

'Earth is in the heavens', Joseph Campbell taught us

Rich Heffern | Jan. 31, 2011 Eco Catholic

Joseph Campbell was a scholar, teacher and thinker who achieved enormous popularity addressing the disenchantment of modern life with a message of renewal and hope. His message had great influence. Today when you hear someone say "I'm spiritual but not religious," Campbell is partly to blame.



Campbell once spoke about the famous image astronauts took of the

Earth rising over the moon's horizon that first appeared during the early 1970s. The space age, he felt, had brought us an awareness that is still slowly sinking in: The world as we know it is coming to an end.

"Our world as the center of the universe, the world divided from the heavens, the world bound by horizons in which God's love is reserved for members of the in group: That is the world that is passing away," said Campbell. "Apocalypse is not about a fiery Armageddon and salvation of a chosen few, but about the fact that our ignorance and our complacency are coming to an end."

Today when books about the end of times, the Mayan predictions for 2012 soar to the top of the bookstore charts, Campbell's view is timely and helpful.

Although the word is commonly used to denote a falsehood, "myth" — as Campbell taught us — is as relevant today as current headlines. A *New Yorker*, Campbell was fond of saying "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the light to change."

Campbell's message was that these are stories about our common religious experience. They are not old museum pieces with little relevance. Myth is about our life today. Myths, he said, are the "masks of God."

One of the most beloved teachers of our time, Campbell was a reliable guide through the mysteries of the ancient texts of *Beowulf*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the Egyptian mysteries, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Arthurian romances, the American Indian myths, stories from the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian religions as well as modern myth makers like James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Pablo Picasso. These stories and images from the world's cultures are, he felt, "secret openings through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation." He was convinced that religion boils up from the "basic, magic ring of myth."

Campbell acknowledged that his Catholic upbringing had proven a rich resource for his life. "I think any one who has not been Catholic in that sort of substantial way has no realization of the ambiance of religion within which you live. It's powerful; it's potent; it's life supporting. And it's beautiful. Every month has its poetic and spiritual value? I'm sure that my interest in mythology comes out of that."

"Truth is one," he said, "and the sages speak of it by many names." The common themes and images in our sacred stories and art transcend the cultures from which they come. He believed that a reviewing of such primordial images and themes in mythology such as death and resurrection, virgin birth, the hero's quest and the promised land "the universal aspects of the soul, the blood memories" could reveal our common psychological roots. "They could even show us, as seen from below," Campbell wrote, "how the soul views itself."

Campbell showed us that that the moon flights and the accompanying photographs were theological moments as well as historic ones. "They ended a great cleft in our spirit, proving to us that Earth is not below and heaven above. Earth is in the heavens," said Campbell's friend Eugene Kennedy. "Carl Jung said that the proclamation by Pius XII of the assumption of the Virgin Mary in the 1950s was nothing less than Mother Earth returning to the heavens. This recent declaration of new dogma shows so well how our religious images reflect our experience," Kennedy said.

Kennedy's interview with Campbell for the New York Times Magazine introduced Bill Moyers to Campbell, leading him in turn to the public television series that made Campbell famous.

In that interview, Campbell talks about the Stanley Kubrick film "2001: A Space Odyssey," particularly the opening scenes that depict our ape-like ancestors millions of years ago snarling and squabbling with each other, then cowering together in fear at night while predators lurk outside their cave. "Yet there is one among them," Campbell points out, "who is slightly different, one who is drawn out of curiosity to approach and explore, one who has a sense of awe before the unknown. This one is apart and alone, seated in wonder before a panel of metal standing mysteriously upright in the landscape. He contemplates it, then he reaches out and touches it cautiously in the way the first astronaut's foot approached and then gently touched down on the moon.

"Awe, you see, is what moves us forward," said Campbell. Awe dwells at the heart of our religious experience.

"We live in the stars," said Joseph Campbell, "and we are finally moved by awe to our greatest adventures. The kingdom of God is truly within us."

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