation to the metaphorical;<sup>29</sup> in other words, whether we have become conscious of being myth-makers.

### Universalism

The worldview at the heart of our pluralist, secular mythology is schizophrenic. Conscious and unconscious mind are divided, as are nature and spirit. Our cultural pedigree is derived from the psychological decision to perceive difference instead of connection. Indeed, the central myth in the Bible is exile: the Great Myth of the Fall and Redemption (where God is separate from Nature, and Man is separate from both), for example, stood at the very basis of Medieval civilization.<sup>30</sup> According to Campbell however, modern society is inspired to turn back to inner space, not least by our voyages to outer space. The potential exists to unite world mythology through such symbols as the first extraterrestrial photograph of Earth.<sup>31</sup>

For many individuals, however, the schizophrenic imbalance of modern mythology has formed a tendency to evoke a quest for spiritual or philosophical illumination. Fritjof Capra, a contemporary writer on spirituality, has noted the same tendency in the quantum physics/mysticism counterculture.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Campbell fails to recognize this in himself.

There is however a great resistance to a change in mythology. "People feel panicky at the thought that we might all have something in common, that they are giving up some exclusive hold on the truth,"<sup>33</sup> Campbell realizes. The process of prioritizing myth in culture (in literature, visual media such as sci-fi, etc)<sup>34</sup> would require the *will* to find a common spirituality of mankind.

As it stands, this will to unite under a common mythology is marginal if not suppressed. While in the educational curricula of the last decades Campbell's "peculiar brand of universalism is being taken seriously, on the ground that it serves as an introduction to multicultural experience,"<sup>35</sup> deeper or

<sup>25</sup> The real function of a church for example, says Campbell, is "simply to preserve and present symbols and to perform rites, letting believers experience the message for themselves in whatever way they can." (Thou, p.29)

<sup>26</sup> Thou p.5, p.12

<sup>27</sup> Hero, p.4

<sup>28</sup> Felser, p.403

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.410

<sup>30</sup> Thou p.23, 57

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.108

<sup>32</sup> Capra, p.22

<sup>33</sup> Thou, p.110

<sup>34</sup> A process to which Campbell contributed through his involvement with the Star Wars franchise

<sup>35</sup> Lefkowitz, p.434

spiritual initiatives are not. This is not the task of the modern institution, nor has it been of traditional religious frameworks: as Carl Jung overstates the case, “it is one of the functions of traditional religions to protect us against the religious experience.”<sup>36</sup> Several obstacles have been institutionalized already: on a rational level, religious symbols are deprived of meaning. On a historical level, they are reduced in emotional value. And by biologizing the symbols (such as Freud's Oedipus complex) their potential for transcendence is denied.

Awakening the myth-maker, whether individually or socially, could “serve as the cure for the family of diseases from which modernity suffers.” To Felser, the imbalanced or schizophrenic tendency towards over-intellectualization (instead of direct experience) is a recent symptom of these diseases – and he includes the postmodern movement.<sup>37</sup> Overcoming the psychic schism, a fundamentally psychological diagnosis, implies the need for a fundamentally religious experience: atonement, or *at-one-ment*, the original, mystical sense of the word.<sup>38</sup> A successful atonement, or union with and integration of the Other,<sup>39</sup> is achieved through the discovery of the self which Campbell first addressed in *The Hero*. First the old order is destroyed (deconstruction), and then reconstruction takes place.<sup>40</sup>

Campbell recounts the mythical examples of this process, but fails to detail its modern implementation; mystical techniques of atonement are not addressed. While the “cure” is thus pointed to, and made relevant to intellectuals, actual methods are not divulged. Again the unanswered question of Campbell's own mystical experience is crucial.

Regardless of Campbell's silence, universalism is his intended result. By surveying, communicating with, and employing the symbols of pluralistic culture, individuals should become “less sectarian, and more universal.”<sup>41</sup> The atoned individual can use the myth, or wear the mask of any 'Other,' and yet still be himself: in the words of Shankaracharya, “Just as an actor is always a man, whether he puts on the costume of his role or lays it aside, so is the perfect knower of the Imperishable always the Imperishable, and nothing else.”<sup>42</sup> Even the masks of science and psychology are open to spiritual or mythological use. What Dinges calls a “Jungian trend of collapsing religion into psychology” is therefore but one of the masks that Campbell himself wears.<sup>43</sup>

There have been criticisms of Campbell's universalism. Mary Lefkowitz, a feminist mythologist, finds weaknesses in his idea of an archetypal Goddess – she seems like a “projection of an ideal European housewife,” a projection made through “basically modern Christian values.”<sup>44</sup> According to this criticism, Campbell himself has failed to deconstruct and universalize his own mythology. Johnson, quoting Mortimer Adler the philosopher, objects to Campbell's theory because it “lets him slip past the problem of religious pluralism not with good reasons but with rhetoric. Campbell...does not resolve the issue of what to do about competing truth claims among religions.”<sup>45</sup>

Echoed in these criticisms is Steven Katz's argument that there is no such thing as a pure,

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<sup>36</sup> Thou p.13

<sup>37</sup> Felser, p.403

<sup>38</sup> Creative, p.27

<sup>39</sup> The Other, by which identity is established through differentiation, “is God too.” Hero, p.161

<sup>40</sup> Hero, p.8

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.231

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.237 (Shankaracharya, Vivekachudamani, 542 & 555)

<sup>43</sup> Dinges

<sup>44</sup> Lefkowitz, p.434

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, p.409

unmediated mystical experience.<sup>46</sup> Unless Campbell or others have had unmediated experiences, the whole dream of universalism is forfeit – Eurocentric or egocentric projections seem unavoidable. However, the argument is rather normative and postmodern: if everything is mediated, mainly by words, one cannot know that there is or is not such a thing as unmediated experience. One can only experience it, and then point to it in metaphor. But, as Wittgenstein famously wrote, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>47</sup> There may not *be* a final word on unmediated experience, nor on competing truth claims among religions.

Still, the criticism stands, and Campbell readily admits to the accusation of Eurocentrism within his work. While Campbell's bottom line was the “affirmation of constants” in world myths,<sup>48</sup> historical differences were key: and the particular development of mythology in Europe is simply unprecedented. The self-responsible individual, artist of her own life, is “distinctly European. We encounter nothing quite like this in the long course of our survey of the mythologies of mankind.”<sup>49</sup> Christianity, itself a “fulfillment of pluralism,”<sup>50</sup> paved the way through its Gnostic roots; having at-oned with the Father, a European Hero eventually became “an incarnation of god, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time.”<sup>51</sup> The archetypes of European narrative were then increasingly located in “the individual's essentially private, inward experience of the Mystery.”<sup>52</sup>

The examples which Campbell uses, though diverse and numerous, seem to fit this development too easily; still, while the trend may be a generalization from Campbell's selective quoting, the evidence is rather persuasive. Through science and space travel we *have* witnessed that the Earth is not at the center of the universe, but a tiny part of the whole. What's more, it is one Earth; henceforth, says Campbell, we can “no longer speak of 'outsiders.' No more chosen ones. That today is suicide.”<sup>53</sup> Accepting a plurality of symbols for developing personal truth is therefore tantamount to loosening the grip of the ego; it is an expansion of consciousness in itself, and may lead to an experience of universalism. The next question then, is who can play the game that Campbell is describing – the game of wearing the many masks of God?

### The Artist of Myth

“As Campbell has tirelessly pointed out, traditionalist religions of both West and East have typically exhibited nothing but contempt for the idea of the autonomous individual. ... God may be in a stick, but in the ego? How utterly scandalous! But Campbell, for his part, would have none of this. It is not that we have had too much individualism, but rather, not enough...We have not yet managed to free ourselves from our pre-modern, pre-scientific habits of thought, and this has inevitably colored our experiments with autonomy.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Katz, p.26

<sup>47</sup> Op.Cit., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

<sup>48</sup> Felser, p.407

<sup>49</sup> Creative, p.480

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.8

<sup>51</sup> Hero, p.41

<sup>52</sup> Felser, p.413

<sup>53</sup> Thou p.30

<sup>54</sup> Felser, p.411

The lack of mythological awareness in modern society, reduced by the onslaught of metaphysical realism in Christianity and secular science,<sup>55</sup> has made the very concept of individuality a fraud. It itself has become a myth, in the modern, derogatory sense of the word. Individuals pass through religious and secular education merely as a way to “infect the youth with the madness of their elders.”<sup>56</sup> Tradition antecedes, determines, and controls experience, so that the individual is precluded from having a creative, original, unmediated experience.<sup>57</sup>

In primitive society the shaman was the only tolerated deviant or individual, who, according to Geza Roheim, “fought the demons so that others could hunt the prey.”<sup>58</sup> However, the psycho-spiritual task now befalls every modern individual: no institution can keep up with the demons of secular, urban life. In Freud's psychoanalysis – the priestly science of the mind – the individual was brought to conformity with the general state of delusion in society. Campbell however intends to end *all* delusion.<sup>59</sup> No more looking to Conscience, Reason, Social Instinct (the herd), or History for authority, like Nietzsche's Nihilist,<sup>60</sup> but an acceptance of responsibility – as with the artist – of the role of creator.

Campbell discusses the Corpus Hermeticum, the Christian mystics, the Grail legends, and the Albigensians as examples of creative, synthetic thought which deviated from the herd. Some of these, like Campbell himself, were engaged in comparing and using images from various traditions for mutual illumination. Their goal, says Campbell – and the ultimate goal to be found in his *Creative Mythology*, concluding volume of *The Masks of God* – was the attainment of non-dual knowledge, or illumination. Homo Dei, the illuminated individual, can recognize the person of god(dess) “not where it can be neither sought nor found, 'out there' somewhere, in transcendence, but – as Christ did – in oneself. And not oneself alone, but all things, all events: in every individual, just as he is God's mask.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, through a mythological consciousness, humans can spiritualize everything in existence. Through the sense of awe, which is the first function of myth, one recognizes God in everything. The stories of myth then provide a set of glasses through which reality is read. The first indication of Campbell's individual is thus of a modern mystic; religious, self-psychological, and illuminated.

Campbell briefly mentions a meditative technique to help reach this goal. Suggested by Carl Jung, it is called “active imagination:” by contemplating any mythic image, letting it speak to the deep centers of the psyche, images and personal associations appear in the mind.<sup>62</sup> The reactivation of this mythological imagination is key to a broadly humanized future, and key to becoming an artist. But aside from this technique the reader is left wanting. Flirting with mysticism has always been socially suspect, and Campbell seems to be forging a path between Jung and Freud – on the one hand advocating mysticism, and on the other leaving the reader guessing how to do it.

The artist necessarily awakens higher, or mythological consciousness through the course of the classical hero's journey, as described by Campbell in *The Hero*. We are told vaguely of a retreat from the world, deep into the psyche, and, battling the demons of one's local culture, breaking through to the “undistorted, direct experience and assimilation of archetypal images.”<sup>63</sup> After the initial breakthrough,

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<sup>55</sup> Felser, p.399-400

<sup>56</sup> Creative, p.47

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.65

<sup>58</sup> Roheim, p.51

<sup>59</sup> Hero, p.165

<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche

<sup>61</sup> Creative, p.647

<sup>62</sup> Thou p.38-40

<sup>63</sup> Hero, p.17

the hero-artist must maintain fluid awareness, not “stubborn ponderosity.”<sup>64</sup> Campbell's hero, whom he traces through all manner of world mythology, is thus personified in the European artist who has contacted the depths of their psyche – a Picasso, a Joyce, etc.

Lefkowitz believes this 'sacred' task of Campbell's hero can be undertaken within the confines of his own mind – that he need never to leave his room.<sup>65</sup> Though not necessarily false, this statement needs to be qualified. Indeed, the journey must be undertaken in one's own mind, as nobody else can do it for you; but as we have seen, the inner is the outer, and any space can be spiritualized – one's room, but also the supermarket, the mosque, and the classroom.

Campbell traces the roots of the artist of creative mythology to Medieval Europe. During what he calls the “Great European awakening” from 1066 to 1140, translations from the Arabic, goods from the Orient, Manichean heresies, Jewish Cabbalism, the troubadours, the Norman conquest, and the preaching of the First Crusade broadened the horizons of the European psyche.<sup>66</sup> The path from unity to multiplicity began, and a burgeoning of creative mythologies from personal experience was recorded.<sup>67</sup> In the twelfth-century love letters of Abelard and Héloïse for example, Abelard superseded Church authority and read and interpreted the Bible for himself. He firmly believed that religious doubt would lead to inquiry and thus to truth. Love and reason were his creative knowledges, and through them he destroyed the old mythology to create his own.<sup>68</sup> The root of Europe's singularity according to Campbell is thus the Western individual, who, like Abelard, following Libido instead of Credo, overcomes institutional coercion and enters the path of self-discovery without guidelines.<sup>69</sup>

We have already noted that Campbell considers the history of mythology to be a record of human consciousness. He states it most clearly with reference to the creative artist: “Art and literature are like revelations of the actual living mythology of our present developing humanity.”<sup>70</sup> Science, another European development, has through its discoveries made each individual into the “center of a mythology of his own;” not unlike the Hermetic God, he or she is the sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. The individual is, as it were, a myth-making machine on a pathless way, making up the story of their life as they go.<sup>71</sup>

Doesn't this sound rather schizophrenic, or at least neurotic? By psychiatric standards perhaps, yes. The current reality, Campbell recognizes, is that there are few who can handle the way of seeing with the “world-eye;” only genius is capable of living this way.<sup>72</sup> However, the social reality itself is schizophrenic; the communities of today are superficial and artificial, and can no longer be looked to for the generation of myth.<sup>73</sup>

The solution is close at hand. Campbell suggests that we, as all the great creative artists of the West have done, awaken ourselves to – and thereby reawaken – the mythological symbols “of our richly compound European heritage of intermixed traditions.”<sup>74</sup> James Joyce, perhaps Campbell's favorite

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.337, p.355

<sup>65</sup> Lefkowitz, p.430

<sup>66</sup> Creative, p.521

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.3

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.44, p.55, p.397

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.64

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.35-36

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.36-37

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.82

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.93

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.94

author, combined Christian, pagan, primitive, and oriental counterparts, thereby transforming them into “nonsectarian, non-ecclesiastical, psychologically significant symbols.”<sup>75</sup>

The essence of a mythological consciousness is as follows: by using the myths as “paradigms of secular human experiences with a depth dimension, the entire course of a lifetime becomes a rite of initiation.”<sup>76</sup> And later: “It is a law of symbolic life that the god beheld is a function of the state of consciousness of the beholder, and in this work – as in life itself – it is the individual's friends and enemies who function for him as messengers and gods of initiatory guidance and revelation.”<sup>77</sup>

Lefkowitz has remarked that in building up his theory of myth, Campbell picks and chooses those stories which fit his theory;<sup>78</sup> and necessarily so. If Campbell is to be the priest of his own religion of self-development, picking and choosing his own initiatory guides is essential.

Dinges voices an institutional concern for such individualism. Campbell is, “by his own admission, Pelagian to the core. [His] is a gospel of self-help, not grace.” His vision of myth therefore reinforces a “Lone Ranger spiritual ethos.”<sup>79</sup> We have seen, however, in the discussion of Universalism that the ‘Lone Ranger’ path is meant to lead to unity and connection with everything in existence – as it did for Buddha, Christ, Campbell, and other mystics. As Felser writes, only the individual artist, free from coerced mythology, can attain a direct experience of the Ultimate Unknown, the reality beyond both Lone Rangers and society.<sup>80</sup> The Catholic Church to which Dinges is bound has hardly warmed to mystical or religious experience beyond the sacraments, and his criticism seems grounded in its dogma. However, it does prefigure an important discussion on institutions.

### Individual vs Institution<sup>81</sup>

Dinges’s concern is with the selfish, boundless egoism that Campbell is praising: “Campbell offers the possibility of a religious identity rich in free-play cosmology, imagery and symbolism, but essentially devoid of moral, authoritative, hierarchical, communal or institutional constraints.”<sup>82</sup> The tension between individual and institution, between private and social conscience (*minne* and *ere*, love and honor) however is to Campbell “*the problem unresolved in the West.*”<sup>83</sup>

The question now arises, how Campbell’s idea of a spiritual awakening through myth-making consciousness can be achieved on a social level. Clearly the idea was to generate a world mythology alongside the existing traditions, and to enable as many people as possible to follow the hero’s path; but since institutions, as Campbell himself noted, are mostly coercive, could spiritual enlightenment be institutionalized? Answering this question will necessarily lead us into some speculation.

Institutionalized, or authoritarian myth is referred to by Campbell as The Waste Land, a common motif signifying spiritual corruption or destitution. It is a false utopia, filled with clichés, and, more concretely, it “extends today from the cathedral close to the university campus.” Indeed, universities are said by Campbell to “willfully stunt the spiritual instinct,” as students are taught by “sterilized authorities... There is no time, no place, no permission – let alone encouragement – for

<sup>75</sup> Creative, p.453

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.484

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.566

<sup>78</sup> Lefkowitz, p.430

<sup>79</sup> Dinges

<sup>80</sup> Felser, p.409

<sup>81</sup> Institutions are generalized here as anything which is imposed on the individual, be it education, religion, legislature, etc

<sup>82</sup> Dinges

<sup>83</sup> Creative, p.430

*experience.*<sup>84</sup> Campbell's low regard for academic specialization, "As he himself says," is thus based on its tendency to "keep scholars from affirming the 'life values' of their subjects."<sup>85</sup> Though a professor himself, his denunciation of scholarship is without restraint: "Scholars trace, describe, and teach school around traditions: it affords them a career. However, it has nothing to do with creative life, and less with creative myth."<sup>86</sup>

The problem is wider than schools. All socially authorized myths and cults, says Campbell, are intended to inculcate belief – even programs for the renovation of society.<sup>87</sup> But has he not shot himself in the foot with this statement? How can the power of myth renovate society if it is a part of social repression? We seem to have a paradox: "Rules are for those not yet illuminated," writes Campbell, because "Otherwise, you are spontaneously compassionate."<sup>88</sup> And yet we need new rules to get to the point of illumination.

Illumination in many myths takes place when the hero meets or wins a woman, a queen or princess or the like: "Woman in the picture language represents the totality of what can be known. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurances she acquires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world... It takes 'gentle heart,' acceptance of the ugly, to love life itself and be its lord." Once a marriage with the queen-goddess of the world, its institutions, and everything else – the Other – is accomplished, the hero is total master of life.<sup>89</sup>

The answer to the institution-individual problem thus lies in the nature of relationship. We may use Campbell's notion of marriage to explain: "In marriage, individuals sacrifice not as individuals but as two become one: they sacrifice to the relationship. Marriage is an ordeal, not a love affair;" it requires the sacrificing of the ego.<sup>90</sup> As Perceval says in *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, "No, I must earn a wife, not be given a wife." And that, says Campbell, "That's the beginning of Europe, the individual Europe."<sup>91</sup>

The notion of illuminated relationship seems to be a social novelty. Traditionally, clear boundaries exist between self and other, and mediators such as priests, laws, and ego are employed. The mythologically illuminated individual, however, no longer relies only on the mediated experience of *relationship*, but is also in full *identity* with her social and natural environment. This is what Campbell calls the basic insight of metaphysical discourse; *Tat Tvam Asi*, "Thou Art That."<sup>92</sup> This unity, while itself a category of the mind, is a basic experience that is pointed to in mythology. Once the temporal truths of the Catholic Church, the Communist Party, etc., are discredited, the relationship to truth is lost. Hence the alienation of society results from its over-reliance on institutions: the experience of unity is imposed instead of being sought.

Only after the individual ego, which perceives reality through *relationships* (separateness), has been superseded, can the *identity* of unity take its place. This is what religious myth points to. The Holy Grail, symbol of supreme spiritual value, is attained not by renouncing the world of social customs, but by participating in it totally as dictated by one's own uncorrupted heart: "what the mystics call the Inner

<sup>84</sup> Hero, p.373-374

<sup>85</sup> Lefkowitz, p.430

<sup>86</sup> Creative, p.40

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.84-85

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p.99

<sup>89</sup> Hero, p.116,118,120

<sup>90</sup> Creative, p.91-92

<sup>91</sup> Power, p.197

<sup>92</sup> Thou p.13. From the Sanskrit.

Voice.”<sup>93</sup>

Today’s institutions are as dominant as ever, even though they present themselves as “permissive, demythologized secular institutions.” Mass media and other forms of indoctrination in the social sphere “delimit the capacity for experience.”<sup>94</sup> Still, demythologization of social regulations has itself opened the path for individualism; rules are man-made, not god-given, and are subject to individual evaluation.

This process of secularization, Campbell says, is slowly following its course. Political machinations are “gradually fashioning a noncommittal social order, a merely practical frame for whatever possibilities.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the only commitment, even socially, is economic. Amidst this seeming permissiveness, there is still tension between freedom and control; and with money as the basic social glue, it is still power, not love, that society is based on. Freud saw no escape from this need to suppress the instincts and yield to social power. With proper initiation rites suppressed, communities remain alienated – but secularization does not necessarily preclude mythological consciousness.

When a new system of initiation is devised for a global community, the lesson can once again be taught of the “essential oneness of the individual and the group.” The hero, with the perfected eye to see and heart to feel, experiences that “there is no separateness.”<sup>96</sup> The path of exile, what Dinges called the Lone Ranger ethos, eventually brings the hero to recognize the Self in all; and as one is no longer alienated from the Self, one is no longer alienated from society.

This is the significance of the European mythological ideal. The creative artist-hero does not wait for society for guidance and salvation, but does the opposite: as agent of one’s own reality, he or she “carries the cross of the redeemer,” always sharing the ordeal of being the heart and soul of a society.<sup>97</sup> To achieve this, a “transmutation of the whole social order is needed.”<sup>98</sup> How do you create this transmutation, or a successful teaching? It is no easy task to communicate to unilluminated people, who “insist on the exclusive evidence of their senses,” the experience of immanence. Each artist must attempt it time and time again.

Bill Moyers, whose interview of Campbell shortly before his death made him something of a celebrity, elicited the strength of his conviction by asking him about the two-sided power of the responsible individual. For the one who is creative, is at the same time destructive. Moyers muses: “Society couldn’t exist if every heart were vagrant, every eye wandering,” to which Campbell calmly responds: “But there are some societies that shouldn’t exist.”<sup>99</sup> As we have noted, nobody has the whole truth on any one thing. While in the study of religious pluralism it may seem foolish to judge the incompleteness or arbitrariness of another’s convictions, it is far from foolish to judge those who uphold final truths over others: the self-responsible individual himself is an institution against social injustice.

### Awakening the Myth-Maker

Campbell concludes *Creative Mythology* as follows:

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<sup>93</sup> Creative, p.564

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.86

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.91

<sup>96</sup> Hero, p.136, p.384-386

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.391

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.389

<sup>99</sup> Power, p.198

“The mythogenetic zone is the individual heart. Individualism and spontaneous pluralism – the free association of men and women of like spirit, under protection of a secular, rational state with no pretensions to divinity – are in the modern world the only honest possibilities: each the creative center of authority for himself...The norms of myth, through an intelligent 'making use' not of one mythology only but of all of the dead and set-fast symbologies of the past, will enable the individual to anticipate and activate in himself the centers of his own creative imagination, out of which his own myth and life-building 'Yes because' may then unfold.”<sup>100</sup>

This remythologization of awareness is not a step back from Enlightenment rationalism. Cognitive limits, already explored by modern psychology, mystics, postmodernism, etc, must be recognized, and truth is to be generated accordingly. Campbell asks, for example, that science should recognize itself as a source of mythology: not to detract from its truthfulness or rationality, but to have it recognize itself as one of the 'masks of god.' Science, like religion, does not have the final truth, but points toward it. Scientific paradigms, such as realism and materialism, dominate education in many European countries. A change in the experience of science would have far-going effects; not the least of which would be the recognition that the scientific study of religion – as Campbell tries to make clear – begs the inclusion of experience.

Campbell writes that “The world itself is an inkblot into which people read their own minds.”<sup>101</sup> By becoming aware of the symbols that dominate their own minds, he argues that pluralistic society could attain a greater depth of community. Every current failure to cope with cultural differences in our postmodern times is simply due to a “restriction of consciousness.”<sup>102</sup> Such restriction is inherent to our institutions, and so Campbell pleads for an institution with open experience around our shared symbols. Is this plea derived from the “romantic penchant for religious experience” that Dinges invokes?<sup>103</sup> Or is the desire for higher consciousness, universalism, and identity truly pervasive in all our world's mythology?

Surely Campbell's answers do not count as objective, any more than those of his opponents. But being an authority on religion is necessarily a subjective task. Lefkowitz has written that “No one should hope to find in [Campbell's work] an authoritative guide to any religion other than Campbell's own.”<sup>104</sup> I believe the criticism is redundant; true objectivity is an unlikely if not impossible presence in any text, especially on religion. Still, by pointing to the experience of the common source of religion in a neglected, but universal realm of human consciousness, Campbell's views purport to be quite the opposite of *sui generis*.

## Conclusion

If mythology is more or less equivalent to recorded history, then it is not difficult to hypothesize as Campbell does that myth is the record of the evolution of the human mind, or consciousness. As we change through time, so do our symbols. But Campbell is referring beyond the symbols, beyond the text, to the realm of consciousness where all these recorded symbols are experienced as the story of our human and individual Self – to the very mystery of being. The myths, especially in European expressions, are argued to be evolving to enable people to enter that realm of consciousness. Even

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<sup>100</sup> Creative, p.677

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.196

<sup>102</sup> Hero, p.121

<sup>103</sup> Dinges

<sup>104</sup> Lefkowitz, p.43

secularization and pluralism are part of this development. Myths can be taught, even institutionalized, and experienced through psychological techniques – as long as the proper understanding of metaphor is maintained. The encouragement of experience is necessary, because without it, and the proper understanding of myth, social disconnect and alienation increase.

Can the universal experience of myth be institutionalized? Campbell's answer is yes, even though his limited audience is more interested in self-development. The structure of society, indeed its very aspirations, are based on its mythological convictions:<sup>105</sup> as long as the individuals who create and sustain the institution remain true to the limit of metaphor – the limits of truth – the structures of society can be incorporated into the deeper experience of pluralism. If not, and educative and religious institutions maintain a historico-scientific reading of mythology, temples and universities remain museums; their knowledge is dead.<sup>106</sup>

Within Campbell's writing, it is difficult to extract the projected development of myth; he is playing with such a multitude of metaphors, that the story becomes diffuse. Our mythologies are converging and diversifying at tremendous rates, and Campbell traces the development of individual people learning to create their own story, with their own symbols, and their own understanding and experience of them. However, it seems Campbell is himself the primary example of this development.

Perhaps he spoke to the wrong audience; or perhaps he should have been more forthcoming on his own experiences. In any case, Campbell is missing a concrete and accessible methodology for awakening the myth-maker: on an intellectual level – as with postmodernism – the information is insightful, but it is weak in prescribing experience beyond the books. The fact that it *points* to experience is still its most significant message.

Campbell's insistence on individual and universal experience is critical, especially in how they are to be realized through the pedagogy of myth. The artist is never a truly institutionalized phenomenon; but when encouraged, the individual becomes a myth-maker himself. As a professor, Campbell's message – that the faith in institutions to understand religion is misplaced – is a polemical challenge for educational and religious institutions; a challenge to help people redefine themselves according to identity, not relationship. Attaining universality of cultural experience – through a plurality of myth, and the inner exploration of Self – sounds Utopian. But Campbell attained it in himself, in his books, and in his classroom, and the precedent stands.

Defining ourselves over and against each other, which is ever more challenging in the web of pluralist relationships, must pass away.<sup>107</sup> And the only way to construct a universal myth is to deny the exclusivity of your own – to deny the exclusive hold on truth. Asking us to experience mythological pluralism within ourselves like this seems unscientific; but Campbell is convinced that it is the key.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Creative p.5

<sup>106</sup> Hero, p.249

<sup>107</sup> Thou p.107

<sup>108</sup> Hero, p.217

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