

Mythology as an Answer to Planetary Crisis

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Is God dead, or more succinctly has the divine myth historically meant to guide and protect us somehow gone away? One could argue that this is a fair question in light of the current state of our planet; terrorism, nuclear proliferation, global warming, famine, disease, racism, war, religious intolerance, deforestation, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornados, polar ice melting, and species extinction make a compelling case that something is amiss. Any reasonable person would be just in questioning the reality of our divine myths in light of the difficulties our world is facing and at a deeper level, a case might be made that the current difficulties of our world stem from a blind trust in mythical figures and their power to make everything right. Joseph Campbell in his work The Power of Myth and Rosemary Radford Ruether in her work Gaia & God present a compelling argument that there is a crisis of sorts in our society and that mythology may enlighten us as to both the causes and the cures.

Campbell contends that one of the primary causes of our present social difficulties is that society has failed to provide its youth with appropriate mythology and ritual. He states:

If you want to find out what it means to have a society without rituals, read the New York Times...Society has provided them with no rituals by which they become members of the tribe, of the community. All children need to be twice born, to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind. (Campbell P.8)

If one were to quickly assess our current methods of socialization they might counter Campbell's contention and point as evidence to the large number of children being schooled in the many Western religious traditions. On any given Sunday one can see young children engaging in ritualistic adoration, studying from the bible or other holy books and preparing for rites and passages of initiation into adulthood. Campbell argues, however, that these religious models and myths are not appropriate for the times and therefore ineffective.

What was proper fifty years ago is not proper today...The moral order has to catch up with the moral necessities of actual life in time, here and now...The old time religion belongs to another age, another people, another set of human values, another universe." Because of this "our kids lose their faith in religions that were taught to them, and they go inside. (Campbell P.13)

What Campbell's observation points out is the difference between being exposed to a faith tradition as opposed to embracing it to such a degree that it generates significant societal action. This then begs the question, if the myths and rituals are neither appropriate for our times nor a significant influence in the lives of our youth then why do they continue to exist and be adhered to, at least in a cursory way, by a large portion of the population? It would stand to reason that if society is holding onto historic myths that they provide some benefit to adherents. Campbell explains the benefit by explaining that myths are:

bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't know what the guide signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself. But once this subject catches you, there is such a feeling, from one or another of these traditions, of information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort that you don't want to give it up. (Campbell P.4)

Our human lives are small, our spheres of influence are limited and we are oftentimes victims of events beyond our control. As Campbell suggests, myths, appropriate for our times or not, provide us with answers to life's most difficult questions, answers that quell our fears of the unknown and make our inevitable personal suffering tolerable. Even when, as Campbell contends, myths become incompatible with our scientific advance, understanding of the world and morality, we stubbornly hold onto them for whatever liberation they can provide. Campbell believes that what human beings are seeking "is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive." Stated simply, human beings require a spiritual dimension to their existence and to whatever degree a myth can provide that, it is valuable.

Although our current myths provide a significant degree of personal benefit, there is evidence that they are problematic on a larger scale. This is best understood in the context of how religion develops and maintains viability. Campbell explains:

You can keep an old tradition going only by renewing it in terms of current circumstances...When the world changes, then the religion has to be transformed. But my notion of the real horror today is what you see in Beirut. There you have the three great Western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-and...they are stuck with their metaphor and don't realize its reference. They haven't allowed the circle that surrounds them to open. (Campbell P.21)

Campbell illuminates one of the central difficulties with religion today which is that the technological world is becoming more inclusive while religions are still subscribing to their more limited boundaries. "Each group says, We are the chosen group, and we have God" (Campbell P.21) which automatically excludes others with

different views. Although many of the religions preach tolerance and policies of inclusiveness, the structure and rituals present in each religion create boundaries and inevitable clashing. In today's world, however,

there are no boundaries. The only mythology that is valid today is the mythology of the planet-and we don't have such a mythology...The task is only to know what is, and then to act in relation to the brotherhood of all of these beings...We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet." (Campbell P.22)

Campbell's belief is that technology has eliminated our boundaries in that each human being sees, knows and interacts with all others and, as such, historic mythologies that are exclusive result in intolerance, hatred, conflict and large scale oppression. A truly effective mythology, a mythology that not only liberates the individual but lifts up the masses must be an all inclusive one, a planet wide mythology. However, Campbell argues that we can't have this new mythology "for a long, long time to come. Things are changing too fast to become mythologized." (Campbell P.31)

Ruether, like Campbell, contends that there is a major problem with the current mythology within our society, most especially as it relates to the nurturing of our planet. As evidence of this she points to the classical Christian view of sin, disobedience, fall from grace, mortality and potential redemption in an after life as "a heritage that is...deeply problematic" and "has contributed as much to the justification of evil as to the repentant overcoming of evil." (p. 139) She goes further to state that the:

evaluation of mortal life as evil and the fruit of sin has lent itself to an earth-fleeing ethic and spirituality, which has undoubtedly contributed very centrally to the neglect of the earth...and to the despising of the work of sustaining the day-to-day processes of finite but renewable life. (Ruether P.139)

Different from Campbell, Ruether argues that our current myths were never appropriate because of their power over rather than connection with the earth, however she would contend, like Campbell, that myths have the potential for personal liberation to the degree that they can be adjusted to relieve us from guilt and move us towards a philosophy of interdependence. She explains:

Mature spirituality frees us from ego-clinging for acceptance of the life processes of which we are inescapably a part...Life is sustained by biotic relationality, in which the whole attains a plenitude through mutual limits in interdependency. (Ruether P.141)

Ruether contends that the dominant Christian mythology has the power to liberate on a personal level to the degree that it can instill appropriate acknowledgment of right attitudes and responsibility towards humanity and nature. She continues:

We are called to exercise our real but finite freedom within these limits...This means that, while we should not hold ourselves culpable for the entire system of sin, much less for biological mortality, we also should not imagine ourselves purely innocent either...We need not only compassionate solidarity with those who are most victimized, but also realistic acknowledgement of how we have benefited from such injustices. (Ruether P.142)

Both Ruether and Campbell agree that our current mythology on a societal scale is problematic and a significant contributor to our current difficulties and they also agree that a new mythology that focuses on the planet is our only viable solution. Campbell believes:

The story that we have in the West, so far as it is based on the Bible, is based on a view of the universe that belongs to the first millennium B.C.. It does not accord with our concept either of the universe or of the dignity of man...We have today to learn to get back into accord with the wisdom of nature and realize again our brotherhood with the animals and with the water and the sea. (Campbell P.31)

Ruether concurs:

We cannot depend upon volunteerism alone to save rain forests and endangered species, set limits to the exploitation of animals and sanction abusers. We need organized systems and norms of ecological relations. Otherwise, not only will most people not comply, but will not be able to comply, because they have no way of filling their daily needs except through the exigencies of the present system. But without the second voice (Gaia) our laws have no heart, no roots in compassion and fellow feeling. They fail to foster a motivating desire for biophilic living. (Ruether P.255)

In evaluating the merits of Campbell and Ruether's argument and the possibility that a new planetary mythology holds the solution to many of our societal woes, it may be helpful to consider one of the premises it is based on. To say, as Campbell does, that we currently have outdated myths that, because of their age, are ineffective is to imply that these myths were at one point effective or appropriate. Certainly an argument can be made that, then as now, the myths provided a level of individual liberation from fear of the unknown and the apparent irrationality of human suffering, however, one might consider whether myths have ever worked on a larger scale to tame the evil, violence and destruction that currently plagues humanity. If we take the example of the Native Americans we might ask whether their mythology was a power with the ability to contain destructive human tendencies or whether they were simply at a stage in their evolution where they lacked the means to overpower their environment. Stating the question differently, if they were left undisturbed would their mythology have kept them in harmony with their world? The answer to this question may lie with the many tribal groups who have been virtually untouched by modernity. There is evidence that some have maintained a harmonious balance with the environment around them, arguably due to their religious beliefs, however, it would be rash to assume that mythology was the sole causal variable resulting in long term maintenance of healthy interdependence. One

could argue that Campbell's position regarding the power of myth to create positive change in our society lacks convincing empirical support. As Ruether argues, there is a long history of religion which at its worst was used as a tool of oppression and at its best has proven to be ineffective in controlling destructive human tendencies, violence and a general disregard for nature which has brought us to this point.

A viable solution may lie in a closer examination of both Campbell and Ruether's observations. Campbell makes a compelling argument that the staying power of our myths are based on universal archetypes, present across various myths, which appear to resonate with our human consciousness and aid us in dealing with the more difficult aspects of our existence. In a similar way, Ruether posits that what has been problematic with our myths historically is that certain dominant mythologies have placed humans in a position over nature and focused more on transcendence to another life than focus on how to live in this one. A way forward may be to create a global mythology that maintains the universal archetypes while eliminating the patriarchal and transcendent aspects that contribute to oppressive tendencies.

Potentially problematic, however is Campbell's observation that the world is changing too rapidly for any new mythology to be created and Ruether's position regarding required changes which are so dramatic, like wide scale population control that a mythology according to her vision would likely never transpire. What must then be added to the equation is a way for the mythology to include a method for rapid change and the identification of plausible avenues to instill a philosophy of interdependence.

We might start with the premise that the problem is not so much that young people are yearning for a myth but rather that they don't realize they already have one. An argument could be made that if our young people were taught the bible (or other holy book) in the same way they are taught Greek mythology there might be a very different result. With Greek mythology they are invited to enjoy a story that was created by people of a very different time. They can accept the story as valid according to the way people saw the world at that time but embrace its impossibilities according to the science of today. They can substitute what they know today into the universal themes of the myth and use it to inspire and guide their actions. As Ruether proffers, our current historic traditions certainly have that potential but they are limited by the power structure that has grown to maintain them. In our modern religious traditions young people find themselves in the realm of absolute truths, divine revelation, and barely perceptible change with no invitation to realistically engage; they are simply participants in a culture that is fearfully holding onto outdated and ineffective traditions that maintain a power structure. The result is that young people seldom view their religious tradition as a myth but rather a "take it or leave it" proposition with most choosing the latter.

If we can introduce our young people to our religious traditions in the form of myths that contain wisdom; if we can create avenues for our young people to adapt their faith to facilitate inclusiveness of all humanity; if we can trust our young people to identify what is divine to them and allow them to embrace and protect it; if we can create avenues of change in our traditions that can keep pace with modernity while maintaining

the basic structures of stability; if we can find a way to convince the power structures to relinquish their antiquated metaphors and focus on maintaining the reference; if we can quiet the world so that our young people can hear the whispers of the divine, then we may have the potential to create a new mythology of human and world interdependence.

Bibliography

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