

# The Power of Myth: Lessons from Joseph Campbell

by Belden C. Lane

Belden C. Lane is professor of theological studies and American studies at Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1989, pp. 652-654. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org).

---

Theology and myth are stepsisters of truth. The one probes with questions, the other spins out tales on gossamer threads. But both serve a common mystery.

I was reminded of this recently in reading Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers's conversation on *The Power of Myth*. This wonderful book is filled with pictures of Tibetan and Native American art, photographs of aboriginal initiation rites and drawings by William Blake. Adapted from a six-part television series filmed at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch shortly before Campbell's death, the book moves from the tales of ancient Greece and India to the latest episodes of Rambo and Star Wars. Here the power of story still lives. As Campbell once said, "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stands this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change."

I happened to encounter the book while at Magdalen College in Oxford, home of C. S. Lewis, who was himself fascinated with myth. In fact, it was along Addison's Walk in that college one autumn night in 1931 that Lewis engaged his friend J. R. R. Tolkien in a conversation on myth. Lewis, who had not yet been converted to the Christian faith, experienced that night something of a pre-evangelical conversion to the power of myth. Tolkien had been arguing that the mythic language of silver elves and moon-lit trees

carried a far richer truth than Lewis the rationalist had been willing to admit. As they spoke a gust of wind swept the fall leaves around them in a flurry of enchantment, as if to authenticate what had just been said. Lewis never forgot that night and the experience that gave birth to his love of myth, his openness to Christian faith, and his later forays into the land of Narnia.

Campbell's death and the attention given to his conversation with Moyers offer the occasion to assess not only his work but the general impact of mythology on the popular imagination. After Mircea Eliade, probably no one is more widely known in the field of comparative mythology than Campbell. For nearly 40 years he taught literature and myth at Sarah Lawrence College, and is best known for his classic works on *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949) and *The Masks of God* (Viking, 1959-68). His role has been that of popularizer and generalist, a Carl Sagan of the arcane world of comparative mythographers. His interview with Moyers ranges over the whole of his work, including his ideas on how tales of the hero's journey, notions of sacred space and images of the Mother Goddess still operate in the postmodern era. Our universe is not as free of dragons as we might have thought. How else do we understand the rush of New Age books and journals, the popularity of Shirley MacLaine and Jean Houston, the multitude of seminars offered on Jungian thought? All these indicate a keen interest in the power of ancient myths and mysteries. Whether this poses more of an opportunity or a challenge to Christian theology is something not yet fully discerned.

One might expect theologians to rejoice in the recovery of myth. After all, theology went through its own formidable struggle with Enlightenment thought. Yet theology and myth often understand their service of truth in very different ways. Theology may balk at an unbridled imagination, racing headlong without sense or direction, while myth easily chafes under the sharp bit of theology's critical restraint. The two stepsisters only partially rejoice in each other's gifts. Christian theologians can discover in Campbell a sympathizer who is also given to fault-finding. Such a friend--joining honesty with compassion--is not easily found and deserves to be heard carefully.

Raised a Roman Catholic and continually drawn to the image world of medieval Christianity as symbolized in the cathedral of Chartres, Campbell recognized the force of Christian myth. Yet he also harshly criticized Western theology and carefully distanced himself from the church. He saw in Christianity a deep distrust of nature and creation, an overemphasis on fall and redemption, and particularly a tendency to be bound within a cultural prison. Christian theology, in his view, needs the intensive and universalizing influences of mythology. Campbell frequently would contrast the priest, who serves as a custodian of facts, with the shaman, who functions as a sharer of experience. He was uneasy with theology because of its penchant for codes and creeds and its abandonment of poetic language. He cited Jung's warning that religion can easily become a defense against the experience of God.

The first question that Campbell's work poses, then, is how to see ourselves as a people for whom myth is life and breath. How can theologians, in particular, be called back to the vitality of narrated experience? Mythology, as Campbell knew, always aims to include the listener in the tale. The story of the hero, for example, ultimately turns us back to our own experience. "The mighty hero of extraordinary powers -- able to lift Mount Govardhan on a finger, and to fill himself with the terrible glory of the universe -- is each of us!" (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*). I am Telemachus, ever waiting for the lost father Odysseus to come home; I am Gilgamesh, longing to overcome the mystery of death. There is in me the blood-red hatred of Kali, who is consumed by his own rage; in me too is Demeter, the earth mother that loves and nurtures. I am Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the learner and the teacher, preparing for bold action. All these stories are my stories.

But our culture denies such a "participation mystique." It suggests that myth functions only as a dimension of primitive consciousness, and is no longer operative in any significant way. Indeed, the whole history of Western culture can be seen as a history of demythologization. The dominant Western story we have been telling ourselves for 3,500 years has been a painful tale of children who, in their progress toward maturity, have steadily cast off their illusions. We see ourselves as courageous men and women come of age, in the

clear light of reason and critical insight. That is *the* modern story by which many in our culture live. But central to Campbell's perspective is the understanding that this story of demythologization is itself a myth, another story offering us energy and meaning. It is "the myth of a mythless humanity." Its very insistence and repetitiveness in our cultural history, from Xenophanes to Voltaire, shows us to be incurable storytellers, molded by the power of myth.

As a phenomenologist, Campbell brought a sense of wonder to the study of classic myths. The most compelling dimension of his conversation with Moyers is their mutual experience of personal encounter with the truth of which they speak. Campbell's scholarship was never separated from life. He was eager to see mythology in the service of world peace and human understanding. He reached always beyond the myths peculiar to a given culture toward planetary mythology. "We need myths," he said, "that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet" (a concern shared by Asian theologian Tissa Balasuriya in *Planetary Theology* [Orbis, 1984]).

This is Campbell's most powerful critique of traditional Western theologies: turning all metaphors into facts, all poetry into prose, they tend toward divisiveness supporting and validating a given social order as divinely ordained. Flexibility is abandoned for the sake of certainty. The power of myth gives way to the multiplication of propositions. Simply put, theology gets caught up too often in explaining the meaning of life instead of seeking an experience of being alive. Theologians need to hear this criticism. Too frequently they have been guilty, as the Polynesians say, of "standing on a whale, fishing for minnows." Theology is never served by an explication of facts that is removed from an underlying experience of the holy. Nor is Christian faith true to its mission so long as it clings to a parochial intolerance.

Yet theologians do have their own distinctive calling to serve truth. In response to Campbell's insistence that experience take precedence over fact, they must urge that experience demands critique. If mythology offers a way of narrating experience, giving it the power of story, theology provides a way of testing that experience. Furthermore, Christian theology--because of the incarnation--will always want to

root an experience of the sacred in the particular and down-to-earth, being wary of vague, undifferentiated encounters with the profound. Western theology characteristically recognizes the particular as a route to the universal. It hears the summons of the mythographer to a broader, more planetary perspective, but it also knows the paradox that universality is sometimes best embraced through particularity. One often reaches wholeness by way of a very particular field of vision. That, after all, is the meaning of Christ incarnate.

Theologians therefore question the tendency of some enthusiasts of myth to borrow sacred tales and practices indiscriminately from any number of traditions and weave them into their own manufactured mythology. This fault describes not Campbell but those who would adopt his ideas apart from his sensitivity to history and culture. The great myths always developed within particular faith communities. To lift them out of those contexts is to distort the very truth to which they point.

Campbell frequently quoted the Hindu truth that "I am the mystery of the Universe." *Tat tvam asi*- "thou art that" which is beyond all description. The stories of the gods are about *me*! This is a profound mystical insight, as proclaimed within the time-honored tradition of the Upanishads. But when extracted from its context, the impact of the sacred narrative can easily be reduced to the individual reception of it. The "me" can become more central than the transcendent mystery to which it points, in which case the element of doxology is lost; and theology, if it be true to itself, must always call the seekers of truth to praise. Campbell's work, because of its wonderful accessibility, is subject to oversimplification. Complex truths, formed in a community, can be reduced to the vague benedictions of an age of individualism -- "Trust your channel and crystal power," "May the force be with you." The continuing vigor of the great myths, as well as the most sublime insights of theology, surely deserves more than this.

Is the current recovery of myth represented by Campbell a movement toward what Paul Ricoeur would call a second naivete? Has it worked its way through the important criticisms that modernity offers, asking all the hard questions

that a bold hermeneutic of suspicion requires? Or is the return to myth a step backward to a first naivete--a return to paleolithic wonder, a denial of reason and a simplistic retreat to a precritical past?

We must recover the power of myth on the far side of reason. Mythographers and theologians will both be needed in that task. Their narrative and critical skills will have to be joined.

In the 1920s C. S. Lewis began with Owen Barfield an argument on the relationship of myth and theology. They never completed it. They wanted to define the parameters of a world where mystery, revelation and reason could be held in tandem. The conversation had been anticipated somewhat earlier by George MacDonald. It would be continued by Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers, and brought down to our own day by Frederick Buechner and Madeleine L'Engle. Each thinker has been concerned with putting imagination to the service of truth. Perhaps Campbell's work can revive their questions, and help bring together shaman and priest, tale-spinner and creed-maker.

Viewed 39346 times.