

Carl Jung: Friend or Foe of Christianity?

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Abstract

Carl Jung, through his bold statement, "I don't believe, I know [God]" was offering a formidable challenge to the conventional religions and their followers. Those reason-based, dogma/belief promoting religions miserably fail to recognize and represent the vast subconscious realms of human psyche and ignore its significance and magnitude. The world of myths and symbols has a lot more to reveal than what creeds and dogmas try to contain. Jungian analytical psychology focused the transcendent and the need for each individual psyche to make friends with the transcendent. His primary concern was healing - not only the healing of the individual psyche but the healing of the collective psyche. Jung's purported 'descent to the Hell', enabled him to get in touch with facts of human psyche hitherto unknown to him. Though some of his perspectives are unorthodox and unacceptable to the Christian dogma, he should be given credit for shedding light to certain important areas that modern humanity has failed to recognize duly and take care of to its own disadvantage and dismay.

Introduction

In his famous 1959 television interview with John Freeman (the only one he gave), Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God. His response, "I don't believe, I know" has gone down in the annals of psychotherapy

as one of the defining moments of analytical psychology's relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular. In this short paper I aim to pitch into the tumultuous sea surrounding the relationship between Jung's analytical psychology and Christianity to see how far we can regard Jung as a 'believer' and if so, what sort. In deference to the ongoing nature of this dialogue I have drawn readily upon *The Red Book*, written by Jung at the height of his psychotic disturbances during the Great War and only recently published (Jung, RB 2009)

Jung and the Christian Way

Jung once wrote:

Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say, over thirty-five – there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. (Jung, CW1932)

In the same work he went so far as to suggest that anyone he encountered at this stage of development who was experiencing mental crisis and who had had some previous religious formation should be encouraged to return to their religious roots if they were to stand a chance of being mentally healed. Thus, from its beginnings Jungian analytical psychology has preferenced the transcendent and the need for each individual psyche to make friends with the transcendent, for not doing so, warns Jung, will lead to severe psychological problems.

There is no doubt that there is much in Jung's writing that is inimical and downright erroneous for a straightforward Christian seeker trying to reconcile her faith with Jungian transpersonal analysis. Yet, despite some of the excesses that are to be found in his work, his map of the soul provides a corrective to the rising tide of materialism that has swamped early twenty-first century culture. As Dueck puts it in his perceptive short book on the relationship between Jung and Christianity, *The Living God and Our Living Psyche: What Christians Can Learn from Carl Jung* (2008):

Rising through the last several centuries, modernity had reached an apex of its power in the first half of the twentieth century, and its capitulation to science had drained away much of the healing power of Christian practices. Jung sought to recover this vitality. (Ulanov and Dueck 2008:5)

Thus, suggests Dueck, Jung attempted “a pastoral attempt to counter the personally debilitating effects of modernity”. His primary concern was healing - not only the healing of the individual psyche but the healing of the collective psyche. Accordingly, his “epistemology is not positivist, but diverse enough to include narrative, dreams, fantasy, propositional truth and ethical pronouncements” (Dueck 2008:9).

‘To a drunken feast of joy’

Despite the help that Jungian psychology can clearly provide the contemporary seeker of the transcendent, my argument in this paper will be that this relationship was neither straightforward nor necessarily helpful. Very early on, before his split with Freud, he could write to his colleague in 1910:

Religion can be replaced only by religion. Is there perchance a new saviour in the International Fraternity - we need the eternal truth of myth (Jung to Freud 11th November 1910 in Bishop 1995)

Thus, from its very beginnings, psychoanalysis explicitly saw itself as replacing Christianity: “Christianity must be replaced by something equivalent” (ibid). Psychoanalysis, writes Jung to Freud (or as they refer to it, from its Greek fore letters: ψα) will provide a new phenomenon to replace religion, and in particular Christianity. To effect this psychoanalysis will draw on the Dionysian spirit popularised by Nietzsche in works such as *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*:

I think we must give ψα time to infiltrate into people from many centres, to revivify among intellectuals a feeling for symbol and myth, ever so gently to transform Christ back into the soothsaying god of the vine (*in den weissagenden Gott der Rebe*), which he was, and in this way absorb these ecstatic instinctual forces of Christianity (*jene ekstatischen Triebkräfte des Christentums*), for the one purpose of making the cult and the sacred myth (*den heiligen Mythos*) what they once were - a drunken feast of joy (*zum trunkenen Freudenfeste*) where mankind regained the ethos and holiness of an animal.

This way the beauty and purpose of classical religion which from God knows what biological need has become a *Jammerinstitut* (literally, ‘an Institute of Woe’. Thus Analysis should be a means to help people get in touch with these Dionysian libidinal impulses.’ (Jung to Freud 11th November 1910 in Bishop 1995)

Thus, as Bishop points out instead of the ‘*Dionysos gegen den Gekreuzigten*’ that we find at the end of Nietzsche’s last published work,¹ Jung will ‘transform the Crucified back into the God of the grape’ (Bishop 1995:64). This ‘Dionysian element’ is one to which Jung would constantly return, even after the break with Freud:

The Dionysian element has to do with emotions and affects which have found no suitable religious outlets in the fundamentally Apollonian cult and ethos of Christianity. (Jung CW: 12.182)

“Intoxication”, he writes in the same essay, “that most direct and dangerous form of possession, turned away from the gods and enveloped the human world with its exuberance.” Thus, for Jung, Christianity was not to be destroyed (how far this remained on Freud’s agenda remained and remains a moot point), but rather to be transformed by helping people to return to the springs of the libidinal – the *ekstatischen Triebkräfte des Christentums* – which Jung felt had been abandoned.²

So, in Jung, we don’t have the destruction of Christianity, but rather the *transformation* of Christianity. Jung is a reformer, in as much as Luther was a reformer. He sees much that is good in Christianity but that it has lost its connection with the libidinal. Thus, he will emphasise two main things in his future reform of Christianity: the return to the libidinal and the importance of the symbolic function.

The Descent to the Mothers

Jung’s ‘return to the religious’ is thus quite unlike anything similar we can find in comparable late modern writers. In many respects his writings mark the end of the modern and the return to the pre-modern as post-modern phenomenon. In this respect his writings, especially after his break with Freud, mark a serious attempt by a late modern thinker to engage with medieval thought patterns on a deeply existential level.

1 Nietzsche’s final written words in *Ecce Homo*: ‘*Hat man mich verstanden: Dionysos gegen den Gekreuzigten.*’/‘Have you understood me: it is Dionysos or the Crucified One...’ (In *Warum Ich ein Schicksal Bin*: 9)

2 It is worth contrasting Jung’s view here with that of the post-Freudian, Julia Kristeva. In *This Incredible Need to Believe* (Kristeva 2009: 84) she contrasts Nietzsche’s ‘Dionysius’s drunkenness’ with the suffering ‘God-man’ of Christianity. She preferences the latter.

After Jung's break from Freud in 1913 Jung himself was plunged into a dissociative state and as the First World War raged in Europe, Jung fought his own internal wars as he tried to make sense of the caverns and hells of psychic space. Until 2009, much of our understanding of this process was hidden from view and had to be pieced together from scraps in his later published work. All we knew for sure was that Jung had undergone some sort of psychotic breakdown which had resulted in a complete restructuring of his psyche. The publication of the *Red Book [Liber Novus]* in 2009 (Jung RB: 2009) has since allowed us an insight into the processes that Jung underwent during those turbulent years. As he wrote of this period:

The years... when I pursued the inner images, were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me. That was the stuff and material for more than only one life. Everything later was merely the outer classification, scientific elaboration, and the integration into life. But the numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then. (Jung 2009 RB: Preface)

From this would emerge all the main innovative elements with which Jung would chart the psyche and develop his own form of what he termed 'analytical psychology.'

The 'descent to hell' charted in *The Red Book* is prefigured in his correspondence with Freud when he used the phrase: "the descent to the realm of the mysterious Mothers" derived from Goethe's *Faust*, Part Two 6287-90. After his break with Freud in 1913 Jung will call his psychological research a 'descent to the underworld', a *katabasis* or descent to *das Reich der Mütter*. From this 'spirit of the depths' [*geist der tiefe*] (RB: 243) he will discover, as he says in the *Red Book*, the 'birth of the new god' [*des neu-gottes*]. Here he tells us that "Christ journeys to Hell and becomes the anti-Christ" (RB: 243) - "no one knows what happened during the three days Christ was in Hell. I have experienced it" [*ich habe es erfahrt*] (RB: Folio V). After the events described in the *Red Book*, Jung's conception of Christianity can never be the same again.

This became apparent in the celebrated correspondence Jung had with the English Dominican priest, Victor White from 1945 until White's

death in 1945.³ Initially keen to incorporate Jung's psychology into his Catholic theology and approach to pastoral care, White realised during the course of his relationship with Jung that the block towards this would be Jung's attitude to evil in general and the Catholic doctrine of *privatio boni* in particular.⁴ We shall return to this conflict shortly.

White, in his last two books, *God and the Unconscious* (1952) and *Soul and Psyche* (1960) rather neatly summarises his attitudes to Jung and Jung's approach to Christianity in general. Here he makes explicit reference to Jung's 'descent to the mothers' (White 1952:210). This he characterises as the essential call of the Gnostic: "essentially the attitude of magic, seeking to subject the mystery to the comprehension of the Ego, and utilizing transcendent power and knowledge for its own ends and aggrandizement" (White 1950:210):

The enlargement of consciousness, inward-turned to the Realm of the Mothers, the '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' of the archetypes, away from the chaos of the hard, cruel world of fact and human history and society: there lies salvation. Know the names and origins of the archetypes and projections of the unconscious; know their conflicts and triumphs and falls and recoveries; and you will be their master and will be saved. (White 1952:210)

White in 1952 contrasts this conception of 'Gnosticism' with 'faith' which he describes as "humbly accepting a Divine revelation it knows it cannot fully comprehend." This 'unknowing' for White (as it did for Dionysius and the medieval practitioners of 'theologia mystica') lies at the heart of Christian belief and stands in complete contrast to the 'knowing' of Gnosticism. In 1952 White explained the problem very well but at this time as he was still very close to Jung's project of analytical psychology and so refused to go so far as to class Jung himself as presenting the Gnostic position. However, after his conflict with Jung over the *privatio boni* he became more critical of Jung's position. In his last book, *Soul and Psyche* (1960) White comes closer

3 The complete correspondence was published in 2007 as *The Jung-White Letters*, ed. A. Conrad Lammers and A. Cunningham. London: Routledge.

4 Literally, 'the privation of good'. St. Augustine's early attempt to formulate a Christian response to the problem of evil and later systematised by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*. The teaching suggests that evil is ultimately caused by an absence of good and has no ontological status in its self.

to describing Jung's position as essentially that of the Gnostic early Christians.

'The Primitives'

One of the characteristics laid at the feet of Gnosticism by White was its tendency to elitism – it was for him the preferred spirituality of the 'moneyed, leisured classes.' In this respect some of Jung's criticisms of institutional religions (including White's religious order) had the aroma of this elitism. This is no more apparent in this apparent distaste for certain forms of 'primitive' Catholicism.

In the discussion of Eckhart and medieval mysticism in Volume Six of the *Collected Works* of Jung we encounter the idea that the medieval mystics are equated with 'primitives' (CW: 6.414). This may seem an isolated reference but it is a theme that Jung returns to repeatedly. That is, that certain forms of religion – and in the case of Western religion this is manifest in Roman Catholicism – are more 'primitive' or chthonic'. Now Jung doesn't necessarily mean this as a bad thing (no matter how insulting it may sound to the members of that denomination) but rather he seems to mean it as other moderns would talk of the 'noble savage' with all its pejorative associations, i.e. that Roman Catholics, for example, have access to some sub-cultural magic which the more sophisticated or thinking Protestants have somehow lost:

(Catholics) have at their command a rich and palpably ritualistic symbolism which fully satisfies the demands as well as the obscure passions of simpler minds. (Jung CW: 11.548)

Or as we find in *Psychological Types*:

Almost everywhere on the lower human levels the idea of God has a purely dynamic character; God is a divine force, a power related to health, to the soul, to medicine, to riches, to the chief, a power that can be captured by certain procedures and employed for the making of things needful for the life and well-being of man, and also to produce magical or baneful effects. (CW: 6.414)

Therefore, the forms of medieval mysticism described become 'a regression to a primitive condition' (CW: 6.415). Nothing, in a way, could be further from the spirit of the *theologia mystica* that we find in these works.

The Creation of the Symbol

It would, however, be unfair and misleading to end this analysis of Jung's interpretation of Christianity on such a negative note. As we

have seen above many contemporary commentators have found much that is useful in Jung's approach and he still finds many enthusiastic followers from within Christianity. As I have already stated, in my opinion, one of Jung's primary concerns, certainly after the expression and style of the *Red Book*, was to recapture key elements of the style and process of medieval thinking for the (post-) modern reader/seeker. In this respect I feel the most important aspect of Jung presented from this perspective is his revival of the importance of the symbol as an entrée into postmodern discourse.

In the recovery of the symbolic Jung was not alone. Whilst his own researches into the nature of the symbol were to prove so important, other mid 20th Century *ressourcement* writers such as Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895 - 1990) had also begun to appreciate the significance of the symbolic for interpreting the medieval mindset. In his perceptive essay on Victorine spirituality *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chenu 1997), Chenu alludes to the role of the symbolic for the medievals as being largely anagogical, i.e. the symbol is the means whereby the heavenly order is reflected in the earthly order:

Creation was a theophany, a manifestation of God, and symbolism was the means appropriate to that manifestation; even granting a dialectical tension between the power of creation to manifest God and its complete inferiority to God, symbolism revealed nothing less than God's transcendence (Chenu 1997:128)

As well as this anagogical element, the symbolic for the medievals was another mode of thought, in contradistinction to, for example, the dialectics of the schools. In this respect, the symbolic for the medievals was not considered another form of logic but a different way of 'showing' truth. As Chenu states:

To bring symbolism into play was not to extend or supplement a previous act of the reason; it was to give primary expression to a reality which reason could not attain and which reason, even afterwards, could not conceptualize. (Chenu 1997:103)⁵

It is therefore apparent how this 'alternative to logic' would appeal to the medievalist (or at least contra-modern) Jung. For him the symbol

⁵ See, for example, Hugh of St Victor: 'Symbolum, collatio videlicet, id est coaptatio visibilium formarum ad demonstrationem rei invisibilis propositarum' / 'A symbol is a juxtaposition, that is a gathering together of visible forms in order to demonstrate invisible things' Hugh of St Victor 'On the Celestial Hierarchy'iii. PL CLXXV 960D.

will become the means whereby the 'meta-rational' components of the greater 'Self' [*Selbst*], will become accessible to the more circumscribed 'I' [*Ich*]. The symbol, in Jung's hands will become the linking point between the known 'I' and the unknown 'Self', thus performing a crucial function in his psychology:

In practice, opposites can be united only in the form of a compromise, or irrationally, some new thing arising between them which, although different from both, yet has the power to take up their energies in equal measure as an expression of both and of neither. Such an expression cannot be contrived by reason, it can only be created through living. (Jung CW: 6.169)

The mediating axis for this process is the symbol:

The mediating position, between the opposites can be reached only by the symbol (Jung CW: 6.162)

This symbol will therefore represent "something that is not wholly understandable, and that it hints only intuitively at its possible meaning" (Jung CW6: 171). This function will also be a 'playful' function:

Schiller calls the symbol-creating function a third instinct, the *play instinct*; it bears no resemblance to the two opposing functions, but stands between them and does justice to both natures. (Jung CW: 6.171)

So, the symbolic function is, for Jung:

- Neither rational or irrational.
- Playful and creative.
- Allowing the conscious to grasp the unconscious.
- A gateway to the Gnostic/Dionysian Jungian god.

Therefore religion, for Jung, becomes the acceptance of the reality of the symbol (Jung CW: 6.202). For him, the *symbolic* and the *religious* (whether that is represented by Christianity, Hinduism or Taoism is irrelevant) are coterminous:

The solution of the problem in *Faust*, in Wagner's *Parsifal*, in Schopenhauer, and even in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, is *religious* (Jung CW: 6.324)

Conclusion: Carl Jung – Friend or Foe of Christianity?

To conclude this paper I know return to my original question: 'Is Carl Jung a friend or foe of Christianity?' Well, if we understand Christianity

in terms of the doctrines or creeds of Orthodoxy then he is no foe, but rather someone who fails to understand the implications of Orthodox Christianity for an interpretation of the nature of Christ and ultimately of Christian life. If we follow the version of Christianity presented by Jung we are no longer following Orthodoxy but rather a late Gnostic version of Christianity.

Is that such a bad thing?

In a world almost swallowed up in reductive materialism Jung saw his fundamental task as preserving the spiritual from the ravages of reductive empirical materialism. This he termed the 'religious outlook to life' which he felt was fundamental in preserving good mental health (See Jung CW: 11.509). His spiritual life was as much for 'unbelievers' as 'believers' to the former of which he explicitly claimed to be addressing his writing:

I am not... addressing myself to the happy possessors of faith, but to those many people for whom the light has gone out, the mystery has faded, and God is dead. For most of them there is no going back, and one does not know either whether going back is always the better way. To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. (Jung CW: 11.148)

In this respect, for Jung all religions are equal. None has the monopoly on the 'cure of souls':

Yes, I agree, the Buddha may be just as right as Jesus. Sin is only relative and it is difficult to see how we can feel ourselves in any way redeemed by the death of Christ. (Jung CW: 11.518)

As with his views on god/God, Jung betrays his theological naivety. He does not seem to understand that, for example, Christianity and Buddhism have fundamentally mutually exclusive views on the metaphysics of human salvation. Be that as it may, if we see reductive materialism as the enemy of Christianity then on the theory that an enemy's enemy is a friend, Jung therefore belongs on the side of the angels and a guardian of Christianity in a world that has rapidly become a stranger to the spiritual – or at least the ability to express that spiritual life in a comprehensible language. In *Seelsorge*, for example, he is quite bullish about the rights of the clergy to trespass on to the realm of the materialist psychologist:

I therefore hold that psychological interest on the part of the Protestant clergy is entirely legitimate and even necessary. Their possible encroachment upon medical territory is more than

balanced by medical incursions into religion and philosophy, to which doctors naively believe themselves entitled (witness the explanation of religious processes in terms of sexual symptoms or infantile wish-fantasies). (Jung CW: 11.548)⁶

There is no doubt that Jung's transpersonal psychological language has given a means for a whole generation to communicate its unease with the astringent materialism of our time. For this, perhaps, Christianity owes him a debt. Although we might want to baulk at awarding him the title 'Defender of the Faith' he certainly deserves the title 'Defender of Faith'. White recognised this when he saw that Jung was a prophet warning against a collapse of the Western psyche brought about by one-sided materialism. In the opening of his 'God and the Unconscious' he quotes with approval Jung's words from 'Psychological Types':

Our age has a blindness without parallel. We think we have only to declare an acknowledged form of faith to be incorrect or invalid, to become psychologically free of all the traditional effects of the Christian or Judaic religion. We believe in enlightenment, as if an intellectual change of opinion had somehow a deeper influence on emotional processes or indeed upon the unconscious! We entirely forget that the religion of the last two thousand years is a psychological attitude, definite form of adaptation to inner and outer experience, which moulds a definite form of civilization; it has therefore created an atmosphere that remains wholly uninfluenced by any intellectual disavowal. (Jung CW: 6.313)

Jung's critique was as much a critique of Christian culture and mindset as it was of Christianity itself. For him, the 'Christian mindset' still continued to mould and shape our everyday realities, even in the 21st century, perhaps more than we would care to admit:

Everything we think is the fruit of the Middle Ages and indeed of the Christian Middle Ages. Our whole science, everything that passes through our head, has inevitably gone through this history. The latter lives in us and has left its stamp upon us for all time and will always form a vital layer of our psyche, just like any phylogenetic traces in our body... The Christian *Weltanschauung* is therefore a psychological fact which does not allow of any further rationalization; it is something which has happened, which is present. (White 1960:67 quoting an address by Jung given in 1934)

Jung's analysis of the individual, of religions such as Christianity and ultimately of Western Cultural Patterns emphasises the need for a correction. Or as he calls it an 'enantiodromia' – a new openness to the

6 We can also perhaps hear here a gentle criticism of Freud's 'explanation' of religion.

transcendental and a balance to the hard ossification that has clearly happened on both sides of the religion/materialist divide over the past century. His psychology, with all its ambiguity and slipperiness, does offer an alternative for the psyche to breathe and rearrange itself in a time of change and realignment of priorities. Jung seems to say that religion may choose to stay on the sidelines of that realignment, but no-one, least of all the psychologists, will in the long term thank it for its self-immolation.⁷

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7 As he says in Jung CW: 12.17: 'Psychology thus does just the opposite of what it is accused of: it provides possible approaches to a better understanding of these things, it opens people's eyes to the real meaning of dogmas, and, far from destroying, it throws open an empty house to new inhabitants.'