

How Jung led me away from to Christianity

by Kenneth Kovacs

“[D]ogma]... ritual... cultic practices... these artifacts of primal experience in time become institutions, and progressively more and more remote from the original encounter with the gods. We all know this is true. If these institutional forms really connected people with the gods, we could see the difference.” I remember the exact moment I read these words ten years ago. It was an experience of resonance and recognition. With considerable excitement I wrote in the margin, in red ink, *Yes! Yes!* These words have become a constant companion, informing my journey and vocation, and, at times, showing up in dreams. They mirrored back to me what I’ve been feeling for some time, but could not articulate. It was James Hollis who did that for me. I was unfamiliar with his work at that time. I remember wandering one day through Politics & Prose, one of my favorite bookstores in Washington, DC, when my eye was drawn to this title: *Creating a Life: Finding Your Individual Path*.¹ I devoured the book (or, better, it devoured me). This was my first introduction to the searching insight and wisdom that one consistently finds in Hollis. Reading this text also signaled my return to the thought of C. G. Jung, which I first encountered as a religion and history major at Rutgers College.

Hollis is right. If religious institutions were doing a good job helping people connect with “the gods,” we would see the difference. This applies to all religions, of course. But as a life-long Presbyterian and a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) for more than twenty-four years, I read Hollis, through the filter of my own experience, as a veiled, yet honest and accurate critique of the contemporary Church, particularly in Europe and North America. If the Church was really doing a good job helping individuals connect with God, the *numinosum*, we would be seeing

the difference. It would be evident. But it’s not.

The Church is in trouble. Christianity is in trouble. These are overly generalized statements, to be sure. Of course there are many churches led by dedicated and gifted clergy who are passionately and imaginatively engaged in helping people connect with the Holy. It is happening and making a difference in those locations. And there are even some clergy who are optimistic about the current state of the Church. It’s obvious that the Church these days is undergoing a massive transition or reformation, the kind that seems to occur once every 500 years.² I suspect, though, that something deeper is going on.

As I talk with colleagues and friends, especially those working in denominational offices, they are less than positive about the prospects of the Church. Congregations are struggling with massive membership decline, the financial burden of caring for aging buildings (many of which were built after World War II when it was “American” to go to church), sexual and financial scandals, eroding trust in authority (especially institutional authority), the polarizing liberal-conservative political divide infecting worshipping communities, all of which contribute to a crisis of identity for the Church. People are moving away from Christianity because of what they see going on in the Church. This is not to say that people no longer have a desire for the Holy or no longer have religious experiences, because they do. People are moving away from the Church because very often (not always, but often) it fails to speak to the deep, human desire to connect with the Holy, to something numinous. These direct encounters with Mystery are occurring apart from the ministrations of religious institutions. “Is it not a paradox,” Hollis asks in his recent work, *Hauntings*, “that the chief practical function of so many religious organizations is to protect people from religious experience? Are they afraid that the faithful might go off the reservation?”³

People have left and continue to leave the “reservation,” in droves. And many are being drawn to Jung precisely because they appreciate his “spiritual” or “mystical” vision and because he seems to stand outside conventional religious traditions, particularly Christianity. Some have even argued that Jung was trying to create a new religion as an alternative to Christianity and the teachings of the Church. There is much in Jung that could and does provide a sanctuary for disenchanting Church-goers, those who wish to be “spiritual” but not religious,

Kenneth E. Kovacs, Ph.D., is pastor of the Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Catonsville, MD, and has served churches in St. Andrews, Scotland, and Mendham, NJ. He is the author of *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter & Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

apart from religious institutions.

However, the more I read Jung—Jung, not necessarily Jungians—it’s difficult to subscribe to the notion that he was trying to form a new religion. Nor do I feel that his theories are always incompatible with orthodox Christianity, although it’s certainly easy to think so. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* offers many examples of his disappointment with the faith of his father, a Reformed Church pastor. Jung’s blistering critique of the Church throughout his writings, his frustration with theologians who accuse him of “psychologizing” the Gospel, and his own “theological,” seemingly heretical writings over the last third of his life could lead one to conclude that Jung was against the Church and that he wasn’t a Christian.

Yet, it’s important to remember that Jung placed himself firmly within the Christian tradition. In the 1930s, Jung said that he stood on the extreme left wing of Protestantism.⁴ And even though, as Sonu Shamdasani concedes, the *Red Book (Liber Novus)* “is an heretical text... it remains within a Christian framework.”⁵ In a conversation with James Hillman, Shamdasani makes this remarkable observation: “If there were an index [to the *Red Book*], it would show that the critical figure is Christ. In Jung’s later writings, [he claimed that] the development of the Christian tradition led to a suppression of what he calls individual symbol formation, so that it had blocked access to direct religious experience. This was what he saw his whole endeavor as recovering.”⁶ This was not only Jung’s “endeavor” in the *Red Book*, but throughout his life’s *opus*. “In Jung’s view,” Shamdasani suggests, “recovering the full depth and range of individual symbol formation is the way forward, paradoxically, to the revivification of Christianity.”⁷ As a Protestant, Jung knew what was lost in Protestantism, “individual symbol formation.” Indeed, in a striking comment, Shamdasani insists that Jung was not against the Church, but that, on the contrary, the “task [Jung] takes up [in the *Red Book*] is one of revivifying ecclesiastical Christianity.”⁸

What I increasingly hear in Jung is the voice of a prophet seeking the reform of the Church. As a prophet Jung is severely critical of the Church, however, like all prophets, he sees things that others cannot—or refuse—to see; he sees its untapped potential. Jung has a vision for what the Church could be and the invaluable service it could provide, not only to Christians and Christianity, but also to a larger society, when a community of people (a real *koinonia*)

risks serious intimacy with the wisdom of the psyche. Jung wrote, the “dogmatically formulated truths of the Christian Church express, almost perfectly, the nature of psychic experience. They are the repositories of the secrets of the soul, and this matchless knowledge is set forth in grand symbolical images. The unconscious thus possesses a natural affinity with the spiritual values of the Church, particularly in their dogmatic form, which owes its special character to centuries of theological controversy... and to the passionate efforts of many great men.” Jung continues, “The Church would be an ideal solution for anyone seeking a suitable receptacle for the chaos of the unconscious were it not that everything man-made, however refined, has its imperfections.”⁹ It’s difficult for the Church to be a container for the psyche when it’s rent asunder by centuries of division and dissension.

The challenges facing the Church today are enormous, but I haven’t given up on it—in part, thanks to Jung. Indeed, what if the Church *imaged* itself as a *vas temenos*—not a sacred container, but a container of the sacred, the “secrets of the soul”? Instead of the Church conflating itself with its contents, its sacred “secrets,” what if the Church really saw itself *in service* to the sacred and viewed itself as the *conduit*, the means, and the place where a connection with the Holy might actually occur, a community that helps individuals live into the transformation that inevitably occurs when one encounters the Holy? It would be a Church that values, celebrates, welcomes, and facilitates these kinds of connections, providing a “safe” place for individuals to have direct, primal religious experiences—a relatively safe place, that is. For what encounter with the Holy or *numinosum* is ever entirely safe? If more of the Church took this approach to its mission, we would definitely see the difference.

Notes:

¹ James Hollis, *Creating a Life: Finding Your Individual Path* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 2001), 57.

² See Phyllis Trickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2012).

³ James Hollis, *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives* (Ashville, NC: Chiron Publications, 2013), 25.

⁴ C. G. Jung, “The Relation of Psychotherapy to the Cure of Souls” (1932), CW 11 § 537, cited in James Hillman & Sonu Shamdasani, *Lament of the Dead: Psychology after Jung’s Red Book* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2013), 123.

⁵ Hillman & Shamdasani, 117.

⁶ Hillman & Shamdasani, 117-118.

⁷ Hillman & Shamdasani, 119.

⁸ Hillman & Shamdasani, 124.

⁹ C. G. Jung, “The Psychology of Transference,” CW 16, § 391 & 392.