

Joseph Campbell's "Four Functions of Myth"

From *Pathways to Bliss* (Novato, CA: New World Library), pp 6-10.

1. ...the **first function** of mythology [is] to evoke in the individual a sense of grateful, affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence
2. The **second function** of mythology is to present an image of the cosmos, an image of the universe round about, that will maintain and elicit this experience of awe. [or] ...to present an image of the cosmos that will maintain your sense of mystical awe and explain everything that you come into contact with in the universe around you.
3. The **third function** of a mythological order is to validate and maintain a certain sociological system: a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties or improprieties, on which your particular social unit depends for its existence.
4. ...the **fourth function** of myth is psychological. That myth must carry the individual through the stages of his life, from birth through maturity through senility to death. The mythology must do so in accord with the social order of his group, the cosmos as understood by his group, and the monstrous mystery.

The second and third functions have been taken over in our world by secular orders. Our cosmology is in the hands of science. The first law of science is that the truth has not been found. The laws of science are working hypotheses. The scientist knows that at any moment facts may be found that make the present theory obsolete; this is happening now constantly. It's amusing. In a religious tradition, the older the doctrine, the **truer** it is held to be.

In the scientific tradition, on the other hand, a paper written ten years ago is already out of date. There's a continuous movement onward. So there's no law, no Rock of Ages on which you can rest. There's nothing of the kind. It's fluid. And we know that rocks are fluid, too, though it takes them a long time to flow. Nothing lasts. It all changes.

In the social realm, again, we don't regard our laws as being divinely ordained. You still hear it from time to time, as in the current abortion problem: God is talking to Senator So-and-so, or Reverend Thus-and-such. But it doesn't seem to make sense otherwise. God's law is no longer the justification for the nation's laws. Congress decides what a decent aim for the social order is and what the institution is that should bring that aim about. So I would say that in this secular society of ours, we can no longer really think of the cosmological and sociological functions as a problem.

However, in all of our lives, the first and fourth functions do still play a role, and it's these that I will be addressing. We are going to find ourselves far away from the old traditions. The first is the problem of awe. And, as I've said, you can have one of three attitudes toward it.

The fourth function now is the pedagogical. Basically, the function of the pedagogical order is to bring a child to maturity and then to help the aged become disengaged. Infancy is a period of obedience and dependency. The child is dependent on the parent, looks to the parent for advice and help and approval. There comes a time, however, when the individual has to become self-reliant and not dependent but himself the authority. Now here we come to a distinction between the traditional attitude toward this problem and the contemporary Western one. The traditional idea is that the adult who has moved from dependency to responsibility should take over without criticism the laws of the society and represent them. In our world, we ask for the development of the individual's critical faculties, that you should evaluate the social order and yourself, then contribute criticism. This doesn't mean blowing it up. Nor does it mean blowing it up before you've found out what it is.