

INTRODUCTION

The bull is horned, massive, and powerfully intent on his single purpose. Facing him is a vaulter, nimble and athletic, preparing not only to evade the charge but to spring above it. But there are no guarantees, and it is a dangerous game.

This image, taken from the ancient Cretan frescoes of bull vaulting, comes to mind as I contemplate the theme of this book. Yes, you've got the metaphor: fundamentalisms are massive, truculent, single-minded creatures, belief systems of immense collective force, charging around in our social arena and also in our minds. Some are religious, positing events beyond all natural laws and commanding us to believe in them. Others, equally monolithic, are scientific and opaquely materialistic; but heretics beware—a scathing dismissal or an academic pillory could be your punishment. The bull's horns are the horns of our modern dilemma: the standoff between literalistic fundamentalism and metaphoric, symbolic thinking—the subject of this book.

In the explosive evolution of a planetary culture and the information superhighway, strange new antipathies and alliances have formed. Across national and cultural boundaries, and even within communities, people scowl at each other, dismiss each other's belief systems, brandish Bibles or other holy books—and sometimes, just as quickly, brandish weapons. Rhetoric becomes polarized and paralyzed. If you fail to vault elegantly above the warring ideologies you will surely get trampled or impaled.

What skills, what training, should an author bring to such a perilous encounter? I offer two, and they are found in the analyses and structure of this book: on the one hand, my years as a psychology professor and neurotherapist, teaching about and working clinically with consciousness and the brain; on the other, my long apprenticeship with mythologist Joseph Campbell, researching and writing books on mythology and shamanism. These universes of discourse may seem far apart, and most self-respecting professionals might refrain from listing *neurotherapist* and *mythologist* together on a resume. Yet the subject at hand—the myth-susceptible human

brain that gets caught up in rigid, obsessive, and destructive ideas—calls for a conjunction between exactly these realms of knowledge.

My desire to write this book manifested after the events of 9/11. As a lifetime New Yorker, I felt personal outrage at how out of control things could get when cultures collide, how even the wisest among us stand like deer in the headlights of an impossible vehicle of doom. Now what do we do? What good is psychology—or anything else we know? Could anyone have seen this coming?

As I mused on the catastrophe, my memory flashed back to a quarter of a century ago. It was some time in 1975, and I was driving the great mythologist Joseph Campbell along the curvy roads of upstate New York on our way to a lecture he would be giving that evening. Along the way, the topic turned eventually to the state of the world. I remember commenting that most modern people seem a little schizophrenic because they don't know what to believe—there are just too many options. On the one side are centuries of hidebound belief that even the believers know is outdated and, on the other, a secular modernism that doesn't seem to believe in anything but the gods of chance.

We were driving past talus slopes under the beetling limestone cliffs of Rosendale, New York, and Campbell had been looking intently at the rocky debris. Suddenly he said something about standing on the “terminal moraine” of thousands of years of mythologies, and that we shouldn't be surprised if the ground seems to be shifting under us. Then he added, in words I can't forget, “The fragments of the gods are all around us.”

As I wondered what he might have meant, I got that old *frisson*, the shiver up and down the spine that happens when a life-changing idea comes one's way. For a moment I wondered: Do these fragments emit a kind of spiritual radioactivity? Do partial gods walk and talk in our dreams, or judge us in our nightmares? Can god fragments themselves be insane?

Just as walking on a tumble of broken limestone rock is risky and demands our full attention, so making our way through the huge fragments around us—the broken cultural belief systems, unloved and worn-out deities, and phantoms of our own fears of transition and change—promises to be risky footing. I feel sympathy for our frightened, changing civilization.

That conversation with Campbell led to fifteen years of research on the topic of personal mythology, finally published in *The Mythic Imagination* (Bantam, 1990). The substance of the book is that, in the absence of a monolithic single religion such as Christianity offered in the Middle Ages, the modern psyche, trying to cope with the resulting alienation and dissociation, looks into the unconscious for guiding myths and images. I hadn't realized, until 9/11, how profound was the alienation and dissociation of the entire modern world—how the world itself seems to have lost its soul and is trying to find it—and thus how dangerous it is to have the volatile fragments of the gods lying around us. The situation could lead to both individual and group psychosis. It was, in fact, only three years or so after that conversation with Campbell that about nine hundred Americans followed a man with darkly messianic delusions, the Reverend Jim Jones, into the jungles of Guyana and died in a horrible mass suicide.

Recently, dozens of books taking positions on the dangers of misunderstood religion have been published with titles such as *The God Delusion*, *The Jesus Machine*, *The End of Faith*, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, and, in a different vein, *Why God Won't Go Away*. Authors, and even cartoonists, have been put on notice to watch what they say about Islam. Articles in popular magazines and scholarly journals alike are giving major coverage to issues of science and spirituality. *Newsweek* magazine has a thoughtful weekly section called "Beliefwatch." It usually takes a Jim Jones or a David Koresh, whose curious messianic delusions are examined later in this book, to prompt serious psychological or neurological investigation into what drives people to the extremes of religion. In this book, however, I am proposing that we do a sort of *preventive analysis* of how myth and culture affect the daily functioning of our central nervous system and, vice versa, of how dysfunctional nervous systems lead to rigid or destructive religiosity, before the next mass suicide, misguided rapture, or other hallmark event in the name of some offended god is headlined in the news.

If you think I am writing to ease my own anxiety about the world's problems, you are probably right. The dozens of books and hundreds of articles I read for this project, while sometimes reassuring me, have left me with no doubt that something large and dangerous is afoot in our

half-conscious world. It goes by the name of fundamentalism. I believe there are new ways of looking at it. I am eager to share something useful I have found—a new way to approach fundamentalism by revealing it as something inherently human, *something we all do*. It is a psychological habit, related to our longing to reduce the awesome complexity of the world to a few simple rules. Being a habit, it can be addressed. I believe that as a species we are in a *genuine developmental crisis*. The world has become the ultimate dysfunctional family, caught in a bad dream of miscommunication and violence. In this sense, this book is wake-up reading, to be taken with your morning coffee, to shake off the nightmare from which we are all struggling to awaken in this dream-shrouded morning of humanity's childhood. The florid public examples of fundamentalism may be there just to awaken us to something pervasive in humanity that is definitely in need of transformation.

Let me offer a preview of the following pages. Chapter 1 looks at the problem of warring fundamentalisms with both a psychologist's and a mythologist's eye and examines Joseph Campbell's "prophecy," written in the 1980s in his *Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, about what happens when clashing fundamentalisms try to work out their dynamics.

Chapter 2 takes the issue straight into the human nervous system to show how physiologically vulnerable we are to dualistic and absolutistic patterns of thinking. Certain parts of the brain do seem to respond to religious imagery, especially ritual, and to the sense of something as sacred. This chapter reveals the peril that looms when a nervous system already susceptible to dichotomies and rigid thinking (the hardware) is compromised with bad mythology (the software).

The third chapter looks at how religions have exploited certain vulnerabilities in the human nervous system—susceptibilities to authority, to obsession and ritual, and to "dissociation," the ability to cut off parts of our functioning and hide from ourselves. A psyche divided against itself is vulnerable to manipulation and ideological thinking.

Chapter 4 investigates Campbell's "fragments of the gods" idea and considers what it is like to live on an archetypal talus. The inner version of the mythological problem is the fragmentation of the personality, and the

personality's desperate attempts to achieve unity at all costs. Some fragments are problematical, like the naive hero, which leads people into childish idealism and fantasy, rather than the soul growth and realism we find with the mature understanding of the hero. Another dysfunctional fragment, because so easily projected on others, is the malignant image of the Antichrist, a collective manifestation of repressed shadow elements.

Chapter 5 takes the duality problem into cultural history and particularly the history of Western religion. We go from the ancient Middle East, through Europe and England, to America, where a new continent birthed strange religious forms never seen before, such as Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses. These novel hybrids nonetheless hold onto ancient (Middle Eastern) beliefs, such as the expectation of a messiah (or his second coming) and a promised millennium of peace. Wonderful-sounding, and entwined with the perennial human need to return to paradise, such a belief, held literally, may imperil the whole world.

The sixth chapter offers a summarizing look at Islam and its own struggles with dualism and patriarchal patterns. Islam's history has been marked by internal schisms from the beginning and by battles between sects trying to out-fundamentalize each other, as in Christianity. The Wahhabist variety of Islam, born in Saudi Arabia, is one militant outcome of this polarizing tendency. We also look at the early historic events that underlie the *Satanic Verses* controversy, which had to do with Islam's repudiation of a feminine element in its own mythology.

In chapter 7, I take the heat off the religious fundamentalists and turn my gaze to secular fundamentalisms, including scientism, medical fundamentalism, psychotherapeutic fundamentalism, skeptical fundamentalism and (oh, yes) new age fundamentalism. Examining these systems shows us that *it is not the content of a belief but the way it is held* that make it a fundamentalism.

Chapter 8, "The Five-Minute Fundamentalist," opens up the idea that fundamentalist thinking is an inherently human habit we all engage in when we are least self-aware. It can also be managed by skillful means involving self-awareness. I share some personal features of grappling with the inner fundamentalist and offer some hopefully useful exercises for revealing this

metamorphic but dangerous psychological character through self-observation and mindfulness.

Chapter 9 is titled “Natural Religion.” Here I differ from the deconstructionist writers who say religion is ridiculous and should be discarded. Alongside the pathological religious forms prevalent through history are authentic, natural forms of religion that blossom in human lives without the hypocrisy, bombast, and coercion of the fundamentalist legacy. There is something perennial about the human desire to reach out to a living and responsive universe and find meaningful connection, love, and creativity. When that happens, and your bliss is embraced, in Campbell’s words, “Doors will open for you that you didn’t even know were there,” and you may once again find yourself at home in the universe.

My hope is that you the reader will draw from this work both an awe of human creativity and imagination and an awareness of just how fragile these faculties are—and how easily subverted. I hope to engender an awareness of how old cultural habits as well as new cultural crises feed into fundamentalist thinking, making us more desperate for simple answers in a changing world. And I hope to inspire you to think, *we are they*, instead of, *it’s us against them!* whenever you meet a fundamentalist, whether a religious or a scientific one. Only in this spirit can we move forward as a unified, healthy humanity, our exquisite diversity yielding not conflict but dialogue and the alchemy of mutual understanding.