

Theology after Jung

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of Jung's theories on teaching students depth psychology and theology in a nondenominational graduate school of religion and a theological seminary. Contrasting the theological and psychological enterprises, with their concomitant dangers and benefits, the major impact of Jung's work is the shock, wonder, fear, joy in encountering the psyche as objective, there within and among us, but a reality we do not invent. The implications for teaching and for what happens in the classroom are explored.

Keywords

Theology, objective psyche, Self, *Deus absconditus*, aliveness.

The nondenominational seminary where I have taught nearly four decades is a graduate school of religion, mainly Christian, that trains students to be professors in universities and for ministries of many kinds—in churches, prisons, hospitals, and, with additional training, as clinicians. I have taught the major schools of depth psychology; in this paper I focus on the impact of Jung's thought on the theological enterprise.

But what is the theological enterprise, and what is the psychological project vis a vis religion? These two disciplines are like terrains on either side of a central river. When religion is dominant in culture, the two are one, what Christianity called the care of souls, what John Mbiti (1970), scholar of African religions, called the drama of rocks, trees, drums, for we human beings live in a religious universe. In the twentieth century, the one became two with depth psychology verging into a separate river from its original containment in theology. Now, in the twenty-first century, the two are converging to meet again, to send boats and bridges back and forth. First, then, a word about theology, with its dangers and contributions, and the same for depth psychology.

Theology

Theology is an intellectual expression of love of God. Our intellect becomes the means of the dance, the adoration, the witness to the center of reality. The dan-

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ger of theology is that its students can veer off into rationalization as defense against the unknown and the unknowing that always come with encounter with the numinous other who exceeds our grasp. Evidence of this defense is intellectualizing talk about the center of reality as substitute for experiencing it. We try to translate the unknown into our concepts of knowing and thus, in Jungian vocabulary, construct an ego-oriented theology. The opposite danger of theology is that its students veer off into unconscious identification with their systematic outline of the unknown. Caught in the archetypal energy at the center of dogma, they unconsciously insist everyone else identify with their system too. The result is theological bullying, or worse, theological sadism. In Jungian terms, this is not Self-oriented theology but an unconscious falling into Self theology.

We see both these dangers acted out in religions. The religious right appears to bypass the ego with its reality testing and differentiation of subject and object. God tells us what to do in every situation so we need not struggle to discern truth. We already know. We bypass the ego for God's will. Believers inflamed with certainty about who God is zealously pursue others to convert. In its worst form, this coercive proselytizing exiles or even kills those who do not sign on. The religious left appears to bypass the Self in favor of this or that interpretation, eschewing the concrete devotion to a path because, after all, we cannot be certain. We bypass God for the ego's will. This results in a flabby, unfleshed religion.

In contrast, theology proper, the genuine article, is a love affair expressed intellectually. Like the humble tumbler who could only show his devotion for the Virgin Mother by doing somersaults and handstands, theologians express love through words and systems and elaborations on doctrines—verbal crocheting, verbal painting, verbal music to celebrate the sovereign of the spheres (Miller, 1966). And they know perfectly well that the object of their devotion surpasses their words, so they circle around once again, and again, as if describing a lover. Listen to some of the greats:

Augustine: "Distinct, however, [from things intellectually seen] is that Light itself, whereby the soul...beholds...all things truly the object of the intellect. For that Light is God Himself; but the soul...when it endeavors to fix its gaze on that Light, quivers through weakness and is not able" (Butler, 1922/1966, p. 54).

Gregory the Great extols that in contemplation the human mind should "by touching (tangendo) love this Wisdom, and yet never by passing through it penetrate it" (ibid., p. 79).

Bernard of Clairveaux exclaims: "When the Lord comes as consuming fire...there ensues a sudden...enlargement of mind and an inpouring of light illuminating the intellect....But not through open doors but through narrow aperture" (ibid., p. 104).

For Gregory of Nyssa, "the true knowledge of what we seek consists precisely in not seeing...[for] our goal transcends all knowledge and everywhere is cut off from us by the darkness of incomprehensibility" (Danielou & Mursillo, 1961, p. 118).

Berdyaev (1953) asserts: "Truth penetrates the world with flashes of light and transfigures life....Truth is God....This differs from the usual interpretation of Truth as a judgement which corresponds to reality [which is] a diminished Truth...not the Truth of the light shining through" (p. 45).

Jean-Luc Marion (1991) joins the chorus when he writes: "One must admit that theology, of all writing, certainly causes the greatest pleasure....[the pleasure] of transgressing it: from words to the Word, from the Word to words....Theology always writes starting from an other than itself....it causes [us] to write outside of [ourselves], even against [ourselves] since [we] must write...by that which [we] receive and in no case master" (p. 1)

Depth Psychology

The psychological project presents different dangers and benefits. The fear that meets a psychological approach to theological symbols is that we thereby reduce them to psychological factors. God the Father really comes down to our oedipal complex, writ large. Jung is suspected of substituting his psychological vocabulary for a theological one. We talk of ego relating to Self instead of soul to God. God, who transcends creatures and all creation, shrinks to a factor in the human unconscious. The Self may transcend the ego, but does it transcend the psyche?

A sophisticated version of this reductionist approach, and it is not accurate to call it reduction, is Edinger's. He aims to extract religious symbolism from its embeddedness in religious traditions and look at it only psychologically, without the impediment of joining the religious community with its need for a unified doctrine. "We attempt to pry these great psychic megaliths, these huge stones, out of their religious context in order to make them available for direct experience" (Edinger, 2004, p. 12). He is assuming here, incorrectly I believe, that all believers do not know direct experience of God. Surely some do, as this remark by Luther about the Psalms which he translates from the Hebrew Scripture illustrates: we find in the Psalms "joyous thoughts about God" (cited in Edinger, 2004, p. 14). Further, Edinger's approach yields a lonely journey and one in danger of intellectualizing (pp. 63, 86). We can grasp the idea abstractly, but how to get it over into living? Gone is the community of sisters and brothers who seek the same God, who gain stimulation by each other's differences in which they build a bigger unity.

The danger opposite to reductionism looms equally large for the psychological approach to religious symbolism. Investigation of archetypal energies in religious images can sweep us up into unconscious identification with those energies; they now have us. So beneath our ego talk about the psychological meaning of dogma, we actually may be caught in identification with our own psychological approach, becoming adamant, intolerant of any who differ from our theory. We may not damn them, as in the religious version of fundamentalism, but we split away from them as falling short of true understanding of the deep psyche. Witness the schisms in Jung societies all over the globe.

In contrast, the contribution of depth psychology to theology, and here I focus on Jung, is to construct a bridge between psyche and religion. Jung sees his analytical psychology not as creating the light—that already exists—but making connections between sacred images and corresponding images in our psyche (Jung, 1953, paras. 14–15). We thereby renew traditional images by our idiosyncratic take on them, and religious tradition feeds us by offering multiple variations on the core images, variations that support our growth beyond our own versions of the images. Another way to say the same thing, and useful to theologians

and analysts alike, is to look into our own God complex and discern its roots in personal biography, in collective containers, and in core archetypal imagery. Then, and only then, do we come face to face with the big questions, such as: Does this power to create and find images for the center of reality exist within us, or outside us, or both?

Teaching

To respond to that question and to the impact of Jung's thought on theology, I must say a word about my own approach to teaching. I can use the three aspects of countertransference to describe it. You remember that countertransference includes first, our own idiosyncratic style; second, our own complexes that need more analyzing; and third, our picking up from the unconscious of others what is going on unconsciously in them. My idiosyncratic style is to offer many theories and psychic objects for students to play with and make their own. I am against coercion, and that opposition would fall into the area of complex too. I want above all to attune to each student's own voice, which often in the beginning of their degree is still unconscious to them. I want to hear and support the student's own experience of the psyche, and to aid them to speak and write out of that, to discover to what they belong and, at the same time, to open to the variety of belongings of other students and of all the theorists we study. This belonging and openness make for lively conversation, so that in the classroom we know we are near to the fire.

Theology students differ from analytic candidates or students in university religious studies because of the theological component. They accept their involvement with what Jung calls the religious instinct as a driving force in their psyches they are aware of (Jung; 1953, para. 14; see Ulanov, 1971, chapter 6). They want a spiritual life, struggle with faith and doubt, search for what doctrines mean in living with others in society, discern ethical consequences of faith in God. They know about the God of their respective traditions (it is a nondenominational school). What they learn in the classes of depth psychology and religion is the *Deus absconditus*, the God hidden in the depths of psyche, both individual and communal. They know about the numinous; what they do not know is God in and through the psyche, this force in the psyche.

Theology after Jung

To come then to the major point: the impact of Jung's work on theology is the shock, the experience, the wonder that the psyche is, there, objective within our subjectivity, a layer that Jung calls archetypal which we do not invent but discover. This is the major effect of Jung on theology in my experience. It no doubt reflects my own approach, which is not to convert students to a way of thinking, to sign them to an allegiance to a particular theory, but instead to communicate the fact of the aliveness of the psyche.

This engendering aliveness is there for the taking, an ever-present gift, a secret in the open, a joy and a fear. This presence gets communicated through my teaching, but I got communicated to through Jung's work. That is his legacy to me,

and mine to my students, an example of the oral tradition of teaching and learning, where you can trace your teachers way back to the greats. It is this excitement about aliveness of psyche that gives students a freedom to become who they are being, and they share this with each other and with me.

When it works, what happens in the classroom operates at a depth level of psyche responding to psyche, the psyche's own objectivity communicating to us, through us to each other, through the material to us, us to the material and imposing a form upon it. It is a very exciting process: original ideas occur to us that we could not find alone. It is a messy process: I do not lecture formally, but welcome questions, comments as I go along presenting material. This method keeps us close to the ground, rather than up in the finer regions of the intellect talking about the material or forming it into a structure.

Only over nearly forty years of teaching and analyzing, which I do in my private practice, can I find words that express the faith beneath what I am doing. I trust the psyche to make itself heard, felt, seen, and I know from my long working that the psyche only gets in through the archaic, through the cracks, the confusions, the gaps. Thus questions, criticisms, the hot spots in each student are where the psyche will touch them. As Jung says, the unconscious is not this or that but the unknown as it intimately touches us (Jung 1916/1960, p. 68). A bridge emerges between the psyche's communicating through primitive hot spots and, in Christian tradition, the story that the Christ, the new being, gets born in the muck of a stable, not in the civilized refinements of the inn.

The major impact of Jung's insights on theology students (and professors) is not in theological controversies such as Jung's notion of the Trinity, or of God as having an evil side and needing to depend on humans for conscious recognition of the necessity to reconcile with the divine shadow. Those sorts of issues go up into the intellectual realm of theology, and Jung's scholarship in religious matters, though exemplary for the analytic community, falls short of what religious scholars bring to the discussion. So in addition to defensiveness of theologians about Jung's novel insights into doctrine, there is also a knowledge gap between Jung and them that impedes vigorous discussion of Jung's influence on theological work.

Where Jung's impact is felt, I repeat, as I am just circling around this main point and describing it in different ways, is the objectivity of the psyche—that it has its own life, so to speak, its own agenda, and cannot be reduced to childhood conditioning (Object Relations theory), to instinctual drives (Freudian theory), to the immediacy of the relation between analyst and analysand (Intersubjectivist, Self psychology, and Relational theory), nor to the ontological questions of the meaning of life (Existentialist theory). The psyche includes all those factors, but that there lives in us individually and in our shared existence in society a life force, or presence, or even guide—through nudges, dreams, body symptoms—is astounding.

In addition, Jung's theory of the Self bears in upon the students' theological conviction. For Jung, the Self, as center of the whole conscious and unconscious psyche, manifests in a pattern of ordering images around a center, and manifests dynamically as if a living organism exerting intention. Images of Self have a generalized or collective quality and are indistinguishable from God-images for Jung. Hence, the *imago dei*, our being created in the image of God, is the Self. Its main pattern is to manifest as authority over ego consciousness, to pull all parts of psy-

che, ego included, to orbit around itself as center, and, dynamically, as if to construct dialogue with our ego, both individually and collectively. We could describe the Church, Synagogue, and Mosque as collective agents that desire dialogue with God (Ulanov, 1988/2000, pp.126–128).

Self images carry into consciousness the *Deus absconditus*, the God hidden in the unconscious, speaking from the other side of conscious convictions and struggles. For theological students, or any believer, these God-images bring what is left out of the conscious God-image, and can prove amazing (see Ulanov, 1986/2003, 1996/1998). Big chunks of our personality, like lost sheep, return to the fold. Theologically, it means God reaches us through the psyche, that it, too, is part of the flesh in which the Holy incarnates, manifests.

How do we teach this fact, and without doing therapy in the classroom, which I oppose as unethical. It can be made real by asking students to pay attention to which images in doctrine or scripture attract and repel them. This is where to begin in choosing a passage to exegete, a dogma to unpack. Such images hold a communication. Jung in particular, with his attention to image, adds a psychic hermeneutic to other methods of exegesis and interpretation, and also makes a bridge to interfaith dialogue, something desperately needed in this first decade of our new century and millennium. For in researching the image, we inevitably find it turns up in other cultures and religious traditions. We spy patterns on all levels—of personal life, cultural trends, of the image's effect in different locations throughout history. This quickens our sense of being touched by or in touch with another source of consciousness, of it with us, an abiding meaning or power that we must relate to (Jung, 1938/58, para. 8).

Within the personal conditioning of the author(s) and the cultural context in which the image is embedded, we reach the archetypal core image and can compare it with its appearance in different traditions. But to do this effectively, we must not merely know about it, but experience that core image. Otherwise we are talking about again, instead of communicating out of being communicated to.

To reach that depth of communication, the students depend on me to pour libido into the unconscious image, the image that arises in a thinker's theory, or the image that arises in me or the student in response to the theory. And I depend on the students to notice what is hot, what touches them from the side of the unknown. But our attention is always on the theory, and we pour back into the receiving of the theory all this energy. We may profit therapeutically in the process, and where relevant, relate that to the theory in question. In such a way, we live the meaning of Jung's statement that the archetypes are "tools of God" (Jung, 1975, p. 130), and that corresponds to the meaning of the religious statement we have fallen into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). We thus experience psychic reality individually and together as a small society, which refutes the criticism of Jung that somehow he only focuses on the inner life and the individual. No. Together in the humdrum day of schedules, school life, religious issues, we find and create this psychic reality.

Jung's focus on the image, at the personal, cultural, and archetypal levels, corresponds to the theological recognition that we need mediators between us and the Holy. Whether we choose a favorite saint, or sutra, or meditation practice, a relic, a guru, a piece of silk blessed by the Dalai Lama, as finite creatures we need

concrete symbols to make a bridge to the infinite they convey. This is another link between psychology and theology: the dependence on symbols to connect to the unseen. In Jung's terms, the ego is needed for God to manifest in this world and God is needed for the ego to exist. Mutuality characterizes the relationship and brings the invisible showing itself in the visible. (Here the function of projection finds its most exalted place.)

This sense of the tremendous presence right there in us and in the classroom arouses fear (Ulanov, 1975/86/2003), awe, even hostility. A boat is floated over to the religious fact of terror before the Almighty as well as a sense of finally coming home into light unchangeable to our darkness, to unfathomable darkness to our light. To accept this sense of the Other, right there objectively within our subjectivity, is to be willing to live a paradoxical life, always a mark of religion, and for Jung, a mark of perceiving the Self, that other source of consciousness that perceives the ego. The relation is two-way, mutual, between the I and the not-I, between the Subject that knows me as subject. From then on life is changed. I must always consult this other not-I so intimately involved with me in this world.

This intimacy affects the way we pray, worship, even do scholarship. For we are talking about a love affair, or a hate affair, about desire, aggression, deep peace, even terror. Awareness of our unconscious God-images brings missing parts of ourselves as well as making the bridge to the Holy at that particular moment. To bring all of ourselves to God, we must include all those parts we would omit, hop over, improve upon, what Jung would call the Shadow. God finds us in the stable. Paradoxically we live at once the accepted and the unaccepted, the official God handed down through the ages and the personal God image, like Jung's "green Christ" (Jung, 1963a, p. 210).

Paradox confounds the rational ego and supports the ego turned toward the Self, and reveals that turning as central to healing. This fact encourages students to think long and hard about Jung's idea that turning toward, into the psyche, so often necessitated by a problem, gives hope. Our ego is bid to leave the familiar country, much like Abraham, and go into the wilderness. This is a spiritual risk, yet leads to life: "If you will contemplate your lack...of inner aliveness...and impregnate it with the interest born of alarm at your inner death, then something can take shape in you, for you inner emptiness conceals just as great a fullness if only you will allow it to penetrate into you. If you prove receptive to this 'call of the wild,' the longing for fulfillment will quicken the sterile wilderness of your soul as rain quickens the dry earth" (Jung, 1963, paras. 189ff.).

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