

# Jung and Religion (Again)

by William Willeford  
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The C.G. Jung Society of Atlanta meets at Trinity Presbyterian Church, as it has in the past at other churches, and as similar groups do elsewhere. Some decades ago a bibliography was published of books and articles about Jung and religion; it listed over 500. If it were updated, it would now include several times that number. At the lower level of these writings, Jung is misrepresented as having tried to found a personal pseudo-religion (Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult*, 1994): indeed contentions that he was a mystic go back to the beginnings of his professional career. At a higher level, many of these writings maintain or assume that in at least some measure and in some sense, not necessarily easy to define, psychology and religion inhabit overlapping and partly even identical domains.

In a recent article the Jungian psychoanalyst Ann Ulanov argues that there is a dimension of the psyche that demands what must be called a religious response (“Countertransference and the Self,” *Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice*, Vol. 1, Fall, 1999). This demand is strong enough that writers in many respects not far from the psychoanalytic mainstream have felt the need to adopt such words as *ontological* (Laing), *sacred* (Winnecott), *prayer* (Bollas) *faith* (Biou) and *resurrection of the body*. Ulanov believes that it is important for an analyst to have a properly spiritual attitude, but she takes these authors to be not quite playing straight (if I may put it more crassly than she does) as they show no signs of a spiritual attitude that would grant the words their full meaning. What then is a proper spiritual attitude? She must think she has one, but, I ask myself, would she agree that I do also, or would she also think that I, too, fudge in the manner of the writers she listed?

Years ago I sometimes taught a university course with the title “Religion and Personality.” In one incarnation of the course, we adopted as a guiding theme the question: how is religion to be distinguished from psychopathology, including out and out craziness? After all, a great many psychotic delu-

sions are religious in character. It became clear to us, as I had suspected, that there are no clear and easy answers to such questions. By speaking of what he called the objective psyche, Jung attempted to overcome, or at least temper, the subjectivity that is an essential ingredient of religion. But the issues of how to talk psychologically about religious reality are subtle and persistent.

A recent issue of the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (44, 4, 1999) includes a series of papers under the general heading “Is analytical psychology a religion? Jung’s search for a substitute for lost faith.” Note that rather than being put into a huff by the title, these authors sympathetic to Jung were ready to accept it as a basis for serious discussion. The title alone should remind us of ways in which the scientist Jung, the son and grandson of clergymen, carried with him and within him the nineteenth-century conflict between religion and science that we associate with Darwin, and made working at it a major theme of his psychology. I turn to these papers now because one of them, Robert A. Segal’s “Rationalist and romantic approaches to religion and modernity,” provides useful distinctions bearing on the matters I have been talking about. And it occurs to me that readers of this newsletter might in their own ponderings find his way of posing the issues helpful.

Fundamentalists for Segal accept religion as explanation—for example, of the way the physical world has come to be and of the structure it has. Rationalists like Freud and Jung are also modernists, unlike fundamentalists, in rejecting religious explanations in favor of scientific ones. But some modernists—like Jung, William James, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, but unlike Freud—are romantics in thinking that science and religion may be compatible if the explanatory aspect of religion is disregarded in favor of others, such as that of providing symbols having psychological value. While both Freud and Jung view religion psychologically, Freud’s rejection of its explanatory aspect makes him condemn it, whereas this is not so for Jung. As Segal summarizes the matter: “Jung so relentlessly psychologizes...religion that religion replaced by psychology is religion as it has always been.... If religion has always been psychology and not explanation, then religion without explanation remains religion. That is why Jung can draw a straight line from Gnosticism to alchemy to [Jung’s] analytical psychology.” The latter has, however, separated out the questionable metaphysics of these predecessors from their valid psychology. “Taken in this way,” Segal concludes, Jung is a consummate romantic.”

In using “romantic” in this way, Segal does not mean, as an ad for a movie or a novel might, that Jung is charmingly sentimental. Rather, though the romantics Segal cites are all from the twentieth century, he is aware that their spiritual heirs belonged to the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century and included Coleridge, Shelley, Hugo and Novalis. These earlier figures countered the rationalism of the eighteenth century, which has persisted as a main component of modern science, with a reverence for imagination as a source

of truth. In this tradition Jung has been an important twentieth-century explorer of religion as imaginative and also potentially true.

In the words of William Blake two hundred years ago:

*The Atoms of Democritus  
And Newton's Particles of light  
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,  
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright."*

No amount of rational and scientific analysis can reduce imaginative truth to mere fact. Whatever else it may be, what Jung called the reality of the psyche is imaginative, and religion is, as it has always been, one of its basic forms of expression. Still, these assertions which convince me, do not, in any simple way, answer the questions that I raised in connection with Ulanov, that hover at the edge of Segal's argument, and that had faced my students trying to distinguish between religion and psychopathology. And so the discussion continues, and so it will include more books and articles on Jung and religion ■

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#### PICTURING GOD

by Wilson Elijah McCreary

The Christian literalist's religion  
is a profusion of confusion.  
Jesus crucified, dead, and buried,  
arisen,  
ascended,  
now a picture on a wall,  
the Man, God  
preaching love,  
care for the afflicted,  
turning the other cheek  
Looks light skinned Caucasian.  
The beard and long hair though,  
a well kempt hippie.  
But never mind,  
we've made Him thoroughly  
into man's image.  
We've had trouble though  
putting him into the movies  
and on the stage.  
To me, a shadowy figure  
mentally a little strange,  
some would say  
emotionally out of balance,  
not like Moses.  
Charlton Heston did a hell of a job,  
didn't he?

#### WORK

by Wilson Elijah McCreary

When I worked on mixing TV pictures  
with computer graphics,  
MultiMedia,  
a euphemism for  
"We can put inane TV images  
on the computer too,"  
I could watch any channel broadcast  
in the local area.  
I was drawn to the religious channels,  
The 700 Club,  
the Trinity Broadcast Network.  
It was a sleazy gaggle  
of wealthy beggars  
in thousand dollar suits  
and three hundred dollar shoes  
engaged in an unholy  
haranguing, singing, dancing,  
pissing contest  
vying for the poor widow woman's  
welfare check  
or, if you were wealthy  
a check for three  
or four hundred  
or maybe a few thousand  
would be even much better.  
It's really a good deal.  
They give you the problem  
and the solution  
all in one package.  
The problem, of course,  
is that you need  
your ticket punched  
for Gabe and Saint Pete  
for entry through the pearly gates  
and you're unworthy,  
a nasty, sinful, worthless worm  
destined to be dust under God's sandals  
unless you pay attention and send  
money.  
The solution is near at hand as well  
Just send the money  
and your mailing address  
and they'll pray for you.  
Anything's possible.