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The Influence of Spengler and Toynbee on Joseph Campbell (and *Vice Versa*?)

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I. Introduction: The Context of the Times

While Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee were about a generation older than Joseph Campbell, all three were young men in the first part of the 20th century. Furthermore, all three lived at the pinnacle of Western power, when the West absolutely dominated the rest of the world.

Late in the 19th to early 20th Century, the West “came of age,” that is, the rush of victory wore off and the West actually began to interact with and contemplate the world it had conquered. Late 19th and early 20th Century Westerners were confronted by the knowledge that they were in the same position as other conquerors before them, such as the Romans, Macedonians, et al. This general mindset produced thinkers who attempted to “step out” of Western culture and treat Western culture as no different from any other high culture. It is no accident that Spengler and Toynbee produced their works during this period.

Moreover, analysis of comparative civilizations was not the only area in which Western thinkers were willing to treat Western Culture as no different from any other. Another such area was comparative religion. Toynbee wrote and theorized about religion in *A Study of History*, but a few years later Joseph Campbell built his career specifically in the area of comparative world religion (and mythology). Indeed, when Campbell published his masterpiece, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, one reviewer wrote that Campbell had done what Toynbee had not “dared to do: include Christianity among the mythologies (other religions) of the world in a comparative study.”

Thus, because Spengler and Toynbee were writing on comparative civilization shortly before Campbell was writing specifically on comparative religion, it is fair to ask

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whether Spengler and/or Toynbee had any influence on Campbell. As discussed in
detail below, this paper will answer that question emphatically, "Yes."

A full intellectual biography of Joseph Campbell is far beyond the scope of this
paper. For example, a discussion of the diverse sources of Campbell’s religious
syncretism is not possible here, because one would have to analyze at length his study
of Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, and possibly philosophers such as
Schopenhauer. Likewise, certain other aspects of Campbell’s intellectual life, such as
the claim of “seemingly ineradicable anti-Semitism” that was made against him in
September of 1989 by Brendan Gill, and subsequently by others, are also beyond the
scope of this paper. This paper will narrowly explore the influence of Spengler and
Toynbee on Campbell.

II. Spengler: Campbell’s "Major Prophet"

It is difficult to exaggerate the influence that Spengler’s Decline of the West had on
Campbell. Between his graduation from Columbia College in 1925 until he began
teaching at Sarah Lawrence College in 1934, Campbell traveled the world trying to
“find himself,” which earned him a reputation in some quarters as a “bum.” In 1931,
Campbell drove west via the South, driving through New Orleans and Louisiana,
Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before reaching Los Angeles.

For a while he lived in Carmel, where he befriended John Steinbeck and philosophers-
marine biologist Ed Ricketts, upon whom Steinbeck based “Doc” in Cannery Row.
Campbell also managed to fall in love with Steinbeck’s wife, Carol, although the
relationship was apparently never consummated.

One day during 1932 Campbell happened to pick up Spengler’s Decline off the shelf
at the Carmel library. Campbell was totally mesmerized by Spengler; he read Decline
in its entirety seven times over the next decade: no mean feat, as any student of
Spengler can attest, especially since he preferred the original German. In October

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66 Larsen p. 145.
67 Larsen p. 177.
68 Ibid.
1932, during one of the subsequent readings, he wrote that “Spengler has become my major prophet.”

Indeed he did. Consider the following illustrative examples of the impact of Spengler on Campbell:

1) Campbell actually used *Decline* to woo his Sarah Lawrence student and future wife, the dancer Jean Erdman. He gave her a copy of *Decline* just prior to her departure on a post-graduation trip around the world with her family, in order to ensure her return. As Campbell put it, “I knew she couldn’t read [it] without having me tell her what it was about.”

Before she left on her tour, Miss Erdman dined with Prof. Campbell at his parents’ New York City residence. Campbell allowed her no illusions about what life with a bibliophile academician would be like. She brought her copy of *Decline* with her and she and Campbell discussed Spengler over dinner. After dinner, Campbell walked her home. It was raining heavily, and Erdman had no raincoat or umbrella; so Campbell took off his jacket, as Erdman later recalled: “I thought, ‘how gallant.’ But he said urgently, ‘Give me the book,’ and he quickly tucked it under his jacket. I knew what I was in for...”

Campbell married Jean Erdman in 1938. One can only hope that they were the only couple ever who fell in love discussing Spengler. The Campbells remained married until Joseph’s death on October 30, 1989.

2) Fellow mythologist Robert Bly recounted the following exchange with Campbell:

Joe... said, “... I spent two years reading *The Decline of the West*... these things proceed like glaciers, these cultural events go mathematically, there’s nothing you can change about them, and once the three Caesars have appeared, everything goes downhill in an absolute genuine and clear way and it’s all laid out.... And that’s what happened in Rome, that’s what happened in the United States!”

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69 Larsen p. 214.
70 Larsen p. 243.
71 Larsen p. 245.
I said, “Who are the three Caesars?”

He said, “Hitler, Mussolini, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt!”...

Joe was saying, “Once the three Caesars have appeared there’s no sense in doing a political act, it makes no sense at all. Don’t waste your time, because everything is disintegrating.”...

What we need [Campbell was really saying] is for people to understand the mythology—and everything will get a lot better right away. The energy with which he went about this missionary work of bringing help to a society—he implies that he knew there was some strong help there.72

That conversation with Bly took place in the last decade or so of Campbell’s life. However, Bly’s account must be correct, because approximately 50 years earlier Campbell had himself referred to his desire to devote himself to trying to reconnect people with archetypal myths:

inflected through all these styles is the archetypal form of man: the myth is the symbolic statement of the grand lines of that archetype: the modern artist is in a position to lead the way back to an experience of the myth: this experience will re-introduce man to the grand lines of his own nature and will establish him in harmony with his own vast solemn depths: every trait, every problem, every form of his own life and of the life of his culture, and of the life of mankind itself, will be found soundly validated in this experience.73

Campbell’s biographers, Stephen and Robin Larsen, state that Campbell was trying to pave the way for what Spengler called “the Second Religiousness.” However, Spengler’s Second Religiousness refers specifically to a resurgence of a culture’s religion, albeit in a slightly different form or with a slightly different emphasis, during the world state of the Civilization stage.74 The result is the temporary re-

72 Larsen p. 509.
73 Larsen p. 227; see also Moyers, Bill, Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth (Mystic Fire Video/Apostrophe S Productions 1988; hereinafter “Moyers”) Episode 2.
74 Spengler, Oswald, The Decline of the West (1 Vol. edition Knopf 1962, abridged by Helmut Werner; hereinafter “Decline”), pp. 221, 347.
invigoration of the Civilization. The key point here is that Spengler’s Second Religiousness refers to a specific religion and a specific Civilization.

Campbell was going for something much more: he was seeking the Mythos, the central insight that would release Mankind’s spiritual impulse from its fetters to a specific body of culture norms. Mankind would then be able “to recognize the Energy behind all the forms of life, including one’s own character”,75 as the Larsens put it. Campbell was seeking a single, constant human archetypology from which all meaning and values ultimately spring and have always sprung.76

3) Campbell was a Jungian,77 and Spengler’s idea that each culture has its own soul, which is represented by the culture’s prime symbol78 meshes perfectly with Jung. According to Spengler, once the Culture is born and prime symbol unique to that particular Culture emerges, the prime symbol defines the culture and cannot ever be changed if the culture is to survive, because if the prime symbol changes then by definition the culture has ended and a new one has emerged. Furthermore, Spengler stated bluntly: “Every soul has religion.”79 The soul and prime symbol are expressed by the art and religion developed by each particular culture.

Spengler’s ideas regarding the soul and prime symbol of a culture smack of Jung’s concept of archetypes in the individual’s unconscious. An archetype or “primordial image” according to Jung is “the instinct’s perception of itself” or ... the self-portrait of the instinct.”80

According to Jung, “The collective unconscious consists of the sum of the instincts and their correlates, the archetypes. Just as everybody possesses instincts, so he also

75 Larsen p. 227.
76 Ibid.
77 Campbell was the editor of The Portable Jung (Viking Penguin 1971; hereinafter “Jung”).
78 Decline pp. 96-98.
79 Decline p. 184.
80 Jung p. 56.
possesses a stock of archetypal images.\textsuperscript{81} Once the archetypal image is triggered, it is set and can be altered only with extreme difficulty.\textsuperscript{82}

In the religious context, once the archetype is set, it is set. For example, if one is raised from infancy as a Buddhist, the unconscious archetypes are set and he perceives the Almighty as a Buddhist would. Even though he may convert to Judaism or become a Southern Baptist, unconsciously he will always perceive religious symbols against a Buddhist background. In this regard, consider pictures of the Virgin Mary from around the world: In India, she takes on a Hindu look; in Japan, she looks Buddhist or Shinto, and in Mexico she is the Aztec-like Virgin of Guadalupe.

All this is perfectly in line with Campbell, who in his landmark PBS television series with Bill Moyers, "The Power of Myth," echoed Spengler when he compared religions to computer codes or software: they each have their own particular signals—or symbols—and each will work in its own time and culture. But one cannot take symbols from one religion and add them to another religion (from another culture) any more than one can take signals from one software program and add them to another and expect the program to still work. According to Campbell, "If a person is really involved in a religion and really building his life on it, he had better stay with the software he's got."\textsuperscript{83}

To return to Spengler, the point at which the culture has progressed through technology, change of environment, or otherwise to the point at which the prime symbol is no longer relevant is the point at which the metaphors or symbols of the culture's religion are also no longer relevant. Eventually, the civilization stage will set in, at which point the culture is moribund and dying. This process can be likened to a Jungian neurosis in an individual due to the triggering of an outdated or inappropriate archetype. Campbell clearly believed that the West had progressed beyond that point:

Nor can the great world religions, as presently understood, meet the requirement. For they have become associated with the causes of the factions, as instruments of propaganda and self-congratulation. (Even Buddhism has lately suffered this degradation, in reaction to the lessons of the West.)

\textsuperscript{81} Jung p. 57.
\textsuperscript{82} Jung pp. 66-67.
\textsuperscript{83} Moyers Episode 2.
universal triumph of the secular state has thrown all the religious organizations into such a definitely secondary, and finally ineffectual position that religious pantomime is hardly more today than a sanctimonious exercise for Sunday morning, whereas business ethics and patriotism stand for the remainder of the week. Such a monkey-holiness is not what the functioning world requires; rather, a transmutation of the whole social order is necessary, so that through every detail and act of secular life the vitalizing image of the universal god-man who is actually immanent and effective in all of us may be somehow made known to consciousness.\textsuperscript{84}

III. Campbell and Toynbee

The first six volumes of \textit{A Study of History}, which Mason referred to as the “old” Toynbee,\textsuperscript{85} were published well before 1949, when Campbell’s \textit{Hero with a Thousand Faces} was published. Given Toynbee’s notoriety, without knowing any more, one could assume with a good degree of certainty that a voracious reader and academician such as Campbell would have devoured the \textit{Study} in short order.

1) The subject of \textit{Hero} is the “monomyth”, a term Campbell borrowed from James Joyce’s \textit{Finnegan’s Wake}.\textsuperscript{86} The monomyth is the standard story of all heroes and myths and is summed up by Campbell as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.\textsuperscript{87}

Furthermore, Campbell breaks the monomyth into three stages: separation or departure (including a chapter entitled “The Call to Adventure”); trials and victories of initiation; and return and re-integration with society.

\textsuperscript{84} Campbell, Joseph, \textit{The Hero with a Thousand Faces} (Bollingen Series/ Princeton 1949; hereinafter “\textit{Hero}”), p. 389.

\textsuperscript{85} Mason, Henry L., \textit{Toynbee’s Approach to World Politics} (Tulane 1958; hereinafter “\textit{Mason}”), pp. 12, 13, 27.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Hero} p. 30 n. 35.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Hero} p. 30.
All this should appear familiar to the student of Toynbee: instead of the monomyth stages, Toynbee discusses Challenge and Response. In reaching the concept of Challenge and Response, Toynbee analyzes mythology and comes very close to the monomyth idea without using that term.\textsuperscript{88} Furthermore, Toynbee discusses withdrawal and return both in terms of individual heroes in the form of mystics\textsuperscript{89}, and collective heroes in the form of the creative minority\textsuperscript{90} which ventures forth from the ordinary and meets the challenge confronting the civilization with a successful response. In other words, it is obvious that Toynbee permeated Campbell’s thought.

2) However, one need not rely on conjecture, because Campbell cites or quotes Toynbee four times in \textit{Hero} (in contrast to Spengler, whom Campbell only quotes once).\textsuperscript{91} It is not an exaggeration to say that if Spengler was Campbell’s “major prophet”, it was Toynbee’s \textit{A Study of History} that prompted Campbell to write \textit{Hero} and analyze the monomyth.

Campbell specifically approves of Toynbee’s ideas of withdrawal and return:

Professor Toynbee uses the terms “detachment” and “transfiguration” to describe the crisis by which the higher spiritual dimension is attained that makes possible the resumption of the work of creation. The first step, detachment or withdrawal, consists in a radical transfer of emphasis from the external to the internal world, macro- to microcosm, a retreat from the desperations of the wasteland to the peace of the everlasting realm that is within. But this realm, as we know from psychoanalysis, is precisely the infantile unconscious.\textsuperscript{92}

Campbell goes on to cite Toynbee with regard to the hero’s return:


\textsuperscript{89} Somervell v.1 p. 217.

\textsuperscript{90} Somervell v.1 p. 230.

\textsuperscript{91} Campbell cites or quotes Toynbee in \textit{Hero} at pp. 16, 17, 20, and 167n, while he quotes Spengler at p. 72n.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Hero} p. 17.
[The hero’s] second solemn task (as Toynbee declares and as all the mythologies of mankind indicate) is to return to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed.\(^\text{93}\)

3) However, at this point Campbell engages in a kind of intellectual dialogue with Toynbee; he criticizes him on a point that Toynbee took to heart, whether due to Campbell’s critique, to someone else’s critique, or on his own, and as a result of which Toynbee changed course. This change of direction dominated the “new” Toynbee, volumes VII-X of the *Study*, which were published five years after Campbell’s *Hero*, in 1954. In the footnote to the passage quoted above, Campbell stated:

> It must be noted against Professor Toynbee, however, that he seriously misrepresents the mythological scene when he advertises Christianity as the only religion teaching this second task. All religions teach it, as do all mythologies and folk traditions everywhere. Professor Toynbee arrives at his misconstruction by way of a trite and incorrect interpretation of the Oriental ideas of Nirvana, Buddha, and Bodhisattva; then contrasting these ideals, as he misinterprets them, with a very sophisticated rereading of the Christian idea of the City of God. This is what leads him to the error of supposing that the salvation of the present world-situation might lie in a return to the arms of the Roman Catholic Church.\(^\text{94}\)

Toynbee apparently never read Campbell’s critique, but he wrote volumes VII-X of the *Study* as if he had taken it to heart. In fact, in 1955 he said that “The Indian standpoint is the one from which the last four volumes of my book have been written.”\(^\text{95}\)

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\(^{93}\) *Hero* p. 20.

\(^{94}\) *Hero* p. 20 n. 20.

IV. Comments from a Spenglerian Perspective

Interestingly, Spengler would have agreed more with the “old” Toynbee position that Campbell criticized, and not with Campbell, who like the “new” Toynbee, was a syncretist and who postulated numerous similarities between Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Spengler, on the other hand, disagreed: “Buddhism, which only a mere dabbler in religious research could compare with Christianity, is hardly reproducible in words of Western languages.” Along these lines, Spengler held that it is impossible to revive a culture—including its religion—once it has run its course. Thus, Spengler would assert that it is impossible to revive the West through a revival of Christianity. He would further assert that religious syncretism could not possibly revive the West, because “the essence of every Culture is religion,” and the religion of the West was (is?) Christianity, not some syncretistic amalgamation.

In other words, to use Campbell’s computer analogy, if one adds new code to software from another program, even if one can get it to work, one has changed the program into a new program. Thus, a Spenglerian would insist that if one adds “code” from another culture’s religion, one has not revived the religion or the culture; he has rather created a new religion which might or might not give rise to a new culture.

Furthermore, Spengler would attribute Campbell’s soaring popularity late in life, at the time of the Moyers televised interviews and thereafter, to megalopolitan materialism and pseudo-intellectualism. Spengler was absolutely prescient in this regard:

Materialism would not be complete without the need of now and again easing the intellectual tension, by giving way to moods of myth, by performing rites of some sort or by enjoying the charms of the irrational, the unnatural, the repulsive and even, if need be, the merely silly...The Isis-cult in Republican Rome...was a religious pastime of high society... Correspondingly, we have in the European-American world of today the occultist and theosophist fraud, the American Christian Science, the untrue Buddhism of drawing rooms, the religious arts-and-crafts business (brisker in Germany than even in England) that caters for groups and cults of Gothic or late-Classical or Taoist sentiment.

96 Decline p. 184.
97 Decline p. 185.
Everywhere it is just a toying with myths that no one really believes, a tasting of cults that it is hoped might fill the inner void. Materialism is shallow and honest, mock-religion shallow and dishonest.\(^{98}\)

Spengler was correct about Campbell’s popularity in this regard: in my experience and opinion, most people who were interested in Campbell at all just dabbled, or to paraphrase Spengler, “toyed with myths.” Campbell’s syncretism simply gave them a good excuse, an intellectual justification, to abandon their traditional Christianity. They could abandon their own churches and nevertheless feel intellectually justified in doing so, could feel good about themselves, because after all, according to Campbell, all conceptions of the Divine are just symbolic anyway, the “Masks of God.” In effect, Campbell became an intellectual version of one of Spengler’s drawing room cults, so that Campbell was ultimately unsuccessful in creating a movement that would renew society by reconnecting with mythological archetypes.

In the end, Campbell’s attempt at reconnecting society to myths was itself a kind of political act, which Campbell had warned against. He should have followed his own Spenglerian advice: “Don’t waste your time, because everything is disintegrating...”\(^{99}\)

V. Conclusion

Civilizationists today seem not to have any great amount of influence in shaping world events. In part because as Campbell observed, “these things proceed like glaciers.”\(^{100}\) There are no civilizationists appearing nightly on cable news programs and giving analysis of events from a civilizational perspective. Thus, perhaps it is difficult for civilizationists today to understand the influence that first Spengler and then Toynbee after him had on the scholars of their day. We should be proud of them. Their influence cannot be over-emphasized: it was deep, long-lasting, and broad. It extended into areas of study far beyond comparative civilizations, and it had a profound effect on one of the great scholars of comparative religion of the 20\(^{th}\) century: Joseph Campbell.

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\(^{98}\) *Decline* pp. 346-7.

\(^{99}\) Larsen, p. 509.

\(^{100}\) *Ibid.*
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