8. Centuries from now, when people look back at the myths of the 20th century, what do you think they will say about us? How will they characterize us?

CHAPTER TWO

MYTH AND RELIGION

Myth is a word that is forced to carry excessive weight. Myths function both to limit and to expand preconceived ideas. The American myth, for example, provides images and ideals that set Americans apart from other peoples. But myths also play a broadening role, especially in religious myths that bring us into contact with the gods, heroes, and saviors that are latent at the core of our selves. In this book we give our attention and emphasis to this second role, and we emphasize the capacity of myths to help persons expand their selves and achieve wholeness.

Myths are stories that give significance to historical events, revealing the mysteries of archetypes, the constants of human experience. As sacred stories structuring the meaning and values of human existence, they strengthen and complement the doctrines of religious traditions.

The Myth of Myth

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a proper understanding and appreciation of myth is its misuse in the everyday speech and writing of many people. For example, when they mention the
“myth of male chauvinism” or the “myth of racial equality” or the “myth of the Loch Ness monster,” they refer to something that is false or needs clarification. Even when myth refers to stories, it implies that these stories are not true; and lacking truth, they are no longer to be taken seriously. Living as we do in a scientific Western world view (perhaps we should say scientific Western myth), we tend to consider the stories in myths as anachronistic, surviving only in an environment that is somehow protected from the impact of historical change and understanding.

From the scientific perspective, the only truths are those which can be verified by empirical methods: What is true is what is testable and predictable. Myths are illusions or even lies, primitive and mistaken ways of relating to the world that are destined to be replaced by science.

To many, myths have a pejorative connotation, such as when they say, “We have to distinguish the myth from the reality.” Dictionaries foster this sense when they define myth as a fictitious story, an unscientific account, or an imaginary person or thing spoken of as existing. Some tend to reduce myth to a kind of rationalization for human behavior. But by and large, the battle against this downgrading of myth in the name of science has been won.

It is generally recognized that when people reduce their beliefs and hopes to empirical certainties or philosophical proofs, they impoverish and delude themselves. It is not so much that they have reduced human life to a story without a point or a journey without a goal. It is rather that they have fabricated other myths of economics, or politics, or technology. Far from avoiding myth, they create demeaning ones; and in limiting truth in this way, they have to find some other way to describe those meaningful elements of life that cannot be reduced to their model, elements like grief, or happiness, or friendship.

Another popular usage of myth, which also detracts from its power today, considers it as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world, a naive philosophy that may have been true “once upon a time.” Myth was necessary for those primitive people living thousands of years ago. It was necessary for them, for it provided a way of projecting their fears and hopes on the mysterious gods. It provided them with a vehicle for moral truths, for sentimentally describing nature, perhaps even for controlling nature by magic or sacrifice. It was all very odd, very queer, not rooted in real life.

To reduce myth to some kind of sociological function in this way is to say, in effect, that myths are other people’s view of life with which we disagree. It denies that people who may have been more primitive from the point of view of the scientific myth really knew what it meant to be fully human or how to relate to each other in a civilized way.

This approach to myth is also generally considered to be invalid. Now we recognize that these earlier groups had powerful ways of relating individuals to the group. Far from the alienation and lack of social cohesion that many experience today, primitive people asserted that the group had a special power that emanated to each individual who participated in the stories. The sacred beliefs and practices evoked in the myths united the believers into a single community. The myths narrated the fundamental unity of the group and actually created it. Telling myths created a group self-consciousness, a common story in which all who participated knew who they were.

A third misleading usage of myth regards it as the product of poetical fantasy, a type of literature not really different from legends, folk tales, or even fables. It is contended that like these other literary forms, myths furnish entertainment, awe, nostalgia, or amusement by evoking a make-believe world. Also, they may contain some moral truths, but these are presented in allegorical form so that they might be easier understood, digested, and accepted. Like legends, folk tales, and fables, myths are never to be taken too seriously, provide no breathless air of authority, and are best suited as plots for movies.

In this view it is generally recognized that myths are much more than these other forms of literature. Legends and folk tales, for example, are imaginative treatment of events that are believed to be historical at least to some degree. The nearness and finality with which an awkward situation is resolved or any enemy confounded brings much satisfaction to their hearers. Legends and folk tales are didactic, cleverly illustrating proper political or ethical behavior by evoking a world of magic. They are national in their presentation of human character; for example, Odysseus is the embodiment of Greek ideals of manly courage, sagacity, and endurance; Sigurd, the personification of the Norse Code of heroism; King Arthur, of Norman-English chivalry.
Myths, as we are using them, do include not only stories about gods, heroes, and saviors, but also those historical events of religious significance in a tradition, such as the account of Israel’s delivery from oppressive slavery in Egypt, or Muhammad’s Night of Power and Excellence, or the narratives of Jesus’ resurrection. But generally they do not depend upon or revolve around a historical basis because their concern is within basic human dilemmas that transcend place and time.

Much of the value of myths lies in their open-ended meanings, their way of illuminating a wide range of experiences, telling us much about ourselves, whoever we are and whatever our circumstances. Myths are the revelations of mysteries rather than clever illustrations or didactic entertainment. Their preoccupation is with more profound problems, such as creation, the origin of evil, or the destiny of humankind. Myths are cosmic and universal rather than national and immediate. They offer reflections on the constants of human experience, both personal and social.

Myth and the Religious Self

Myths help humans in their quest for the religious self. They are a complex of images, metaphors, and rituals that provide humans with a map for charting their course through the baffling regions they encounter in their lives. An integral part of religion, they proclaim a central reality and then build a structure of values around and in relation to it. Their stories point to the inner meaning of the universe and of human life. Appealing to the imagination, they provide a comprehensive view of reality. They serve to reveal or explain the mysteries of life, death, and the universe, though their images at once reveal and conceal, are implicit rather than explicit, and suggest rather than state. Myths are religious, for their narratives deal with the Absolute Reality at the core of the self, the essence of the self, which is both transcendent (true for all times and places) and immanent (true here and now). Myths convey concrete notions about how this Absolute Reality at the core is to be approached.

Insofar as myths are sacred stories that traditionally have structured the meaning and value of human existence, they are part of the language of religion. Myths show how the experience of the sacred is given form within an individual’s life and the life of the community. They outline a picture of a larger reality beyond our own limited personal experience. Adumbrating an entire universe of sacred and secular, they provide a perspective on human origin and destiny, the limits of human power, and the extension of human hopes and desires. They circumscribe all of human experience, providing stories of the values that give significance to people’s lives and lift them out of the humdrum of daily existence.

Like all symbols, myths function on levels of the human psyche other than the rational. They fulfill deep psychic and spiritual needs by providing the images, symbols, and rituals that enable people to cope with limiting situations, such as suffering, evil, or death, and to pass through important transitions, such as birth, puberty, adulthood, and old age. They narrate the human dilemma, the discordance between our fundamental reality (symbolized as the divine image at our core) and our actual mode of being (symbolized as sinful, guilty, and alienated from or unaware of that core). Myths let us divine (rather than define) how to resolve this dilemma by relating the aspects of our existence to that religious core.

Myths provide “soul”; they get beyond “merely making a living.” The stories they narrate are classics because their message and significance are permanent. Myths are texts that never belong to the past but always to the present; they are always contemporary, for in them humans, precisely because they are humans, keep rediscovering themselves. Their themes of love, truth, courage, mercy, compassion are valid for all generations and transcend any concrete, material expression of them. Their themes cannot be analyzed by empirical methods but demand to be illustrated in stories.

Myths are not the same as doctrines, though they both are ways of bringing insight to religious experience. Doctrines basically use philosophical language as their form of expression. Myths exist alongside and in interaction with the more abstract ideas of the doctrinal dimension. They are generally located in and derive their authority from the sacred books, the scriptures, of the world’s major religious traditions. These scriptures include, for example, the Hebrew Scriptures for Jews and the Bible for Christians, the Qur’an for Muslims, the Lotus Sutra for many in the Buddhist tradition, the Vedas and perhaps the Bhagavad-Gita
for Hindus. These scriptures are generally older than the doctrines that often take centuries to develop. Myths are told not to distort these doctrines but to strengthen them and root them in the religious tradition. This does not mean that myths are necessarily the source of the religious doctrines; indeed, these doctrines often derive from other sources.

Myths and doctrines both have an element of compelling authority, both have an equal claim to be believed, for they are both attempts to provide people a way of experiencing and interpreting the mystery of human existence. Still, neither doctrines nor myths are to be equated with the experience of the Absolute Reality. This would lead to a dysfunction, and perhaps to a loss of faith.

Myths are not the enemy of doctrines but their complement. The stories in myths help provide some understanding of the more abstract content of doctrines. They can enhance traditional interpretations and illuminate perennial theological problems. They can liberate doctrines from the strait-jackets that were fastened on them by all the cultural, intellectual, and political circumstances they encountered when they were formulated. By attending to the images, symbols, and metaphors in myths, people can come to a greater appreciation of the content of the doctrines of their own religious tradition and they can relate more constructively to the myths and doctrines in other religious cultures.

The use of the term “myth” in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral regarding the story told in the myth; indeed, the actual story may not be factual. Myths may be false. Still, the truths that myths deal with are “infinitely true”; that is, they tell a special kind of story that describes the basic mysteries of life and provides a way to respond to them. Myths are not just pictures of images that might be meaningful to religious believers but remain meaningless to the outsiders. Rather, they are dramas placed in the familiar world of space and time that attempt to reveal, through particular details, universal truths. There is a sort of convergence at the level of truth in the great religious traditions. It makes no sense to say that one religious myth is “better” or “truer” than the other. They are not antithetical. We cannot say, for example, that the truths in the myths of Buddha must be contrasted with the truths about Jesus in the gospels, or that the truths in Taoism must be opposed to the message of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures.

The Hindu Vedas express it this way: “Truth is one; the sages call it by many names.”

Myths are responses to the real world that seek, in their various conditioned ways, to reveal to religious believers an unconditioned reality. Beyond the variety of languages and expressions, there is a common meaning; beyond the disparity of religions, there is a common revelation. To refuse to recognize this truth, we fall into the trap that a Buddhist parable warns us against: We mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. To recognize this truth, we shift our sight from the pointing finger to the moon itself. We then transcend any particular mythic (or doctrinal) expression and experience the reality at the very core of our humanity.

Approaches to Myth

There have been skirmishes on the nature and function of myth in many academic areas in the past century. Linguistics, psychology, cultural anthropology, and structural analysis are just a few of the fields that claim myths as their special province and their particular possession. They have charted the relationship of myths to rituals, struggled over the origin of myths, traced the diffusion of myths from one culture or religious tradition to another, and developed typologies of myth (cosmogonic, heroic, utopian, etc.). While admitting valuable insights from all these fields, I feel that it would take us too far afield to rehearse all their arguments here.

Myths won’t go into one packet; they cannot be coerced or owned by one academic area. They are too rich to allow for only one method of interpretation. They never allow of a single meaning, once and for all. Valuable insights into how myths interact with and challenge the human personality to strive for wholeness may be drawn from any number of methods of interpretation. Freud’s classical tri-layered picture of the personality (the id, ego, and superego), and Levi-Strauss’ model of binary oppositions, for example, are neat, elegant, and attractive. Important, too, are the phenomenologists who provide insights by studying the variants of particular myths, and also literary critics who explore the symbolic language of myths from still different perspectives.
Throughout this book I will be utilizing the insights of many persons, most of whom build on the thoughts of three persons. I would now like to introduce the major thrust of each of these three — Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and C.G. Jung—who have had such an influence on scholarship in myth studies. I pick them because they attend specifically to the religious and communal dimensions of myth. They have opened up perspectives that beckon us further to become conscious of and to consent to the mysteries of our existence. They concur that the underlying thrust of myths is somehow connected with deep impulses in our psyche and that the ultimate function of myths concerns the achievement of personal wholeness.

This wholeness is not fully understood or achieved except in a context of the community. Myths, they insist, are not just about me; they are about us. Myths tell the members of the religious tradition who they are and where they are going. The insights of these three men on the religious and communal dimensions of myth have helped many persons develop an attitude toward myth that makes their past sensible, their present meaningful, and their future possible.

**Mircea Eliade: Sacred Beginnings**

A champagne bottle is used to whack the prow of a ship to launch it into the waters for its maiden voyage. Politicians and local entrepreneurs appear at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new business. Hospital and school administrators have their picture taken with the first overturned shovel of dirt from the construction site of a new wing. All of us delight in celebrating our birthdays and in making New Year’s resolutions. People delightfully celebrate religious rituals of beginnings, too. The Jews, for example, commemorate their deliverance from slavery each year at Passover time; at Easter, Christians rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus.

The human desire to commemorate our beginnings is at the basis of Eliade’s writings on myth. The pattern of the eternal return to the beginnings, to the sacred, primordial time is found throughout *Sacred and Profane, Patterns in Comparative Religion, From Primitives to Zen, History of Religious Ideas,* and his many other works. For him, the fundamental characteristic of religion, expressed in myths and rituals, is the “nostalgia for paradise,”

the desire to live as much as possible in the sacred, ideal world of the beginning.

In retelling myths, humans relive their deepest symbols and re-create the realities (the gods, heroes, saviors) at the core of their religious self. They recall the fabled time of the beginnings when they are released from the terror of history into a secure and meaningful world. They overcome that tyranny of time, which affects everyone to the extent that they allow themselves to be governed by deadlines, clocks, and schedules, or to live in the shadow of time and change. In narrating myths and celebrating rituals, they exercise a way of healing, of overcoming time, the devourer. They annihilate chronological time and come into contact with sacred reality. For example, for the Jews, Yahweh is liberating his people now (not just at Passover); for the Christians, Jesus is risen today (not just at the first Easter). Because myths (and rituals) are not mere commemorations but true experiences of the sacred beginnings, Eliade asserts that they are the most precious human possession. They are sacred, exemplary, and significant.

First, myths are sacred. For Eliade, the sacred is not another world alongside the “real world” of everyday existence. The sacred world is a real world of events and things that can be re-experienced within the everyday world. The symbols and images of myths provide the framework for uncovering this real world. Persons in religious traditions want to participate in this sacred reality, to be saturated with its power. They want to find ways of discerning evidence of this sacred in their consciousness. They open themselves up to this sacred world when they recount and appropriate the primordial deeds of the gods in forming, establishing, or creating the cosmos.

At the sacred time of the beginnings, the supernatural beings brought a reality into existence, whether the whole of reality (the cosmos itself) or a fragment of it (such as an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution). This is the sacred time of the primordial events, a time qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of everyday existence that persons desire to re-enter and re-experience. The sacred beings brought order out of chaos at the beginning. In opening themselves up to this sacred world, persons hope to put some order into the chaos of their own environment, so as not to be overwhelmed by it. Repeating
and participating in the myths of the beginnings, they then attempt to articulate their behavior, their understanding of the world, and their value systems in terms of a sacred time and a sacred space.

Second, myths are exemplary. The primordial happenings recounted in myths are the exemplary models for all behavior in the profane world. Although people want to shape the profane world according to their needs, they want to bring themselves into conformity with the sacred world. By encouraging pre-existent models, myths thus promote social cohesion. To treat religious myths and rituals as efforts to gain control over new dimensions of the environment would be to consider religion as magic. They are rather the elements of religion that bring humans and their world into harmony with the objectively real world (which they cannot control). This harmony comes gradually through the constant repetition that lends importance and significance to the stories and dramatic action.

What happens on earth, in history, is unreal and illusory, while what happens in myth is real and substantial. To the extent that persons coordinate their earthly activities with the deeds narrated in the myths, they participate more fully in reality. Through regular repetition, they recall and imitate the exemplary pattern of their gods, which thus constitutes their world view and lifestyle and organizes and shapes their environment.

Third, myths are significant. They convey the models or paradigms of meaningful human actions. Myths address the whole person, not the intelligence or the imagination only; and they put persons in touch not only with themselves, but with the entire cosmos. They speak to the similarity of existential situations in which humans find themselves: similarities of social relationships (of male and female, of parent and child), of physical environment (storms, sunshine, drought), and of individual experience (of birth, growth, maturity, old age, death). Myths of the different religious traditions have much in common, for they all treat those common problems and struggles (of goodness vs. evil, of life vs. death, of unity vs. diversity) that make life meaningful. Far from alienating persons in different religious traditions, myths can unite them by revealing the very substance of human existence and the meaning of human destiny in recounting the deeds of the gods.

Eliade's understanding of myth is very beneficial for us, but it is not beyond all criticism. For example, his notion that myths are always accounts of beginnings is a bit narrow. Perhaps stories about origins may be the prototypes for other myths, but they are not the only type. Not all myths should be interpreted as accounts of how time-bound things came out of something timeless and eternal, out of something that was "in the beginning." Myths of heroes' quests, myths of saviors, and utopian visions of the end of the world are obvious examples of myths that cannot be reduced to this pattern.

Secondly, his division of the world into sacred and profane, into real and unreal, seems to discount all those moments of time that are not a repetition of a mythical beginning. By separating the world into sacred and profane, there is a tendency to empty the profane sphere of significance and worth. Actually, the reaction should be quite the opposite. When events of the immediate, ordinary world are related to sacred time, they should be viewed with renewed fascination, for they become significant and noteworthy in their own right. All time is now sacred, either as ecstatic moments when we are called outside the realm of everyday experience or as moments when we stand more deeply within that experience, reaffirming and revitalizing it. Sacred and profane time interpenetrate each other; they are not rival modes. If we understand this, we can stifle the temptation to find new universals by means of which we order the world and the temptation to regard the empirical world as the "real" world (since it is experienced daily).

**Joseph Campbell: The Monomyth**

When Joseph Campbell was asked if he considered himself a guru for students of myth, he replied that he was not directing anybody and that his idea of a top scholar in myth studies was Eliade. Campbell suggested that he and Eliade stand back to back, one facing a popular community, and the other the academic community. Despite Campbell's reluctance to admit his own scholarship, his contributions to the study of myths, including *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the four volumes of *The Masks of God*, the lavishly illustrated *The Mythic Image*, and *The Way of Animal Powers*, have secured his place among this century's top mythologists.

Campbell describes myths in many ways. They are symbols that evoke and direct psychological energy. Vivid stories or legends, they are but one part of a larger fabric that expresses a culture's attitude toward life, death, and the universe. Myths are not fantasies or misstatements; rather, they are veiled
explanations of the truth. They are the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Myths are public dreams that move and shape societies. Conversely, one's own dreams are the little myths of the private gods, antigods, and guardian powers that are moving and shaping each person. Even though they are localized in religious traditions, myths express an intentionality that goes beyond that limited context and a meaning that pushes toward universality.

Unlike Eliade who finds the significance of myths in relation to the past, Campbell finds it in relation to the present. Eliade considers myths as repetitious returns to the sacred time of the beginnings; Campbell attends to the divine energies that myths manifest in our lives at the present moment. The central significance of myths for our present existence is made clear in the four functions that Campbell assigns to myths.

The first function of myth, the spiritual or mystical, is the most distinctive, eliciting and supporting a sense of awe, gratitude, and even rapture in relation to the mystery both of the universe and of human existence. Myths help persons experience and appreciate, if not understand, the numinous power outside human control. They provide the possibility of release for human emotions, ranging from demonic dread to mystical rapture, vis-a-vis what is strange and "other," fascinating and terrifying.

Myths address fundamental realities and basic mysteries of human existence: What are we? Why are we here? What are our responsibilities as humans? Why aren’t the unjust punished? Why do innocent children suffer? Why are there earthquakes, hurricanes, devastating floods, cancer, and other calamities? How can we achieve composure knowing that we shall die? What happens when we die? Though the myths of the various religious traditions address these and similar questions in a different fashion, they do indeed address them.

The second function of myth, the cosmic or cosmological, provides an image or model of the universe that supports and is supported by this sense of the numinous. Genetically built into humans is an organizing mode of perception by which they can interpret the world with a sense of order. Based on this order, myths offer a comprehensive, understandable image of the world that is roughly in accord with the best scientific knowledge available. With symbols and images that correspond to the actual experience and mentality of each culture, myths tell humans what their universe looks like and where they belong in it.

Myths present an image of the universe as an organized, sanctified arrangement rather than its opposite, chaos, where disorder, confusion, and absence of structure are rampant. Mythic images shape and validate the environment, perhaps by setting boundaries between the sacred and the unsacred (perhaps places, or animals, or activities), boundaries of time (perhaps festivals corresponding to lunar and solar cycles), or boundaries between the spheres of sky, land, and sea. Even though the details of myths may alter as circumstances change over time, they help people know what to expect, so that they can feel comfortable in their orientation to their surroundings and can act with familiarity in specific circumstances. Myths comfort people in the fictions and fantasies they invent. These people have no difficulty living as if there were such a thing as a minute or a second (rather than just the tick-tock of a clock), as if there were a mathematical zero or an actual infinity, as if a utopia were politically achievable.

The third function of myth, the social or sociological, serves to support the current social order and help integrate the individual organically within the group (for example, the caste system in India, making life bearable for the impoverished). Myths establish links between the individual and the group. They serve to develop conformity and to mold the young, perhaps through stories as in the recounting of American ideals of freedom, conquering the wilderness, sharing the gifts of a new land (at Thanksgiving time), or through organizations such as the Boy Scouts with initiation rites promoting the virtuous life of honor, respect, and obedience.

Myths provide social orientation and direction by instilling the culture’s values and by providing persons with routines in times of crisis. In America, all citizens are commonly taught that the United States is the world’s natural moral leader, and they are encouraged to defend such principles as freedom of speech, tolerance of diversity, and equality of all before the law. Again, the customs and gestures that prevail at funerals, while varying widely from one religious tradition to another and even within the same tradition, do help the bereaved at their time of loss. The habitual, socially acceptable activities (the wake,
the grieving, sharing food after the funeral) all help build up a sense of group solidarity through communal expression of sorrow.

If it seems that the social function of myth suggests that some necessity of conformity is vital for society — "We've always done it this way," or "Where do you draw the line if we allow some changes?" — it is more than offset by the final function, which calls for creative individuality.

The fourth function, the psychological, initiates persons into the order of realities of their own individual psyche, guiding them toward their own spiritual enrichment and realization. Campbell states that this is the most important of myth's functions. It guides individuals, stage by stage, through the inevitable crises of a useful life: from the childhood condition of dependency, through the traumas of adolescence, and the trials of adulthood, to the deathbed.

Myths help children through the fears that arise from their smallness and dependence by alluding to the hidden power they have within, not quite yet ripened or revealed. Mythic fantasies keep children from being overwhelmed by a world of large and mysteriously powerful adults. Adolescent boys and girls are eased through crises by supernatural helpers who encourage them to trust their intuition, and take the risk, to challenge elders when they are no longer worthy of respect.

Adults find in myths the insight that people who misuse their potential lose it, but those who use their power and creativity both generously and wisely are richly rewarded. Those who spend their lives for the sake of others achieve the complete realization of their religious selves.

Finally, those in old age find in myths the vehicle for communicating their wisdom to the younger generations. Moments of fullness and moments of happiness are not something in the distant future awaiting us after death; rather, these moments are possible in everyday experience to be realized here and now.

Myths make possible the experience of such moments of wholeness, of complete realization of the religious self, by enabling persons to participate in the greater drama concerning the journey of the human race. Through sharing the adventures of the gods, heroes, and saviors, they discover this precious secret: The god is not just Yahweh or Brahma; the hero is not just Perseus or Parsi; the savior is not just Ahura Mazda or Jesus. These and other mythical figures are just the local faces or the temporal manifestations of the numinous. The true gods, heroes, and saviors, by contrast, are at the heart of the self; indeed, they are the self. By developing this spiritual awareness, persons help to heal the split between their subjective psyche and their objective world, between their ego and their religious self. Problems and dis-ease of emptiness and meaninglessness are dissolved as persons become aware of and consent to this larger self, this divinity within.

Campbell's four functions of myth, and the psychological function in particular, are developed within the framework of his monomyth. This monomyth is his attempt to synthesize different myths from around the world into a single unified whole, a kind of multiplicity within a unity. Campbell adumbrates a universal pattern of departure, initiation, and return by linking together the heroes of various cultures and traditions who set out to answer the call of adventure, the call of life itself. Impelled by some crisis, the hero leaves the protective but unchallenging milieu of home and sets out feeling that he will be incomplete unless he does so. The hero has embarked on a quest for separate identity as a person of exceptional courage and wisdom. After crossing the threshold of the unknown, the hero has to perform some task, perhaps slaying a monster, rescuing someone, gathering up a hoarded treasure, or fetching the water of life from a well at the world's end. Vulnerable and facing the possibility of failure, the hero generally achieves the task. Occasionally, the hero is reluctant to return to his everyday world, but most often the hero does return, transformed. In the homcoming he shares the fruits of his labor, his boon or reward for the task, with the community.

Implicit in the departure, initiation, and return of the monomythic hero is a kind of spiritual death and transformation that is valid for humans as well. What the hero ultimately finds is his own self, his identity. Every person lives, in symbolic fashion, through the same stages in the process of maturing into the religious self. Myths thus portray a universal condition, outside of time and applicable to all humans. By participating in the myths, and, in particular, the monomyth, humans embark on a life cycle greater than their own and follow a model on the path to psychological and religious maturity.

Campbell's reconstruction of the monomyth is criticized by scholars. In tracing it through several cultures and religious
traditions, Campbell is very selective and focuses on those
features that are the same in all the variants. He randomly skips
centuries and cultural provinces to dwell on the myths that fit
his overarching pattern well. His desire to synthesize world
mythology, to find a unity in human cultural history, is most
intriguing, especially since so many extraordinary features fall
into place. But the connection is only suspected and not suscepti-
bile of proof. Whether this criticism is valid or not, Campbell’s
monomyth paradigm may help us understand ourselves better
and provide insights into the nature of the religious self.

The other criticism routinely leveled at Campbell concerns
his hypothesis that mythology is a function of genetics or biology.
It may be intriguing to suggest that myths are a product of the
human imagination moved by the energies of the nervous system
operating against each other, but this, too, is no more than a
suggestion. It is gratuitous to argue that myths are similar be-
cause humans have the same biological needs and the same kind
of unconscious processes no matter what situations they find
themselves in. Scholars would prefer to approach mythic simi-
larity in terms of diffusion from one culture to another. Whatever
the cause of the similarity, there is still much we can learn about
our own mythic structure and our religious self by studying the
mythic themes common to the world’s religious traditions.

**C.G. Jung: Individuation and Wholeness**

The language I used in Chapter One to explain the spiritual
journey from the empirical self (the center of our consciousness)
to the religious self (at the core of our unconsciousness) is based
on the insights of Jung. His commentaries on the realities of myths
(aw well as dreams and fairy tales), which greatly influenced both
Eliade and Campbell, are spread throughout the more than twen-
ty volumes of his *Collected Works*. Representative of his approach
to the interpretation of myths are *Aion* and *Mysterium Conjun-
tionis*, a short book he edited near the end of his life, *Man and
His Symbols*, is probably more easily accessible.

Jung was fascinated that the same stories arose in India,
the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, as well as in China and
Japan. So many of the same symbols and mythological motifs
are found in different parts of the world. In spite of differences
in culture and consciousness, there is something universal in
human experience. Similar, if not identical, reactions to the same
basic human situations are found in people throughout history
and in all parts of the globe. For him, this was the clue that their
proper soil and seeding place is not in any geographical loca-
tion but in humans themselves. Myths are indestructible and
they have a startling likeness to one another around the planet.
The same themes seem to emerge, he felt, as though something
in the psyche of a race had ripened and produced a fruit that
responded, not in its form but in its substance, with the fruit of
all other races.

Jung contended that myths give expression to certain un-
conscious processes that produce dream images that apparently
have no relation whatsoever to conscious experience but are
similar in all persons. He was convinced that within every person
exists the “collective unconscious,” the seedbed of images link-
ing each person to the psychic life of human beings everywhere.
Different from the personal unconscious that contains all the
repressed, forgotten, subliminally perceived experiences of each
individual’s life, the collective unconscious consists of the
elements characteristic of the human species. It contains the
whole spiritual heritage of humanity’s evolution, born anew in
the brain structure of every individual. Biologically inherited,
these images do not exist passively, but have their own energy
and operate on the emotions, drives, and interests of human
beings. They influence how humans behave and react to others.

Jung referred to these images that regulate the forces of the
psyche as “archetypes.” The archetypes are analogous to the
instincts, but operate in the psyche instead of the body. They
are inherited primordial images that emerge from the uncon-
scious to bring the human psyche some insight and awareness
into the constantly repeated experiences of humanity. As univer-
sal and timeless patterns or dramas of human experience, they
are manifested in the individual’s psyche in ways that are drawn
from and peculiar to that person’s total experience.

Archetypes are not the same as prototypes. Prototypes are
acts or events that happened at a certain time in history and con-
tinue to be effective throughout history. They are formative inso-
far as they change people’s lives and continue to influence subse-
quent generations. Really, though, they are relevant only for
the culture or tradition in which they first occurred. When they
are repeated, it is because they were effective at one time, and
people within that culture hope they will be so again. Archetypes, on the other hand, have universal application. It is their timelessness that people value. Archetypes show the truth of the moment as having the same structure and meaning as an absolute and eternal truth.

Nor are the archetypes the same thing as stereotypes, which are outer forces or patterns of activity. Stereotypes refer to the roles that a society or culture expects persons to perform. They are unvarying forms or patterns, fixed or conventional notions or concepts, allowing for little individuality, freedom, or critical judgment. As for archetypes, though, they are powerful and invisible forces that shape behavior and influence emotions. They are the inner forces personified by the gods, heroes, and saviors in myths, which do make individuality, freedom, and wholeness possible.

Since many archetypes repeatedly appear in the cycle of human life, we will have occasion to look at many of them in the course of this study of myths. Perhaps the most basic archetype is the self, which, as we have already seen, is the center of the total personality, which no longer coincides with the ego but with a point midway between the conscious and the unconscious. A psychological construct that served to express an unknowable essence that could not be grasped or defined, this self was called the "god within us" by Jung.

A second archetype, the hero, exemplifies the course of action needed to achieve the task of creating the self. This is spelled out at length in Campbell's monomyth of the hero who sets out on the journey or quest for a successful life. Two other essential archetypes, the anima and the animus, are the contrasexual part of the psyche, the image of the other sex that each of us carries within. Developing this unknown side of the self is another of the tasks for each person, female or male, in the process of coming to maturity.

One last archetype, the shadow, is a composite of personal characteristics and potentialities the individual is unaware of. It usually contains inferior characteristics and weaknesses that the ego's self-esteem will not permit it to recognize. This archetype is relevant in any discussion of evil. As with any of the archetypes, it can be interpreted either in a negative or positive fashion, depending on the context in which the ego experiences it.

The archetypes lead the way in each person's spiritual development, playing an important role in the journey toward wholeness. When a person knows which gods, heroes, and saviors are dominant forces within, he or she can acquire self-knowledge about the strength of certain instincts, about priorities and abilities, and about the possibilities of finding personal meaning through choices that others might not encourage. The archetypes in myths are worthy of our attention because they help bring meaning to the facts of ordinary life. Transpersonal and transcultural, they speak directly to the perennial mysteries of life—birth, fear, hope, love, suffering, death—as they are experienced by each person. The archetypes in myths provide structures of consciousness through which the entire human situation can be appropriated. They can give new depth and meaning to each human life, insofar as we become conscious of them and consent to their action in us.

The spiritual development of the individual, as it is achieved through recognizing and appropriating the archetypes, leads to the reconciliation of the different, polarized aspects of the personality. To this process of reconciliation, Jung gave the name individuation, which for him is the future goal toward which humans strive, for the most part, unconsciously. Myths help make this striving conscious. They are the doorways to wonder, the passageways to the experience of the numinous. Arising out of permanent and universal elements of our human spirit, myths transmit signals to our psyches from the collective unconscious. They provide the clues for potential development, for the self's possibilities with respect to the future. When they become alive and enable individuals to make continual contact with their inner selves, myths have great power to vivify persons and bring them to wholeness.

Awareness of and consent to the archetypal elements in myths thus help persons appropriate the elements of the collective unconscious. These elements are constellated in polar, binary groups—Eros and Thanatos, good and evil, man and woman, love and hate, order and chaos, Yin and Yang—which serve to distort the totality. Though the totality of human life consists of both sides, we lean toward one pole or the other. We are either male or female, young or old. We, therefore, need myths which help us attend to both poles without neglecting either one. Through the archetypes, the myths rehearse for us our limitations,
our undeveloped human elements. Through them we enlarge our vision and embrace the totality of what it is to be human. We discover our self enhanced, enriched, supported, and magnified. Through stories and rituals of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, and so forth, myths incorporate our individual life-crises and life-deeds into a larger whole. This is a healing process moving toward that wholeness in which we recognize that we are one with the universe.

Criticism of Jung’s thought, as with Campbell’s, centers around the hypothetical nature of his concepts. They are not clearly defined, nor are they based on hard empirical evidence. He presents the archetypes and the collective unconscious as universals in such a way as to make them immune from psychological or sociological analysis. His suggestion that certain behavior is appropriate and necessary for all individuals if they are to achieve individuation is derived from non-scientific generalizations. Just to give one example, his archetype of the animus seems to have resulted from forcing a mirror image where there is none, from deducing its presence in women solely as a conclusion from his hypothesis that the anima is an essential feminine component in the masculine psyche.

Admittedly, there are risks involved in utilizing someone else’s concepts, especially if we remove them from their original context (in Jung’s case, analytical psychology) and start from different assumptions. Still, Jung’s system is very useful as a way of teasing the fragments of life into a vision of wholeness. His language of individuation, collective unconscious, and archetypes has been a welcome tool for understanding and interpreting myths and for describing the development of the spiralling, religious self. His insistence that it is impossible to achieve an authentic personal identity if we are forced to discard the encounter with the numinous as unscientific nonsense is a powerful stimulus to self-development.

The Value of Myths

Myths from different cultures and different times in human history have provided different points of view and different stories about the meaning and outcome of life. Since humans all share basic experiences, myths often contain the same or similar motifs, modified and elaborated. They confront us in the telling, and we can learn something about ourselves in listening to them. The whole pattern of our lives and thoughts is symbolized in a few recurring themes. Myths are the food that feed our sense of identity, often leading us to exclaim, “Aha, that’s my story too.” By evoking the gods, heroes, and saviors that exist as perpetually incarnate in ourselves, myths help us see our purpose from the vantage of the religious self, the full and eternal significance of our humanity appears. We are acting out not mere piddling affairs of everyday life, but the great archetypal situations. Myths enable us to see our identity and our destiny in relation to the unseen world — God, Dharma, Tao, Nirvana — and give us an added impulse, a spark to our faith, our feelings, and our dignity.

Even though myths contain similar motifs, their interpretation cannot be reduced to illustrating some simple truism. There is no way of interpreting myths that solves all the problems they raise, and no two interpretations leave all the same problems unsolved. Myths bear a meaning and a permanence that resist definitive interpretation. The three approaches to the interpretation of myth that we have glanced at in this chapter are all similar in approach, but their differences do shed new insights on each other. Eliade’s approach is more retrospective; Campbell’s is more oriented to the present; and Jung’s is more teleological. Taken together, they help us understand better the gods in our past, the heroes in our present, and the saviors in our future.

These three approaches to myth, taken from so many other possible approaches, stress more than others that when we enter the realm of myth, we are already in the “eternal now,” as much as we will ever be in some imagined heaven later on. Myths, according to their interpretations, help us live fully in the present time, making grand connections with our future and our past. They help us “overcome time” by linking us with the past and orienting us to the future. They tell us not what did take place, but rather they point to those universal events that always do and will take place. Myths tell us of those events that can focus our impressions of human life, rather than leaving them loose and disorganized. They transform life from a wearying succession of isolated events into a passion for meaning.

Though myths of different religious traditions and cultures deal with the perennial themes of shared human experience, they
offer different paradigms and idiosyncratic metaphors. The religious traditions offer their own integrated system for understanding all the parts of reality as a whole. And that is precisely the attraction of studying the myths of the various religious traditions. To the extent myths are dissimilar, they introduce us to something new, unexpected, unpredictable. To the extent they are similar, they help us find points of contact with our own myths. They are dissimilar enough that we can never complain of boredom; they are similar enough that we can find the overarching patterns.

The viability of the myths of other religions depends on their applicability to peculiar conditions of history and environment rather than on the extent that we find them useful or entertaining. These stories merit our understanding as well as our admiration, for they can tell us truths about ourselves as well. The joy and fun in studying these myths is not in taking them literally, for this would turn them into obstacles of meaning rather than conveyors of it. Taken literally, the myths would describe a world removed from and irrelevant to our own.

If we study them precisely as myths, we let their power become conscious. They can stretch our minds and imagination, opening up new paths for further exploration of the nature of the religious self. Myths have the power to transform us when we appreciate them for what they are, rather than getting bogged down in details about their source, their variants, their translations, their claim to be taken literally. They can move us beyond our limited horizons of experience by their power of disclosure. Studying them in their variations and in their various interpretations, we can integrate our life experiences into a totality and can respond to the pull of the religious self at our core.

**Review Questions**

1. Describe some ways the word “myth” is misused and misunderstood in everyday speech today.
2. How do myths help humans on their quest for the religious self?
3. In what ways do myths differ from religious doctrines?

4. What does Eliade mean when he suggests that the fundamental characteristic of religion is the “nostalgia for Paradise?”
5. What does Eliade mean when he suggests that myths are sacred, exemplary, and significant?
6. Explain the four functions that Campbell assigns to myths.
7. What does Jung mean by the “collective unconscious?” What are archetypes?
8. What does Jung mean by the process of individuation?

**Discussion Starters**

1. “The occupational hazard of mythologists is a Faustian drive to round up all the myths of the world in a single place and sprinkle scientific salt on their tales.” (Wendy O’Flaherty)

2. “Myths are maps, and myth is a symbolism, and for this reason myths are not to be taken literally. It is rather that when the dust falls from before our eyes, human beings are themselves the gods and demons, acting out, not the piddling business of worldly life, but the great archetypal situations and dramas of the myths. The gods are the archetypes, but they exist as perpetually incarnate in ourselves.” (Alan Watts)

3. “In dealing with symbols and myths from far away, we are really conversing with ourselves — with a part of ourselves, however, which is as unfamiliar to our conscious being as the interior of the earth to the students of geology. Hence the mythical traditions provide us with a sort of map for exploring and ascertaining the contents of our own inner being to which we consciously feel only scantily related.” (Heinrich Zimmer)

4. “Myths permit us to examine our place in the world by comparing it to a shared idea. Myths are shared fantasies that form the tie that binds the individual to other members of his group. Such myths help to ward off feelings of isolation, guilt, anxiety, and purposelessness.” (Bruno Bettelheim)