

Book Review
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The Power of Myth



"The Power of Myth," Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers (Doubleday, 1988)

One of the best selling non-fiction books of the late 1980s was *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 that were first shown on US public television in 1988, about six months after Campbell's death, and is regularly repeated on eTV, TVNZ's morning educational television programmes.

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 book's 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:

1. The 'mystical function' discloses the world of mystery and awe, making the universe "a holy picture."

2. The 'cosmological function' concerns science and the constitution of the universe.
3. The 'sociological function' "supports and validates a certain social order."
4. The 'pedagogic function' which tells us "how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances."

The modern world, 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."

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 But certain myths are (at least in part) to be rejected as "out of date," particularly the personal lawgiver God of Jews and Christians.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 of the dignity of man. It belongs entirely somewhere else."

Campbell's own mythic commitment is to the "trans theological" 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." 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."

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."

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." 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." 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 centre, and I know that good and evil are simply temporal aberrations and that, in God's view, there is no difference." 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."

Transcendental Mystery

According to Campbell, myth opens us to the realm of transcendental mystery where awe and inspiration energize and permeate our beings. But we can say nothing concrete of it. It is beyond concepts, names, and thought. It is metaphysically mute.

The transcendent is non-dual 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."

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.

Literalism on Trial

Campbell is ever at odds with a religious literalism which treats mythic themes as historical, 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 that 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." 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."

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 notes that "this is blasphemy in the normal way of Christian thinking."

He expresses amazement at the Judeo-Christian commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Such militant monotheism curtails the mythic imagination.

Campbell's book proclaims the 'good news' of the power of the human creative imagination to use myth to express its essential divinity. ■

