**BILL MOYERS**: Genesis 1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL**: This is the song of the world, from a legend of the Pima Indians: “In the beginning there was only darkness everywhere, darkness and water. And the darkness gathered thick in places, crowding together and then separating, crowding and separating.”

**BILL MOYERS:** “And the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters, and God said, ‘Let there be light.'”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** This is from the Hindu Upanishad: “In the beginning there was only the great self, reflected in the form of a person. Reflecting, it found nothing but itself, and its first word was, ‘This am I.'”

**BILL MOYERS:** Why myths? Why should we care about myths? What do they have to do with my life?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, my first answer would be, well, go on, live your life, it’s a good life, you don’t need this. I don’t believe in being interested in subjects because they’re said to be important and interesting. I believe in being caught by it somehow or other. But you may find that with a proper introduction, this subject will catch you.

And so what can it do for you when it does catch you? These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported man’s life, built civilizations, informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage and if you don’t know what the guide signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself. But once this catches you, there is always such a feeling from one or another of these traditions of information, of a deep, rich life-vivifying sort, that you won’t want to give it up.

**BILL MOYERS:** So myths are stories of the search by men and women through the ages for meaning, for significance, to make life signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.

**CAMPBELL**: 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 what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that the life experiences that we have on the purely physical plane will have resonances within that are those of our own innermost being and reality. And so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive, that’s what it’s all finally about, and that’s what these clues help us to find within ourselves.

**BILL MOYERS:** Myths are clues?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.

**BILL MOYERS:** What we’re capable of knowing within?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** And experiencing within.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** I liked your defin-you changed the definition of a myth from the search for meaning to the experience of meaning.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** The experience, the experience.

**BILL MOYERS:** The experience of life.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** The experience of life. The mind has to do with meaning; in here, what’s the meaning of a flower? That Zen story of the sermon of the Buddha when his whole company was gathered, and he simply lifted a flower. And there’s only one man, Kashyapa, who gave him a sign with his eye that he understood what was said.

What’s the meaning of the universe? What’s the meaning of a flea? It’s just there, that’s it, and your own meaning is that you’re there. Now we are so engaged in doing things, to achieve purposes of outer value, that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it’s all about.

Now, we want to think about God. God is a thought, God is a name, God is an idea, but its reference is to something that transcends all thinking. The ultimate mystery of being is beyond all categories of thought. My friend Heinrich Zimmer of years ago used to say, “The best things can’t be told.” Because they transcend thought. The second best are misunderstood, because those are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can’t be thought about, you know. And one gets stuck with the thoughts. The third best are what we talk about, you see. And myth is that field of reference, metaphors referring to what is absolutely transcendent.

**BILL MOYERS:** What can’t be known.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** What can’t be known.

**BILL MOYERS:** Or can’t be named.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** Except in our own feeble attempt to clothe it in language.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** And the ultimate word in our language for that which is transcendent is God.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you remember what went through your mind the first time you saw Michelangelo’s Creation?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** By the time I became aware of that, my notion of divinity was not quite so personal, you know. The idea of God, that he’s a bearded old man of some kind, with certain not very pleasant temperament, that is I would say a sort of materialistic way of talking about the transcendent.

**BILL MOYERS:** There’s just the opposite of it found on an island in the harbor of Bombay, from around the eighth century.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** This is a wonderful cave. You enter the cave from a bright sky. Of course, moving into the darkness, your eyes are blacked out. But if you just keep walking slowly, gradually the eyes adjust, and this enormous thing, it’s about 19-feet high and 19-feet across, the central head is the mask of eternity. This is the mask of God.

**BILL MOYERS:** The mask of eternity.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That is the metaphor through which eternity is to be experienced as radiance.

**BILL MOYERS:** And these other two figures?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Whenever one moves out of the transcendent, one comes into a field of opposites. These two pairs of opposites come forth as male and female from the two sides. One has eaten of the tree of the knowledge, not only of good and evil, but of male and female, of right and wrong, of this and that, and light and dark. Everything in the field of time is dual, past and future, dead and alive. All this, being and nonbeing; is, isn’t.

**BILL MOYERS:** And what’s the significance of them being beside the mask of God, the mask of eternity? What is this sculpture saying to us?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** The mask represents the middle, and the two represent the two opposites, and they always come in pairs. And put your mind in the middle; most of us put our minds on the side of the good against what we think of as evil. It was Heraclitus, I think, who said, “For God all things are good and right and just, but for man some things are right and others are not.” You’re in the field of time when you’re man, and one of the problems of life is to live in the realization of both terms. That is to say; I know the center and I know that good and evil are simply temporal apparitions.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, are some myths more or less true than others?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** They’re true in different senses, do you see? Here’s a whole mythology based on the insight that transcends duality. Ours is a mythology that’s based on the insight *of* duality. And so our religion tends to be ethical in its accent, sin and atonement, right and wrong. It started with a sin, you see. In other words, moving out of the mythological zone, the garden of paradise where there is no time, and where men and women don’t even know that they’re different from each other, there the two are just creatures. And God and man are practically the same: “He walks in the cool of the evening in the garden where we are.” And then they eat the apple, the knowledge of the pairs of opposites, and man and woman then cover their shame, that they’re different; God and man, they’re different; man and nature, as against man.

I once heard a wonderful lecture by Daisetz Suzuki, you remember, this wonderful old Zen philosopher, who was over here. He was in his 90s. He started a lecture in Switzerland that I heard in Ascona. He stood up with his hands on his side, and he said, “God against man, man against God, man against nature, nature against man, nature against God, God against nature. Very funny religion.”

Now, in the other mythologies, one puts oneself in accord with the world. If the world is a mixture of good and evil, you do not put yourself in accord with it. You identify with the good and you fight against the evil, and this is a religious system which belongs to the Near East, following Zarathustra’s time. It’s in the biblical tradition, all the way, in Christianity and in Islam as well. This business of not being with nature, and we speak with sort of derogation of “the nature religions.” You see, with that fall in the garden, nature was regarded as corrupt. There’s a myth for you that corrupts the whole world for us. And every spontaneous act is sinful, because nature is corrupt and has to be corrected, must not be yielded to. You get a totally different civilization, a totally different way of living according to your myth as to whether nature is fallen or whether nature is itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit being the revelation of the divinity that’s inherent in nature.

**BILL MOYERS:** Don’t you think that Americans, modern Americans, have rejected this idea, this Indian idea, this ancient idea of nature as revealing the divinity, because it would have kept us from achieving dominance over nature?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yeah, but that’s the biblical condemnation of nature that they inherited from their own religion and brought with them. God is not in nature, God is separate from nature, and nature is not God, and this distinction between God and the world is not to be found in basic Hinduism or Buddhism, either.

I’ll never forget the experience I had when I was in Japan. To be in a place that never heard of the fall in the garden of Eden. To be in a place where I can read in one of the Shinto texts, “The processes of nature cannot be evil.” When every impulse, every natural impulse, is not to be corrected, but to be sublimated, you know, to be beautified. And the glorious interest in the beauty of nature and cooperation with nature, and coordination, so that in some of those gardens you don’t know where nature begins and art ends. This to me was a tremendous experience, and it’s another mythology.

**BILL MOYERS:** Speaking of different mythologies, let’s just have a little fun here. I took these from your atlas.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Oh, yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** I’ll read from Genesis, and then you identify and read from the corresponding …

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Oh, yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** Genesis 1: So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** And now this is from a legend of the Bassari people of West Africa. “Unumbotte made a human being, its name was Man. Unumbotte next made all antelope, named Antelope. Unumbotte made a snake, named Snake. And Unumbotte said to them, ‘The Earth has not yet been pounded. You must pound the ground smooth where you are sitting.’ Unumbotte gave them seeds of all kinds and said, ‘Go plant these.'”

**BILL MOYERS:** And Genesis 1: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** And from the Upanishad: “Then he realized, I indeed am this creation, for I have poured it forth from myself. In that way he became this creation, and verily he who knows this becomes in this creation a creator.” That’s the clincher there. When you know this, then you’ve identified with the creative principle yourself, which is the God-power in the world, which means in you. It’s beautiful.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you think we’re looking for, when we subscribe to one of these theories of creation, one of these stories of creation? What are we looking for?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, I think what we’re looking for is a way of experiencing the world in which we are living that will open to us the transcendence that informs it, and at the same time informs ourselves within it. That’s what people want, that’s what the soul asks for.

**BILL MOYERS:** You mean we’re looking for some accord with the mystery that informs all things, what you call that vast ground of silence which we all share?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yes, but not only to find it, but to find it actually in our environment, in our world, to recognize it, to have some kind of instruction that will enable us to see the divine presence.

**BILL MOYERS:** In the world and in us.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** In India, this wonderful Anjali, this greeting, you know what that means?

**BILL MOYERS:** No.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s the greeting of prayer, isn’t it? That’s what we use for prayer. They greet you with that—that’s greeting the god that’s in you as you come in. These people are aware of the divine presence. When you enter an Indian home as a guest, you are a visiting deity, and you feel it, by God, the way they treat you. It’s something in the way of a hospitality that you don’t get where you have simply one person and another person. It’s a recognition of the identity.

**BILL MOYERS:** But weren’t people who told these stories and believed them and acted on them asking far more simple questions, you know, who made the world, how was the world made, why was the world made? Aren’t these the questions that these creation stories are trying to address?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** No. It’s through that answer that they see that the creator is present in the whole world. Do you see what I mean? This story that we’ve just read, “I see that I am this creation,” says the god. When you see that God says he is the creation and then you are a creature, well, the god is within you and the man you’re talking to, also. And so there’s that realization, two aspects of the one divinity.

**BILL MOYERS:** Accord again, harmony again.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Wonderful thing.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let me ask you some questions about these common features in these stories, the significance of the forbidden fruit.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, there’s a standard folktale motif called “The One Forbidden Thing.” Remember, in Bluebeard, “Don’t open that closet.” You know, and then one always does it. And in the Old Testament story, God gives the one forbidden thing, and he knows very well (now I’m interpreting God) he knows very well that man’s going to eat the forbidden fruit. But it’s by doing that that man becomes the initiator of his own life. Life really begins with that.

**BILL MOYERS:** I also find in some of these early stories, the human tendency to find someone to blame.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let me read Genesis 1, then I’ll ask you to read one from the Bassari legend.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** All right.

**BILL MOYERS:** Genesis 1: “And God said, ‘Have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you that you should not eat?’ Then the man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I ate.’ And the Lord God said to the woman, What is this you’ve done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’ Now, I mean, you talk about buck-passing, it starts very early.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s right.

**BILL MOYERS:** And then there’s the Bassari legend.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** It’s been tough on serpents, too. “One day Snake said, ‘We too should eat these fruits. Why must we go hungry?’ Antelope said, ‘But we don’t know anything about this fruit.’ Then Man and his wife took some of the fruit and ate it. Unumbotte came down from the sky and asked, ‘Who ate the fruit?’ They answered, ‘We did.’ Unumbotte asked, ‘Who told you that you could eat that fruit?’ They replied, ‘Snake did.’ It’s the same story.

**BILL MOYERS:** Poor Snake.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** It’s the same story.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you make of this, that in all of these stories the principal actors are pointing to someone else as the initiator of the fall?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yeah, but it turns out to be Snake. And Snake in both of these stories is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** The power of life, because the snake sheds its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The snake in most cultures is positive. Even the most poisonous thing, in India, the cobra, is a sacred animal. And the serpent, Naga, the serpent king, Nagaraja, is the next thing to the Buddha, because the serpent represents the power of life in the field of time to throw off death, and the Buddha represents the power of life in the field of eternity to be eternally alive.

Now, I saw a fantastic thing of a Burmese priestess, a snake priestess, who had to bring rain to her people by calling a king cobra from his den and kissing him three times on the nose. There was the cobra, the giver of life, the giver of rain, which is of life, as the divine positive, not negative, figure.

**BILL MOYERS:** The Christian stories turn it around, because the serpent was the seducer.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, what that amounts to is a refusal to affirm life. Life is evil in this view. Every natural impulse is sinful unless you’ve been baptized or circumcised, in this tradition that we’ve inherited. For heaven’s sakes!

**BILL MOYERS:** By having been the tempter, women have paid a great price, because in mythology, some of this mythology, they are the ones who led to the downfall.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Of course they did. I mean, they represent life. Man doesn’t enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into the world of polarities and pair of opposites and suffering and all. But I think it’s a really childish attitude, to say “no” to life with all its pain, you know, to say this is something that should not have been.

Schopenhauer, in one of his marvelous chapters, I think it’s in *The World as Will and Idea*, says: “Life is something that should not have been. It is in its very essence and character, a terrible thing to consider, this business of living by killing and eating.” I mean, it’s in sin in terms of all ethical judgments all the time.

**BILL MOYERS:** As Zorba says, you know, “Trouble? Life is trouble. Only death is no trouble.”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s it. And when people say to me, you know, do you have optimism about the world, you know, how terrible it is, I said, yes, just say, “It’s great! Just the way it is.”

**BILL MOYERS:** But doesn’t that lead to a rather passive attitude in the face of evil, in the face of wrong?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** You participate in it. Whatever you do is evil for somebody.

**BILL MOYERS:** But explain that for the audience.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, when I was in India, there was a man whose name was Sri Krishnamenon and his mystical name was Atmananda and he was in Trivandrum, and I went to Trivandrum, and I had the wonderful privilege of sitting face to face with him as I’m sitting here with you. And the first question, first thing he said to me is, “Do you have a question?” Because the teacher there always answers questions, he doesn’t tell you what anything, he answers. And I said, “Yes, I have a question.” I said, “Since in Hindu thinking all the universe is divine, is a manifestation of divinity itself, how can we say ‘no’ to anything in the world, how can we say ‘no’ to brutality, to stupidity, to vulgarity, to thoughtlessness?” And he said, “For you and me, we must say yes.”

Well, I had learned from my friends who were students of his, that that happened to have been the first question he asked his guru, and we had a wonderful talk for about an hour there on this theme, of the affirmation of the world. And it confirmed me in a feeling that I have had, that who are we to judge? And it seems to me that this is one of the great teachings of Jesus.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, I see now what you mean in one respect; in some classic Christian doctrine the world is to be despised, life is to be redeemed in the hereafter, it is heaven where our rewards come, and if you affirm that which you deplore, as you say, you’re affirming the world, which is our eternity of the moment.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s what I would say. Eternity isn’t some later time; eternity isn’t a long time; eternity has nothing to do with time. Eternity is that dimension of here and now which thinking in time cuts out.

**BILL MOYERS:** This is it.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** This is it.

**BILL MOYERS:** This is my …

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** If you don’t get it here, you won’t get it anywhere, and the experience of eternity right here and now is the function of life.

There’s a wonderful formula that the Buddhists have for the Boddhisattva. The Bodhisattva, the one whose being, *sattva*, is illumination, *bodhi*, who realizes his identity with eternity, and at the same time his participation in time. And the attitude is not to withdraw from the world when you realize how horrible it is, but to realize that this horror is simply the foreground of a wonder, and come back and participate in it. “All life is sorrowful,” is the first Buddhist saying, and it is. It wouldn’t be life if there were not temporality involved, which is sorrow, loss, loss, loss.

**BILL MOYERS:** That’s a pessimistic note.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, I mean, you got to say yes to it and say it’s great this way. I mean, this is the way God intended it.

**BILL MOYERS:** You don’t really believe that?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, this is the way it is, and I don’t believe anybody intended it, but this is the way it is. And Joyce’s wonderful line, you know, “History is a nightmare from which I’m trying to awake.” And the way to awake from it is not to be afraid and to recognize, as I did in my conversation with that Hindu guru or teacher that I told you of, that all of this as it is, is as it has to be, and it is a manifestation of the eternal presence in the world. The end of things always is painful; pain is part of there being a world at all.

**BILL MOYERS:** But if one accepted that, isn’t the ultimate conclusion, to say, well, “I won’t try to reform any laws or fight any battles, or paint any--”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I didn’t say that.

**BILL MOYERS:** Isn’t that the logical—couldn’t one draw that, though, the philosophy of nihilism?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, that’s not the necessary thing to draw. You could say, “I will participate in this row, and I will join the army, and I will go to war.”

**BILL MOYERS:** “I’ll do the best I can on Earth.”

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** “I will participate in the game.” It’s a wonderful, wonderful opera, except that it hurts. And that wonderful Irish saying, you know, “Is this a private fight, or can anybody get into it?” This is the way life is, and the hero is the one who can participate in it decently, in the way of nature, not in the way of personal rancor, revenge or anything of the kind.

Let me tell you one story here, of a samurai warrior, a Japanese warrior, who had the duty to avenge the murder of his overlord. And he actually, after some time, found and cornered the man who had murdered his overlord. And he was about to deal with him with his samurai sword, when this man in the corner, in the passion of terror, spat in his face. And the samurai sheathed the sword and walked away. Why did he do that?

**BILL MOYERS:** Why?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Because he was made angry, and if he had killed that man then, it would have a personal act, another kind of act: that’s not what he had come to do.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let me tell you what happens to me when I read these stories, no matter the culture of their origin. I feel first this sense of wonder at the spectacle of the human imagination, simply groping to try to understand this existence. Does that ever happen to you?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I tell you, mythology I think of as the homeland of the Muses, the inspirers of art, poetry. And to see life as a poem, and yourself participating in a poem, is what the myth does for you.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean, a poem?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I mean a vocabulary in the form, not of words, but of acts and adventures, which is connotative, which connotes something transcendent of the action here and which yet informs the whole thing, so that you always feel in accord with the universal being.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, the interesting thing to me is, that far from undermining my faith, your work in mythology has liberated my faith from the cultural prisons to which it had been sentenced.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL**: It liberated my own. I know it’s going to do it with everybody who really gets the message. Every mythology, every religion is true in this sense, it is true as metaphorical of the human and cosmic mystery. But when it gets stuck to the metaphor, then you’re in trouble.

**BILL MOYERS:** The metaphor being …

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, Jesus ascended to heaven. The story is, he ascended bodily to heaven. The story is that his mother, still alive, asleep, ascended to heaven. So this is metaphorical of something; you don’t have to throw it away, all you have to find is what it’s saying.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you think it is saying?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** What it’s saying is he didn’t go out there, he went in here, which is where you must go, too, and ascend to heaven through the inward space to that source from which you and all life came. That’s the sense of that.

**BILL MOYERS:** But aren’t you undermining one of the great cardinal doctrines of the tradition of classic Christian faith, the death, of the burial and the resurrection of Jesus prefiguring our own and overcoming the body with a higher physical truth.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, that would be what I would call a mistaken reading of the symbol. That’s reading it in terms of prose instead of in terms of poetry. That’s reading a metaphor in terms of the denotation, instead of in terms of the connotation, do you understand that? A purely literary problem.

**BILL MOYERS:** The poetry gets to the unseen reality.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That which is beyond even the concept of reality. It’s that which transcends all thought. It’s putting you there all the time, and in some way giving you a line to connect with that mystery which you are, and the myths do it, by gosh, they do it.

Now, according to the normal way of thinking about the Christian religion, we cannot identify with Jesus, we have to imitate Jesus. But to say I am God, as Jesus said, is for us blasphemy. However, in the Thomas gospel, Jesus says, “He who drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I shall be he.”

Wow. That’s Buddhism. We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, only don’t know it. And the Buddha, the word means, “the one who waked up”, of “to wake”, woke up to the fact that he was Buddha consciousness, and we are all to do that: to wake up to our Jesus within us. This is blasphemy in the normal way of thinking in Christianity, but it’s the very essence of gnosticism and of the Thomas gospel.

**BILL MOYERS:** And heaven, that desired goal of most people, is within us?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Heaven and hell are within us, and all the gods are within us. This is the great realization of the Upanishads of India, already in the ninth century BC. All the gods, all the heavens, all the worlds are within us. They are magnified dreams, and what dreams are, are manifestations in image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each other. And that’s all myth is. Myth is a manifestation in symbolic images, metaphorical images, of the energies within us, moved by the organs of the body, in conflict with each other. This organ wants this, this organ wants this: the brain is one of the organs.

**BILL MOYERS:** So when we dream, are we fishing in some vast ocean of mythology…

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That goes down and down and down. And you can get all mixed up with complexes, you know, things like that, but you’re standing on the lord of the abyss, really. There’s a Polynesian saying that frequently comes to my mind: “Standing on a whale, fishing for minnows.” We are standing on a whale. The ground of being is the ground of our being, and the outward turned, we see all these little problems here, but inward, we are the source of them all. That’s the big mystical teaching.

**BILL MOYERS:** You’ve seen what’s happened to primitive societies that are unsettled by white men’s civilization. They go to pieces, they disintegrate, they succumb to vice and disease. And isn’t that the same thing that’s been happening to us since our myths began to disappear?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Absolutely it is.

**BILL MOYERS:** Isn’t that why conservative religious folk today are calling for a return to the old-time religion?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s right.

**BILL MOYERS:** I understand the yearning. In my youth I had fixed stars; they comforted me with their permanence, they gave me a known horizon; they told me that there’s a loving, kind and just father out there looking down on me, ready to receive me, thinking of my concerns all the time. Now science, medicine has made a house-cleaning of belief, and I wonder what happens to children who don’t have that fixed star, that known horizon, those myths to sustain them?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** All you have to do is read the newspaper. I mean, it’s a mess. But what the myth has to provide, I mean, just on this immediate level of life instruction, the pedagogical aspect of myth, it has to give life models. And the models have to be appropriate to the possibilities of the time in which you’re living. And our time has changed, and it’s changed and changed, and it continues to change so fast, that what was proper 50 years ago is not proper today. So the virtues of the past are the vices of today, and many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today. And the moral order has to catch up with the moral necessities of actual life in time, here and now, and that’s what it’s not doing, and that’s why it’s ridiculous to go back to the old-time religion.

A friend of mine composed a song based on the old-time religion, “Give me the old-time religion, give me that old time. Let us worship Zarathustra, just the way we used to, I’m a Zarathustra booster, he’s good enough for me. Let us worship Aphrodite, she’s beautiful but flighty, she doesn’t wear a nightie, but she’s good enough for me.”

And when you go back to the old-time religion, you’re doing something like that. It belongs to another age, another people, another set of human values, another universe. So the old period of the Old Testament, no one had any idea. The world was a little three layer cake, and the world consisted of something a few hundred miles around the Near Eastern centers there. No one ever heard of the Aztecs, you know, or the Chinese, even. And so those whole peoples were not considered, even, as part of the problem to be dealt with. The world changes, then the religion has to be transformed.

**BILL MOYERS:** But it seems to me that is what we are in fact doing here.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** That’s in fact what we better do. But my notion of what the real horror today is what you see in Beirut, where you have the three great Western religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and because the three of them have three different names for the same biblical God, they can’t get on together, they’re stuck with their metaphor, and don’t realize it’s reference.

**BILL MOYERS:** So each needs a new myth.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Each needs its own myth, all the way. “Love thine enemy,” you know, open up, don’t judge.

**BILL MOYERS:** Given what you know about human beings, is it conceivable to you that there is a point of wisdom beyond the conflicts of truth and illusion by which our lives can be put back together again, that we can develop new models?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Sure. It’s in the religions. All religions are true for their time. If you can find what the truth is and separate it from the temporal inflection, just bring your same old religion into a new set of metaphors, and you’ve got it.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you see some new metaphors emerging in the modern medium for the old universal truths that you’ve talked about, the old story?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, I think that *Star Wars* is a valid mythological perspective. It shows the state as a machine and asks: Is the machine going to crush humanity, or serve humanity? And humanity comes not from the machine, but from the heart.

**DARTH VADER**: Luke. Help me take this mask off.

**LUKE SKYWALKER**: But you’ll die.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I think it was in *The Return of the Jedi* when Skywalker unmasks his father. The father had been playing one of these machine roles, a state role. He was the uniform, you know? And the removal of that mask, there was an undeveloped man there, there was a kind of a worm. By being an executive of a system, one is not developing one’s humanity. I think that George Lucas really, really did a beautiful thing there.

**BILL MOYERS:** The idea of machine is the idea that we want the world to be made in our image, and what we think the world ought to be.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, the first time anybody made a tool, I mean, taking a stone and chipping it so that you can handle it, that’s the beginning of a machine. It’s turning outer nature into your service. But then there comes a time when it begins to dictate to you. I’m having a bit of struggle with my computer, actually.

**BILL MOYERS:** Your computer?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I just bought one a couple of months ago, and I can’t help thinking of it as having a personality there, because it talks back, and it behaves in a whimsical way, and all of that. So I’m personifying that machine. To me, that machine is almost alive. I could mythologize that damn thing.

**BILL MOYERS:** There was a wonderful story about, I think, President Eisenhower, when the computer was first being built. You remember that story?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Eisenhower went into a room full of computers, and he puts a question to these machines, “Is there a God?” And they all start up and there’s all those lights flashing and wheels turning and things like that, and after about 10 minutes of that kind of thing, a voice comes forth, and the voice says, “Now there is.”

Well, I bought this wonderful machine, IBM machine, and it’s there. And I’m rather an authority on gods, so I identified the god, and it seems to me an Old Testament god with a lot of rules, and no mercy.

**BILL MOYERS:** It’s unforgiving, isn’t it.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Catch you picking up sticks on Saturday and you’re out, that’s all.

**BILL MOYERS:** But isn’t it possible to develop toward the computer, the computer you’re wrestling with at this very moment, isn’t it possible to develop the same kind of attitude of the Pawnee chieftain who said that in the legends of his people, “…all things speak of Tirawa, all things of speak of God.” It wasn’t a special privileged revelation; God is everywhere in his works, including the computer.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, indeed so. I mean, the miracle of what happens on that screen, you know, have you ever looked inside one of those things?

**BILL MOYERS:** No.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** You can’t believe it. It’s a whole hierarchy of angels, all on slats, and those little tubes, those are miracles, those are miracles, they are.

**BILL MOYERS:** One can feel a sense of awe.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, I’ve had a revelation from my computer about mythology, though. You buy a certain software, and there’s a whole set of signals that lead to the achievement of your aim, you know. And once you’ve set it for, let’s say, DW3, enter, if you begin fooling around with signals that belong to another system, they just won’t work, that’s all. You have a system there, a code, a determined code that requires you to use certain terms.

Now, similarly in mythology, each religion is a kind of software that has its own set of signals and will work. It’ll work. But suppose you’ve chosen this one. Now, if a person is really involved in a religion and really building his life on it, he’d better stay with the software that he’s got. But a chap like myself, who likes to play with—

**BILL MOYERS:** Cross the wires?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** —the various softwares, I can run around, but I probably will never have an experience comparable to that of a saint.

**BILL MOYERS:** But do you think that the machine is inventing new myths for us, or that we with the machine are inventing new myths?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** No. The myth has to incorporate the machine.

**BILL MOYERS:** a pagan deity?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Just as the old myths incorporated the tools that people used, the forms of the tools and so forth are associated with power systems that are involved in the culture. We have not a mythology that incorporates these. The new powers are being, so to say, surprisingly announced to us by what the machines can do. We can’t have a mythology for a long, long time to come; things are changing too fast. The environment in which we’re living is changing too fast for it become mythologized.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do we live without myths, then?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, we’re doing it. The individual has to find the aspect of myth that has to do with the conduct of his life. There are a number of services that myths serve. The basic one is opening the world to the dimension of mystery. If you lose that, you don’t have a mythology, to realize the mystery that underlies all forms. But then there comes the cosmological aspect of myth, seeing that mystery as manifest through all things, so that the universe becomes as it were a holy picture, you are always addressed to the transcendent mystery through that. But then there’s another function, and that’s the sociological one, of validating or maintaining a certain society. That is the side of the thing that has taken over in our world.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Ethical laws, the laws of life in the society, all of Yahweh’s pages and pages and pages of what kind of clothes to wear, how to behave to each other, and all that, do you see, in terms of the values of this particular society. But then there’s a fourth function of myth, and this is the one that I think today everyone must try to relate to, and that’s the pedagogical function. How to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. Myth can tell you that.

There’s a wonderful story in one of the Upanishads, the Brahmavarta Upanishad, of Indra, this god who is the counterpart, really, of Yahweh. He is the god patron of a certain people and of historical life and time, with all kinds of rules for people to live by and that sort of thing. And there was a time when a great monster named Vritra had closed all the waters of the Earth, and so there was a drought, a terrible drought, and the world was in very bad condition.

Well, it took this god Indra quite a while to realize that he had a box of thunderbolts there, and all he had to do was drop a thunderbolt in Vritra and then blow him up. And when he did that, of course, he blew Vritra up and the waters flowed and the world was refreshed. And he said, “What a great boy am I.”

So, thinking what a great boy am I, he goes up to the cosmic mountain, which is the central mountain of the world, and so he decided he would build a new world up there, a new city, and particularly his palace was going to be a palace worthy of such as he. So he calls Vishvakarman, the main carpenter of the gods, and gives him the assignment to build this palace. So Vishvakarman goes to work, and in very quick order he gets the palace into pretty good condition, and then Indra comes, but every time Indra arrived, he had bigger ideas about how big and grandiose the palace should be.

So finally Vishvakarman says, “My gosh,” he says, “we’re both immortal and there’s no end to his desires. I’m caught for life.” So he decided to go to Brahma, known as the creator, and complain. Well, now, Brahma sits on a lotus, this is the symbol of divine energy and divine grace, and the lotus grows from the navel of Vishnu, who is the sleeping god, whose dream is the universe. So here’s Brahma on his lotus, and Vishvakarman comes to the edge of the great lotus pond of the universe, and down, and he tells his story. Brahma says, “You go home,” he says, “I’ll fix this up.”

So next morning, at the gate of the palace that’s being built there appears a beautiful blue-black boy, with a lot of children around him, just in admiration of his beauty. So in comes the boy and Indra on his throne, he’s the king god, he says, “Young man, welcome, and what brings you to my palace?” “Well,” says the boy, with a voice like thunder rolling on the horizon, “I have been told that you’re building such a palace as no Indra before you ever built” And he said, “I’ve surveyed the grounds and looked things over, it seems this is quite true. No Indra before you has ever built such a palace.” Well, Indra says, “Indras before me! Young man, what are you talking about?”

The boy says, “Indras before you?” He says, “I have seen them come and go, come and go.” He said, “Just think: Vishnu sleeps in the cosmic ocean, the lotus of the universe grows from his navel. On there sits Brahma the creator. Brahma opens his eyes, a world comes into being, governed by an Indra. Closes his eyes, the world goes out of being. Opens his eyes, the world comes into being; closes his eyes … And the life of a Brahma is 432,000 years, and he dies. The lotus goes back, another lotus, another Brahma. And then think of the galaxies beyond galaxies in infinite space; each a lotus with the Brahma sitting on it, opening his eyes, closing his eyes with Indras. There may be wise men in your court who would volunteer to count the drops of water in the oceans of the world, or the grains of sand on the beaches, but no one would count those Brahmas, let alone those Indras.”

And while he’s talking, there comes in parade across the floor of the palace an army of ants in perfect range. And the boy laughs when he sees them. And Indra’s hair goes up, and he says to the boy, “Why do you laugh?” And the boy says, “Don’t ask unless you are willing to be hurt.” And Indra says, “I ask. Teach.” The boy says, “Former Indras, all. Through many lifetimes they rise from the lowest conditions spiritually to highest illumination, and then they drop their thunderbolt in Vritra, and they think, ‘What a good boy am I,’ and down they go again.”

And then Indra sits there on the throne and he’s completely disillusioned, completely shot, and he thinks, well, let’s quit the building of this palace. He calls Vishvakarman and says, “You’re dismissed, you don’t have to” so Vishvakarman got his intention, he’s dismissed from the job and there’s no more house-building going on. And Indra decides, “I’m going out and be a yogi and just meditate on the lotus feet of Vishnu.” But he had a beautiful queen named Indrani, and when Indrani hears this, she goes to the priest, the chaplain of the gods, and she says, “Now, he’s got this idea in his head, he’s going out to become a yogi.” “Well,” says the Brahmin, “come in with me, darling, and we’ll sit down and I’ll fix this up.”

So he talks to Indra, they come in and they sit down before the king’s throne, and he tells him, “Now, I wrote a book for you some years ago on the art of politics. You are in the position of the king. You are in the position of the king of gods. You are a manifestation of the mystery of Brahma in the field of time. This is a high privilege, appreciate it, honor it, and deal with life as though you were what you really are.” And with this set of instructions, Indra gives up his idea of going out and becoming a yogi, and finds that in life he can represent the eternal in the way of a symbol, you might say, of the Brahmin and the ultimate truth.

So each of us is, in a way, the Indra of his own life, and you can make a choice, either to go out in the forest and meditate and throw it all off, or stay in the world and in the life either of your job, which is the kingly job of the politics and achievement, and as well in the love life with your wife and family, you are realizing the truth. Now, this is a very nice myth, it seems to me.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do we ever know the truth? Do we ever find it?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Well, each person can have his own depth experience and some conviction of being in touch with his own satyananda, his own being, true consciousness and true bliss. But the religious people tell us we really won’t experience it until we go to heaven, you know, till you die. I believe in having as much as you can of this experience while you’re alive.

**BILL MOYERS:** Our bliss is now.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** I think in heaven you’ll be having such a marvelous time looking at God that you won’t get your own experience at all. That’s not the place to have it. Here’s the place to have the experience.

**BILL MOYERS:** Here and now.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Here and now.