

# Jung and the Christian Way

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## ***Abstract***

By showing the psychic roots of religion and the psychological relevance of Christianity, Jung did a real service to humanity. His theories challenged the corrosive and personally debilitating effects of modernity on the psyche. His depth psychology is capable of revitalising Christian spirituality today through providing an essentially modern psychological bridge between traditional Christian dogma and authentic healing experience - an encounter with the Holy Spirit. There exist a lot of neglected, undeveloped, unacknowledged parts of our personality which need to be constantly recognised and accepted, so as to be dissolved and transformed – ‘made new’ – by God’s love, throughout our psychological, and deeper prayer journey. Jung’s writings on the psyche contain much of the teaching of Christian spiritual direction and guidance from past centuries, in the idiom of modern depth psychology. Jung tried to tell the world that those experiences which were considered as something reserved for an elite, belong to the normal range of human life and what might have once seemed rarefied, remote and reserved for saints and monks is now in great demand and longed for by many ordinary people.

## **Introduction**

Several contemporary Christian authors regard Jung’s most important contribution was his essentially pastoral response to counter the corrosive and personally debilitating effects of modernity on the psyche (Ulanov & Dueck, 2008). As modern secular psychology is generally unable to contain, and relate to, mystery, paradox, ambiguity and contradiction, Jungian psychology tends to value, and respect, these

psychological states and integrates them into its theoretical and clinical understanding of psychological growth and maturation. The symbols of religion, particularly the Christian symbols, were a major preoccupation in his life and work where he was attempting to show the psychic roots of religion and the psychological relevance of Christianity, with his epistemology diverse enough to emphasise the existence, and reality, of unseen factors indirectly, via the subjective experience of dreams, symbols of transformation, fantasies, intuitions, hunches, awe and dread.

### ***Homo religious: Hardwired For Belief in God***

In this brief paper, I want to focus on two particular pastoral ways in which Jung addressed these important modern issues, and how his depth psychology, I believe, is essential in revitalising Christian spirituality today. At the heart of Jung's work was his lifelong exploration of the psychology of the *homo religiosus*. One of his central contributions was the recognition and value that he accorded the 'religious function' of the psyche – the innate religious urge which he regarded as an inborn need of the psyche which, he firmly believed, could not be neglected or violated without grave injury to psychic health and well being, particularly in the second half of life. His particular interest and emphasis lay in what he regarded as the central role of experience or encounter with the numinous, sacred, holy or the Holy Spirit as the main authentic way to a renewed faith in, and sense of, connection to the transcendent, or God, for many individuals in our modern times:

Theology does not help those who are looking for the key, because theology demands faith, and faith cannot be made; it is in the truest sense a gift of grace. We moderns are faced with the necessity of rediscovering the life of the Spirit; we must experience it anew for ourselves.' (Jung, 1961)

His main concern was to present a psychology of life integration and wholeness, free from attachments to formal religious language or ideology. He wanted the religious dimension of the psyche - the quest and longing for God, the sacred or holy to be seen as natural and innate, as a 'fact' of the psyche, rather than as supernatural or as an object of 'belief'. Jung was fairly ambivalent about traditional Christianity, striving to preserve the spirit of religious tradition but throwing many old religious forms into an alchemical fire, as he was certain that religious faith points to the reality of, and authentic, transformative encounters with, the living God:

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. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate experience.' (Jung, 1940)

His treatment of religion may look destructive and disrespectful to some, but underneath he saw himself as an alchemist in the laboratory of faith, consisting in creatively exploring new postmodern expressions of the eternal religious spirit (Tacey, 2007). He viewed his depth psychology as providing an essentially modern psychological bridge between traditional Christian dogma and doctrine and authentic and healing human experience and encounter with the holy, the numinous or the Holy Spirit. He was convinced that man's perennial religious impulse would rise again in self and society in new and creative ways, and his explorations took him back to the ancient past and the late medieval period, and forward to the world yet to be born.

### **Spiritual Revolution in Postmodern World**

He knew that profound changes were happening both in society and in the psyche of modern men and women, and that fresh and new expressions of religion were both necessary and in the making. Of course, what Jung was looking forward to and was prophetically writing about in the 1940's and 1950's is now happening in many quarters in our postmodern world, but it is a quiet spirituality revolution (Tacey, 2004). This is not religion in its old forms, but religion in the sense of mythos or sacred story - as a searching for, and re-connection to, all that is holy, and for Christians, how our individual life is part of, and binds, conforms us to the human, and divine, life of Jesus in ever more life giving and transformative ways.

Jung's vocation as healer of the soul, is another aspect that we will take up in this article. His depth psychology is basically a psychology of healing of psychic disturbance. He has given vital contributions in this regard, which he states clearly in a late letter:

I am simply a psychiatrist, for my essential problem, to which all my efforts are directed, is psychic disturbance: its phenomenology, its aetiology, and teleology. Everything else is secondary for me' (Jung, 1961).

The main thrust of his psychology was to articulate, and describe, from his working with thousands of people for over fifty years, the way of healing of human neuroses. He called it the journey of individuation, the integration of psychological opposites where unconscious material is raised to consciousness and is incorporated by it. Individuation is, in a way, a rounding off of the psyche and is therefore often symbolised, in art and dreams, by mandala patterns – where we can become a separate undivided conscious unity, a distinct whole, first by unifying ego consciousness, and then the whole psychic system of conscious and unconscious, in order to approach wholeness. In his writings, C.G. Jung emphasized repeatedly that the process of individuation is mainly a psychological one, and not a spiritual one.

A large thrust of Jung's psychology, was an attempt to offer the Christian tradition in particular (and the other religious traditions in general) psychotherapeutic understanding, and treatment, for its deeply ingrained tendency to split the physical and spiritual aspects of the human psyche. Jung's anguished answer to these modern monumental questions was contained in his last great volume, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 'An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy' (Collected Works Volume 14), which is a book about the power of love to heal the conflict between the opposites in the divided self and divided society. It was the culmination of Jung's alchemical studies begun the 1920's, and completed the opus of his lifetimes contribution to modern depth psychology. This volume focuses on the profound healing that can take place when the power of love – God's love - constellates the wholeness latently present in our psyche. This deep psychological healing process brings us to the centre of our being, where the power of God's love, through relationships, is capable of healing all the conflicts between the opposites, healing all the dualities and splits within ourselves.

### **Individuation, Integration and Spirituality**

Usually our psychological journey towards individuation and integration can't really be separated from our spiritual journey of prayer and longing in our heart and soul to be immersed in God's love and real community, and that when we use the term 'soul', 'true self', 'essence' etc, we are including what we would call 'psyche'. All experienced phenomena can be expected to have at least some connections with unconscious psychodynamics and these connections are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. It is only upon considering their fruits – their effects upon the experienced and lived

life of faith – that we can begin to appreciate and appraise their true value.

Since we come to know God through our psyche, we must be prepared to heal and transform all the muck of our own interior stable in which the divine can be born. Inherited with the pure gracious gift of God's self are the unacceptable parts of our lives that get attached to our views of God. In our journey towards the centre of ourselves and beyond, the way deepens and darkens as it progresses, and as soon as we turn towards the interior world of self reflection, self knowledge and prayer, we usually encounter whole dimensions of ourselves that have previously been unconscious, hidden and unknown. In modern psychological terms, these are called the 'shadow' parts of the psyche, which encompasses all the psychic contents that have been driven back into the unconscious: all the neglected, undeveloped, unacknowledged parts of our personality which need to be constantly recognised and accepted, so as to be dissolved and transformed – 'made new' – by God's love, throughout our psychological, and deeper prayer journey (McLean, 2003). It is a mysterious paradox that the place of our greatest pain, vulnerability and powerlessness is the door through which our heart can be so broken that it forces us to turn away from the outer world and trace the thread of our own darkness back to our source in God. Unless we can fully participate in life and become relatively differentiated, the wholeness that the individuation process is striving for cannot be reached. Conscious and unconscious stand in a reciprocal, dynamic relationship; out of the unconscious rise contents and images, and they show themselves to the conscious mind as though secretly asking to be grasped and understood, so that 'birth' may be accomplished and 'being' created.

So, the aim of the individuation process is a synthesis of all partial aspects of the conscious and unconscious. It seems to point to an ultimately unknowable, transcendent 'centre' of the personality, which Jung calls the Self, which is always there, as the central, archetypal, structural element of the psyche, operating as the organizer and director of all psychic processes. The symbol of the quaternity, usually in the form of the square, is one of the oldest symbols, besides the circle, of the self, which symbolizes all the parts, qualities, and aspects of unity (Jung, 1940). These 'uniting symbols' most vividly represent the fundamental order of the psyche, the union of its polaristic qualities, and are the prime symbols of the self and of psychic wholeness. Jung called them the '*atomic nuclei*' of the psyche, representing the *coincidentia oppositorum*, or union of opposites, in particular of conscious and unconscious contents, and transcend rational understanding.

All these symbols are the vehicles and at the same time the product of what Jung called the transcendent function, that is, of the psyche's symbol-making capacity, of its creative power, the process of transformation to new attitudes and perspectives and paths to psychic renewal – "The raw material shaped by thesis and antithesis, and in the shaping of which the opposites are united, is the living symbol" (Jung, 1971). The transcendent function is one of the central tenets of Jung's model of psychological growth through dialogue with the unconscious with application both as a vital clinical tool, understanding the workings and dynamics of everyday life with profound spiritual implications. (Miller, 2004)

### **Towards the Unknown Within**

With this notion of the self, Jung was reaching to describe, intuitively and theoretically, a psychological dimension that was far exceeding the limits of individual's usual conscious self-awareness and identity. Jung's notion of the self stretches our psychological and ontological understanding *towards* the unknown within, *towards* the personal relation to, and encounters with, a transcendent reality, which is normally hidden from our everyday consciousness. Jung's writings contain much of the psychological teaching of the ancient Christian contemplative tradition transposed into the idiom of twentieth-century psychology. In his concept of the self, Jung shares the belief that God's presence lies within the centre of the soul, expressed from a psychological, rather than a mystical, perspective, and his writings on the psyche contain much of the teaching of Christian spiritual direction and guidance from past centuries, in the idiom of modern depth psychology.

The mystical writers down the centuries, and indeed the Christian contemplative tradition in general, suggests that there are even deeper dimensions of experience that are able to be awakened and engaged, and that the individuation process is but a threshold, a transition, to another way of knowing. This deeper spiritual journey in essence, is regarded as a continuation of the Jungian integration/individuation process, but on a deeper, or higher octave, so to speak. From this wider spiritual perspective, individuation is not an end point in itself, but the completion of one journey and an arrival, a preparation for another, as yet unknown journey. This is well expressed by Jung, as quoted by Jacobi in her book, the *Way of Individuation*:

The experience of God in the form of an encounter or '*unio mystica*' are possible and authentic ways to a genuine belief

in God for modern man. The individuation process can 'prepare' a man or woman for such an experience. It can open him or her to the influence of a world beyond his rational consciousness, and give him or her insight into it. One might say that in the course of the individuation process, a man or woman arrives at the entrance to the house of God. Whether he or she opens the door and penetrates to the inner sanctuary where the divine images are, this last step is left to him or her alone. (Jacobi, 1967)

Jung movingly writes of the beginning of this cusp between two ways of knowing, or the entrance to another way of knowing. Mystical knowledge, Jung claims, differs from ordinary knowledge in that it effects a transformation, and it is found not in the succession of images which pass across the imagination and from which we abstract our concepts, but by a penetration of the mind into the centre of its own being – in mystical experience that transforms, Jung writes, "it is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension" (Jung, 1940). And, Jung writes, this new way of seeing, this new dimension, is dependent on the birth of a new centre, which he called the self.

Here, Jung is referring to that important cusp, or transformation, between two ways of knowing or being, towards a more mystical or contemplative consciousness, towards union in the centre of the soul. The 14<sup>th</sup> century text the *Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of the 'the sovereign point of the spirit', called the *apex mentis* or the 'substance of the soul,' or 'the centre of the soul. St John of the Cross often speaks of the 'centre of the soul' e.g. In *Canticle*, I, 6:

And it is to be observed, if one would learn how to find this Spouse (as far as may be in this life), that the Word, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden essentially in the inmost centre of the soul.

Mystical union or the spiritual marriage was the primary metaphor of St Teresa to describe this mystical dimension. Among other major mystical categories are those of contemplation and the vision of God, deification, the birth of the Word in the soul, ecstasy, or radical obedience to Divine Will.

### **Horizontal and Vertical Thinking**

Whereas ordinarily we think horizontally, one image or concept being replaced by another, the language of the contemplatives indicates

that mystical thought is vertical: it does not entail the acquisition of new ideas and concepts but is a descent into the darkness of one's own mind, void of images and conceptual thinking. This world of perpetual solitude found by the descent into oneself, is the sovereign point of the spirit, the centre of ones being. It is the world in which there reigns silence and union. In short, mystical knowledge does not move in successive images but spirals down into the depth of the soul to encounter God in the obscurity of silence (McLean, 2007).

St Teresa and St John of the Cross use ways of speaking which have been employed by numerous mystics from St Augustine to Ruysbroeck – a way of speaking reminiscent of depth psychology - that view mental activity not horizontally but vertically, not in space but in silence, not in motion but in rest, not in time but in timelessness. This distinction between two ways of knowing, two ways of being or different forms of awareness has been described by Christian saints and mystics throughout the centuries. In personal terms, the fruit of this deeper journey is that we come to know our self in new ways, this knowledge coming from the Divine, and not from our ego-centric, perspective. So, it is really describing that cusp, or transition, when the integration of the natural personality, or the process of individuation, has generally occurred, and a deeper process of spiritual transformation is underway. It is arguable whether depth psychology has yet evolved to the point where it can speak meaningfully about these deeper contemplative states of mind – that dimension of experience which lies beyond the familiar polarity of consciousness and unconsciousness.

The Christian contemplative tradition teaches us that the centre of the soul may be trusted, a centre which reveals itself as life giving, not annihilating, pointing not to our personal life alone but to the image of the crucified, and resurrected, Christ as the symbol and reality that contains our whole life. Our Christian journey is graced by divine presence accompanied by emergence of the figure of Christ, where the movement towards the innermost chambers of the human heart in prayer, relationship and community is a response to His divine call of Love. This divine image not only expresses the growing intimacy with God, but also, as a psychological symbol, signals the emergence of a more completely individuated personality, a fuller realization of our true self.

This longing for union with the love of God remains as a permanent feature of the psyche, despite this longing not always fitting in with traditional religious forms. Modern Christian people long for



relationship with the transformational healing love of God, through Jesus, enabling them to live in truly authentic, life giving ways. Jung was explicit in saying in a 1945 letter that this was what his work was all about:

The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neuroses but rather with the approach to the numinous. The fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology (Jung, 1945).

He was describing the psychological healing path towards direct authentic encounters with the living God and it is this that postmodern people want, not only doctrinal or creedal religion. Part of Jung's contribution was to show that such experiences are not reserved for an elite, but belong to the normal range of human life and what might have once seemed rarefied, remote and reserved for saints and monks is now in great demand and longed for by many ordinary people.

## Conclusion

I would like to finish with Ann Ulanov's helpful wisdom of the psyche:

We live in the psychological century, where explorations of inner space probe as far as those that go into outer space. Theology and the church hobble themselves when they fail to recognize the broad, deep, rich life of the unconscious already there in religious ritual, symbol, doctrine and sacrament. It is a failure to take seriously the transcendent in its persistent immanence, in and among us. Within the system of the psyche, we experience unconscious contents as transcendent to our egos. Theology's failure to take the unconscious seriously leaves the immanence of God unreceived, incarnated. Consciousness of the psyche's reception of God is essential if we are to perform the ministry of the ego in housing all that we are given to be. (Ulanov, 2000)

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