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Inspired Myth **Philosophical Comment on Thought of Joseph Campbell**

Britney Spears, scantily clad, carrying a six foot python, dances erotically before a frenzic crowd, worshipping and adoring her, as Aphrodite of old. Across town, men gather around an electronic altar to worship Hercules and Aries, whose latest incarnations find them armored with pads, football helmets, steroids, and Gatorade. Meanwhile the priest looks out upon his congregation Sunday morning, noting it's resemblance to the gerontology ward he had visited three days earlier, wondering where the rest of his flock have gone. Little does he know that many have traded in their allegiance to their parent's religion, and instead, when asked by Statistics Canada to state their religion, have enthusiastically professed themselves as Jedi.

What is going on here? How is it that those symbols traditionally associated with western religion, particularly Christianity, have been forsaken in favor of those pessimistically regarded as "secular?" What is it about these new symbols that give them such potent sociological resonance? Dr. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), a scholar of mythology, religion, and psychology, proposes one possible answer, which lies within the structure of mythology itself, and its link to what Jung called the "collective unconscious" – a proposition that carries with it many philosophical consequences for the human understanding of God, nature, religion, society, and ourselves.

Campbell on Myth and Ritual

Campbell's point of departure is to notice (as do most scholars of mythology) the undeniable similarities that exist between the myths of different cultures and of different

eras.¹ While not identical in many details, these myths hold so much in common with each other to warrant an explanation. The typical explanations offered for this phenomenon are either *diffusion*, wherein all myths come from a common originating society (a view less commonly held), or *independent invention*, wherein each individual society has developed their own myths, that somehow bear similarities to each other. This latter view is held by Campbell, along with Tylor, Frazer, Freud, and most notably, Jung (Patai 22f, Segal 126).

For Campbell, this phenomenon derives from the human psyche itself, from what Jung calls the “collective unconscious.” Myths (some of which are the bases of religions, ancient and modern), for Jung, and in agreement for Campbell, are made up of universal symbols called archetypes, which are encountered in one’s individual unconscious self (dreams, visions, psychotic episodes) but tend to have a common meaning from one subject to the next. The recognition that myths, fables, and stories, which have a communal resonance, are all comprised of such archetypes, is the main impetus of Campbell’s studies:

For the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source. (*Hero*, 4)

This will mean that a story or event that follows the general pattern laid out by the archetypes of the collective unconscious, a pattern Campbell calls the “monomyth,” (*Hero* 3, Patai 59) will have a psychological resonance with the hearers, elevating it to the level of myth throughout a society.²

As such, Campbell points out that historically, myths have served four functions within a society: a) mystical/religious – in that one regards the world around them as a wonder in which she can be in awe, b) cosmological – to give one a sense of the order in

¹ In using the word “myth,” we do not take its vernacular meaning: a story with questionable veracity. We refer to myths simply as those stories upon which religious systems base themselves, regardless of their veracity.

² It should be noted that there is a difference between those images encountered in dream and those in myth. The dream is the individual expression of the monomyth, which carries the same archetypes, but is often also blurred by the psychological baggage of its subject. As such, dreams can express either the integration or disintegration of the individuation process, dependent on the state of that subject. Myths, on the other hand, express the universal pattern, set free from the particularities of individual unconscious damage.

the universe, and an explanation of physical events, c) sociological – to support the moral order of a society, and d) psychological – to lead one to the integration of one’s own personality. Campbell points out that within a secular, materialistic, scientific society such as ours, the first three purposes of myth have lost their meaning for many people, leaving us only with the fourth, psychological function. This does not trouble Campbell however, as it is *from* and *for* the psyche that these myths have arisen (*Myth* 3:8-11).

A brief example will be illustrative. The Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne (that Campbell himself uses, *Hero* 60-1) shows the god in sexual pursuit of the reluctant nymph Daphne, wherein she retreats to the river Peneus, her father, who transforms her into a tree to preserve her from Apollo’s advances. Taken as a historical, cosmological, or sociological event, this story lacks credulity. However, a psychological interpretation does speak *truth* to us about human nature, human sexuality, and our reluctance and fear thereof. The myths, for Campbell, are then true, in that they are true about *us*, and the transcendental forces at work within us.

Ritual, for Campbell, is the enactment of a myth. Rituals have been set up by societies to provide the opportunity for the subject to participate in the myth, and in doing so, bring about the psychological integration of a reality that cannot be expressed cognitively in a satisfactory way (*Myths* 5:9). One illustrative example is the four year old child whose pet hamster dies. His mother does not know how to explain to him the nature of life and death, the possibility of hamster heaven, the “Circle of life” from the *Lion King*; in fact she doesn’t know if she believes these realities herself. So she puts the hamster in a shoebox, and in the presence of the child, buries the hamster in the backyard. This simple ritual allows the child to psychologically integrate that which is beyond his understanding – it carries him through the experience, allowing him to make peace with it and himself.

This can be said of all rites of passage: the subject(s) seek rituals to help them integrate realities in life that are beyond human understanding, forces and powers that existed before and point beyond our limited individual lives: birth, puberty, sexuality and procreation, frailty and guilt, vocation, communion through sacrifice, weakness and mortality.³

Myth and ritual, and thus, religion, are therefore indispensable for the psychological development of the individual, as far as Campbell is concerned, and as a result, for the healthy development of a society (Segal 133). Without these myths and rituals, Campbell observes, we are unable to integrate these forces within us; we remain in a state of infantile mother-attachment; we fail to take adult responsibility for ourselves and our actions; we never learn to live in harmony with our own unconscious selves, and consequently, the world around us (*Hero* 11ff).

Questions Arising from Campbell's Thesis

In the mid 1970's, one of Campbell's best students endeavored to make a movie, using many of the archetypes and mythological themes that Campbell had spent his life categorizing and illustrating. That movie was not only successful, but triggered a sociological phenomenon throughout North America. The student's name, of course, was George Lucas, and his movie: *Star Wars* (1977).

At work here is society's psychological need for myth, to help people orient themselves within a universe that is beyond their understanding. As the elements of traditional religions find themselves outdated and irrelevant, perhaps due in part to their insistence of the literal veracity of the doctrinal formulations of their myths, the masses seek out *new* stories which allow them to integrate their inner forces, and honor the divine power within them. This could account for the examples mentioned at the beginning of this paper: devotions to sexuality and aggression, not given much attention by

³ A note: in the Catholic tradition, these seven examples are manifest in its seven sacraments.

contemporary Christianity, but intrinsically manifest in life. It can also explain, within the Catholic tradition, the vast numbers of lapse Catholics who return to their faith, albeit briefly, for their rites of passage: baptisms, first communions, weddings, funerals.

But we must ask a question: can *Star Wars* support a religion, as some believe it can? This points to the question of the importance of a historical/doctrinal foundation of a religion. Campbell does not believe such a foundation is necessary, so long as the psychological underpinnings are present. Doctrinal formulation of a myth is a secondary consideration to the myth itself. In fact, historical interpretations and the insistence on doctrines can be counterproductive; they can strip a myth of its power upon the individual, and then find themselves irrelevant in the face of contrary historical data. To an extent, this position is reflected in critical methods of Biblical interpretation, intent on countering a purely fundamentalist approach. But Campbell even goes so far as to say, “The rites work; the dogmas don’t.” (*Myths* 5:9) All that is important, as far as Campbell is concerned, is the myth itself. Whether it has any historical veracity is not important.

To me, this is going too far. It seems to me that the credibility of a myth and its lesson requires that it have *some kind* of historical actualization. As an example, Campbell would regard Christ as a proto-archetype of all persons in their quest for individuation; Jesus is a symbol of one’s path to self-transcendence. But what credibility do Jesus’ life and teachings have if, as an historical personage, he did not himself achieve some kind of transcendence of life and death to which his disciples bore witness? Or how can we believe that we can slay our own Goliaths had there not once been a David to slay his? I believe a symbolic system needs some kind of doctrinal formulation, albeit without becoming overly reliant on such a formulation; otherwise observance of myth is reduced to a kind of fideism, which Segal argues, Jung would identify with psychosis (133).

Nonetheless, I think it is fair to agree with Campbell that myths, *all* myths, even those with historical origin, use a language that speaks to the psyche, as they are transmitted from one person, and one generation, to the next (*Hero* 29).

Still, it seems to me that Campbell has not abandoned doctrinal formation at all. In fact, he has traded one doctrinal interpretation of myth for another. For him myths are primarily psychological realities: this is the Campbell doctrine. It seems to me that, rather than abandoning all other interpretations, a more balanced approach might be to regard doctrines, and perhaps even the historical events themselves that might give rise to them, as Campbell does myths: as symbols referring to realities that are beyond expression.

Are myth and religion then *true* in any way beyond psychological? Even for Campbell, myths can indeed be interpreted metaphysically – in fact *all* myths can – in that they symbolically report *a* truth about the universe as it is, about God, and about the individual's interrelationship therewith. In fact, in line with the use of symbol described by Tillich, it is only by use of these symbolic archetypes that one can access such realities, given that they are themselves beyond cognitive understanding; that is to say, they dwell in the realm of the Kant's *noumena* (Schrillback 90f). Does this imply God? Whether or not this *noumena* is God, or just that which lies beyond our limited human grasp, we are still left with the question: why? Why do myths work, as I believe Campbell and others have definitely shown they do? Is this an expression of natural selection at work on a sociological level, or perhaps are we, each or us, endowed within our psyches themselves with a kind of *transcendental existentiell*, to use Rahner's language: a kind of inner draw towards an ultimate reality, wherein we derive our meaning, and from which we achieve ultimate illumination.

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