

# The Power of Religion: Methodological Themes in the Work of Joseph Campbell

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Joseph Campbell was a well-known figure in the world of mythological studies. His seminal work in the field, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, was widely read, and immediately prior to his death in 1987 his general popularity was enhanced by way of a series of interviews conducted at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch by the journalist Bill Moyers. The location for these interviews may have owed something to Lucas' debt to Campbell's work, Lucas having previously identified Campbell's account of the hero-myth as a major inspiration for his films. This example shows the extent and nature of Campbell's reach into popular culture, but while Campbell's *monomyth* certainly seems to have given Lucas and others a frame on which to hang their dramatic narratives, there is a theme running through Campbell's work that I believe also contributes to his enduring popularity in the West. That theme is a religious one. The perspective that explains and ultimately unifies the various stories that Campbell might characterise as mythic or religious is a kind of secular religiosity with its roots in Western individualism and modern psychology. Quite apart from Campbell's gifts as an author, and the penetration of his ideas into popular culture, it is this implicit transcendentalism that explains much of his enduring appeal.

Religion itself is a well-known conundrum, not merely for its great diversity of ideas and practices, but also because of the semantic evasiveness of the word. That diversity is part of the problem, of course: by what rule do we say that two or more otherwise distinct cultural practices are versions of the same thing? Consideration of religion as an identifiable and generalisable phenomenon begins by presuming certain characteristics to be universal of it, a move lying at the heart of any comparative method.

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The first “comparative religionist,” as Eric J. Sharpe put it, “was the first worshipper of a god or gods who asked himself... why his neighbour should be a worshipper of some other god or gods,”<sup>2</sup> and Campbell was, first of all, a comparativist. In his youth, he noticed how similar the myths of Native American cultures were to the stories of his own Catholicism and, so the story goes, this observation is what inspired him to his mature work as a mythologist. *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* explicitly identifies a *monomyth* lying behind a vast array of heroic tales, and it is the religious dimension of these unifying themes of Campbell’s that I am considering in this article. But there is that word again: “religion.”

No single article can put to rest the disputes over its proper meaning, but it is important to mention that while the controversy will necessarily complicate an understanding of how Campbell intends the word “religion,” there are habits of use that suggest what he had in mind. On one level the words “religion” and “mythology” are to Campbell two versions of the same thing, and both words have positive implications for him. When he speaks of religion pejoratively, however, he intends an institutional, typically Western, meaning of the word because, more optimistically and in contrast, mythology derives its power and potential from its responsiveness and adaptability to human experience. Life places demands on us and will, in one way or another, bestow eternal truths by way of historical accidents, and mythology’s capacity to reflect and adapt to this is what makes it of benefit to mankind. Religion in the institutional sense, is a potential obstacle to this due to its tendency to conservatism and ossification, and Campbell sees these problems more characteristic of religious forms of the West, than the East.

Our way of thinking in the West sees God as the final source or cause of the energies and wonder of the universe. But in most Oriental thinking, and in primal thinking also, the gods are rather manifestations and purveyors of an energy that is finally impersonal.<sup>3</sup>

A more positive religiosity, and hence religion, is possible for Campbell, despite his reservations about many of its historical forms. In the end, “religion” can mean for Campbell an internalisation of those destructive institutional forces, or it can describe the kind of enriching insight that characterises the best myths, the worthier religions and, to him, the best

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<sup>2</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1992), p. 1. See also E. O. James, *Comparative Religion* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1961), p. v.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Sue Flowers (ed.), *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 207.

kind of comparativism: the kind that sees not only mundane explanations for universal “mythological and religious themes, but also that addresses questions of “ultimate concern,” as Paul Tillich would have it.

William James’ broad characterisation of religiosity as any state of mind that relates the believer to the believer’s idea of divinity<sup>4</sup> is a reasonable analogue for what Campbell intends by the word in its more optimistic sense, but where James was always quite open about his (sometimes equivocal) belief in the value and usefulness of religious attitudes, Campbell’s professed lack of belief perhaps distracts from a deeper methodological sympathy. I will return to James’ possible influence on Campbell later in this article, but for now it is worth noting that it is this kind of religiosity that Campbell expresses and which marks him as a perennialist in the field of religious theory.

### **Myth and Religion**

Although Campbell’s passion was specifically mythological, his related religious interests are important to acknowledge, not least of all because he frequently addressed the religion-question directly. For Campbell, misunderstood mythology was only part of a class of problems that included humanity’s often-misguided religiosity as well; and the benefits properly religious insights could bestow were available by way of the same interpretive methods he brought specifically to the study of mythology. While for Campbell a certain type of religiosity was little more than mythology misunderstood, elsewhere he endorses a methodological re-appropriation of religious ideas in service to his broader program for human flourishing. In this sense, both religion and mythology can serve legitimate human interests.

It may seem ironic that while Campbell was suspicious of many religions his reading of mythology helped him arrive at apparently religious conclusions, but this is to ignore the implicitly religious ideas that underpin

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<sup>4</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1929), pp. 480-481 and 493: “The pivot round which the religious life... revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism... Today, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns... Religion, occupying herself with personal destinies and keeping thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history.”

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his generalisations. Quite naturally, his comparative mythology work relies on there being enduring ideas to which many otherwise disparate mythologies refer, and these ideas are very often religious in nature. Take, for example, his analysis of this recurring theme:

What is the meaning of the virgin birth? In India, there is this system of the kundalini, as it's called, the idea of the centres, psychological centres up the spine. And they represent the psychological planes of concern and consciousness and action... Now, in each of these centres there is a symbolic form. At the base, the first one, there is the form of the lingam and yoni, the male and female organs in conjunction. At the heart chakra, there is again the male and female organs in conjunction, but in gold. This is the virgin birth. It's the birth of spiritual man out of the animal man.<sup>5</sup>

While these mythological expressions can be as varied as there are people to have them, there are nevertheless eternal and universal truths of human import to which these expressions refer. With a striking religious tone, Campbell insists that such insights are not merely personal or cultural but refer to universal human truths:

The life of mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors delivering, not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realisation of transcendence, infinity, and abundance, as this of which the upanishadic authors tell. Indeed, the first and most essential service of a mythology is this one, of opening the mind and heart to the utter wonder of all being.<sup>6</sup>

One of the interesting and, perhaps, compelling things about Campbell is how he portrays the typically cryptic spirituality of the modern secularist. Despite what are manifestly religious pronouncements, Campbell characteristically avoids explicit supernatural claims whenever he can. While a mythological idea is always a metaphor for human spiritual potential, any experience of the eternal is there to be had in the here and now, "and nowhere else... If you don't experience it here and now, you're not going to get it in heaven."<sup>7</sup>

Although Campbell said many things suggesting sympathy with the notion of enduring consciousness—though not necessarily enduring personality—he believed that the clearest benefits of mythology were for the lives with which we are most familiar. Part of the function of myth is to

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<sup>5</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and Religion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 223.

facilitate the successful integration of individuals with communities, but the modern world of rapid social change presents obstacles to this important function. While myths may have offered for thousands of years crucial insights to the society from which they arose, today's societies are far too diverse and inconstant to allow for this. In the past, myths had time to evolve and reflexively nurture their parent cultures, but the modern world presented to Campbell a new problem:

I don't think there can ever be a general comprehensive mythology. For there to be a shared mythology there must be a shared body of experiences. In small horizon-bound societies everyone was immersed in the same social and visual reality ... But our contemporary world is so heterogeneous that few people share the same experiences. Pluralism makes a unifying myth impossible. But if we cannot reinstate such a mythology we can, at least, return to the source from which mythology springs—the creative imagination.<sup>8</sup>

For mythology to continue to serve humanity, Campbell's ultimate recommendation was for human beings to see beyond their culturally-bound religious personas in order to gain insight into the universal spiritual potential which is their birth-right. Of the *telos* of such insight Campbell was content to concede that this was, in principle, unknowable, which reflects his methodological debt to the classic distinction between the Occidental and Oriental, and his preference for the latter. Campbell had a clear preference for Eastern mythology because of its tendency to offer symbols as temporal inflections of a higher, hidden significance.<sup>9</sup> Modernisation itself has driven the mythological work entirely inward, and to Campbell's way of thinking the Eastern model is a more reliable metaphor for human psychology in general, and thus a more suitable model for spiritual growth.

As was shown earlier, it was this model that he applied when interpreting the universal significance of virgin-birth stories, and he used it frequently as a psychological framework to explain human behaviour: either according to more fundamental, animal imperatives; or in ways reflective of more spiritual objectives. Campbell discussed this in a paper entitled "Metaphors of Psychological Transformation."

In the normal course of a well-favoured human lifetime the unfolding of the body's vital energy transpires through marked stages of transformation

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<sup>8</sup> Sam Keen, 'Man and Myth: a Conversation with Joseph Campbell', *Psychology Today* vol. 56 (July 1971), pp. 35-39, 86-95.

<sup>9</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, pp. 208-209.

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which in the pictographic lexicon of India's yogic schools are represented as controlled from separate spinal centres known as chakras.<sup>10</sup>

Every person has within the potential to act from one or more of these psychological centres; to behave with regard to the merely expedient, as characterised by the first three chakras:

These, and these alone, have supplied the motivations of historical man, his effective moral systems, and his nightmare of world history. They are the centres of the basic urges, furthermore, that mankind shares with the beasts—namely, (1) to survive alive by feeding on other lives, (2) to generate offspring, and (3) to conquer and subdue. Unrestrained by any control system, these become devastating, as the history of the present century surely tells.<sup>11</sup>

Or to act in a manner that is, as Campbell would have it, more properly human; more spiritual:

The transformation of character that is prerequisite for living in the light of a transformed world is symbolised in the imagery of the yogic lotus ladder by a final triad of chakras—numbers 5, 6, and 7—which are of the head and mind pursuing aims and ends beyond range of the physical senses.<sup>12</sup>

The intermediate, fourth, “heart chakra” is the point of transformation; of movement from the purely animal to the genuinely human; the golden chakra of the virgin birth. The birth of the spiritual life from merely carnal is represented by the chakra-system here, and by miraculous births in other traditions. It is at this point, for Campbell, that authentically religious contemplation begins. For him, it is the point of awakening to compassion.

Campbell's debt to depth psychology will be covered later, but for now the point may be prefaced by noting that his belief in the validity of the final two chakras of the kundalini system marks an important departure from his otherwise sympathetically Jungian approach. It also reveals an unapologetically mystical strain in his work. In “speaking of the death of the ego,” Segal points out,

Campbell reveals that he is not a Jungian after all. He is a mystic. His interpretation remains psychological, and his brand of psychology is far more Jungian than Freudian, but it is finally not Jungian... Campbell himself recognizes that neither Jung nor Freud espouses a return to sheer unconsciousness. He contrasts the typical Eastern goal, the dissolution

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 66.

of the ego itself, to the conventional Western one, represented by Jung as well as Freud.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Campbell's great reliance on the work of the depth psychologists, his method goes further to explicitly incorporate idiomatic *religious* insights; and contrary to the suggestion that such an approach distorts the subject matter, in step with humanist psychology, the conscious testimony of the believer is taken seriously by Campbell insofar as it serves an ultimately perennialist agenda. In this way, religion is seen to be potentially beneficial for the same reasons that mythology, read properly, can be said to be so.

To Campbell, every person has a spiritual potential realisable within the life he or she must presently endure: "All religions, all mythologies are true in this sense."<sup>14</sup> Eastern religions, with their tendency to represent ultimate and impenetrable mysteries by way of temporal analogies—to be aware of their symbols *as symbols*—were more in keeping with his expectations of what religion could do for us: encode the ultimate mysteries of human spiritual potential. In contrast, Western religious traditions, by and large, were disappointing for Campbell because of their tendency to literalise, historicise, and misread the local analogy as the final and unambiguous message.

In sympathy with earlier theorists anxious to claim speculative territory from religion, Campbell accepts that as the natural sciences explain more of what was previously couched in religious doctrine religion's purchase upon history becomes more tenuous. But instead of regarding this progression as proof of religion's eventual irrelevance,<sup>15</sup> Campbell takes this as evidence of the essentially metaphorical nature of religious discourse, and of its merely implicit metaphysical possibilities. On the post-mortem ascents of Jesus and Mary he has this to say:

What is connoted by such metaphorical voyages is the possibility of a return of the mind in spirit, while still incarnate, to full knowledge of that transcendent source out of which the mystery of a given life arises into this field of time and back into what time dissolves ... The imagery is necessarily physical and thus apparently of outer space. The inherent

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<sup>13</sup> Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps one of Campbell's more positive contributions to the discussion of religion against a broadly atheistic worldview. He is essentially reductionist without being dismissive, not least of all because his interpretations are essentially religious. Again, for the modern spiritual-but-not-religious individual this holds obvious appeal.

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connotation is always, however, psychological and metaphysical, which is to say of inner space.<sup>16</sup>

The ascension represents a psychological process with a view to metaphysical realisations; a fairly typical Campbellian reading, complete with the usual post-Enlightenment (post-Kantian, really) metaphysical undercurrents informing an essentially psychological reading. Others have drawn persuasive parallels between Campbell's interpretive habits to his earlier academic work in literary analysis,<sup>17</sup> exchanging poetic implication for post-Kantian psychoanalysis, and presuming, perhaps, that the raw material of religious imagery is the only-partly revealed machinations of a universal human psyche.

Whether or not the parallel is perfect, Campbell clearly believes he is onto something that believers themselves may have missed. Quite naturally, then, religious traditions that remain stubbornly literalist, refusing to read between the lines, lie outside of Campbell's consideration as a religious theorist. To be religious in any positive sense is to see beyond religion to an ineffable point at which all legitimate religiosity begins. Again, in sympathy with William James, Campbell believes that a very particular, and irreducibly personal, insight lies at the heart of all religion, whether or not the subsequent traditions do justice to that fact. Creation myths, stories of incredible births, transformations, multi-limbed figures, and super-sonic ascensions to Heaven are both ridiculous in a naturalistic universe and immensely enriching if read as metaphors for processes within the mind of an appropriately religious individual. Thus, for Campbell, all human beings share a cross-cultural potential for this kind of—essentially Eastern, if you ask him—type of religiosity.

### **Anti-Religion, Antisemitic?**

In addition to the crime of religious literalism, institutions that claim to be in unique possession of religious truth Campbell clearly found offensive. This may seem hypocritical; Campbell is, after all, offering a universally legitimate interpretation of all religion and myth. What may save Campbell—as much as it distinguishes him from Jung—is his conviction that the ultimate reference of religious insight is, by definition,

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<sup>16</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake: Unlocking James Joyce's Masterpiece* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2005 [1944]).

unknowable. His claim to know the mind of God is that we cannot know the mind of God. Obviously, the claim to universal truth occurs in West and East alike but, again, because religions of the East often lend themselves more easily to metaphorical interpretation, Campbell's vehemence on this point was focused on the West. More specifically, as Segal notes,

Campbell asserts that mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, together with ancient Greek and Roman religions, systematically misconstrue their own myths. While he grants correct interpretations by marginal, heterodox movements like Gnosticism, he argues that in the West conventional believers have systematically been indoctrinated in a false understanding of myth.<sup>18</sup>

And subsequently duped of any truly elevating religious insight. By drawing upon religious undercurrents in the West, Campbell is able to extend his examples of a universal, non-literal, religiosity beyond the Orient. Campbell exploits the interrelationship between Gnosticism and early Christianity—particularly as it occurs in the Gnostic gospels—because of its recurring theme that the believer should look for the divine within. Islamic interpretations of Christian texts, and medieval grail-legends likewise receive praise from Campbell for the ease with which they may be used to a similar purpose. Conspicuously, however, of the major Western religions, Campbell makes little use of Jewish examples that would just as easily fit his theoretical framework.<sup>19</sup> This notable avoidance of Jewish subject-matter speaks to the most serious attack made against his reputation, both as a humanitarian and as a theorist: that he harboured anti-Semitic prejudices.

It has to be said that antisemitism sits uneasily beside Campbell's otherwise apparently humanitarian outlook – although sadly this is often the twisted logic of prejudice. Segal suggests that part of Campbell's problem may have been generational, but while he may well have been “brought up to regard Jews [uncharitably],”<sup>20</sup> he was likewise nurtured by a culture that has long championed (at least on paper) the universal dignity and equality of all human beings. We might easily suppose a tension in

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<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Segal, 'Myth Versus Religion for Campbell', in *Uses of Comparative Mythology: Essays on the Work of Joseph Campbell*, ed. Kenneth L. Golden (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Segal, 'J. Campbell on Jews and Judaism', *Religion*, vol. 22 (1992), p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Segal, 'J. Campbell on Jews and Judaism', p. 163.

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Campbell between his antisemitism and his broadly humanist beliefs. Certainly there are many examples of a more generous outlook in his work.<sup>21</sup> Campbell's own thoughts on the matter suggest his suspicion of Judaism is more theoretical than prejudicial. When being told by a Jewish student that her identity resides primarily in her Jewishness, Campbell's response is textbook individualism: "Rachel," says Campbell, "I never thought of you as Jewish or anything else, but as Rachel. Suppose I were to say to you, 'If I didn't think of myself as Irish, I wouldn't know my identity'. That wouldn't make sense, would it?"<sup>22</sup>

Campbell does not want anything to get in the way of the individual's direct and authentic engagement with "the ultimate ground of all being," as he would put it. While his antisemitism seems in doubt, his suspicion of the coercive power of human institutions, even to the point where that power affects exclusively religious matters, is not; and this from an atheist! While it is interesting to speculate about which direction the influence runs, we can do little more than that. Certainly, both are possible: his familial antisemitism may have driven his theoretical bias toward personal autonomy, or his love of individualism may fuel a distrust of religions which resemble the Jewish example: culturally and metaphysically exclusive claims to absolute Truth. His strenuous individualism emerges repeatedly in his writing, and alongside stories of Campbell's outrageous prejudice we must, in fairness, consider those who report that he was remarkably free from such.<sup>23</sup> In the end, competing stories such as these can make us no more than uncomfortable and equivocal. More important for the current discussion is how antisemitism shows itself in Campbell's theories about the nature of religion, if at all.

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<sup>21</sup> Despite believing in Campbell's essentially antisemitic bias, Sandler and Reek acknowledge his more humanitarian side: "*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* impresses the reader by its generosity of spirit and particularly by the way in which it presents, as a counter to pettiness, hostility, and 'man's inhumanity to man,' the Avalokitesvara Buddha whose overcoming of ego allows for his compassionate identification with all beings." Florence Sandler and Darrell Reek, 'The Masks of Joseph Campbell', *Religion*, vol. 11 (1981), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Robin Larsen and Stephen Larsen, *Joseph Campbell. A Fire in the Mind: The Authorized Biography* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2002), pp. 510-511.

As mentioned, one way of viewing Campbell's attitude to Judaism is that it is a conspicuous example of what he disliked about Western religiosity in general, remembering his broad characterisation of Western religion as being overly parochial and literalistic. Certainly, a reading of Judaism in these terms is possible:

As stated unequivocally in II Kings 5:15, "There is no god in all the earth but in Israel." For at that time the center of the universe was Jerusalem. And the center of Jerusalem was the Temple. And the centre of the Temple was the Holy of Holies in the Temple. And the center of the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant therein. And the foundation of the universe was the Stone that was there before the Ark. Mythologically, metaphorically, that was a perfectly good cultic image. But it had nothing to do with the universe, or with the rest of the peoples of this planet.<sup>24</sup>

Campbell then proceeds to discuss how diaspora Judaism relocated its spiritual centre in race rather than place, merely shifting the locus of this particular kind of religious hubris.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere he does make more positive use of Jewish mysticism, extracting from it the same kind of life-affirming mythological core,<sup>26</sup> but not to the degree to which he makes use of the heretical strains in other, otherwise problematic, religious traditions. Despite a comparable rich variety in the history of Jewish religiosity, Campbell seems content to conspicuously ignore those Jewish examples that lend themselves to his more positive interpretation of religion's potential.

Using this ignored perspective, Judaism is indeed potentially compatible with Campbell's religious ideals. It has even been suggested that Judaism itself plays an important role in the development of the Western individualism of which Campbell is so fond:

The remarkable resemblances among Roman law, present-day American law, and Jewish jurisprudence in Biblical days is more than mere coincidence. The Jews devised, four centuries before Christ, a legal system based on the dignity of man and individual equality before the

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<sup>24</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Sam Keen, who interviewed Campbell on several occasions for the magazine *Psychology Today* in 1971, is of a similar opinion: "You have to remember that Joseph grew up loving mythology and loving the plurality of the stories. So he was naturally offended by that single instance in human history [the Judaeo-Christian tradition] where plurality is taken as idolatry." Larsen and Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind*, p. 513.

<sup>26</sup> Segal, 'J. Campbell on Jews and Judaism', p. 158.

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law, while Europe still had trial by ordeal as late as the fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

To ignore the Jewish contribution to modern humanism is an ironic oversight, to say the least, for such a squarely—albeit mystical—humanist reinterpreter of religiosity itself. Of all the evidence suggesting that Campbell was anti-Semitic, his failure to adequately treat Jewish religiosity with equivalent charity is arguably the most suggestive. It implies either that he could not treat that particular subject dispassionately, or that he unreflectively rejected the positive influence of Jewish culture upon the West. To Campbell's essentially Western perennialism, Judaism apparently had next to nothing to contribute. Critics further suggest that Campbell's very methodology is anti-Semitic to the core. Sandler and Reeck offer one of the most unforgiving characterisations along such lines, arguing that

to differentiate the freedom-loving, non-state-forming Germano-Celtic type from the state-and-priest-ridden Levantine is so transparent a revival of the old prejudice of Aryan culture against Jewish that one blushes for an author so disingenuous, especially when that author knows and deplors Nazi politics.<sup>28</sup>

But perhaps they go too far. Naturally, Campbell's rejection of orthodoxy has anti-Semitic potential, but given that Campbell was hostile to any "state-and-priest-ridden" orthodoxy, it is too much to conclude that his theories are, at heart, racist.

A key difference between mythology and our Judaeo-Christian religion is that the imagery of mythology is rendered with humor. You realise that the image is symbolic of something. You're at a distance from it. But in our religion, everything is prosaic, and very, very serious. You can't fool around with Yahweh.<sup>29</sup>

Campbell's assault is not uniquely directed at Judaism as the attitude of prosaic seriousness is cross-cultural. Clearly, a historical and reflexive attitude antithetical to Campbell's entire outlook is not likely to be met with any favour, Jewish or not. But that in itself is suggestive: The fact that Judaism historically expresses the worst kind of religious impulses, to Campbell, suggests that Campbell had a personal stake in the religious question: that he cared about the kind of conclusions that were drawn in

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<sup>27</sup> Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God and History* (New York: The New American Library, 1962), p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Sandler and Reeck, 'The Masks of Joseph Campbell', p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 220.

religious matters. Given how much religiosity there is in his comparativism, this would hardly be surprising.

The question naturally becomes, if we accept Campbell's explicit atheism, and his potentially prejudicial stance on certain religious forms, what is the nature and source of the crypto-religiosity that drives so much of his interpretive work? There are at least two identifiable influences which resonate with Campbell's methodology: the early psychological work that paralleled Campbell's development as a scholar, and the romanticism and individualism of his own culture which Campbell himself linked to its mythological roots.

### **The Influence of Psychology and Psychoanalysis**

Campbell is frequently compared with Carl Gustav Jung, and it is not hard to see why. He shares with Jung a fascination with mythological tropes, and both theorists are interested in how individuals and societies adapt to myth. Campbell was also very involved with the Eranos conferences, which were quickly taken over, in spirit, by Jung and his followers. Like many of the attendants at Eranos, Campbell came away reassured of the value of Jung's psychological approach to questions of religiosity and myth, and Campbell later edited the assembled Eranos papers into a six-volume selection. Jung's response to Campbell's work was also favourable.<sup>30</sup> Most significantly perhaps, the depth psychology that runs through Campbell's work is more akin to Jung than any other psychologist of that school; and, like Jung, Campbell begins his work by noticing the pattern of similarities among different cultures. In the final of his PBS interviews with Bill Moyers, Campbell positions himself *alongside* Jung rather than as his successor by identifying a common theoretical ancestor: Adolf Bastian, whose "elementary ideas" influence both Jung and Campbell's broadly

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<sup>30</sup> Not long after their meeting in 1953, Campbell sent Jung a copy of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Jung wrote in reply, "Thank you ever so much for kindly sending me your very beautiful book. I had already seen it before and have duly admired it. You are certainly shaping after my late friend Heinrich Zimmer. It is the same style and outlook. I am glad to have made your personal acquaintance this summer." Ritske Rensma, *The Inmateness of Myth: A New Interpretation of Joseph Campbell's Reception of C.G. Jung* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 88.

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psychological approach.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Campbell did draw upon the refinements of the Jungian model.<sup>32</sup>

Sigmund Freud's theories do not seem to have been as instrumental in forming Campbell's mature thought, and it is fair to say that he relies on Freud only as far as Jung himself would have done.<sup>33</sup> Although there is nothing in Campbell's writing to suggest the kind of euhemerism of Freud's earlier work on religious origins,<sup>34</sup> Campbell does cite, with reservation, Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in his *Masks of God* series. Keeping in mind Campbell's dislike of religious literalism, and his predilection for cultural decoding, he is sympathetic to comparable efforts by Freud to unmask the profound secret of the myth of Moses. For Campbell, religion is capable of providing genuine insight into the human situation, but he is also more than willing to entertain Freud's idea that it is the practice of neurotics in certain cases:

[A]ccording to [Freud's] by no means unlearned view, it furnishes the only plausible psychological explanation of the peculiarly compulsive character of biblical belief, which is in striking contrast to the relaxed, poetic, and even playful approaches to mythology of the Greeks of the same period.<sup>35</sup> Biblical religion, according to Freud, has the character of a neurosis, where a screen of mythic figurations hides a repressed conviction of guilt, which it is felt, must be atoned, and yet cannot be consciously faced.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In his later work, Campbell seems to equate them more directly: "The Buddhists speak of Buddha Realms. These are planes and orders of consciousness that can be brought to mind through meditations of appropriately mythologized forms. Plato tells of universal ideas, the memory of which is lost a birth but through philosophy may be recalled. These correspond to Bastian's 'Elementary Ideas' and Jung's 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious'." Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> "Campbell holds that Bastian's hierarchy of Elementary Ideas is essential, but believes that depth psychology, as initiated by Freud and Jung, now makes it possible to go beyond Bastian's mere listing and description of the Elementary Ideas to a study of their biological roots." Marc Manganaro, *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 169, quoting from Campbell's essay 'Bios and Mythos'.

<sup>33</sup> Lesser known than Jung's 'collective unconscious', for example, are equivalent ideas in Freud's psychological model. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (London: Penguin, 1938), p. 157.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Notice Campbell's characterisation of Greek belief. In his survey of religions, he favours those societies that take this kind of 'poetic' attitude to their religions. This tendency is historically apt when we consider that in contrast to the religious legalism and divinely ordered societies of Hebraic cultures, those societies with a distant and philosophical eye on their own religions are perhaps the earliest examples of what we now call "comparative religion." See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 7. Campbell, in this sense, is methodologically, perhaps self-consciously, recapitulating sympathetic historical religious themes.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 126.

Freud's opinion is at least superficially similar to Campbell's, which suggests a relationship to the younger man's work and the depth psychology that grew in parallel with his own theoretical development. Should we perhaps consider both Campbell and Jung the theoretical twin-offspring of Bastian and Freud? While it is plausible to suggest that Campbell need not have been directly influenced by Freud, it is implausible to suppose that the immense influence of the Viennese psychoanalyst would not have made an impression, and Campbell was certainly content to characterise Freud as "one of the bravest creative spirits of our day."<sup>37</sup>

For reasons already mentioned, the link is clearer with Jung, even if by way of Bastian. But it is important to recognise that Campbell's similarity to Jung is not as complete, or exclusive, as it might appear. That religious dimension distinguishes Campbell from Jung in ways that Segal has suggested, and there is a phenomenological dimension to Campbell's work in keeping with other psychological work on religion that predate Jung's popularity in the field. In addition to the depth psychologists already discussed, there are correspondences in Campbell's work to the ideas of an earlier type of psychology exemplified in figures such as James H. Leuba (1868-1946), Edwin Diller Starbuck (1866-1947) and, again, William James (1842-1910). Although Campbell's structural approach is partly ratified by the insights of depth psychology, he is also interested in the psychology of the believer as it manifests consciously, as it was for these members of the humanist school of psychological theory. In contrast with Leuba, and more like Starbuck and James, Campbell also concedes the possibility of the transcendental to which the belief refers, which is, of course, the contra-Jungian distinction noted by Segal. Campbell often betrayed his religious sympathies by his selective use of religious testimony. The following are Campbell's words, discussing the Native American mystic Black Elk.

[H]e had seen himself standing on the central mountain of the world, which in his view, of course, was nowhere near Jerusalem, but Harney Peak, in the Black Hills of South Dakota. And while there, "I was seeing in a sacred manner," he said, "the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all things as they must live together, like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the centre grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father." There, I would say, was a *true* prophet, who knew the difference between his ethnic ideas and the elementary ideas that they enclose, between a metaphor and its connotation, between a tribal myth and its metaphorical import.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Campbell, *Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, pp. 33-34.

## *The Power of Religion*

Campbell habitually favoured prophets and mystics whose insights lent themselves to a universalist interpretation. The stubbornly parochial forms of religious devotion Campbell saw as examples of religion failing in its responsibility for human enrichment. For a religion to work as a transmitter of mythic ideas (ideas that spoke to the human condition and that were legitimately transformative) the message may be coined in the local tongue, but it must be pregnant with universal significance and open to that interpretative dimension. As far as the conscious beliefs of the religious affect Campbell's theories, he clearly favours those who fit a pre-determined metaphysical point of view, and this kind of selectiveness, it must be admitted, weakens Campbell's affinity with humanist psychology because it arbitrarily jettisons much of its raw material. A portion, at least, of the unique religious point-of-view remains methodologically essential for Campbell, even while it remains but a portion.

In his final interview for the PBS series, Campbell discussed transpersonal psychologist Abraham Maslow with reference to Maslow's influential theory of B-type cognition and "peak experiences." From Campbell's perspective,

[t]he peak experience refers to actual moments of your life when you experience your relationship to the harmony of Being. My own peak experiences, the ones that I knew were peak experiences after I had them, all came in athletics.<sup>39</sup>

Maslow included in his list of possible peak experiences both religious and secular rapture, and Campbell's argument that the rewards of religion (properly conceived) were attainable by anyone with a suitable attitude to any life-experience is certainly one that conforms to Maslow's cognitive model. Lacking any conventional religious experiences of his own, a Maslow-type experience may have been as close an empathy Campbell expected with the authentically religious. His own "peak experiences" occurred in his life as a young athlete, and however much transcendentalism there is in Campbell's thought, the earthly, bodily component of religious sensibility is never far away:

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 220.

<sup>40</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 5.

Campbell, without ever being formally religious beyond his boyhood Catholicism, seemed to have an interest in understanding (and not merely by analogy) what the religiously devout might be experiencing.<sup>41</sup> His approach expresses the individualism and emphasis on personal experience that persists in the West to this day, and was certainly part of the *zeitgeist* from which humanist psychology sprung.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, individualism can be said to lie at the heart of his religious interpretation. The ease with which Eastern religious models can be made to conform to Western individualism may go some way to explaining Campbell's privileging of the Oriental perspective. As Sharpe puts it, "the interest which the Romantics showed in the East was in large measure determined by the support which it gave (or appeared to give) for a certain kind of individual, intuitive philosophy of life."<sup>43</sup>

### **Romanticism and Individualism**

Indeed, for Campbell, the Romance tradition of twelfth century Europe explains much of what is characteristic of Western culture. He characterises the Romantic tradition as a crucial transitional moment in Western civilisation; shifting from allegiance to tradition to what we now commonly assume as appropriate (even religiously appropriate) personal authenticity. In Campbell's words,

[i]t was important in that it gave the West this accent on the individual, that one should have faith in his experience and not simply mouth terms handed down to him by others. It stresses the validity of the individual's experience of what humanity is, what life is, what values are, against the monolithic system.<sup>44</sup>

This theme of personal authenticity over tradition and authority is what he identifies in the medieval story of Tristan and Isolde. With European stories this is less problematic because a Western individualist interpreting his own culture has, at least, a reflexive plausibility. A North American scholar might well be intuitively sensitive to the historical precedents of his own culture. But to bend a non-western tradition to the same interpretation invites obvious

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<sup>41</sup> Segal notes this peculiarity: "Ironically, Campbell himself was politically conservative; was not the least religious; never practiced meditation, let alone took drugs; and above all grasped the unconscious meaning of myths through sheer reading rather than through any encounter with the unconscious." Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Kirk J. Schneider, 'The Revival of the Romantic Means a Revival of Psychology', in *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Leading Edges in Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds Kirk J. Schneider, James F.T. Bugental, and J. Fraser Pierson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), pp. 65-76.

<sup>43</sup> Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 187.

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problems, unless we presume that a meta-narrative informs these disparate stories in exactly the same way that individualism could persist for centuries in a more-or-less uniform culture. Again, Sharpe is keenly aware of the problems with this kind of comparativism. The adoption of exotic philosophies without consideration for history and cultural peculiarities can lead to the worst type of theorising: “eclectic, intuitive, frequently inaccurate, [and] resting on the foundations of a highly individual personal philosophy.”<sup>45</sup> As much has been said of Campbell more directly, and the point not only addresses a theoretical weakness, it also goes some way to explaining his popularity: he appeals to us in the West because he flatters our unconscious prejudices. Those who are suspicious of traditional religious institutions and yet regard themselves as *spiritual* are the perfect audience for Campbell. We feel we are seeing behind the corrupting, local superficialities to a deeper religious truth—one supposedly universal, but which in fact merely suits our unapologetic individualism.

More sympathetically, perhaps, theorists such as Campbell bring to the subject exactly the right kind of insight. Not clumsily imposing the parochial on the universal, but rather revealing the universal through the *embrasure* of the inescapably local. After all, it is commonplace to be aware of, and correct for, the distorting potential of our own subjectivity, but bootstrapping ourselves above our personal and cultural foundations is an ultimately futile enterprise. There always remains a residue of indefensible selfhood from which we must proceed, but this is not necessarily corrosive to the task of understanding any human phenomenon. Parenthood is scrutinised and theorised broadly and minutely, but parents understand it in an entirely irreducible way. In the same way, there is an aspect of religiosity only open to the religious. From this point of view, Campbell’s atheism would be a handicap were it not for his oddly religious intuitions.

Campbell was obviously aware of the strong individualism of his own culture (as we have seen, he traces it to the twelfth century and the Romantic institution of the troubadours), and he cannot have been so blind to not see the individualism and stress on personal authenticity that ran through his own work. One of Campbell’s predecessors is interesting in this regard for considering a scholar’s own subjectivity to be essential to the work of understanding religion. It might even be said that the hermeneutics of Joachim Wach (1898-1955) summarise Campbell’s methodology perfectly:

In principle there could resound in each of us something of the ecstatic, the spectral, the unusual—something of that which to us, the children of another age, of another race, and of other customs, appears strange among the

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<sup>45</sup> Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 24.

religious expressions of distant lands. Where this natural disposition is developed through training, there also the prerequisite for an actual understanding of foreign religiosity exists.<sup>46</sup>

What such an approach demands, however, is 'religious instinct,' and perhaps this was among Campbell's talents: a capacity for a-religious religiosity. In using it unapologetically he consciously ignored the warnings of his peers and predecessors. James Bissett Pratt (1875-1944), for example, although he was prepared to accept the possible reality of transcendental objects, denied that religious empathy could ever be part of a scientific investigation of the religious mind:

[The psychology of religion] must content itself with a description of human experience while recognising that there may well be spheres of reality to which these experiences refer and with which they are possibly connected, which yet cannot be investigated by science.<sup>47</sup>

Campbell's religiously normative appraisal is very distinctive for going beyond the merely descriptive, and incorporating the transcultural religious insight he implicitly practised, however much he may or may not have believed it himself.

### **A Methodology of Religion/A Religious Methodology**

Campbell certainly seems to have lacked any deliberate bias, quite the opposite. What he had was an idea of the spiritual potential of every human individual (admittedly, a very Western individual) regardless of the cultural inheritance through which this potential must be read. And he did not exclude himself in this regard, even to the point of including this general religious insight into his methodology. William G. Dotty makes the same observation:

The fact is that Campbell was 'doing' religion all along, but in a non-religious guise, and he was encouraging readers to follow his example, as we could confirm from any number of quotations, as for example: "The images of myth are reflections of the spiritual potentialities of every one of us. Through contemplating these we evoke the powers in our lives."<sup>48</sup>

What makes Campbell interesting as a theorist is that he is one who attempts to accommodate views unique to the subject of his enquiry. In this way he is part of that humanist psychology tradition mentioned earlier.

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<sup>46</sup> Joachim Wach, *Understanding and Believing*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> James Bissett Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), p. 42.

<sup>48</sup> William G. Dotty, 'Dancing to the Music of the Spheres: The Religion in Joseph Campbell's "Non-Religious" Mythography', in *Paths to the Power of Myth: Joseph Campbell and the Study of Religion*, ed. Daniel C. Noel (Belleville, MI: Crossroad, 1990), p. 8.

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The sorts of claims he made concerning the general meaning of specific religious expressions require an *a priori* belief that can easily be called “religious.” Indeed, Campbell, on many occasions, was positively mystical when discussing the themes he believed to be universally present, as in the example that Doty provides above. Speaking of the study of esotericism, Pierre A. Riffard argues that the perspective of the believer is an essential compliment to empirical studies, and Campbell’s approach might well be considered in this way:

The external method, essentially historical-critical, has the advantage of proceeding on familiar ground, with chronologies, documents, etc., but it has the disadvantage of providing information that is, finally, of little relevance ... The internal method, on the other hand, has the advantage of adhering to its object, of speaking the very language of esotericism, not an alien language.<sup>49</sup>

The facts—or as close as he may come to them—are readily provided by empirical research; but to appreciate the meaning of religion it is not always, if ever, possible to do so from beyond a world-view framed by the basic beliefs of religiosity itself. The historian provides the “how,” the mystic theorist helps to impart the “why?” Campbell may be regarded more positively as this kind of theorist, with a foot in both camps.

It is this, in part, that accounts for his enduring popularity. Campbell’s theories have obvious appeal to a society as thoroughly secularised as our own yet which, perhaps as a reaction, still remains desperately curious about questions of ultimate concern. When long-established religious forms no longer satisfy this need—moreover, when traditional institutions are considered incapable of ever doing so—Campbell’s revisiting of the broadly gnostic brand of spirituality with its formula of self-examination is perfectly welcome in a society that champions the moral right of the individual as supreme and which encourages individual expression at every turn. Again, from Doty:

Campbell provided an ostensibly ‘non-religious’ approach to the understanding of religious experience at a time when many well-educated persons had turned away from formal participation in religious institutions. At the same time, there are ample (if sometimes ironic) reasons to see a genuinely religious core in his approach and to assess that mythography from the standpoint of Religious Studies.<sup>50</sup>

More than simply encouraging an ill-considered spiritual hedonism, Campbell’s eclecticism exposes his admirers not only to a world of specific cultural perspectives on these questions, but also to an important heritage of

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<sup>49</sup> Pierre A. Riffard, ‘The Esoteric Method’, in *Gnostica 2: Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, eds Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Doty, ‘Dancing to the Music of the Spheres’, p. 4.

theorising on the nature of religion itself. His publications and public lectures are highly eclectic, incorporating ideas from such wide-ranging sources as Bastian, Kant, Schopenhauer, Joyce, Yeats, and Maslow, amongst others, which, although used in unorthodox ways,<sup>51</sup> nevertheless readily equips his audience with a sense of the breadth of the subject and the range of ideas applied to it. What his generalist approach does for us is, at first blush, provide a glimpse of the essentially multidimensional quality of both religion itself and the theoretical responses to it. Campbell knew he was a generalist, and knew as well how this placed him in the opinion of his peers:

Specialization tends to limit the field of problems that the specialist is concerned with. Now, the person who isn't a specialist, but a generalist like myself, sees something over here that he has learned from one specialist, something over there that he has learned from another specialist—and neither of them has considered the problem of why this occurs here and also there. So the generalist—and that's a derogatory term, by the way, for academics—gets into a range of other problems that are more genuinely human, you might say, than specifically cultural.<sup>52</sup>

To this smorgasbord approach Campbell brought a set of preconceptions that, even if derived from a selection of cross-cultural themes, still have the potential to distort the data of pure research, especially when the themes selected suit uniquely Western ideals. Yet they are quasi-religious preconceptions, and if Sharpe is correct in saying that “the phenomenologist of religion must, if he is honest, confess that the enterprise on which he is engaged cannot but involve the subjective faculty of interpretation,”<sup>53</sup> then what better preconceptions than some understanding of the religious life itself?

## **Conclusion**

While seeming to lack any religious affiliation, personal or institutional, Campbell's theoretical approach to mythology and religion presupposes certain ideas and attitudes that fall easily within the ambit of respectable definitions of religiosity itself. For this reason, he is best understood as the type of phenomenologist who, beyond simply admitting that the scholar's

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<sup>51</sup> In his elucidation of Hindu metaphysics using Kantian epistemology, for example, Campbell uses Kant in a way quite different to that of his predecessor in the social sciences Friedrich Max Müller. Where Müller wanted to extend Kant to take into account the human apprehension of the Infinite, Campbell argued that Kant shows the bounded nature of human understanding which must admit ignorance of *Brahma*. See Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 49 and Garry W. Trompf, *Friedrich Max Mueller as a Theorist of Comparative Religion* (Bombay: Shakuntala Publishing House, 1978), p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> Flowers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 248.

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preconceptions cannot be entirely dismissed, maintained in his perspective on the religious and mythological something of the mystical, a-rational, transcendent ideas of the more self-consciously devout. Alongside Joachim Wach, Campbell should perhaps be likened to pioneers in the study of religion such as Willard G. Oxtoby who believe that a scholar's eidetic vision makes the study of religion more like literary criticism, or aesthetics, than any of the natural sciences. Certainly, this is a fitting comparison given Campbell's parallel treatment of literature and religion.<sup>54</sup>

While a wilful acquiescence to subjectivity remains problematic, Campbell is not alone in taking this approach to the religious question; one that, if nothing else, serves to engage a secular Western audience with that beleaguered and controversial subject. As a scholar of religion, Campbell perhaps might have gained something from being more like phenomenologist W. Brede Kristensen and remembered that, "if our opinion of another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion."<sup>55</sup> But, just as Campbell may have been so counselled, we ought not forget that an emphasis on naturalism in the study of religion is fundamentally at odds with religious psychology, and invites comparable problems.

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<sup>54</sup> Manganaro, *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority*, p. 152.

<sup>55</sup> W. Brede Kristensen, *Religionshistorisk Studium* (Oslo: Olaf Norlis Forlag, 1954), p. 27.