WHOLENESS IN A TIME OF NEED – A REVIEW ARTICLE

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A response to William Barrett's *Time of Need: Forms of Imagination in the Twentieth Century,* New York: Harper & Row, 1972 and Joseph Campbell's *Myths to Live By,* New York: The Viking Press, 1972.

I

From our perspective, it is hard to imagine the enthusiasms of the age of reason. The fascination of geometric cosmology is difficult to recapture. Descartes' confidence in the application of a series of theoretical deductions may have taken metaphysics from medieval scholasticism into more relevant forms, but it is almost as remote from our experience as the arguments of Abelard and Occum. What did Descartes really believe that he had accomplished? We find this hard to answer. We do know that in some respects his presuppositions are of more immediate interest to us than are his arguments. Descartes, as a Christian, accepted the significance of Jesus in the teachings of the church. In addition, he accepted and even depended upon intuitive, introspective thought as complimentary to theoretical construction. These two assumptions – the significance of the historical Jesus and the intuition of the human mind – have received more attention by subsequent theologians than have any of Descartes' developed theories.

While a rational, mathematical approach to metaphysics reappeared – with substantial modifications in the twentieth century – the real future of religious thought was caught between these two assumptions about history and knowledge. The Enlightenment provided a unique opportunity for these two developments, for in the changing role given to authority in religious faith and practice the Englightenment enabled theologians to search for new perspectives. Looking less to doctrinal summaries and creedal affirmations, they look more attentively to their own emotional experiences and to the historically accessible information about Jesus and his ministry. In brief, the theologians and philosophers who were interested in religious questions increasingly became empiricists. They turned to personal observation for clues to truth. John Locke, in the fourth book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and in *The Reasonableness of Christianity,* published five years later, led the way for one line of

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seekers. While generally claiming that revelation is always in accord with reason, he argued that basic Christianity consisted of personal adherence to the moral example and authority of Jesus. This direction in theology seems reductionist when compared with the ornate theology of the middle ages and the doctrinal positivism of the Reformers. However, to historically conscious intellectuals of the nineteenth century it seemed persuasive. David Friedrich Strauss' *The Life of Jesus* (1835-36) provided a prolegomenon for many followers, for he held that the basic historical traditions had been inflated by the infusions of mythological expectations in the early church. This side of the liberal tradition included the succeeding volumes by Ritschl, von Harnack, and Schweitzer. If a common thread is traced through these writers, it is surely the attempt to preserve the ethical perspective of Jesus. Convinced that the ethical teaching of Jesus had been obscured by the essentially unnecessary mythology and eschatology, they hoped to liberate the ethical content of the New Testament and to make it attractive to the rising scientific culture.

Apace with the developing theology of an autonomous Christian ethic was the concern for spiritual experience. While this introspective focus was often accompanied by historical awareness, it was primarily directed toward a phenomenology of personal religious experience. Considered to be authentic on its own terms, this outlook did not oppose reason but attempted to remain independent of reason. Pascal's familiar words that the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing set the tone. It was thought that theologically discriminating perception of subjectivity would disclose the essential character of the Christian faith. With antecedents in medieval mysticism, a modern form of this approach appeared in Friedrich Schleiermacher's view that true religion was based in a sense of the Infinite. In *The Christian Faith* (1821-22), Schleiermacher argued that the locus of religious experience was found in the feeling of absolute dependence. He thus hoped to avoid the reductions of creedal regidity, rationalism, and sheer ethics.

Foremost among others in the tradition of religious subjectivity was Rudolph Otto. Otto's effort produced a doctrine of the bipolarity of religious consciousness which accommodated anthropological terminology to the Christian dynamic of sin and salvation. Otto linked "sin" with the humility of the individual in his encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans,* and he correlated "salvation" with the sense of rapport and participation in this "numinous" reality. His major contribution, however, lay in his reemphasis of the *sui generis*

nature of religion. In *The Holy* (1923) he wrote of man's special intuitive faculty for the apprehension of the numinous and claimed once again that this experience cannot be in truth reduced to either theoretical doctrines or to ethical activitiy.

William James' classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) also fits this tradition, inasmuch as he claimed in it that the reality of the divine touched human life at subliminal or unconscious levels of consciousness. Gabriel Marcel also emphasized the uniqueness of the individual's apprehension of the divine. In *The Mystery of Being* (1950-51) he pointed out that the individual himself, as well as the mystery of Transcendent Being, was beyond rational or intellectual categories. More recently still, Paul Tillich focused atention on the individual's experience of both his own contingency and the ground of Being. Subjectivity and objectivity are linked in one's ultimate concern.

Tillich's attempt to understand the presence of the divine in human experience included an appreciation of the importance of mythology and symbolism. In our time the attempt to demythologize the New Testament has been more widely associated with Rudolf Bultmann. Claiming to interpret rather than to destroy the myths, Bultmann's method eventually led to an attempt to depict the essence of the Gospel in the vocabulary of Heidegger. Even though he held that New Testament mythology was opaque for modern man, he believed that God still called individuals through the kerygma in a very personal way. Both Tillich and Bultmann were skeptical about the capacity of New Testament imagery to speak to us. Both attempted demythologization into philosophical categories.

It was, however, C. J. Jung, particularly in his posthumous *Symbols of Transformation* (1962), who provided the categories for a new approach. Jung saw the potential in mythology as enduring for modern society. In his theory of the archetypes of the collective unconscious he has taken this long tradition of psychic realism to a new level of phenomenological observation. Jung's reevaluation of the dynamic potential of seemingly archaic symbolism has enriched the writing of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell considerably. More indirectly, William Barrett is indebted to this sense of the dynamic psyche in search of unifying symbols. Both the analyses of Campbell and Barrett assume the creative, synthetic capacity of spiritual life. Thus, both extend into new dimensions the liberal traditions of spiritual observation and renewal.

II

William Barrett's *Time of Need* is basically an analysis of the

theme of nihilism in recent literature. The selection of writers is a natural one in a sense. It includes those whose portraits of contemporary life are the most shattered. Thus, it includes Camus, Hemingway, Faulkner, Hesse, Kafka, Beckett, Forster and Joyce. Each study is well worth reading in itself, and each contributes an additional shade to the picture of the darkness which has settled over Western culture in the last few decades. There is a chilling and powerful sense of despair in the combination of these writers, for each study increases the feeling of fragmentation and helplessness. At the conclusion one is literally forced to agree that this chorus of voices has sung a lamentation over the death of history and meaning which is unforgettable.

However, even the power of this vocal combination and the resourcefulness of Barrett's analysis fail to lead easily and unquestionably to this conclusion. A decade or two ago this study would have fallen quite heavily upon us. At this point it seem slightly misplaced. It is not that we no longer believe in the power of the nihilist question. On the contrary, we accepted this dark kerygma of despair years ago, and its sober realism is not really challenged. Paradoxically this collection of writers is no longer representative for us even though we have adopted them as our spokesmen. Accepting them as true, we now feel a profound desire to look beyond them. And it is this attempt to transcend despair philosophically and culturally which has taken us beyond these Jeremiahs of the spirit. Thus, this analysis of existentialist literature is remarkably incisive, but it is no longer as existentially relevant to culture as it once was.

The collection of studies in this volume contrasts remarkably with William Barrett's and Henry D. Aiken's three volume survey, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. In the third volume the survey includes Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, Marcel, Sartre, Gilson, Tillich and Buber. To this list could be added other philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Blondel, Brentano, Jaspers, and Recoeur. Any of these could have been included in *Time of Need*, and if they had been the essay would have been substantially modified. If several of these philosophers had been included, Barrett's method would have been widened. He would have used the insights of creative thinkers who are not strictly artists or novelists. On the other hand, Barrett purposefully limited this study to artists or novelists. He did so because he believes that art reveals a truth more basic to our condition than does philosophy or religion. This methodological assumption is open to criticism. The arts certainly disclose different dimensions of existence from other disciplines. However, Barrett does not really succeed in making the case that this particular artistic vision is more representative or

realistic in any sense. A broader selection of writers, including philosophers, psychologists, and theologians, would have provided unifying visions of life in the context of nature. There are significant forms of imagination in our time which attempt to take alienation seriously and overcome it. On the more conventional, and commonplace side, there are also significant attempts to overcome alienation in local community organizations. The question of the author's taking these cultural phenomena seriously must be faced. His method forces us to ask the question, in what sense does a selection of novelists continue to represent the Western spirit?

Aside from these methodological questions, Barrett's grasp of existentialist literature is sure, and any book by him deserves serious consideration on its own terms. In this volume, Barrett takes the reader on an odyssey of spiritual despair. In comparison with his earlier *Irrational Man* his perceptions are more searching and his analysis is far more pressing and detailed. He locates the nihilism of modern man in his pervasive anxieties of fragmentation. Because traditional mythology does not work for us ,we have no assurance of metaphysical security or coherence in our lives. Barrett recognizes that many artists and writers have searched vainly for the unifying myth. They looked for a myth which would stand at the edge of our darkness and speak to us of that which is both unknown and real. The Christian mythological tradition is, at least as far as the artists are concerned, important to help us. Even so, despite our failure to discover a functional mythology, we still need it. Barrett's words are frank.

> Because despite all our progress and our vaunted accumulation of knowledge, we are still children in the dark who have to make up stories so that we will not be so alone, that the darkness itself may become more familiar and friendly, and the poor shreds and patches of our life be pieced together. (p. 338)

Although we need myths for directing and energizing our lives, we can only make a meaningful contact with them while we are dreaming. This alienation from our mythological heritage means that we have lost the ability to live with the archetypal patterns of life – youth and age, parents and children, man and woman.

What is Barrett's recommendation? In courageous words which should surprise few readers, Barrett urges us to confront and attempt to "live through" this cosmic alienation. We must live through it and not deny it. With will and energy we must now face the meaninglessness of the universe and attempt to create our own meaning. Barrett believes that because art must seek its own renewal in the unity of

Being it will call us to return from the whirl of modern life to that "primal source." (p. 382) It is this alienation from nature and "primitive being" which at bottom concerns Barrett. Earlier civilizations were more closely related to primitive cultures and repeated in their own myths the primitive myths and rituals. Barrett is closer to Heidegger than he is to Sartre, and he closes the book with an unanswered question. Recognizing that Heidegger does not recover a sense of meaning for us he still suggests that the answer for our nihilism must be in some sense metaphysically real. While his references to Being are frustratingly vague, we have come to expect this from philosophers such as Heidegger and Jaspers. Of more particular philosophical concern, Barrett states that if our civilization does eventually succeed in breaking its ancient ties with "primitive being," it will be a highly audacious and adventurous step. Will this adventure succeed? Barrett concludes that contemporary art points only toward the prospects of spiritual disaster.

Barrett's diagnosis of our time of need is thus quite pessimistic. Taking the title from Heidegger's characterization of the long time of need as the "night of a world," he sees in the art forms of the twentieth century only the perceptions of cultural impotence. The sense of spiritual starvation and constriction in contemporary art forms reveals to him the fragmentation of both time and personality in our culture. And these fragmentations are in turn the results of our increasing cosmic alienation from primal being. This existential dislocation has now produced in the forms of imagination the bare, harsh statements of the nihilistic question.

This diagnosis must be taken seriously. It is a reminder that there will be no easy sunrise for our civilization. In our time of need, a time which has been curiously and pathetically filled with the gimcrackery of emotional and social growth, the nihilistic question continues to prevail. More to the root of the issue, the two great streams of the European theological tradition, the ethical and the internal, have not been able to meet this need. Cracks in our sense of time and personhood appeared with the suddenness and relentlessness of Eugene Ionesco's rhinoceros. Barrett's thesis speaks to this, for he holds that art opens the doors of perception to what has been taking place behind the backs of philosophy and religion. In our case, the claims of the liberal theological traditions for our allegiance have been severely weakened by the shattering endurance of the nihilistic question of our existence. The reasons for the failure of these traditions to meet our spiritual needs are complex. An important part of the problem is the human need for the imaginative unity of experience and the seeming

inability of theology to meet these imaginative needs. We needed, in summary, more than enlightened, reasonable theories. We need unifying imaginative forms, or in Campbell's words, "myths to live by."

III

Campbell's *Myths to Live By* is a collection of lectures and papers which were given over the course of a decade. It includes such subjects as the impact of scientific revolutions on myth, the origin and antiquity of mythology, the importance of rites, the relationship between Eastern and Western religions, the mythology of love, the mythologies of war and peace, the symbolic similarities in mythology and schizophrenia, the symbolism of the moon walk, and the expansion of our mythological horizons. Some of the chapters, such as the ones on the confrontation of the East and the West contain familiar material. Others contain interesting observations, but they do not provide the information suggested by the title of the book. On the whole, however, this book can be conceived as a creative and imaginative foil to the question of Barrett's *Time of Need.*

It is apparent that there are wide areas of agreement between Barrett and Campbell. Both contend that the general authority and power of traditional mythology have been severely weakened. Likewise, both agree that, however paradoxical it might seem, human society requires a unifying relationship to myths. From the methodogical viewpoint, both are impressed with the contributions which artists make toward an understanding of our culture. The differences between the writers in these two books are also apparent. Where Barrett limits his scope to Western novelists, Campbell has chosen the entire realm of human symbolic experience for his concern. In fact, his four-volume work, *The Masks of God,* is one of the most comprehensive evaluations of the role of mythology across different times and cultures ever written. An equally significant difference between these books lies in Campbell's abiding interests in religious symbolism and psychoanalytic theory. Whereas Barrett takes a sharp scapel and lays bare the malfunction of the human spirit, Campbell is constantly offering the possibility of spiritual therapy along with his analysis. To press this decisive difference further, Campbell seems to think of his analysis as an essential part of a comprehensive process of spiritual growth. The path he offers is not an easy one to follow. It is, however, a program which corresponds with the sober prognosis both he and Barrett give to us.

Because Campbell moves eclectically in all of these essays, we will look at several important points which he makes in the book as a

whole. For fuller development of his perspective, these points should be seen in the context of *The Masks of God.* However, in this book he makes some of his most arresting ideas accessible to a more general readership.

First, Campbell raises the question of scientifically understanding the life-supporting nature of myths. In this framework, he speaks of mythic figures as "facts of the mind," and asks that psychologists and comparative mythologists evolve techniques for the enlightened use of these "facts." Campbell knows that myths will elude the findings of the hard sciences. However, following Jung, he believes that this technique would involve both a study of myths and a personal dialogue with the mysterious inner forces that appear in dreams. Because myths are "permanent features of the human spirit," they tell us

> of matters fundamental to ourselves, enduring essential principles about which it would be good for us to know; about which, in fact, it will be necessary for us to know if our conscious minds are to be kept in touch with our most secret, motivating depths. In short, these holy tales and their images are messages to the conscious mind from quarters of the spirit unknown to normal daylight consciousness... (p. 26)

A "scientific" understanding of myths would thus include psychology but it would not be reductive or determinist. It would, to the contrary, recognize that man himself remains a center of mystery even though the external world has been demythologized. This approach to the understanding of myths would be personal rather than doctrinaire. It would be more in accord with ritual participation than with dogma. In Campbell's words,

> Having your image of God – the most intimate, hidden mystery of your life – defined for you in terms contrived by some council of bishops back, say, in the fifth century or so: what good is that? But a contemplation of the crucifix works; the odor of incense works; so do, also, hieratic altars, the tones of well-sung Gregorian chants, untoned and mumbled Introits, Kyries, heard and unheard conscerations. What has the 'affect value' of wonders of this kind to do with the definitions of councils? (p. 97)

Thus, Campbell's understanding of the relationship of history and symbol has considerable bearing on his epistemology. In other volumes he is more open to the contribution of historical events to the meaning of a myth or symbol. In this volume, however, he is frankly unimpressed with the potential contribution of history to meaning.

He thinks, instead, that symbolic images carry inherently meaningful possibilities in themselves. If they do not speak to us in this way it is because we are simply not ready for them to speak. (p. 102).

It is at this point that Campbell's method seems weak. His goal is a knowledge of the power and functions of myths in human consciousness, but he seems to be surprisingly opaque to the contributions which history and creed make to symbolic consciousness and to culture as a whole. At the least, from a psychological standpoint, the creedal activity of church councils has a phenomenological dimension. It is a particular process of symbolic formulation from the context of a communal and historical experience. It is a response to consciously felt needs for further imaginative and confessional formulations. Campbell does not choose to work with this material in this way. He has, in *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology,* considered the function of Christian symbolism in the epics and literature of the West. However, he has not considered the function of this symbolism within the doctrinal history of the West. This omission is significant. One reason why mythology has become problematical for us in this century is that repeatedly our forefathers isolated it from its historical context. They elevated it in doctrinal formulas above the vicissitudes of history and beyond the communal needs which bore it. In short, they separated it from historical relativism and honored it. This question must now be asked of Campbell: does he in his attempt to consider the vitality of mythology apart from its doctrinaire formulas, isolate it in near fundamentalist fashion within the pristine limitations of the spirit?

The second assumption of Campbell in this volume is a mythological positivism. Campbell indicates that the mythological function is both mysterious and cosmological, but that it is not quite supernatural in the traditional sense. Thus, he believes that myths have the power to disclose our "most secret motivating depths." They are as he puts it, messages to us from our subconscious. It is at this point that Campbell's use of such phrases as "transcendental seeing" and "divine ground" become ambiguous at best. He gives the impression, however, that he prefers to limit the meaning of such phrases to psychological and natural dimensions. This tendency is illustrated by his statement that the function of ritual is to give form to human life in depth. (p. 44) Thus, the roles of myths and rites are, as he pointed out in *Masks of God: Primitive Mythology,* means for bringing an adolescent into harmony with his social, psychological, and natural environments and for maintaining this harmony throughout his life. They are measures "to link the individual to transindividual purposes

and forces." (p. 59) Campbell deplores the contemporary disregard for traditional ritual forms. However, his uneasiness is based on his fear of incohesion in society. His primary concern thus seems to be for the psychological and cultural strength of civilization.

From Campbell's perspective, this view of myth and ritual is an advance over the Jewish and Christian attempts to separate the spiritual from the material. It is also an advance over what he sees as the heavy handed authority of Biblical religion. He depicts the Old Testament legal tradition in terms of a rigid "stone-cut" burden of "divine edicts" which are carried about as luggage. He describes its cosmological framework of "the tightest little cosmological image known to any people on earth." (p. 89) Although Campbell is open to flights of imaginative interpetation when he studies Eastern religions, he thus sees the symbolism of Biblical religion from a literalist and authoritarian perspective and he quickly condemns it as such. Is it the old strawman trick? His method involves a tendency to reduce the Biblical imagery to its minimal psychological dimension and to the cultural antecedents of its historical epoch. He also misrepresents the Christian view. Thus, he can say that whereas the Buddhist sees life as a noble and glorious art of play, the Christian basically sees "every act of nature as an act of sin, accompanied by a knowledge of its guilt." (p. 123) He writes that the key to life is to see it as an art and a game which is played for its own sake, without thought of gain or loss. The criticism which seems valid at this point again concerns Campbell's method. Does he foreclose the meaning of Biblical symbols and myths by reducing them to literalist values and sheerly mundane references?

A third question can be directed toward Campbell's attempt to find in the various mythologies of the world a common meaning. Following a relatively conventional chapter on Zen, Campbell "demythologizes" the mythology of love. Beginning with a Hindu explanation of the transcendental possibilities of rapturous love, he attempts an interpretation of the death of Christ. Because God and man yearn for one another, the death of Christ symbolizes a mutual sacrifice in the marital rather than penal sense. Campbell does not mean to imply that this was uniquely present at the Cross. On the contrary

> When extended to symbolize not only the one historic movement of Christ's crucifixion on Calvary, but the mystery through all time and space of God's presence and participation in the agony of all living things, the sign of the cross would then have to be

> looked upon as the sign of an eternal affirmation of all that is, ever was, or shall be. (p. 154)

This psychic motif is found in all religions wherever love arises and life awakens. The cosmic symbolism here is creative and the cross cultural perspective is an important contribution. Campbell's strength is that he is able to show how symbols function psychologically. His weakness remains his unwillingness to take seriously the very historical variants of the symbols which are often seen as decisive.

The fourth and last area is one to which Campbell repeatedly returns in other books, the correspondence between mythological themes and emotional illness. Campbell has noticed "symbolic similarities" between mythological themes and essential schizophrenia. In contrast with both shamanic psychological crises and paranoid schizophrenia, essential schizophrenia is basically a disassociation from the symbol system of one's own culture. One important element here is Campbell's helpful discussion of the function of important symbols within an individual's nervous system, as well as within the link between a society and its cultural norms. Thus, a functional mythology guides an individual through his decisions and his sense of harmony with his culture and with the cosmos.

When essential schizophrenia occurs there is a sense of disharmony or splitting in one's life. The person feels that he is regressing backwards in time and experiencing human forms of union and consciousness. The process reaches its peak with a terrific sense of a task to be accomplished. Frequently the powers of the mind seem to be divided into those which oppose the task and those which are supportive. If one presses through to the culminating crisis and survives it, he is able to accept the world, to see it in a new light, and to affirm it in a terrible joy. This return is a rebirth, for the ego now recognizes that it is a

> reflex of a larger self, its proper function being to carry the energies of an archetypal instinct system into fruitful play in a contemporary space-time daylight situation. (p. 230)

Thus, the ultimate aim and result of this quest is the service of others. The point is that we must learn how to pass through this process repeatedly and constructively. In the course of this mythological and schizophrenic task we become not the Saviour figure itself but saviours who help our friends and family with their lives. Thus, symbols have the potential to both awaken us to a new center of our lives and to lead us into spiritual resonances which extend far beyond our own

culture. In this process we come to see the perennial mythology in a new light. We recognize that it is addressed to the purpose of waking individuals to new life. We thus receive traditionally known myths in a renewing and highly subjective sense.

If Barrett sees the need for rebirth, Campbell provides the ritual. Found universally, the symbols and myths of the world point the way to the process of renewal which we have usually resisted. This phenomenon promises psychic renewal, but it may not deliver all that it suggests. There is reason to doubt that essential schizophrenia is an adequate analogy or description of personal renewal. True renewal is certainly a more dynamic process of social interaction than this.

The major problem in Campbell's approach is that it is a serious reduction of human experience. He holds that it is possible to employ techniques of spiritual renewal which recognize the intrapsychic limitations of the archetypal figures. In terms of classical theology, it is a return to nominalism which is more radical and complete than any heretofore encountered in Western theology. He claims that the mind can use religious symbols for its healing while knowing all the while that the referent of the symbols is only the mind itself and the silence of the universe. There is no God but we can act as though there is for brief periods.

Barrett contributes a chilling description of the fragmentation of civilization. Campbell adds a picture of the symbolic process which suggests that we still have the spiritual capacity to reform our visions. Both approaches are brilliantly executed and valuable. Nevertheless, they seem to remain waiting, incisive and rare, yet slightly off-balance. They both suggest that there are forms of imagination yet to be considered seriously by sophisticated members of our scientific culture. They both seem to wait with anticipation for myths of some kind which can be lived by. These books by Barrett and Campbell represent a time of need.

The weakening of the liturgical and confessional traditions at the Enlightenment served the course of liberal theology. However, the focus on the ethical teachings of the historical Jesus, on the one side of the tradition and the concern for a therapy of salvation on the other seemed to ignore the potential of the religious imagination. The empirical concern for historical and subjective immediacy lost touch with the creedal tradition. It is not likely that we can pick up the threads of that unfinished tapestry and easily weave with them again. We will need the help of Barrett to discover our loss. We will need the help of Campbell to discover the depths of ourselves. And we will need the imaginative forms of the historic creeds to recover the meaning of the Incarnation.