Revisiting Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth

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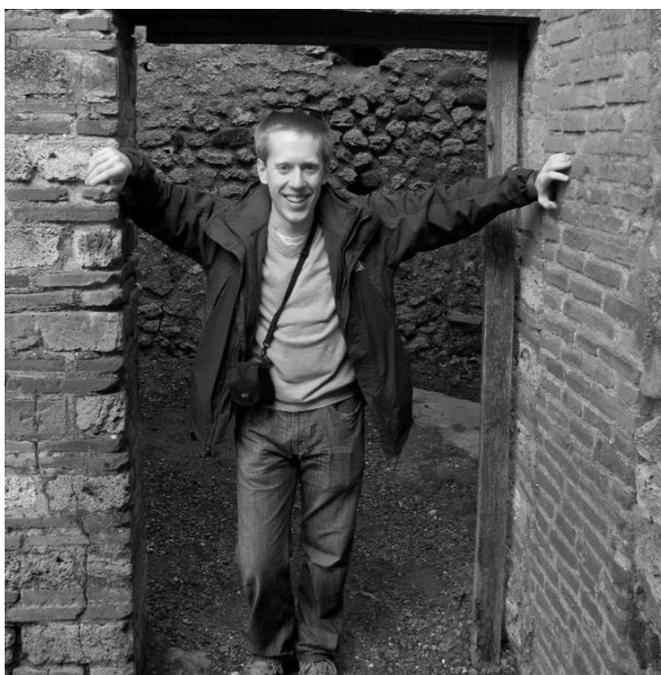
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‡ REVISITING JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S *THE POWER OF MYTH* ‡[1]

First published in 1988, *The Power of Myth* is the companion to Bill Moyers' acclaimed television profile of Joseph Campbell.[2] *Power* is comprised of eight transcribed conversations between Moyers, a theologian-turned-journalist,[3] and Campbell, a comparative mythologist. Campbell, a meticulous prose writer, initially resisted the idea of transcribing the spoken interviews, but Moyers' choice of editor, Betty Sue Flowers, whom Moyers described as "herself interested in this realm of the spirit and in mythology,"[4] persuaded Campbell to authorize the project and help Flowers in editing the volume.[5] In her introduction to *The Power of Myth*, Flowers stresses the "rich abundance of material" captured in the interviews, and she speaks of Campbell with reverence, describing him as "[answering] Moyers' penetrating questions with self-revealing honesty, based on a lifetime of living with myth."[6] Flowers' introduction, combined with Bill Moyers' description of Flowers as a spiritually minded person, suggests that *The Power of Myth* was assembled not so much as an academic text, but rather to give Campbell and his mystical ideas the most flattering showcase possible.

Although myth remains the primary focus of the book, the interviews delve heavily into philosophy and religion. Campbell outlines his concept of the *monomyth*[7]—a fundamental hero's

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[1] First, I must thank my extremely erudite friend, Wendy Eisenberg, for advising me to read *The Power of Myth* in the summer of 2012, thereby introducing me to Joseph Campbell. Second, thanks go to Will Chavez and Amit Jhaveri, my teaching assistants for Theories of Religion at the University of Rochester, whose feedback greatly aided my research and writing during the fall of 2012. Third, I thank all of the Theories students (but especially Hannah Ward, Heena Ali, Christina Palis, Josh Haley, Cassidy Welter, and Charles Aquilina), whose seminar discussions helped me to wrap my head around this material. Lastly, I thank Professor Douglas Brooks, who told me, after hearing this paper's thesis, to "go after it."

[2] Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

[3] "Moyers, Bill—U.S. Broadcast Journalist," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, accessed December 4, 2012, http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/moyesrbill/moyersbill.htm.

[4] "Herself interested in this realm of the spirit and in mythology" is taken from Stephen and Robin Larsen's interview with Bill Moyers (January 1990), which is quoted at length in Stephen and Robin Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 551.

[5] Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind* 551.

[6] Betty Sue Flowers, Editor's Note to Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), xi.

[7] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 37-38.

journey underlying all of the world's stories[8]—and presents myth as a way to provide a moral education.[9] The professor also articulates his personal philosophy, "Follow your bliss,"[10] praises authenticity and romantic love,[11] and expresses his disappointment in a world that he believes to be losing its mythological basis.[12]

Twenty-five years later, both the book and the series DVD remain in print,[13] indicating that Campbell's ideas continue to resonate with the general public. Campbell's ideas have gained some traction in academia, too. Notably, Thomas C. Foster's widely read textbook, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, devotes an entire chapter to Campbell's theory that all stories are the same story.[14] Indeed, my high school English teachers taught the monomyth theory as if it was the only way to interpret mythology. Given the popularity of Campbell's ideas and the approaching twenty-fifth anniversary of *Power*, the text merits a new critical reading. In this paper, I will consider the relevance of *The Power of Myth* to the secular study of religion. By "secular study of religion," I mean the academic approach that eschews theology, focuses only on the empirical, observable aspects of religious practice, and does not consider one religious tradition to be inherently superior to another.

Joseph Campbell was, first and foremost, a teacher, not a field researcher. In *The Power of Myth*, which reads like an introductory survey of comparative mythology and religion, Joseph Campbell borrows from the work of many other religious scholars. However, it is difficult to recognize

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8 Ibid., 136.

9 Ibid., 4, 163.

10 Ibid., 118.

11 Ibid., 185-205.

12 Ibid., 82, 84, 131.

13 "Joseph Campbell on Power of Myth with Bill Moyers," Amazon, accessed December 4, 2012, http://www.amazon.com/Joseph-Campbell-Power-Myth-Moyers/dp/B003SXHZEA/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1354646550&sr=8-1&keywords=joseph+campbell+and+the+power+of+myth; "The Power of Myth [Paperback]," Amazon, accessed December 4, 2012, http://www.amazon.com/The-Power-Myth-Joseph-Campbell/dp/0385418868/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1354646642&sr=8-1&keywords=the+power+of+myth.

14 Thomas C. Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 185-192.

Campbell's sources, due to the book's conversational structure and lack of a bibliography. Identifying the scholars from whom Campbell draws is therefore the first step in analyzing *The Power of Myth*. Campbell's sources can be divided into three primary groups—the qualitative studies of religion, the empirical (or fully social-scientific) studies of religion, and the studies that blend the two approaches. Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade are the most significant qualitative intellectuals who inform Campbell's discourse. The research of these men reflects a bygone era, when theology, not religious studies, dominated academia, and belief in God was a *native category* (i.e., considered objective and "a foundational taxonomic concept" of society).[15] According to Otto, religion encompasses non-rational, or *numinous*, elements.[16] In the presence of the *numen*, humans experience the *mysterium tremendum*, feeling of holy dread and awe, and then recognize God's *tremenda majestas*.[17] Campbell appropriates Otto's terminology, describing myth as "a *mysterium…tremendum et fascinans*."[18] A discussion of cathedrals, which draw the individual's attention to the sacred or numen, greatly resembles Otto's reflections on sacred space and art.[19]

Just as Otto assumes there is a numen, Eliade asserts that there is a genuine *sacred*, which manifests itself in physical objects.[20] Humans build their lives around sacred religious sites (particularly the *axis mundi*, the world's holy center) and convey divine truth through rituals.[21] Eliade contends that secularism is weakening symbolism and ritual, preventing men from reaching their full spiritual potential.[22] More so than Rudolf Otto, Eliade has a pronounced effect on Campbell's thinking.

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[15] William Scott Green, "Something Strange, Yet Nothing New: Religion in the Secular Curriculum," Association of American Colleges, *Liberal Education* 73 no. 5 (1987), 4. [Note: The page numbers listed in these endnotes differ from the page numbers in my bibliography, for the PDF of the article that I received was reformatted for eight pages.]

[16] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1-7.

[17] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12-24.

[18] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 38. The phrase appears again on page 65.

[19] Ibid., 15; Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,* 65-71.

[20] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1987), 8-16.

[21] Ibid., 32-42, 184-195.

[22] Ibid., 201-213.

In what reads like a direct quote from Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, Campbell states that, "The center of the world is the *axis mundi*, the central point, the pole around which all revolves."[23] Other Eliade-style passages reveal Campbell's thoughts on ritual,[24] which, in his view, links "the individual to a larger morphological structure"[25] and encourages humans to "live spiritually."[26] Eliade's portrayal of weakened ritual in the modern day resurfaces in Campbell's claim that "the rituals that once conveyed inner reality are now merely form."[27] Finally, Campbell's description of a non-rational transcendent energy to which men respond is analogous to Eliade's sacred, as well as Otto's numen.[28]

The second camp from which Campbell draws, blending the older belief in religion's innate qualities with social science's emphasis on concrete data, includes William James, Peter Berger, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. These men are empiricists and open to new innovations in social science, but they still believe that some sort of greater sacred is out there.[29] William James represents a midway point between the 19th century's theological, qualitative study of religion and the 20th century's secular, empirical study of religion. According to James, the sacred inspires strong emotion in individuals: "There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious."[30] By using emotional rhetoric to characterize religion, James (like Otto and Eliade before him) implies that religion has given qualities. Throughout *The Power of Myth*, it is apparent that Campbell shares James' faith in religion's qualities.[31] Although James has his solemn sacred, however, he is also a psychologist who cites a seemingly endless number of case histories to

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[23] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 89.

[24] Ibid., 81-87.

[25] Ibid., 72.

[26] Ibid., 182.

[27] Ibid., 84.

[28] Ibid., 132.

[29] In REL 293W, Theories of Religion, at the University of Rochester, Douglas Brooks has described this faith in a sacred or *numen* as "There is a *there* there."

[30] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 38.

[31] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 207.

describe different religious experiences.[32] Professor Campbell uses a similar technique in framing his argument, citing a tremendous number of world myths to support his qualitative theory of universal stories and themes.

Campbell's vision, wherein all myths are considered equal to each other, also resembles the conclusion of James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In the final pages of that book, James argues that many gods (not only the Christian god) could be considered real, for all world religions provide divine solutions to earthly problems.[33] This assertion is surprisingly progressive for a man writing in an overwhelmingly Christian era. For this reason, James points toward the religious pluralism of the late 20th century, when Campbell did most of his teaching and writing. Indeed, Campbell eschews any viewpoint that privileges the Judeo-Christian tradition, arguing that the Hebrews and their spiritual successors stifled many traditional myths, including myths favoring women.[34] Both James and Campbell clearly believe that one must look around the world, and not just in enclaves of European-American Christians, for spiritual truth.

Writing several decades after James, Berger contends that religion creates plausibility structures, or *sacred canopies*—structured belief systems that place a meaningful order (*nomos*) onto the world.[35] This concept of religiously constructed order resurfaces in *The Power of Myth*, when Bill Moyers asks if myth "harmonize[s] our lives with reality," and Campbell says yes.[36] Campbell also shares Berger's distaste for secularization. According to Berger, secularization destabilizes mankind's longstanding plausibility structures, inspiring "severe anomy and existential anxiety."[37] Similarly, Campbell cites secularization as a cause of civil disorder.[38] To these men, a desacralized,

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[32] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 123-126. Contains two excellent examples of the psychologist's firsthand accounts.

[33] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 507-526.

[34] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 100-101, 171-173.

[35] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 16-28.

[36] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 4.

[37] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125.

[38] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 8-9.

demythologized world is not a positive development.[39] One key difference between Berger and Campbell, though, is that Berger partly blames religious pluralism for the destabilization of sacred canopies,[40] whereas Campbell takes James' side in favor of pluralism. As such, Campbell and James are arguably more optimistic than Berger.

W.C. Smith's blend of the qualitative and empirical approaches shows a certain degree of optimism, as well. Smith believes that scholars should abandon the abstract term *religion*, which lacks a clear definition.[41] Instead, scholars should study the *cumulative tradition* (i.e., the history and material culture of religious individuals) and, more importantly, personal *faith*.[42] According to Smith, a greater appreciation of the faith of different religious groups "might contribute to…constructing a brotherhood on Earth deserving the loyalty of all our groups."[43] In other words, an appreciation of religion's qualitative aspects can foster the interfaith movement. Just as Smith argues that multiple religions can access faith, Campbell argues that divinity exists in all men, and it is the responsibility of individuals to recognize the divinity in their peers.[44] Additionally, both Smith and Campbell critique the Judeo-Christian tradition: Campbell feels that the Hebrews displaced the place of women in religious mythology,[45] while Smith believes that Christians are too often insensitive to the faith found within other religious traditions.[46]

Wayne Proudfoot and Jonathan Z. Smith, the postmodern empirical scholars who began writing during Campbell's later years, do not take faith into account, nor do they discuss a sacred-

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[39] Berger's ideas bear some resemblance to those of Eliade, but Berger is a sociologist, and so his favorable feelings toward religion are camouflaged by the technical jargon of sociology.

[40] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy,* 127-153.

[41] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 51-60, 141-153.

[42] Ibid., 170-192.

[43] Ibid., 202.

[44] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 213-214.

[45] Ibid., 165-183.

[46] Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 193-202.

numen, which is, in truth, an unverifiable, subjective concept.[47] Instead, Proudfoot and J.Z. Smith focus solely on what W.C. Smith called the *cumulative tradition*—religion's observable phenomena (i.e., empirical evidence). When articulating his secular, social-scientific approach to religion, J.Z. Smith invokes the "map is not territory" argument: The academy creates religion, and so scholars of religion must take care to ask good questions, lest they produce inaccurate or biased models (maps) of religion.[48] For Western scholars, an accurate map is one that does not treat Westerners as the makers of history and Easterners as the objects of history.[49] As previously outlined, Joseph Campbell draws heavily from the qualitative and the half-qualitative, half-empirical schools of thought, but his critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition and championing of international mythic structures greatly resembles Smith's call for non-Western-centric studies of religion. In this slight way, Campbell shows some agreement with postmodernism.

In *Religious Experience*, a discussion of methodological problems in the study of religion, Proudfoot stresses the careful collection and interpretation of data. Secular scholars must avoid descriptive reduction, "the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it."[50] Descriptive reduction prevents scholars from recognizing the nuances of religious phenomena. Meanwhile, scholars should engage in explanatory reduction, "offering an explanation of experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval."[51] Explanatory reduction therefore seeks accurate solutions underlying the details of religious experiences. In *Map Is Not Territory*, J.Z. Smith offers an excellent justification for explanatory reduction: "There can only be a relatively limited number of systems or archetypes [i.e., explanations], though there may be an infinite number of manifestations [i.e., descriptions of

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[47] The reader can probably surmise my own approach to the study of religion. I fully subscribe to the secular school of thought, of which Proudfoot, J.Z. Smith, and Émile Durkheim are leading members.

[48] J.Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 289-309.

[49] Ibid., 294-298.

[50] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 196.

[51] Ibid., 197.

religious phenomena]."[52] Campbell's concept of the monomyth—the fundamental paradigm of the hero's journey underlying many diverse myths—is an example of correctly executed explanatory reduction.[53] In spite of this fact, which might again suggest some sympathy with the late 20th-century empirical approach and postmodernism, Campbell engages in considerable descriptive reduction, a problem that I will explore later in this article.

Aside from the material he borrows from other writers, Campbell also throws his personal philosophical views into this theoretical mix. To a great extent, these ideas lack a direct correlation to the theories of religion outlined so far in the present work. Separately from his combination of theories, Campbell proposes his own religious plausibility structures, as he tries to establish universal principles found in mythology. Professor Campbell stresses the importance of personal experience and finding bliss.[54] He lauds the goddess traditions, describing women as representative of creation.[55] Humans must accept the hero's journey, which includes suffering and venturing into new places.[56] One part of the hero's journey is learning to love, which involves learning to be courageous.[57] Ultimately, individuals must find sublime peace, a feeling of wonder that cannot be conveyed fully in words.[58]

Having mapped the extensive theoretical origins of Campbell's discourse, let us briefly summarize *The Power of Myth*'s key implications. Campbell believes that there is a sacred or numen, which he describes as an abstract energy. Humans respond to this energy by creating myths, which give meaning to human life. The monomyth structure appears in the stories of most societies, indicating that there are universal principles and that religion possesses given qualities. The Judeo-Christian tradition superseded many traditional myths and rituals; secularization weakened mankind's

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[52] Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 259. The bracketed words are my own addition, for the purpose of clarification.
[53] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 37-38.
[54] Ibid., 120-121.
[55] Ibid., 165-183.
[56] Ibid., 145-163.
[57] Ibid, 187.
[58] Ibid., 230-231.

mythological knowledge further, inspiring civil chaos. However, individuals can rediscover myth and follow the ancient principles, namely the need to follow one's bliss, pursue romantic love, honor women, and recognize the divinity in other people. Seeing the divinity in all humans can aid the ecumenical and interfaith movements, while a rediscovery of myth can restore a layer of spiritual meaning that modern secular society lacks.

Joseph Campbell's interpretation of myth and religion—a theoretical mélange—makes for intellectually engaging literature. Since Campbell draws from several modes of academic religious inquiry, he clearly strives for intellectual synthesis. He wants to propose new interpretations of religious myth, harmonizing two centuries of religious theory in the process. Professor Campbell's goal is laudable, but his argument is characterized by seven pronounced tensions. As Campbell shifts between scholarly camps, which are all jumbled together in his monomythic vision, these tensions become increasingly apparent and difficult to reconcile. My analysis of these tensions (or "incongruities," to borrow J.Z. Smith's terminology)[59] is somewhat anecdotal, but I feel that this structure is appropriate, given the anecdotal format of *The Power of Myth.*

(1) Campbell tends to speak of myth as if it is an eternal, self-evident construct, produced by the transcendent unity and elemental energy of which he frequently speaks.[60] As critic Robert S. Ellwood notes, "For [Campbell], a myth seem[s] to be a rather disembodied, timeless story of eternal human significance."[61] Elsewhere in *Power*, however, Campbell asserts that myth harmonizes the world with stories.[62] This claim is a concession that man constructs myth. By describing myth as almost a product of nature, yet also describing it as an empirical creation of mankind, Campbell contradicts himself. This contradiction speaks to the irreconcilable gap between the theological belief in religion's

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[59] See J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 61-65.

[60] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 183, 208-209.

[61] Robert S. Ellwood, "Why Are Mythologists Political Reactionaries? An Investigation of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell," in *Religion and the Social Order: What Kinds of Lessons Does History Teach?*, ed. Jacob Neusner, 199-225 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 215.

[62] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 4.

qualities and the secular belief in religion's lack of qualities. These antithetical ideas cannot effectively be synthesized.

(2) In the course of the interviews with Moyers, Campbell praises knowing one's intellectual limits.[63] Meanwhile, Professor Campbell proposes forward his own system of spiritual beliefs. He speaks as though he has discovered an absolute, universal set of principles underlying all of the world's religious traditions. In other words, Campbell speaks like a prophet revealing the secrets of the cosmos, or a hermeneute manipulating the canon of religious stories to convey a certain point.[64] If he is a prophet, then Campbell is suffering from some degree of intellectual arrogance. If he is a hermeneute, then Campbell is being selective with his data. His plausibility structure of bliss and heroism is therefore not a universal truth, but rather one man's subjective interpretation of mythology.

(3) Campbell says that he does not oppose modern technology, which is a by-product of secularization and historical progress.[65] With that said, Campbell repeatedly expresses reservations about computer technology, even going so far as to call his first computer "an Old Testament god with a lot of rules and no mercy."[66] The supremacy of the human mind over technology becomes a recurring motif throughout *The Power of Myth*. Notably, when Campbell analyzes the *Star Wars* trilogy in terms of comparative mythology, he stresses the positive triumph of the intuition-trusting Luke Skywalker over the mechanistic Darth Vader.[67] Of course, the symbolism in *Star Wars* is not subtle at all, but Campbell the hermeneute chooses to stress this symbolic victory of humans over technology. As such, Campbell shows something of a reactionary streak toward the modern world, which he believes to be stripping humanity of its mythological foundations. Indeed, as Ellwood relates,

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[63] Ibid., 55.
[64] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 44-52.
[65] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 131.
[66] Ibid., 18.
[67] Ibid., 144.

"Campbell…prided himself on not really being part of the modern world. He never watched television and had no interest in popular culture."[68]

(4) Campbell's philosophical beliefs, emphasizing the pursuit of bliss and love, are heavily oriented toward individual experience. Although Campbell does discuss some examples of group rituals, which teach men to "live spiritually,"[69] the majority of his thought is oriented towards individuals. According to Ellwood, Campbell considered himself a classical conservative; moreover, Ellwood contends that, "[Campbell's] mythic model is clearly the free enterprise 'rugged individualist' of a romanticized American past."[70] It is beyond the scope of this paper (and, frankly, Ellwood's short review) to assess thoroughly a link between American conservatism and Campbell's individualist sacred canopy. Still, there is definitely a "self-made man" tinge to Campbell's rhetoric. The role of the individual in uncovering myth's power is therefore one of Campbell's native categories.

(5) As explained earlier, Campbell's theory of the monomyth successfully meets J.Z. Smith and Proudfoot's criteria for explanatory reduction. However, Campbell has a tendency to engage in descriptive reduction, which Proudfoot discourages, since descriptive reduction ignores the differences between individuals' religious experiences. When discussing myth, Campbell jumps abruptly around the world, arguing that all myths are the same.[71] In his most glaring instance of descriptive reduction, when discussing Jesus and the Buddha, Campbell states that "[y]ou can match those two savior figures right down the line, even to the roles and characters of their immediate disciples or apostles."[72] In other words, Campbell regards the details of both a Hindu and Christian myth as interchangeable. It is clear, then, that Campbell usually skims over the details of different religious contexts.

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[68] Ellwood, "Why Are Mythologists Political Reactionaries?," 220. The one clear exception to Campbell's disinterest in pop culture is his fascination with the *Star Wars* trilogy.

[69] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 182.

[70] Ellwood, "Why Are Mythologists Political Reactionaries?," 220-221.

[71] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 115.

[72] Ibid., 136.

I say "usually" skims over because Campbell later contradicts himself in regard to the descriptive reduction. A few pages after his initial reduction of the Jesus and Buddha narratives, Campbell alters his position: "The messages of the great teachers—Moses, the Buddha, Christ, Mohammed—*differ greatly*.[73] But their visionary journeys are much the same."[74] In this case, the reduced explanation of the journey—the monomyth—remains the same, but Campbell now accounts for unique details (i.e., the different messages) in each narrative. Are the details—the descriptions—of the Jesus and Buddha narratives exactly the same, or are they very different? Campbell never resolves this tension between descriptive reductionism and descriptive expansionism. This tension is problematic, suggesting that Campbell uses or does not use descriptive reduction on a case-by-case basis. Overall, the arbitrariness and potential for bias within Campbell's analysis of religious data detract from the intellectual credibility of *The Power of Myth*.

(6) Like James, Otto, Eliade, W.C. Smith, and Berger, Professor Campbell believes that myth (and, by extension, religion) possesses genuine qualities. This view aligns not with pure social science, but rather with theology. Campbell's belief in a qualitative interpretation of religion is therefore an intellectual holdover from a less secular era. Considering that Campbell was in his eighties when he participated in this interview series, perhaps Campbell's fondness for older modes of thinking is understandable. Still, Campbell's support for certain qualities of myth robs his argument of some of the empirical rigor one would expect from a late-1980s religion study.

(7) Campbell plucks ideas selectively from the secular-empirical tradition, the theistic-qualitative tradition, and the half-qualitative, half-empirical tradition. As such, to which faction of the study of religion does Campbell truly belong? Is Campbell a theist or non-theist? On the one hand, Campbell denies any belief in a personal god,[75] stating unequivocally that Jesus' ascension into Heaven

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[73] Italics are my own addition.

[74] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 141.

[75] Ibid., 213.

is a scientific impossibility.[76] Meanwhile, Campbell speaks enthusiastically about genuine mysteries in the world, a divinity in all people, and a mysterious energy to which people respond through religious myth. There is some form of spirituality behind his discourse. Campbell is therefore trying to be empirical *and* qualitative, secular *and* religious, progressive *and* reactionary, all at once. He belongs neither to the purely empirical nor the purely qualitative school of religion. Rather, he is in line with W.C. Smith, William James, and Peter Berger, those thinkers who attempted (somewhat unsuccessfully) to meld the new techniques of secular scholarship and social science with classical theistic arguments. Indeed, in addition to his comparative discussion of world mythology, Campbell wants to establish new plausibility structures of his own (bliss, love, etc.). He wants his readers to develop theological (or, as he might put it, mythological) beliefs, so he cannot be regarded as a secular intellectual.

If the continuing sales of *The Power of Myth* are any indication, the general public has no problem with Campbell's non-secular claims. However, the secular scholar of religion cannot accept this book into the pantheon of classic social science monographs. Under his façade of academic rigor and pithy quotes, Campbell preaches a subjective theology. For this reason, *The Power of Myth* should not be categorized with truly secular books like J.Z. Smith's *Map Is Not Territory* and Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

In his ruminations on world mythology and religion, Campbell combines the qualitative and empirical traditions with a healthy dose of his own personal philosophy. Surprisingly, he weaves these competing theories and personal anecdotes into a remarkably coherent discourse. Campbell is eloquent and passionate, and Bill Moyers contributes genuinely interesting questions, lending a strong Socratic aspect to the interviews. The text includes some intriguing claims about mythology, and Campbell's plea to follow one's bliss and find love is rather moving. Still, Campbell's argument contains

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[76] Ibid., 56.

irreconcilable tensions and far too much reductionism. *The Power of Myth* does not belong in the same category as thoroughly secular, empirical studies of religion. Rather, the text is a work of popular philosophy—the last lecture of Joseph Campbell, who died not long after the interviews were conducted.[77]

Nonetheless, *The Power of Myth* may remain of some interest to secular academics. The book is akin to one of J.Z. Smith's incongruous maps, which are "incapable of overcoming disjunction," yet are capable of "[playing] between the incongruities and [providing] an occasion for thought."[78] Campbell may use outdated intellectual models, and his argument cannot withstand the contemporary secular scrutiny demanded by J.Z. Smith and Wayne Proudfoot, but he does make readers think deeply about the comparative study of mythology and religion. Readers must recognize the limits of Campbell's map, though, when they set out on their journey.

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[77] Bill Moyers, Introduction to *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), xiii-xix.

[78] Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 309.

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