

# The Mysticism of Joseph Campbell

John Gentile, PhD

*But who or what is this man—if man he be—  
whose image is now impressed upon us in a way  
that we shall not forget?*

—Joseph Campbell on the Sorcerer of  
Les Trois Frères,  
(*Historical Atlas, Vol. I, Part 1, 76*)



Cave Painting—Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères

In *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, Joseph Campbell describes a long and difficult journey through the caves of Les Trois Frères in the French Pyrenees. After passing through a low and very narrow passage, the intrepid seeker reaches an inner Paleolithic sanctuary on whose walls are carved scenes from a hunt. On the wall opposite the passage opening waits the painting of what has become known as the Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères, apparently a human figure in the skins of several animals, who may be a shaman (75 – 78). Campbell’s vivid description in *The Flight of the Wild Gander* inspired me to read his longer commentary in *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. I: The Way of the Animal Powers, Part 1*, in which he quotes at length Herbert Kuhn’s first-hand account of his journey into the cave of the Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères (73 - 79).

One night, after reading Campbell’s descriptions, I experienced a waking dream during that liminal time betwixt waking and sleeping. The dream was a very vivid imaginal response to the story of that journey into the cave, its terrors and difficulties and the sense of darkness and isolation. From that dream, I understood the potential of that cave as a site of separation, initiation, and re-birth in a way that is far deeper than simply intellectual. Since then, I have tracked down Kuhn’s book *On the Track of Prehistoric Man* to read his account in full and I remain fascinated by cave paintings. Campbell effectively caught my imagination.

“[T]he power of his own work,” write Florence Sandler and Darrell Reeck in “The Masks of Joseph Campbell,” “is a fictive power.”<sup>5</sup> I agree with Sandler and Reeck, believing that much of the appeal of Campbell’s writing is evocative; it moves

his readers in the same way that literature does. During a lecture at Pacifica Graduate Institute, Dennis Slattery invited his listeners “to create your own Joseph Campbell.” This invitation reminded me of a comment by Christine Downing during her lecture on Sigmund Freud. She explained that she was presenting “My Freud,” meaning a reading of Freud as she had come to know him, the Freud who had inspired her own thinking. I am member of the generation of Americans who first met Joseph Campbell through *The Power of Myth* televised interviews with Bill Moyers during their initial broadcast in 1988. Since that time, I have continued my reading of Campbell, particularly *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which inspired my original theatre production, *The Hero’s Journey*, performed at the Mythic Journeys conference in June 2004. “Psych moves in spirals,” Slattery said in that same lecture. His comment resonates with me because I have come to understand the education process through the image of a spiral. My current study of Campbell is, then, a further turn in that spiral and an opportunity to clarify for myself what his work has meant and continues means for me, what I find inspiring, and, also, what I find helpful in the writings of his critics to assist me in going deeper in my study of myth. I find I am able to hold both an awareness of Campbell’s limitations as well as a deep respect for his contributions. I now understand that much of what Campbell (and other writers) have claimed regarding the Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères, as Henry Pernet argues, is ultimately only conjecture—but that does not diminish my admiration for Campbell’s undeniable erudition or insight into the world’s mythologies. In other words, I am circumambulating towards an understanding of “My Joseph Campbell.”

Sandler and Reeck state that Campbell “holds his readers by his extraordinary fluency and enthusiasm, his erudition especially in out-of-the-way material, his provocative cross-cultural juxtapositions, and his intellectual range and generosity of spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Again, I agree with their assessment.

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However, I find Campbell's greatest appeal in his insistence that mythology's first function is to place us in accord with the transcendent, that mythologies are "the masks of God," and that these ancient stories are metaphors pointing us towards the ineffable. "The first function of a mythology," Campbell writes in *Creative Mythology*, "is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is . . ." <sup>4</sup> Additionally, his regard for all mythologies from across the world as sacred and his call for a global or planetary mythology seem even more necessary today than during his lifetime when national lines are blurring and all cultures, not just that of the United States, are multicultural.

Campbell's claim that mythologies connect us to the "ground of being" (a phrase he borrows from Paul Tillich), to divinity immanent and transcendent, causes some readers to dismiss him as a mystic rather than a scholar. His claim also distinguishes him from a writer like James Hillman, who shares both Campbell's a deep respect for poetic metaphor, ancient mythologies, and polytheism and his aversion for literalism and monotheism. However, Hillman, unlike Campbell, resists moving beyond psychology to spirituality. Robert A. Segal, for all his brilliance as a scholar, was not the right person to write an introduction to Campbell's work; Segal, it appears to me, wishes to turn Campbell into a positivist and he remains content to disparage Campbell's contribution on charges of inconsistency and lack of proof. Instead, I find Campbell's mysticism to be his greatest strength. A scholar of mysticism, like Andrew Harvey, seems a more appropriate author to introduce new readers to Campbell's work.

Joseph Campbell, to my mind, is a guide for us to read mythologies as ways to the sacred. At his best, he models for us, his readers, an inherently aesthetic or poetic response to the world's wisdom traditions. He guides us away from the twin traps of literalism and ethnocentrism—and the brittle attitude of

scholarship. He challenges us to move beyond the notion of a personal Godhead and to see the sacred immanent in nature, oneself, and in each other. Finally, he challenges the individual to take responsibility for his or her own spiritual journey rather than rely the dogma of received religion ■

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Joseph John Campbell (March 26, 1904 – October 30, 1987) was an American professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College who worked in comparative mythology and comparative religion. His work covers many aspects of the human experience. Campbell's most well-known work is his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), in which he discusses his theory of the journey of the archetypal hero shared by world mythologies, termed the monomyth.