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Occidental Mythology (The Masks of God, Volume 3), by Joseph Campbell

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Occidental Mythology (The Masks of God, Volume 3), by Joseph Campbell

Abstract

Occidental Mythology begins with an anthropological description of the development of religions from the East and Middle East and how they evolved into or influenced Occidental religious traditions. Campbell describes how early polytheistic goddess religions were replaced in pre-history by patriarchal monotheism. His argument is that many episodes in the Bible make sense if they are understood as a record of a dim memory of the Neolithic goddess worship replaced by patriarchic monotheism.

Additional Keywords

Joseph Campbell

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OCCIDENTAL MYTHOLOGY (THE MASKS OF GOD, VOLUME 3). Joseph Campbell. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2021. 509 p. 978-1608687299. \$25.49.

FOR MY TASTES THE RE-RELEASED EDITION of *Occidental Mythology* by Joseph Campbell is a satisfying contribution as the third volume of his series *The Masks of God* (first published 1964). This 2021 edition is a volume from The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series published by the Joseph Campbell Foundation (JCF).

Occidental Mythology begins with an anthropological description of the development of religions from the East and Middle East and how they evolved into or influenced Occidental religious traditions. Campbell describes how early polytheistic goddess religions were replaced in pre-history by patriarchal monotheism. His argument is that many episodes in the Bible make sense if they are understood as a record of a dim memory of the Neolithic goddess worship replaced by patriarchic monotheism. Campbell discusses topics such as the evolution of the symbol of the snake as it appears in early religious texts and art of the Middle East and India into the snake's meaning and appearance throughout the Old Testament of the Bible. His discussion also describes similarities found in other ancient texts such as the ancient Sumerian and Akkadian epic poem "The Epic of Gilgamesh" to stories found in the Old Testament.

The book continues on to describe ancient Greek religion and mythologies and how they informed Roman religion and served as a foundation for Occidental mythology and religion during the following centuries. Campbell's chapter "GREAT ROME 500 B.C. — 500 A.D." is a magnificent history of the development of Christianity that includes the history of religious beliefs in the Celtic Province during that time. This will be of particular interest to anyone interested in Celtic mythology, folktales, and art. The section provides a nice historical foundation for all three. Part Four of the book, "The Age of the Great Beliefs," examines the history of Christianity across Europe and the roles of Islam and Zoroastrianism in Occidental religion and mythology.

Campbell is both erudite and thorough in his history of how each religious tradition contributed to the development of Occidental Mythology and religious belief up through Medieval times in Western Europe. To understand his approach to the material it is useful to include the following quotation:

A DISTINCTION MUST BE DRAWN, through all our studies of mythology, between the attitude toward divinities represented on one hand by the priest and his flock, and on the other by the creative poet, artist or philosopher. (463)

The quote above is representative of his use of William James's distinction of "tough-minded" and "tender-minded" approaches to religion found in *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking* (4-13). Campbell's cultural criticisms are mostly directed at Christianity and to a lesser extent the other Abrahamic religions. He did not approve of a "tough-minded" approach to religion in which sacred texts are treated as literal history. His discussions of Eastern religions were always positive because they represent the "tender-minded" symbolic approach to sacred texts of a "creative poet, artist or philosopher."

Although I have gotten great pleasure from The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series, I feel compelled to warn librarians and readers that the volumes are not all of uniform quality. The previously published and completed volumes are excellent. I particularly recommend *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the four volumes of *The Masks of God, Myths to Live By*, and the essay collections *The Mythic Dimension* and *The Flight of the Wild Gander*. Together, all of the volumes of the series contribute to the completeness of the series. But some volumes will be appreciated only by serious Joseph Campbell fans or according to the tastes of the reader.

In conclusion, I highly recommend the book *Occidental Mythology: The Masks of God, Vol III*. It is appropriate for all public libraries and for most libraries of educational institutions from high school up through college and university levels. The presentation of mythologies and their development throughout human history justifies having this third volume of *The Masks of God* to be included in the collection development of most libraries. Exceptions to my recommendation might include the libraries of some conservative religious institutions.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons

James, William. "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy." *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Longman Green and Co., 1907, pp. 1-16. https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/James/James_1907/James_1907_01.html.

PHILLIP FITZSIMMONS is the Steward for Society Archives for the Mythopoeic Society. His professional title is the University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian at Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) in Weatherford, Oklahoma. At work he is responsible for the General Thomas P. Stafford Archives and is the administrator of the SWOSU Digital Commons. He manages Mythsoc's physical and digital collections through the SWOSU archive facilities. The Mythsoc digital repository is found at <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythsoc/>. His research interests include the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, the Inklings, Joseph Campbell; and digital services for academic libraries with an emphasis on archive management, institutional repository administration, and library reference services.