

1

Introduction

NEED

THIS BOOK 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.

A question asked by each generation is “What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology?” This book 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

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “myth.”

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”;²

Professor of philosophy Tom Snyder 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

While professor of religion Ian Barbour 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 open⁴

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

2. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 124.

3. Snyder, *Myth Conceptions*, 20.

4. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 114; italics in original.

5. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109.

6. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 125.

7. Purtill, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 1.

4 True Myth

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, “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

8. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 32.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 33.

11. Purtill, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 3.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

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 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 Purtill 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

14. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 20.

15. Barbour, *Ethics in an Age of Technology*, 3.

16. Simonson, *The Lord of the Rings*, 67.

17. Segal, *Myth*, 4–6.

18. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 67; italics in original.

19. Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, 38.

STATEMENT OF THESIS

The thesis of this book 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 book 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 book 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, are also considered. Additionally, this book 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's 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 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's 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's 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:

20. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

21. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, vii.

22. *Ibid.*, 7.

23. *Ibid.*, 8.

24. *Ibid.*, 20.

25. Nicholi, *The Question of God*, 86. See "Myth Became Fact" in Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 63–67.

26. White, *C. S. Lewis*, 36.

8 True Myth

“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 word *mythos* 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 book will explore these questions. Initial research points to a conclusion that, in Lewis’s thinking, the life of Jesus Christ was the literal incarnation of the perfect myth: Jesus Christ as God Incarnate in true humanity embodied 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,

27. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 45.

28. *Ibid.*, 42.

29. *Ibid.*; italics in original.

30. *Ibid.*, 43.

31. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

32. *Ibid.*, 48.

33. *Ibid.*, 63–67.

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 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

34. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 170.

35. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 66–67; italics in original.

... 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's 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

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

36. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 236.

37. Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 1:977; 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.

41. Campbell, interview by Moyers, Episode 1: "The Hero's Adventure," June 21, 1988; Episode 2: "The Message of the Myth," June 22, 1988; Episode 3: "The First

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*:

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

Storytellers," June 23, 1988; Episode 4: "Sacrifice and Bliss," June 24, 1988; Episode 5: "Love and the Goddess," June 25, 1988; and Episode 6: "Masks of Eternity," June 26, 1988.

42. Larsen and Larsen, *Joseph Campbell*, 490–91.

43. Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 10.

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 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.

44. Kennedy, *Thou Art That*, xvii.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 3.

48. *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

49. *Ibid.*, 7.

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 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 four-fold: 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 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

50. Ibid., 48.

51. Ibid., 2-5.

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 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.

52. John 11:44.

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) independence in the form of the words used; (2) a minimal use of suspense or surprise; (3) minimal empathy with the characters of the story; (4) dealings with fantasy, the impossible, and preternatural; (5) no comic sense; even if the experience is joyful, it is also grave, and it must (6) contain a numinous or all-pervasive sense of the other.⁵⁴

Early in life Lewis recognized a great chasm between myth and history and prior to his conversion he wrestled with how to bring these two concepts together. After his conversion he was able to see myth as a means by which the natural and supernatural could meet. In fact, it could be said that, to Lewis, the Christian view of myth is history plus miracle equals myth.

What makes Lewis's arguments stand out in his day as well as in ours was his countercultural insistence that not only was a supernatural view far from being passé, but it was necessary as a way for humans to think and make sense of their existence. In his own day Lewis wrestled with the widely influential views of scholars such as James Frazer and the University of Marburg New Testament theologian, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). In studying magic and religion throughout the world, Fraser saw no need for asking whether religions were true or false and so Christianity, not being unique, was only one religion among many. Meanwhile, Bultmann, considered by many to be the most significant and influential New Testament scholar of the century, maintained that the gospel records were myths that helped explain events in a world comfortable with supernatural causes. But Bultmann believed that since the modern person could not accept the idea of supernatural causes, the gospels needed to be stripped of their myths in order to get to the core of what the early disciples believed about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

53. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*.

54. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

Lewis found both approaches inadequate and misleading. Regarding Frazer, Lewis believed the similarities between myth and Christianity could just as easily be used to argue in favor of the truth of Christianity as against it, and as a literary critic and lifelong reader of myth, Lewis felt Bultmann did not fully understand what myth actually was.

In spite of differing with these authors, Lewis nevertheless recognized that people have difficulties with the miraculous. But instead of dismissing the truthfulness of the gospel accounts or the veracity of the miraculous, Lewis sought to find a way forward that would allow the tension between myth and fact to blend together harmoniously and thus concluded that, in the birth of Christ, myth became fact although it still remains a myth.

The fourth chapter will examine the approach to myth of Joseph Campbell, considered by many as the leading mythographer of the modern era. Influenced early in his childhood by his Roman Catholic upbringing and an early interest in Native American spirituality, Campbell would later recall that as early as the age of six or seven he was captured by the beliefs of Native Americans. As he wrote later in a personal journal, "I early became fascinated, seized, obsessed by the figure of a naked American Indian with his ear to the ground, a bow and arrow in his hand, and a look of special knowledge in his eyes."⁵⁵

But his parents' Catholicism would also leave an indelible impression upon Campbell. From serving as a young altar boy, through elementary school and into his college years, Campbell faithfully attended Catholic services. Even so, this loyalty was not without reservation, for Campbell is often found expressing dismay and criticism of the Church in his private writings until he finally decided to abandon his formal practice of attending Mass, finding more spiritual satisfaction in the natural world around him than in the incense and candles of the Catholic liturgy.

As Campbell matured and started to consider myth academically, two authors greatly influenced his thinking. They were the anthropologist James Frazer (who, in a different way, influenced Lewis) and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875–1961). While Lewis would find Frazer's observations on universal themes of myth running throughout all cultures and religions lacking, Campbell would find such explanations fascinating and persuasive.

Campbell explains his view of myth arguing that 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

55. Larsen and Larsen, *Joseph Campbell*, 3.

(i.e., youth, adolescence, middle age, death).⁵⁶ In these four points it is easy to see how myth and religion coalesce in Campbell's thinking.

Before his introduction to Jung, Campbell was influenced by the writing of the Austrian neurologist and father of the psychoanalytic school of psychiatry, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). And although Campbell would later find Jung's approach more appealing, he would admit that his classic work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*⁵⁷ was the result of the "Freudian insight on the universality of the Oedipus myth."⁵⁸

A final and critical issue to explore is Campbell's understanding of the relation of myth to Christianity. Unlike Lewis, who would come to look at all things from a Christian worldview, Campbell looked at the world and its religions from a mythological view. His travels around the world and his study of various religions and cultures allowed him to flatten out all religions so that whatever they had in common became prominent, thus enabling him to identify universal themes and conclude mythological underpinnings to all the world's great religions.

This fourth chapter will also explore the divergent views of Lewis and Campbell regarding myth and its place within Christian doctrine pointing out areas of agreement as well as evaluating their differences. The purpose of this exploration is to arrive at some conclusions about the place and role of myth within Christianity.

The fifth chapter will address Christianity as history, mystery, and myth. Since both Lewis and Campbell see history, mystery, and myth within the Christian faith, the question is how to identify each. Both men were comfortable using myth as a hermeneutical tool in reading the Bible, but differed on how it was used and the conclusions one might derive from applying myth to the biblical record.

Is an element of myth necessary to understand the true message of Christianity or does myth serve to undermine the truth claims of the faith? C. S. Lewis often spoke about the role of myth in Christianity, yet he believed in the historicity of the gospel accounts. How did he reconcile myth to history?

And Campbell, though raised in the Catholic faith, came to conclude that a historical reading of the Bible missed the true meaning of the narrative, confusing the literal and metaphorical interpretations of the religious stories. To Campbell, a literal reading of biblical passages clearly meant as

56. Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 2–5.

57. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

58. Larsen and Larsen, *Joseph Campbell*, 106.

myth serve only to further divide humanity along religious lines and do a disservice to religion by misunderstanding the original intention of the text.

For C. S. Lewis, Christianity is a true myth; that is, a myth which is also a fact. This blending together of two ideas often understood as diametrically opposed enabled Lewis to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable: the universal allure of myth with the historical convictions he held concerning the gospels.

For Joseph Campbell it is the mystery of myth that gives Christianity its power; a historical reading of the gospels, especially of the miraculous elements, works against the message and purpose of the Christian faith. For Christianity and the Bible to accomplish their purpose and remain a viable faith with meaning in a technological and scientific age, it is necessary to understand their mythological nature.

The sixth chapter will summarize the role of myth in a technological society as understood by Campbell and Lewis. For each of these authors, myth is timeless and has a vital place in every culture as a means by which one can understand truth and find some meaning in the vicissitudes of life. And because religion is also an important component in culture as it too seeks to address many of the same issues of life, myth's role in religious belief will be addressed as well.

Because culture is comprised of individuals, this chapter will also discuss myth and the significance of the individual as well as myth and the significance of society and culture. How significant is the individual to myth and can the individual significantly influence myth? As individuals progress from birth to adolescence and from adulthood to death, how does myth help them face such changes in a world also undergoing change?

And how does myth influence culture? And when it does, does the influence differ from culture to culture or does each culture influence the meaning of myth? As cultures advance in fields such as science, education, and technology, what becomes of myth? Like religion, can myth exist and even thrive in a culture dominated by science and technology or does it become weakened or even extinct? If it does remain, what form must myth take to remain a vital part of human existence? Does myth, like religion, need to be organized with agreed upon doctrines and creed, or can it survive with no clear set of values simply by becoming a part of everyday life in thinking and conversation? And what is the significance of the abundance of words, titles, terms, logos, and trademarks in the West with mythical origins? In cultures where the stories are no longer told or believed, why do the names and figures have such lasting value? Is it just a matter of trademark recognition or is there some deeper meaning in myth that the human psyche does not recognize but cannot ignore?

In closing, the seventh and concluding chapter will review the salient points as they pertain to the topic, “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.” Following the conclusion and a brief review, recommendations for further study will be made to students interested in exploring further the influence of C. S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on myth and the influence of myth in religion and culture.

The topics of religion, spirituality, technology, and culture along with the range and limits of scientific method are common themes in classroom discussions. When one realizes that scholarship continues to investigate these issues and publish books addressing the tensions between religion, myth, and the influence of technology, the timelessness and relevancy of such a study is apparent.

Summary Review of the Literature

In preparing for this project a literature review was conducted and a bibliography of approximately 100 (and growing) books, journal articles, and internet selections was created. These selections fall into a number of categories. The first body of work seeks to put into context the life and thinking of Joseph Campbell. Specifically included are Campbell’s own works including *Myths to Live By*; *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and Religion*; *The Masks of God*; *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*; *The Power of Myth* (with Bill Moyers); *The Flight of the Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimensions of Fairy Tales; Legends, and Symbols*; and *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*.

Closely tied to the study of Joseph Campbell are the works of those who have investigated Campbell’s life and work. Included in this field are: Stephen and Robin Larson’s biography, *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell*; Joseph Felser’s “Was Joseph Campbell a Postmodernist?”; Tom Collin’s “Mythic Reflections: Thoughts on myth, spirit, and our times, an interview with Joseph Campbell, by Tom Collins”; Robert Segal’s *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction*; and Jonathan Young’s “Joseph Campbell’s Mythic Journey.”

The second body of work explores the life and thinking of C. S. Lewis and his understanding of myth as explained by Lewis and those who have studied him. Specifically these include collected works edited by Walter Hooper such as *Of Other Worlds: C. S. Lewis, Essays and Stories*; *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Family Letters 1905–1931. Vol.1*; *The Collected*

Letters of C. S. Lewis: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931–1949, Vol. II, and The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963 Vol. 3. Works by Lewis, both fiction and non-fiction, include *An Experiment in Criticism*; *God in the Dock*; *Essays on Theology and Ethics*; *Mere Christianity*; *Out of the Silent Planet*; *Perelandra*; *Surprised by Joy*; *The Abolition of Man*; *That Hideous Strength*; *The Joyful Christian*; *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*.

Closely tied to the above works are those that study Lewis's understanding of myth such as Louis Markos' "Lewis Agonistes: Wrestling with the Modern and Postmodern World" and "The Myth Made Fact"; William Gray's *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffman*; David Downing's *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*; Bruce Edwards' *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*; Don Elgin's "True and False Myth in C. S. Lewis's 'Till We Have Faces'"; Charles Moorman's "Space Ship and Grail: The Myths of C. S. Lewis," and Duncan Sprague's "The Unfundamental C. S. Lewis."

A third body of resources is composed of works that explore the meaning of myth in language and culture. These include Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*; Tom Collins' "Mythic Reflections: Thoughts on Myth, Spirit, and our Times"; Mircea Eliade's *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*; G. A. Gaskell's *Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths*; Michael Grant's *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, and Claude Levi-Strauss' *Myth and Meaning*.

The fourth body of work will be resources that engage myth from the religious perspective with some focus on Christianity. These include Mortimer Adler's *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*; J. J. Bachofen's *Myth, Religion, & Mother Right*; Ian Barbour's *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*; William Cobble's "C. S. Lewis's Understanding of God's Work in Paganism"; Tom Collins' "Mythic Reflections: Thoughts on Myth, Spirit, and our Times"; Winfried Corduan's *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions*; Louis Markos' "Culture, Religion, Philosophy, and Myth: What Christianity is Not" and "From Homer to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics"; John Oswalt's *The Bible Among the Myths*; Clark Pinnock's "Theology and Myth: An Evangelical Response to Demythologizing," and Thomas Snyder's *Myth Conceptions: Joseph Campbell and the New Age*.

Scholarly Contribution

To date there has been no comprehensive study comparing the similarities and differences of these two leading scholars concerning their respective understanding of myth and its role in the thinking of Western culture where both religion and technology remain persuasive aspects of daily life. Such a study is needed not only because it fills a gap in Campbell and Lewis studies, but also because an exploration of their views provides information and assistance for a greater understanding of the role of religion and literature in a technological age. Such a study of religion, myth, culture, and technology as discussed in the writings of C. S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell can serve as an invaluable contribution in exploring the question, “What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology?”

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