

# Is There a Modern Super or Meta-Myth?

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March 2003

## Introduction

The following was written in response to a question posted by the great Captain Ahab on the New Order Mormon bulletin board, and later lightly edited.

Great question Ahab, and lots of good answers so far. Let me chip in with mine.

For the third morning in a row I was just awakened early by the light of a full moon streaming in my window, and seeming to bring with it great new ideas. This morning, it was your question that was in my mind, which I had been thinking about a week before you posted it (we seem to be headed down similar tracks), with the hope that an answer would show glimpses of itself. This, for me at the moment, is THE question and will be such for some time. While I do not think I have the answer yet (and in fact think that the answer is that there is no answer), let me share with you what I have found so far and invite others to develop this wonderful thread further.

After flirting with Joseph Campbell's writings for several months, I have recently embarked on a serious study of his work. In my view, he is one of the most important spiritual figures of our time, and I am going to treat him as such from now on.

As usual, this post will be over long. I plan to think with my fingers on the keyboard until I run out of time and space, and then post this for what it is worth.

## What Are the Forces that Shape Mankind's Myths?

My study of Campbell and others so far indicates that myth is the result of the several realities that continually confront mankind.

The first is mystery. We still know so little about our world. Our ancestors knew much less. Science is teaching more and more about our world. But what it tells us comes in fits and starts, steps forward and steps backward, and we never know, really, what is truth and what is error. As Karl Popper said, "There are only two kinds of scientific theories – those that have been proven false (or inadequate), and those not yet so proven."

The second is change. Our world changes as a result of natural catastrophe, developing civilization and technology, and the march of science that both changes the world in absolute terms and changes our perception of it, which is every bit as important as the absolute changes from the point of view of myth.

The third is the continual "groping toward God" that Mircea Eliade, William James, Campbell and others have pointed out in which most of the human race in all times and cultures has engaged. You could say that this observation or knowledge has come to us

through science and its continual unearthing of empirical data. Eliade was a great scientist. He collected data, analysed and pointed out patterns just as surely as any physicist does. Eliade was one of the many scientists who approached religion inductively (lets collect as much data as we can, and look for patterns) instead of deductively (lets see if the data we find in our own little world matches the grand theory put forward by our little religion). When the inductive approach is used, the grand theories of all of the little religions start to look pretty inadequate. None of them explain the others. Each of the little religions were of course set up to produce evidence that would confirm their own theories. And in isolation of each other, they could persuade adherents who saw no more than the evidence generated by the religious experience within the particular religion that the theory put forward, that (surprise, surprise) that mode of faith was “the one and only true” way to God. However, as information became more available, and the scientific method became more and more the lens through which modern man sees life, it has become nigh impossible for each little religion to maintain its grasp on its adherents. This led to a retreat by some into fundamentalism, and the abandonment of religion altogether by others.

Next is our need to find meaning in life. And it is this last that drives the creation of myth as man wrestles with the above three perennial facts of life. Most of the myths Campbell articulates and weaves together so well are nothing more than the essence of various little religions, whether they be of an obscure tribe in the Australian Outback, or the Judeo-Christian tradition in its entirety. Since each society is different to a degree, the need to find meaning within each will drive the creation of different myths. Consider, for example, the challenges facing the peoples of China as they slowly emerge from communism and poverty embedded in a largely Buddhist tradition, in the process controlled as carefully as possible by their government; or those of the peoples of Eastern Europe who still hear faint echoes of Greek Orthodoxy while they adjust to harsh realities of life after their communist system fell apart during a breathtakingly short period of time; or those of the peoples of North America who are worried about things far up Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and grope after all kinds of New Age theories, fundamentalism and the entire range of ideas in between. The mechanism required to find meaning in each of these circumstances will be quite different, and hence it is unlikely from my point of view that any one myth can cover all of that ground. This explains to me what the Church has seen such phenomenal “success” from a missionary point of view in certain times and places. There are peoples and circumstances for whom the myth projected by the Church is very appealing, and they will flock toward a loud, powerful statement of that myth. Many other peoples are unmoved by it. The more well informed the people, the less appeal that myth will have. For this reason, the Church’s mythology is going to change, and we can see it changing already with the distancing of our leaders from ideas such as man can become like God.

Lastly, I note the excellent research Pascal Boyer has recently pulled together in his book “Religion Explained”. While the book falls well short of its title, it does marshal a useful summary of recent neurological research that explains the “inference systems” used by our brains for a variety of purposes, and suggests the evolutionary imperatives that caused those systems to develop. While those systems likely developed under the

pressure of forces that had nothing to do with religion, they now define the pathways over which religious concepts must reach us, and hence an understand of these pathways is a useful predictor of which concepts of the many possible within the religious sphere will gain currency, and which will not.

### **Is There a Super or Meta-Myth?**

And so we come to the question of whether there is a “super myth” that can solve all of our religious problems and do so permanently. In view my view, that amount to asking whether there is a myth that contains absolute truth, and that therefore will stand for all time.

It seems to me that this question falls into the very trap that has caused most of the problems modern religion faces. It tries to use logos (science and its presumption of absolute truth) to define the ultimate mystery. It is precisely the misuse of the lens of science to interpret myth that has gotten us into our current religions mess, as Karen Armstrong so nicely points out in “The History of God” and “The Battle for God”.

Consider the following as an illustration of how the above principles operate, and how modern society has gotten into difficulty my misunderstanding this process. Campbell and others have written beautifully about the deep-rooted problems in western society caused by the good – evil; true – false dichotomy at the root of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I struggle to rid myself of this worldview, and I suspect that struggle will be life long. This issue is at the root of the “one true church” idea, and is in other ways responsible for most of what I see as the real problem with not just the LDS faith but western Christianity in general.

The Judeo – Christian tradition has it that good is a force that emanates from and is within God. Evil is a force outside of God. Unfortunately, evil is the force that dominates our nature and that of the world we inhabit. Hence, “the natural man is an enemy to God” is what Joseph Smith (“JS”) came up with to replace the doctrine of original sin, since he abolished that. The effect of the original sin on the earth itself was not abolished by JS, so that part of standard Judeo Christian theology comes down to us undiluted.

The fall of Adam caused the earth to also fall from its pristine state, be infected by evil and to bring forth “thorns and noxious weeds” spontaneously. This requires that man subjugate the earth to restrain its unruly nature and make it productive to sustain a society that had developed past the hunter-gatherer stage. This is a classic myth, no doubt developed in an agricultural society in which that was the paradigm within which life was sustained.

Campbell tells the story of how the plains Indians at one time were an agricultural people living in the Mississippi River basin. Their myths at that time explained this reality – they had an earth god to whom they made sacrifices to keep the land productive and the rains coming, to control floods etc. Buffalo played a small part of their lives, and hence

had a minor role in their theology. Enter the Spaniards. They introduced horses to the native culture. Mounted on horses, the natives could hunt buffalo. Hence, they migrated to the plains and became hunter – gatherers again, but in an environment of abundant buffalo that would support more people than their subsistence agricultural society could. As their society changed, so did their theology. The buffalo, as their sustaining force, became their primary god, replacing the earth god who continued to operate on a subservient level. They developed myths that justified their killing of the buffalo, worshiped the buffalo for making itself available to them to sustain their lives, and recognized a kind of resurrection that occurred as they killed the buffalo and yet saw the herd replenish itself.

The plains Indians buffalo myths are interesting because they developed after European intrusion into the Americas brought a major technological change (horses) that drove a quick and fundamental societal change, and so the development of these myths was relatively abrupt and is still visible. However, they are functionally identical to the mythos of the Eskimo peoples related to seals and whales, of the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest respecting salmon, etc. That is, the human kind needs to explain the reality of its existence and most primitive societies created (and still create) an explanation that shows a harmony between man and his environment. In hunter – gatherer societies, we must kill other living things to eat, and so we will do so in a way that turns the hunt and taking of other life into a sacred ritual, during which we try to be as respectful as possible of the things we take in order to maintain our lives, and create a belief system that allows us to feel that we are sustaining their lives as well. We also try to be as respectful of this source of life as we can, given the state of our knowledge of our environment and related phenomena.

So, thanks to the research of Campbell and many other like him, we have a pretty clear picture the world over of how myths evolve and are used within society. Using inductive reasoning to see the patterns in that data, it is pretty easy to listen to the myths within the Judeo – Christian tradition and determine what kind of a society they came from and the needs those myths met within that society. Since the Judeo – Christian tradition developed over millennia, it contains myths reflective of various societal stages. The pattern we see in all of the other myths and societies we study shows that as societies change, myths change. This is so because myths are functional within society. Therefore, as society changes, the myths must change. And then we notice something deeply disturbing about the myths that most of the Christian segment of our modern society still uses to guide it. They have not changed sufficiently so as to continue to perform their function within society. These myths were developed 2 to 4 thousand years ago, and became written in stone as a result of the relatively early development of writing within the culture that created these myths, and the later development in cultures into which these myths had been transported of a logos based way of seeing the world that literally interprets data. This modern paradigm until recently (and still in most parts of our society) admitted to only one kind of “truth” – that determined in accordance with the rule of science and history as their now stand. Hence, if our ancestors “believed something to be true”, the information in which they believed will either pass the modern logos based tests to determine objective truth, or it must be branded false and abandoned.

So you have a group of unfortunates trying to guide their lives using someone else's outdated myths, and surprise, surprise, encountering a great deal of dysfunction as a result.

The two results of what these unfortunates are doing are as follows. A great many of them are saying, once the lights come on: "This is ridiculous. None of these stories are true; hence they are lies (another application of the true – false dichotomy taught by the same religion they reject). Hence, we will no longer believe in a god of any kind." The other group, only equipped with their true – false dichotomy, says: "No. These things are true. Literally true. And we can prove it!" They then alternately ignore and/or hide the evidence, and engage in pseudo science and history to try to support their position. The tendency to fear, already a major force within their religions system, is heightened by this new reason to be defensive and fight against an evil force. This energized fear creates all kinds of dysfunction, and in its worst manifestations becomes the "militant ignorance" that someone whose name I can't recall referred to as life's worst evil.

As I have said before, I believe JS was a prophet in the sense that he did have, or at least recognize, some important ideas that were useful in solving problems faced by his people in his time and place. However, he got some big things wrong. Perpetuating the Adam and Eve creation myth with its core of evil and conflict in modern society was one of them. That skin colour has anything to do with behaviour was another. Using God to justify his sexual predilections was a third. In many other ways, JS was a mythologist, and his teachings have great potential in that regard. However, Brigham Young ("BY") and those who came after him were not mythologists. As science and history have knocked harder over the years at the LDS door, The Institutional Church (personified by the Church Office Building or COB) has taken over and driven the organization away from its mythological roots toward literalism, fundamentalism and fear. And that is why it is no longer permissible to contradict church doctrine and remain a member of the Church. The organization and the worldview it inculcates in its members are powered primarily by fear.

There is one more important point to add before I attempt to propose a path toward solution. That is the paradigm of harmony as opposed to that of conflict on which the modern interpretation of the Judeo – Christian tradition is based.

Campbell tells a story of an old, respected Zen priest who was invited to speak at a prestigious conference in Europe respecting matters concerning religion, sociology, anthropology etc. He stood silently at the podium in a very Zen way for a while, and then started his address by saying something like – Man fights society. Man fights nature. Man fights God. Man fights man. God fights man. Nature fights man. God fights nature. Nature fights God. Nature fights man. What a strange religions this is!

The point was too obvious for Campbell to explain. That is part of what I like about him. He teaches as myth does. He does not often make the obvious point. Why? Because what is obvious to me might be completely different from what is obvious to you when it

comes to interpreting myth and symbol – there is no limit to the number of right answers we can find. Since I am not a great teacher, I don't mind telling you what is obvious to me, while making it clear this is only one of many possible important and helpful meanings that could be derived from these teachings that we consider as we go along.

The point I take from the Zen priest is that our whole Judeo - Christian worldview is based on fear, and the need to subdue other things, or submit to other things. The paradigm of harmony is completely different, and can be drawn from Christ's teachings, and particularly from those that were not canonized (such as the Gospel of Thomas), but are now recognized by some biblical scholars as being older and likely a more reliable record of Christ's teachings than anything in the New Testament. A good argument could be made that Christ's teachings were bastardized by those who came later to conform them to what became the Judeo-Christian and other traditions.

When we choose to see the world and other people in harmonious terms, we can be much more open to the beauty, wonder and challenges around us. Eastern religion can teach us a lot in that regard. I think we can reinterpret and better understand a lot of Christ's most important teachings if we first ground ourselves firmly in the harmony with nature and our surroundings taught by the Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus etc., and then come back to Christianity. Many of the mystics from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions did just that, in many cases without even knowing it. Armstrong's "The History of God" is a great place to find a summary of that process. And don't get the idea that I think Buddhism or any other "ism" is the true way. In fact, I recently learned that some of what I like best about Buddhism is probably a recent inclusion in that tradition and was borrowed by it from phenomenology, a western philosophical form.

Here is an example of the harmonic tradition. The creation itself in most of the eastern religious ways, many native traditions, and some of the mystic streams with monotheism, is conceived as a "pouring out" of god himself (I do not like using the personal, masculine form to describe god, but that is the convention in our society, and the fact of the matter is that English does not offer a good alternative, and so I will continue to do this). That is, all things, including us and any source of evil around us, are manifestations of god and part of him. Hence, we must seek harmony with all these things, instead of trying to subdue and fight with them. Harmony does not mean assimilation. We do not need to become evil. But we need to accept it and live as harmoniously as we can with it. There can, for example, be harmony in necessary violence, such as in the killing of an enemy or an animal to eat. Attitude is everything. The parts of reality around us by which we do not wish to be influenced can be ignored, and in some cases we will expend effort to set up buffers of one kind or another around us to protect us from these.

Another way to think of this process of harmonization is in terms of emphasis. I will actively seek those things that resonate, or harmonize, with me. The rest does not matter in a sense, and in particular I will avoid those parts that create disharmony for me, since those things slow me down. By assuming that in most things I can find harmony, I will likely find it in many places where it would otherwise not be apparent, and I will find it.

This is an attitude, or worldview, first and foremost. What we find is most determined by how and where we look.

### **Toward a Meta-Myth?**

So, how do we deal with our need to find meaning, and get off the logos based bandwagon described above? I suggest that we use the story as the Plains Indians and their reaction to the introduction of horse based hunting technology as our model. The Plains Indians were required by this technological change to face a new mystery and necessity – the requirement that they take the life of large numbers of living creatures in order to sustain their own lives, and their need to live in harmony with their

The purpose of “the spirit” (we may as well continue to use this well worn metaphor, remembering that this is what it is) is to help us find meaning within our own context. That includes the empirical evidence of our day, which amount to no more than the best understanding or our environment we can muster.

Art is a form of myth. Music, poetry, great literature, the visual arts all reach beyond empiricism and into the reaches of the subconscious to move us. Campbell says that the Star Wars series is classic myth of the first order. In fact, Lucas drew heavily on Campbell’s work to develop the themes, motifs and characters that made that series so memorable. And how about the Lord of the Rings? And how about Harry Potter? Great modern myths.

However, these modern myths stop well short of performing the societal function the ancient myths performed. They do not imbue life with real meaning. They do not bridge the gap between our logos based world, and the mythos underpinning of our subconscious. This is the important point.

I heard Campbell in his video series with Bill Moyers, just yesterday, answer Moyers’ question about the super myth. I have not read all of Campbell’s work yet, but this was done near the end of his life and he still had not found, or created, the super myth at that point. He told Moyers that perhaps it would be something like Star Wars, something to do with the great unknown that is space.

With the greatest of respect for Campbell, I think he is looking in the wrong the place. I think the myth of our day will be found within, not without. That is where most of our remaining mystery lies.

I have concluded there can be no super myth, except perhaps that myth will continually evolve. There is only the myth of our day; the one that helps us find meaning in our circumstance. The challenges of our day require that we grapple with an increasing scientific paradigm; indeed, with reality that genetic engineering and other advances in that field have put us squaring in god’s shoes in many ways. Our power to choose has become both awe inspiring, and terrifying. And secondly, our world is becoming more and more interconnected, making it important that we lose the tribal mind-set that forms

much of Christianity's foundation. The modern myths I find to be most helpful in this context are those that come from the great philosopher's of science, and the democratic tradition.