

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

**BELIEF IN AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY: C. S. LEWIS AND JOSEPH
CAMPBELL ON MYTH AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE CHRISTIAN
FAITH IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

BY

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GRADUATE STUDIES


This dissertation of James Menzies entitled "Belief in an Age of Technology: C. S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on Myth and its Application to the Christian Faith in a Technological Society" submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the meaning and significance of myth as understood by Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis and its place in the Christian faith in a technological society. The thesis of this study is that, in spite of the many similarities in their life experiences, the high regard each man had for myth, and their agreement that myth has an important place in Christianity, they differed considerably on myth's role in the faith.

Joseph Campbell understood Christianity as comprised of mythical themes similar to those in other myths, religious and secular. Admitting that certain portions of the biblical record are historical, he taught the theological and miraculous aspects as symbolic, stories in which the reader can find life-lessons for today. Campbell believed that these life-lessons are the heart of Christianity and that taking the theological or miraculous elements literally not only undermines Christianity's credibility, but results in sectarianism and a misunderstanding of the universal themes held in common by all humanity.

C. S. Lewis defined Christianity as a relationship between the personal Creator and his creation mediated through faith in His son, Jesus Christ. As such, Lewis was a supernaturalist who took the theological and miraculous literally. Although Lewis understood how one could see symbolism and life-lessons in miraculous events, he believed miraculous events took place in human history.

Joseph Campbell understood critical doctrines of Christianity as myth and maintained that understanding myth was a key to making sense of key doctrines of Christianity in any society, including a highly-technological one. C. S. Lewis understood myth as one means among many used by God to point people to his son, Jesus Christ.

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**BELIEF IN AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY: C. S. LEWIS AND JOSEPH
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Need

This dissertation seeks to answer the question “What was the meaning and significance of myth as understood by Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis and how did each man apply his understanding of myth to the Christian faith?” In the process of answering this question the Christian faith is represented by certain historical doctrines held by the church since its inception as recorded in the Bible; the central record of the early Christian experience and faith upon which Christian doctrines, traditions, and experiences were subsequently built and therefore central in the interpretations of Campbell and Lewis. Attention is also given to the role of myth in a highly technological society as understood by each author.

The Ph.D. program of Salve Regina University seeks to bridge a number of disciplines and to explore the human condition by addressing the question “What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology?” This dissertation will address the question by exploring not only the thinking of Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis regarding myth and religion, but by investigating the influence and presence of myth in philosophy, media, ethics, history, literature, art, music, and religion in a contemporary context. A comparison, analysis, and critique of the perspectives of these two men will enable individuals working in these disciplines to integrate the thoughts of Campbell and

Lewis in further reflection upon the relationship between humans and technology in the twenty-first century. For both men, myth held significance, even in a technological society.

Background

Throughout history humanity has pondered matters beyond sensory perceptions. These include hopes, dreams, hunches, intuition, life after death, a realm of “spirituality” and spiritual beings, and even the thought process itself. But because humans often limit certainty to sensory perceptions, assurance about such things remains elusive. And at those rare moments when someone thinks he or she is closest to certainty, where reasoning is able to make sense of existence, such confidence can collapse by a simple change in circumstances. For instance, at the moment a village is convinced how best to please the gods by thinking, “If we offer up our children as a sacrifice the gods will repulse the enemy,” tragedy can strike as an enemy breaks down the walls, invades, and conquers, leaving the people to wonder why the gods remain angry. Individually one may be convinced that his or her act of lust or anger certainly must enrage the “unknown other” but then rewards come. So the question remains: How can I make sense of my existence?

One response to this existential question found throughout primitive and technologically advanced cultures is understanding the role of myth. Throughout human history, myth has served as a source to explain questions of creation and human origins, making sense of tragedy, finding meaning for one’s existence, and to help prepare for life after death. And whether one examines indigenous cultures steeped in religion or highly technological cultures espousing many (or no) religions, there is frequently an evidence

of myth handed down through generations resulting in ideas and beliefs that intentionally and unintentionally become part of such cultures and societies.

But as universal as *myth* is, few words are used with more definitions, or with as many meanings as there are authors to offer them. Following the first entry, from the *Westminster Review* in 1830, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has the following definition:

A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon. *Myth* is strictly distinguished from *allegory* and *legend* by some scholars, but in general use it is often used interchangeably with these terms.¹

But as traditional and succinct as this definition is, myth appears to be as old as humanity and as profound as the most challenging philosophy.

Further confusing the study are the numerous scholarly writings that each offer their own variation on the term. One dictionary provides the definition,

In popular usage the term . . . connotes something untrue, imaginative, or unbelievable; or, in older parlance, 'a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events' (OED);²

New Testament professor Richard Soulen comments,

. . . some myths are grounded in pure fantasy while others convey a strong sense of realism. In the past many scholars identified different kinds of myths, such as creation myths, initiation myths, captivity myths, and trickster myths. Each of these different kinds of myth does different things;³

Christian apologist Tom Snyder remarks,

. . . in popular usage, a myth refers to fictional and untrue tale, so I have come to prefer the term *story*, since the status of a story is clearly left open;⁴

¹ "Myth" http://0-dictionary.oed.com.helin.uri.edu/cgi/entry/00320409?query_type=word&queryword=myth&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=gSaU-hA7urG-3369&hilite=00320409. Accessed: October 1, 2010.

² Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism: Second Edition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), s. v. myth, 124.

³ Tom Snyder, *Myth Conceptions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955), 20.

And literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes writes,

Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones. Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is fertile in suggestions.⁵

The scope of usage of myth is so vast that it causes New Testament scholar Richard Soulen to admit, “There is, however, no agreed-upon definition, whether in terms of its form (that is, its relationship to fairy tales, sagas, legends, tales, epics, etc.), or in terms of its content and function.”⁶ Professor of Philosophy Richard Purtill observes “So much has been written about myth, from all kinds of standpoints, with all kinds of purposes, that the boundaries of the concept of myth have been considerably stretched.”⁷ And in the opinion of Old Testament research professor John Oswalt, the thorniest problem in the entire study is how to define myth.⁸

But as Oswalt goes on to point out, the question of definition faces two challenges: “We must first ask whether it is broad enough to include all the items that manifestly share the majority of the common characteristics of the class being defined. Then we must ask whether the definition is narrow enough to exclude those items that only exhibit one or two of the common characteristics. This is a major problem with the definitions of myth.”⁹ In exploring the question Oswalt presents two approaches: a historical-philosophical approach and a phenomenological or descriptive approach. He further discusses the semantics and history of the word and concept of myth by writing,

⁴ Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, (San Francisco, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 114, italics in original.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

⁶ Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 125

⁷ Richard Purtill, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality & Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 1.

⁸ John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2009), 32.

⁹ Ibid.

“We may further subdivide the historical-philosophical definitions into three groups: the etymological, the sociological, and the literary.”¹⁰

Purtill also categorizes myths into sections or groups. He points out that to some scholars myth is, first, related to *gospel*, “which includes but is not confined to the four New Testament accounts.”¹¹ While Purtill is careful to point out that traditional Christian believers, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, regarded the gospels as historical accounts, others see a resemblance between the gospels and myth. For instance, gospels and myth are stories concerning acts of God or the people of God with moral or religious significance. A second category is *literary* myth, “which is the use of mythical characters and heroes for purely literary purposes.”¹² In this case neither the audience nor author considers the story as true. His third grouping is *philosophical* myth, “the conveying of philosophical ideas by allegories or metaphors that have a greater or lesser resemblance to original myth.”¹³ Yale professor of divinity, Brevard Childs, adds this comment concerning myth and *true* myth:

Not every story with a reference to a primeval event can be classified as a true myth. In order to be a myth, such a story must bear a ‘truth’, that is, myth must relate to the basic structure of being within the world order. This ‘truth’ consists in a recognition of the life-determining reality which the mythical mind has apprehended in the powers of nature . . . Such stories concern themselves with the creative acts of power of the primeval age which establish the order of being, such as the discovery of the hunt and agriculture, or the origin of life and death.¹⁴

So just as science and religion scholar Ian Barbour defines technology as “the application of organized knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems of people and machines,”¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ Purtill, *Tolkien*, 3.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers) 20.

¹⁵ Ian Barbour, *Ethics in an Age of Technology*. (San Francisco: Harper), 3.

one can perhaps understand myth as the application of faith (or imagination) and reason (or experience) to the practical events of daily life and existence.

The mythological world . . . provide[s] the individual with a model in order to understand the meaning of his or her existence. For this reason, any mythology must feature an ample range of characters, gods, enemies, places and circumstances to ensure the possibility of a personal relationship, for all the members of the community, to the primordial world.¹⁶

So myth is a story, potentially real or symbolic whose main figures are divine, human, or even animal in which the story accomplishes something significant for its adherents.¹⁷

Myth brings significance and meaning to life as much as life brings meaning to myth.

In considering Christianity, the role of myth and history is essential because, as Purtil alludes to above, since its inception some of Christianity's adherents have maintained that myth is antithetical to the faith; that Christianity is a historically-based belief (e.g., Lewis in his later years), while others (e.g., Lewis in his early years and Campbell), have argued for origins based on ancient and universal myths. Orthodox Christianity maintains that Christian history is not legend or imagination, that the events of Christ's birth, life, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension happened in a specific time and place in history, and that Jesus was, in fact, "a historical person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*."¹⁸ So for the Christian evaluating myth with regard to the historicity of the biblical text upon which Christianity relies, the question is, in the words of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, "Where does mythology end and where does history start?"¹⁹

¹⁶ Martin Simonson, *The Lord of the Rings and the Western Narrative Tradition* (Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2008), 67.

¹⁷ Robert Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-6.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 67. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 38.

Statement of Thesis

The thesis of this dissertation is that Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis started with a similar understanding of myth and its role in explaining basic tenets of the Christian faith. Events such as the incarnation and physical resurrection of Jesus Christ are doctrinal and *not* historical. But while Campbell maintained his perspective and beliefs throughout his life Lewis underwent a transformation causing him to rethink the nature of myth and the historicity of Christianity. This dissertation will explore the beginnings and individual developments in the thought of each author.

This objective is accomplished through an exploration of the role and relevancy of myth in an age of advanced technology. Specifically, this dissertation considers myth as understood and explained by Joseph John Campbell (1904-1987) and Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), two scholars who devoted much time and effort to the topic. Their major works, as well as nuances in their definition, understanding, and application of myth, is also considered. Additionally, this dissertation gives attention to each thinker's understanding of historical Christianity; it considers the ways in which myth can serve as an aid in understanding basic Christian beliefs.

Rationale of Research Validity

Comparing these writers is important because of the influence both have in the study of myth as a genre and the role that religion plays as part of the worldview of individuals in a technological society. Lewis' influence is not only evident in his primary fields of medieval and renaissance literature and English literature of the sixteenth century, but also in his wide-ranging essays on culture, ethics, and religion. And with his twenty books on mythology and close to forty years of teaching about myth at Sarah

Lawrence College, Joseph Campbell's influence can be anticipated whenever myth is studied. Anyone embarking on research of the nexus of myth and faith in contemporary society will do well to be familiar with the thinking and contributions of C. S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell.

C. S. Lewis

By the time Joseph Campbell began teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, NYC (1934), Clive Staples Lewis had been teaching English for ten years at Magdalen College, Oxford, UK. Just prior to Campbell's appointment, Lewis had professed faith in Christianity and published his first theological work, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*,²⁰ where he shares in allegory his journey from atheism to belief. And later, in *Surprised by Joy*, he explains, "This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity."²¹ So at the time Joseph Campbell is developing his understanding of myth at Sarah Lawrence, Lewis, in these works, is introducing the reading public to his later and revised understanding of myth.

During his youth Lewis showed little interest in religious matters. In speaking of his upbringing and the religious influence of his parents he states "I was taught the usual things and made to say my prayers and in due time taken to church. I naturally accepted what I was told but I cannot remember feeling much interest in it."²² Of his mother's religion he could "say almost nothing," concluding, "My childhood, at all events, was not

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986).

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), vii.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

in the least other-worldly.”²³ He considered his mother’s death, when Lewis was only ten, to be his “first religious experience.”²⁴

Prior to his conversion, Lewis held a common “mythical” view of Christianity. Early in his life Lewis believed the virgin birth, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ were fictional events that did not take place in history. As Armand Nicholi observes, “Many of these myths, as those of Balder, Adonis, Bacchus, contained stories similar to the one of the Bible—of a god coming to earth, dying to save his people, and rising again from the dead. Lewis had always considered the New Testament story simply another one of these myths.”²⁵ White sums up Lewis’ view of Christianity prior to his conversion:

He considered all religions to be mythologies, stories created by simple, primitive people to explain the complexities and terrors of the world, and to him in 1914 Christianity was no different from sun worship or the pagan religions associated with the gods of Olympus.²⁶

Lewis’ faith in Jesus Christ resulted in his revisiting and revising his understanding of myth. At the age of sixty-three, Lewis devoted the fourth chapter of his work *An Experiment in Criticism* to explaining his approach: “I define myths by their effect on us.”²⁷ For Lewis, at this point in his thinking, a myth was “a particular kind of story which has a value in itself—a value independent of its embodiment in any literary work.”²⁸ Lewis admits he was not satisfied with the word “myth” and would have preferred another. He saw the challenge with myth as being two-fold: first, the Greek

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ Armand Nicholi, Jr., *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 86. See “Myth Became Fact” in Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 63-67.

²⁶ Michael White C. S. Lewis: *A Life* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 36.

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 45.

²⁸ Ibid., 42.

word *muthos* originally meant any sort of story and not just the kind Lewis considered mythical, and second, Lewis admitted that anthropologists understood myth differently from how he used the term. But he felt myth was the only word available. “It is difficult to give such stories any name except *myths*, but that word is in many ways unfortunate.”²⁹ Here, Lewis admits the word can be confusing and his only options were *myth*, or to invent a new word, and myth seemed to him to be “the lesser evil.”³⁰

As Lewis further explains, “(S)ince I define myths by their effect on us, it is plain that for me the same story may be a myth to one man and not to another. This would be a fatal defect if my aim were to provide criteria by which we can classify stories as mythical or non-mythical. But that is not my aim. I am concerned with ways of reading . . .”³¹ Further, he writes, “the degree to which any story is a myth depends very largely on the person who hears and reads it.”³² For Lewis, what one person considers mythical another reader considers historical, thus bringing history, theology, and personal faith into the study of myth.

One area to be studied and answered in relation to myth, therefore, is how did Lewis regard the biblical record? Did he consider it a collection of stories that reflected myths on God, creation, and redemption? Or did he understand it as a historical account of real people and events? This dissertation will explore these questions. Initial research points to a conclusion that, in Lewis’ thinking, the life of Jesus Christ was the literal incarnation of the perfect myth: Jesus Christ as God Incarnate in true humanity embodied

²⁹ Ibid., italics in original.

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

³¹ Ibid., 45-46.

³² Ibid., 48.

everything myths seek to describe. As one of his chapter titles put it, in Christ “Myth Became Fact.”³³

Lewis had a complex understanding of myth. It was the means by which the abstractions of the mind and the spiritual (or what people consider the perfect or ideal existence) find concreteness in human experience, bringing together “the two hemispheres [of mind] in sharp contrast. On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other, a glib and shallow ‘rationalism.’”³⁴ As Lewis describes it,

Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular day, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle . . . to be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other.³⁵

Yet, to Lewis, myth corresponds to the imagination much as history and fact corresponds to reason. It was possible for myth to be historical, that is, for myth to “happen.”

Though Lewis studied the many categories or genres of the Bible—poetry, prophecy, epistles—of particular interest to him were the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. As a first-in-his-class recipient in Greek and Latin literature, Philosophy and Ancient History and English Literature, and a professor of medieval and renaissance literature, Lewis was also well versed in literary criticism. He refers to his expertise when he writes,

I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste. And yet the very matter which they set down in their artless, historical fashion—those in narrow, unattractive Jews, too blind to the mythical wealth of the Pagan world around them—was precisely the matter of

³³ Ibid., 63-67.

³⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 170.

³⁵ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 66-67. Italics in original.

the great myths. If ever a myth had become fact, had become incarnate, it would be just like this. And nothing else in all literature was just like this. Myths were like it in one way. Histories were like it in another. But nothing was simply like it. And no person was like a person it depicted; as real, as recognizable, to all that depth of time, as Plato's Socrates or Boswell's Johnson . . . this is not 'a religion,' nor 'a philosophy.' It is the summing up in actuality of them all."³⁶

And in a sentence that could serve as his own summary of things, Lewis concludes,

"Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it the same way."³⁷

Initial research indicates that Lewis' conclusion of the Gospels is that they are not legends; indeed, everything about them convinced him they could *not* be legends.

Now as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don't work . . . Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us . . . and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so."³⁸

The very fact that so little is known of Jesus' life convinced Lewis that what is known does not fit the pattern of legend, the story is not creative enough. As he said concerning the details in the account of Christ's encounter with the woman caught in adultery,³⁹

"Surely the only explanation of this passage is that the thing really happened? The author put it in simply because he had *seen* it."⁴⁰

³⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 236.

³⁷ Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Family Letters 1905-1931* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 977. Italics in original.

³⁸ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 158-59.

³⁹ John 8:1-11.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 159. Italics in original.

Joseph Campbell

Perhaps no individual in the twentieth century has a better claim on the title, *mythologist*, than Joseph Campbell. As the author of twenty books and professor at Sarah Lawrence College (Yonkers, NY) for thirty-eight years until his retirement in 1972, Campbell is perhaps best known through the six, one-hour interviews aired on PBS, *The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers*, first aired in 1988 (a year after Campbell's death), and later published into a bestselling book.⁴¹ The towering influence of Campbell in the world of mythology is evident in the estimation of Campbell made by Sam Keen, the psychologist-theologian who, like Campbell, was the subject of a Bill Moyers television special and for many years served as contributing editor at *Psychology Today*. As someone who knew Campbell personally and interviewed him for an issue of *Psychology Today*, Keen pays this tribute to Campbell,

I often say Joseph didn't know more than *any* of us, he knew more than *all* of us. I think he was the Encyclopedia—all by himself. None of us had as much data as he did. I don't think even Eliade rivaled him. . . .

You don't get light without a shadow. Joseph was a man who had a single enthusiasm for a lifetime. He paid certain things for it. We all do.⁴²

Everyone who knew Campbell personally, as well as those who worked with him professionally, considered him one of the greatest students and teachers of myth.

Campbell's interest in religion and myth began at an early age. As he describes it in *The Power of Myth*:

⁴¹ Episode 1: The Hero's Adventure (first aired 6/21/1988 on PBS), Episode 2: The Message of the Myth (6/22/1988), Episode 3: The First Storytellers (6/23/1988), Episode 4: Sacrifice and Bliss (6/24/1988), Episode 5: Love and the Goddess (6/25/1988), Episode 6: Masks of Eternity (6/26/1988), See http://fenopy.com/torrent/Joseph_Campbell_The_Power_Of_Myth/MTA0MjE5Ng==/index.html, where the series can be downloaded. Accessed: February 26, 2009.

⁴² Stephen and Robin Larsen, *Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002), 490-91.

I was brought up in terms of the seasonal relationships to the cycle of Christ's coming into the world, teaching in the world, dying, resurrecting, and returning to heaven. The ceremonies all through the year keep you in mind of the eternal core of all that changes in time. Sin is simply getting out of touch with that harmony . . . It wasn't long before I found the same motifs in the American Indian stories that I was being taught by the nuns at school.

In those days there was still American Indian lore in the air. Indians were still around. Even now, when I deal with myths from all parts of the world, I find the American Indian tales and narratives to be very rich, very well developed.

And then my parents had a place out in the woods where the Delaware Indians had lived, and the Iroquois had come down and fought them. There was a big ledge where we could dig for Indian arrowheads and things like that. And the very animals that play the role in the Indian stories were there in the woods around me. It was a grand introduction to this material.⁴³

Evident in this personal narrative is Campbell's early attention to similarities and synchronicities of American Indian folklore to the miraculous elements of Christianity.

His childhood exposure to Roman Catholicism and early interest in Native American Indian beliefs combined to lead Campbell to the conclusion that both religious beliefs were mythical. His assumption that faith had basis neither in history or in the material world—other than both being rooted in nature—would launch Campbell on a trajectory culminating in the assumption that the Biblical testimony of many of the events of Christ's life were never intended to be taken literally.

Regarding Roman Catholicism, Campbell would formally abandon the Catholic Church before his mid-twenties; "he felt that the Church was teaching a literal and concrete faith that could not sustain an adult."⁴⁴ His feelings toward the church have been termed "bitter"⁴⁵ and even though he did see a pedagogical need to teach children "through concrete interpretations, rather than through metaphor they could not

⁴³ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 10.

⁴⁴ Eugene Kennedy, *Thou Art That* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), xvii.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

understand,” he never returned to attending Mass.⁴⁶ But Campbell saw a religious function of myth, “the mystical function, which represents the discovery and recognition of the dimension of the mystery of being.”⁴⁷

Regarding myth and the Christian faith, understanding Campbell is challenging since he taught and wrote so much about myth and, as seen above, *myth* is open to an almost endless array of definitions. Further complicating the issues is how Campbell and his interpreters understand the Biblical narrative as it pertains to history and metaphor. For instance, in the editor’s forward to *Thou Art That*, Eugene Kennedy writes, “To describe the [Old and New] testaments as myth is not, as Campbell points out, to debunk them . . . Joseph Campbell’s purpose in exploring the biblical myths is not to dismiss them as unbelievable but to lay open once again their living and nourishing core.”⁴⁸ And seven pages into the same book Campbell writes, “The problem, as we have noted many times, is that these metaphors, which concern that which cannot in any other way be told, are misread prosaically as referring to tangible facts and historical occurrences.”⁴⁹ And in another place he remarks, “Jesus dies, is resurrected, and goes to Heaven. This metaphor expresses something religiously mysterious. Jesus could not literally have gone to Heaven because there is no geographical place to go.”⁵⁰

While some Christians understand the life-giving core of the gospel message as mediated by a faith in historical facts, facts that contain a power that transcends time and space, such as the physical resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, Joseph Campbell believed that though aspects of the Christian faith were historical, the message is

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xiv-xv.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

mediated through metaphor. How one distinguishes the historical occurrences from the use of metaphor to lay open this nourishing core is paramount in the thinking of Joseph Campbell.

As will be seen, Campbell's approach to the *purposes* of myth is fourfold: myths (1) awaken the conscience to the universe, (2) give one an image of the order of the universe, (3) validate the moral order of the culture in which the myth arose, and (4) help an individual through personal crisis and various stages of life (i.e., youth, adolescence, middle age, death).⁵¹ So myths might be understood as having therapeutic value since they offer a world-view, a way of looking at reality that notices similarities in all of humanity such as birth and death, and offering an explanation that sustains people in times of loss and crisis.

Structure of the Study

To properly analyze myth, myth and Christianity, and the views of Lewis and Campbell regarding myth, it is necessary to establish the need, purpose, and method of such a study. In a highly technological society one must ask if a need remains for research into myth and its role in Christianity. Does myth continue to have a place in the present postmodern age and, if it does, are the views of C. S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell relevant to establishing and understanding that place?

To answer such questions requires research into the meaning of myth. Therefore, the first chapter will explore myth's definition, genre, lexical history, usage, and application. This chapter will also study the role of myth in a technological culture by tracing its history from the primitive culture of hunters and gatherers to today's highly scientific and computerized Western society. Does the power of myth decrease as culture

⁵¹ Ibid., 2-5.

becomes more technological? Or does myth remain and simply adapt itself to the changes in culture? Does myth, in fact, become strengthened as a society moves away from the humanities and science finds itself unable to answer the deeper questions of meaning and life?

This chapter will also explore the tension of history and belief regarding the Christian faith. Both Campbell and Lewis believed people and events in the Bible existed in history, but they differed on the historicity of the supernatural and miraculous. Did the human Jesus, who both men believed lived and died, ascend to heaven? Can the same text that has Jesus saying “Come forth” be believed when it records “And he that was dead came forth”?⁵²

Finally, this chapter will introduce Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis by giving a summary of their upbringing, educational pursuits, achievements and writings, their religious heritage (and disagreements with that heritage), and their understanding of myth and Christianity and how this understanding changed over the years.

The second chapter will explore myth by reviewing attempts to define its meaning and role in society. Because myth defies any single, complete and satisfactory definition, it will be put in context by showing its place and role in the areas of religion and culture. Are religion and myth synonymous or antithetical? Does myth help one better understand religion or does it confuse and mislead? How much does culture influence myth and myth influence culture? Can ancient myths find a place in a technological culture?

Following this investigation, myth is considered as a literary genre by considering comparisons and contrasts of myth to other genres such as fantasy and allegory. The

⁵² John 11:44. English Standard Version.

purpose of this chapter is not necessarily to arrive at a definition of myth, but to consider the character, attributes, and benefits of myth.

The third chapter will review the pertinent information with respect to the life and writing of C. S. Lewis. Although most of his education was grounded in philosophy and literature, Lewis devoted much time, thought, and writing to the subjects of myth, fantasy, and the role of myth in the Christian faith.

To understand Lewis's approach to myth one needs to be familiar with the literary, experiential, and religious sources that influenced Lewis. Literary influences include Scottish social anthropologist James Frazer (1854-1941), English writer G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), Scottish author and poet George MacDonald (1824-1905), and the English writer and poet J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973). Experiential influences include his boyhood interest in fantasy and his witnessing the death of his (then forty-six year old) mother and the grief of his father when Lewis was only ten years old. This event had a tremendous impact upon the boy who prayed that his mother would not die.

Religion too had a great influence on Lewis's view of myth. He would refer to his conversion to the Christian faith time and again in his writings and, although he would make it clear that he was a layman and not a theologian and that he had many reservations and disagreements with organized religion, from this point on when Lewis spoke about myth he did so as one who believed in the historicity of the Gospel accounts of both the life and miracles of Jesus Christ.

The clearest and perhaps most comprehensive explanation for Lewis's view of myth is his attempt to pin down the meaning of myth in *An Experiment in Criticism*.⁵³ According to Lewis, six characteristics were required for a story to be myth: (1)

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).