

The Timely Mythologist

Review of: Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959–1987*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008

In an essay titled, “The Historical Development of Mythology,” Joseph Campbell sets out to discuss topics in mythological studies that have been “left unfinished or entirely neglected” (2008, 17), beginning with the problem as to whether myths are a structuring principle of the human psyche or historically based. He immediately takes the historical path, locating the roots of Western mythology in Zoroaster, the sixth-century bce prophet who set Light against Dark and Good against Evil. Then he tracks this “potent mythical formula for the reorientation of the human spirit, with its cosmic battles and conflagrations” through the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great to the Orphic schools of Greece (21).

Although today, certainly in the theology of the three major Abrahamic religions, the war between Good and Evil (we’re good; the other is evil) still governs the foreign policy of many nations, “[i]n the primitive world, where the clues to the origin of mythology must be sought, gods and demons are not conceived in the way of hard and fast, positive realities. The phenomenon of the primitive mask, for example, is a case in point.” He says that a man wearing a mask representing a god *becomes* the god. “In other words, there has been a shift of view from the logic of the normal secular sphere, where things are understood to be distinct from each other, to a theatrical or play sphere, where they are accepted for what they are *experienced* as being, and the logic is that of ‘make-believe’—‘as if.’” (2008, 28). But this apparent shift from “the normal secular sphere” into the sacred is more complex than a mere perceptual change, as Campbell suggests, because primal people *never left* the sacred sphere and what we call the normative secular sphere didn’t exist. The masks transformed the privileged dancer into the god, not the audience, who already inhabited a world populated by gods, or else the performance would indeed have been make-believe, which, I suggest, it wasn’t.

On the other hand, in what has become a secular world, even to people who think of themselves as religious, contemporary sacred practices have become “as if,” for example, the Eucharist, transubstantiating wine into blood and a wafer into flesh. What for primal people was substantive, what they took for how the world actually worked, has become a mystery to us. Therefore, our belief that our ancestors lived in a mysterious world is a conceit. On the contrary, unlike us, our ancestors were intimate with their gods. And as we lost touch with those parts of our psyche and became literal-minded, mysteries replaced verities, and the gods became symptomatic.

The fulcrum of this collection of ten essays is titled, “Renewal Myths and Rites of the Primitive Hunters and Gatherers.” In this lecture, which Campbell originally presented to the Eranos Conference in Switzerland, he introduces his subject by discussing cave bear skulls found in Switzerland and in the German Alps, which have “circles of stones arranged around them” (2008, 39). The caves, used by bears and Neanderthals as early as 100,000 bce, were also subject to many natural events that could have caused the stones to be placed in a seemingly signifying circle. In a well-argued book, Finnish paleontologist Björn Kurtén writes, “It now seems impossible to accept the evidence for deliberate burials (or placement) of bear skulls and other bones in the Drachenloch Cave near Vättis” (1976, 89). Whereas Campbell calls this a sacred site, even suggesting that “in some very early period these relics had been associated with a cult” (2008, 39), newer evidence contradicts his theory.

Campbell goes on to say that “the magical energy of women was utilized in the rituals of the long age of the early hunt; but it was through the male that the life-sustaining benefits finally come, and the male point of view, the male force, the male mode of experiencing life, death, and renewal was the ultimate determinate in myth and ritual of those primitive votaries of the Great Hunt and the Master Bear” (2008, 41). Again, how can he be so sure? It is not that Campbell didn’t know better, but as an artist at heart, he preferred his imagination to the deterrent of

scientific proof. The lecture “brought the house down—as much as the Swiss decorum of Eranos allowed”:

. . . and showed Joseph Campbell capable, not only of compassing, but of controverting certain pet theories of depth psychology, bringing them into relationship with the insights of anthropology, and archaeology, and tying the whole thing together conceptually. In effect, the presentation was a tour de force of Campbell’s own methodology and maturing outlook in a very Jungian place. (Larsen 1992, 31)

Sometimes Campbell exhibits a macabre sense of humor. For instance, in “Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art,” he writes of initiation rites among the Euahlayi of Northwestern New South Wales. “Among the Australian aborigines, if a boy in the course of his initiation seriously misbehaves, he is killed and eaten—which is an efficient way, of course, to get rid of juvenile delinquents, but deprives the community, on the other hand, of the gifts of original thought” (222).

For this story, Campbell cites Géza Róheim who, in turn, cites K. Langloh Parker’s, *The Euahlayi Tribe*. Katie Parker (1856–1940) and her husband spent twenty years living near the Euahlayi, by the Narran River, during which time she wrote books on Aboriginal folkways and myths. She became a splendid anthropologist and spoke their language, although not fluently. An old man, by way of two female translators, told her about the initiation of boys, called a *Boorah*. She writes that when two boys who had been ordered to lower their head laughed instead, “Their fates were sealed.” The boys

fell to the ground, to all appearances lifeless. Then the old men went forward, each with a stone knife in hand. Stooping over the two boys they opened veins in each, out flowed the blood, and the other men raised a death cry. The boys were lifeless. The old wirreenuns, dipping their stone knives in the blood, touched with them the lips of all present. (Parker 1902, 72)

Later on Parker writes, “The bodies of the Boorah victims were cooked. Each man who _had been to five Boorahs ate a piece of the flesh, no others were allowed even to see this done” (1902, 73). We do not know why Parker was told about this particular incident. I can only guess that the old man wanted to emphasize the solemnity of the ritual and the sacral importance of blood among the Aboriginal societies. Émile Durkheim noted, “Human blood is so holy that the tribes of central Australia very often use it to consecrate the most respected cultic instruments” (2001, 106).

Many reports of cannibalism practiced among the Australian Aboriginals, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, have been put forth. Others have argued against these reports; for instance, Katherine Biber, writes, “The discourse of cannibalism is a repeated and powerful trope in colonial contact and conflict. Fascination with—and accusations of—anthropophagy, ritual sacrifice and survival cannibalism disclose the fear of the native ‘Other’” (n.d.). Too many incidents have been reported, however, to discount something that was, usually during times of famine, practiced by primal people worldwide. In fact, Róheim also quotes R. H. Mathews, “In former times this blood (drunk ceremonially by the novices) was obtained from a man who was killed for the purpose, and portions of his body were eaten” (Mathews 1899 and 1900, 70; Róheim 1945, 232). Róheim comments, “Here we come as near to a ritual representation of the killing and eating of the Primal Father as we can ever get. In the case of the Euahlayi’s, the blood-letting plus cannibalism complex appears in reverse, as practiced on the initiates” (1945, 232). But what purpose would a ritual played out in reverse serve?

I have gone into this story at length to point out Campbell’s discursiveness with a thorny and contested issue. Although he uses it to make a point, that creativity is to be found among the rebellious, which he unfortunately links to a tasteless joke, the storyteller subsumes the scholar, perhaps leaving a prejudiced reader to wonder.

In his first book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the one that made him a popular culture figure, Campbell presented his inspired theory of the *monomyth* (1968, c.1949). After this, he

spent the rest of his life trying to prove—and improve—upon it. It wasn't so much that he didn't know that all myths didn't follow the hero's path that he had mapped out step by step in the book, but he wasn't interested in inconsistencies. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, Campbell had had his epiphany; he knew who God was and set out to tell the world.

If he hadn't walked away from the Catholic Church, Campbell might have become a scholar/priest. Instead, he writes, "The idea of God is an idea that is metaphoric of something that cannot be told" and when attempted, "We are not talking about God at all. We are talking about our *idea* of God." He then quotes Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth-century theologian, mystic, and thorn in the Medieval Church's side, "The ultimate leave-taking is leaving God for God." (2008, 188).

All through his ministry Eckhart was threatened with excommunication, but he always defended himself so brilliantly that only after he died was the Church able to extract its pound of soul. This fate has befallen many great teachers, and indeed, Joseph Campbell was a masterful teacher. Thus, critiquing the work of a man who contributed so much—in books, public lectures, classrooms, and on TV—to our understanding of mythology's scope and wonder is daunting. As the conversation as to who we were and who we have become continues, this book, along with the entire collection of Campbell's work, will remain an important part of the discussion.

endnote

1. *The Mythic Dimension* was originally published in 1993 by HarperCollins. New World Library acquired the rights in order to add it to their series of the *Collected Work of Joseph Campbell*, which includes ten other titles.

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