



Saving Jesus, Freeing *Christ*: A Jungian Perspective

by Jerry R Wright

Speaking at Yale University in 1937 on the subject of psychology and religion, Carl Gustav Jung suggested that “to gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the *psychological approach*.” Noting that such a perspective would likely sound absurd to most “happy possessors of faith,” he targeted his psychological remarks to those for whom the religious light and mystery had faded, those for whom traditional religious images had effectively died due to centuries of excessive rationalism and literalism. (Jung, CW: 11:148)

Now seventy-five years later, I concur that a depth psychological approach to religion is indispensable to address the modern mind and ancient soul, and to assist in the birth of a new

religious paradigm capable of nurturing both. Writing and speaking about these critical matters, I, too, have a specific reader and audience in mind: I am addressing those spiritual pilgrims who have rejected the confines of an out-dated worldview and religious paradigm, who wander courageously and faithfully in the archetypal wilderness awaiting the birth of a new life-giving, soul-satisfying myth. I am addressing those who have been shaped by the Christian tradition, directly and indirectly, but who honor all other religious paths as equally valid, and equally partial, in speaking to the experience of the Divine which has innumerable names, unlimited manifestations, to which all can bow and none can possess.

“Saving Jesus, Freeing *Christ*,” is an admittedly grandiose title (*Christ* is italicized to denote an image rather than a proper name). Drawing on the revelatory insights of the analytical psychology of Jung and his interpreters, it proposes a radical re-visioning of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the archetypal image of *Christ* which found expression through him.

Here is the heart of the matter from a psychological perspective and why it matters that we give it our careful attention: when the wisdom teacher, Jesus, was idealized and declared to be God or the Son of God by the *projections* (see below for discussion of projection) from his early disciples, by the Apostle Paul, and by the early Church Fathers, Jesus was *misnamed* ‘Jesus Christ’ or the briefer designation ‘Christ.’ Over several generations, first orally and then in a few written documents, the historical Jesus was raised to divine status and given messianic designations which, by the fourth century, were sealed in dogma and doctrine. Henceforth this mistaken identity was reinforced by councils, creeds, and popular parlance, so much so that for most people ‘Christ’ is a synonym for Jesus or simply his last name.

Referring to Jesus in these mistaken ways is so commonplace that it may be startling to allow into our consciousness the possibility that *Christ* was never meant to be a proper name for a person. Rather, *Christ* is an archetypal image, the name for an invisible mystery which courses through the universe, through all people, and which seeks ever more conscious manifestation or incarnation, as it did through Jesus. *Christ* is an image for that inner, innate longing and potential to be more complete and whole, and to have the fragmented parts of our individual and collective lives united. That longing and potential are built into the fabric of life itself, and into our human fabric.

Again, *Christ* is an image or symbol for that which is deepest within life which strives toward completeness or fulfillment, that felt-sense that there is a “More” toward which we, and all life, moves. In other religious traditions, synonyms for *Christ* are Tao, Buddha Mind, Great Spirit, Khidir, Brahman, Perusha, and countless others. The reality or dynamic to which these images speak has also been rightly described in scientific language as the evolutionary processes within nature, within matter itself. The psychologist Jung favored the image *Self*; noting that empirically the Self “appears synonymous with the inner Christ of the Johannine and Pauline writings.” (Jung, CW: 11:156). With this in mind Jung freely interchanges *Christ* and *Self*, as do I.

With the revelatory insights of analytical psychology, we can now appreciate how the universal image of *Christ* was limited to Jesus in the Christian mind, and why it remains largely so. And, what it will take to free the image. The key is *psychological projection*. While wisdom teachers have known and

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taught this key, it remained the task of analytical psychology to identify its subtle dynamics. Yet, these dynamics remain largely ignored, most notably in religious and political circles.

Far from being a pathological function as is commonly thought, psychological projection is a form of *revelation*, initiated by the Self (or the Divine) to bring to ego-consciousness something here-to-fore hidden or unknown. It is an ingenious device to mirror in the outer world something which desires to be recognized, owned, and integrated in the inner world; that is, some aspect of psychic life needed for balance and/or wholeness. Projection is not something the ego does, not something *we do or make*. Rather, *projections happen to us* and are initiated to promote awareness and integration of unconscious aspects of our person and potential. Projections are natural, necessary, and purposeful. Drawing on a familiar theological and psychological metaphor, the purpose of projection is to bring the darkness into the light. Projection is not pathological; however, failing to recognize and withdraw projections promotes pathology, and religious pathology is the most virulent kind.

Applied to the topic before us, the mystical teacher Jesus became a giant screen on which was projected the unconscious “hopes and fears of all the years,” as the lovely Christmas carol reminds us. An apparent wise and charismatic teacher, far along the path of individuation, Jesus mirrored to his followers, then and since, something of their own longing and potential wholeness. In psychological language, he became the necessary ideal object to receive their projections and to awaken within themselves their own *Christ* nature.

Remember, in the wisdom of the Self, unconscious contents are first seen in projected form in order to be recognized, withdrawn, and consciously owned and integrated. However, when projections are not recognized as such, their recipients remain idealized and, in the case of religious figures, become objects of worship. This was/is the case with Jesus, and how he became the Christ in the minds of his followers, rather than one through whom the image of *Christ* was manifest, or incarnated. Thus, he also became the literal “one and only Incarnation,” rather than one in whom is seen the kind of life which desires to be incarnated in all persons.

Without sufficient knowledge of the phenomenon of projection, and generally favoring externalized religious devotion, Christians have continued to relate to Jesus via idealized projections. In the traditional doctrine of substitutionary atonement, for example, Jesus became (and remains) primarily a scapegoat who carries both the dark and bright shadow, or the projected sins and psychological gold of his followers. He carries their ‘gold’ through the unconscious elevation of him to be the literal Christ or God. He carries the unconscious “dark shadow” by being the scapegoat for sins.

Unfortunately, scapegoat Christology does not eliminate the human shadow. It merely goes underground only to find enemies in the outer world, and the blood-letting continues in Jesus’ name. Nor does prolonged idealization allow his followers to recognize and incarnate the qualities prized in him and his teachings. Thus, *worshipping* Jesus has been preferred over the risky transformational task of “living one’s own life as truly as Jesus lived his,” since to do so one would likely be “misjudged, derided, tortured and crucified.” (Jung, *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*, 236) A *religion about Jesus* has generally been preferred over the apparent *religion of Jesus*.

Speaking of these critical matters in a letter to a Christian

pastor, Jung wrote:

“The Self or Christ is present in everybody a priori but as a rule in an unconscious condition to begin with...and cannot become conscious and real without the withdrawal of external projections...it can happen only when you withdraw your projections from an outward historical or metaphysical Christ and thus wake up the Christ within...An act of introjection is needed, i.e. the realization that the Self lives in you and not in an external figure separated and different from yourself.” (Jung, CW:18:par 1638, emphasis is Jung’s)

Penned late in his life and career, this may be Jung’s clearest differentiation between Jesus and the archetypal *Christ* or Self and their conceptual relationship to each other. Succinctly, Jung is promoting the realization *that Christ is an image of an inner numinous longing, energy, and experience rather than a reference to an external or separate religious figure*. Though it was necessary to idealize Jesus at a certain stage in the unfolding of religious consciousness, the task now is to withdraw those *Christ* projections from Jesus *in order to wake up the Christ within*.

Thus, for Christianity to evolve and mature as a life-giving, soul-satisfying religion, it will require **saving Jesus** from carrying unconscious projections, in both their positive and negative valences, and **freeing the archetypal image of Christ** from its two thousand years of ecclesial imprisonment. Otherwise, Christianity will continue to promote an external religion which avoids the inner, transformational task taught and lived by Jesus.

However, this difficult psycho-spiritual work must be done *not* for the purpose of setting aside those projected contents as unreal or unimportant, but to reclaim their value. Projected contents are of ultimate importance because they permit us to identify contents of the human soul still longing for incarnation. Again, unconscious contents are first seen in projected form in order to be recognized, withdrawn, and consciously owned.

Until these psychological insights are integrated into the religious bloodstream of its leaders and teachers, Christianity will likely remain in an adolescent stage of development incapable of promoting and nurturing a mature spirituality. Furthermore, it will also continue to contribute to the religious pathology which threatens our world through explicit and implicit claims to be a superior religion, to possess absolute truth, and to be the favored children of God. The other two major monotheisms, Judaism and Islam, are equally indicted (both also perpetuate idealized projections onto their religious heroes and teachers).

Any religion which claims divine favor or possession of absolute truth in its sacred texts is the victim of a psychological inflation and/or religious delusion. Unable or unwilling at the present time to face these inner, psychological realities, the three major monotheisms—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—represent the greatest down-drag on the evolution of religious consciousness and, therefore, pose the greatest threat to our world. Psychologically, the refusal to become conscious is humanity’s original and greatest sin. However, that refusal “is indulged in with the greatest piety, even among those who should serve mankind as teachers and examples.” (Jung, CW: 9i:455)

In summary, the rather recent discoveries of analytical psychology have the potential to rescue Christianity and the Church from 2,000 years of scapegoat Christology, to save Jesus from a false metaphysical identity, to recover his full humanity (and ours), and to free the image of *Christ* from its literalistic and ecclesial imprisonment—all of which could make a vital contribution to a more inclusive, soul-satisfying religious paradigm. Even more important are the implications for western culture and politics which continue to be influenced by the literal and shallow Christology of the last two thousand years. The literal and false notions of Jesus as *the* Messiah, or *the* only Son of God, gave rise to the bloodbaths of Christian imperialism; and they continue to promote attitudes of religious, cultural, and political superiority which feed the delusion of a divine right to subdue the earth and its inhabitants. Paradoxically, perpetuating such attitudes may be the greatest obstacle for the coming of the new order which Jesus envisioned, the metaphorical Kingdom of Heaven.

I am acutely aware that questioning the divinity of Jesus is a taboo topic for most Christians. Yet as Jungian analyst Elizabeth Boyden Howes writes, “There is a taboo which has to be broken in order for consciousness to be achieved. The forbidden somehow becomes the saving element...and most mysteriously and most paradoxically, the gods seem to be behind both the taboo and the thrust out of the taboo into the new pattern.” (Howes, *Intersection and Beyond*, Vol. 1, p. 125) Speaking to the same issue, Jung declared that we should not be satisfied with unchangeable traditions since “even revealed truth has to evolve. Everything living changes. The great battle that began with the dawn of consciousness has not reached its climax with any particular interpretation, apostolic, Catholic, Protestant, or otherwise.” (Jung, CW: 18:par.1652)

Stripping Jesus of divine status by removing the Christological crust which remains projected onto him might be seen as “throwing the baby out with the bath.” My intent, however, is just the opposite. It is an effort to recover both Jesus and the *Christ* image from being submerged and lost in the waters of the unconscious. It is an effort to save both from centuries of dogmatic literalism and from being mascots to sports teams, copilots in our cars and decorated signs along the highway, WWJD bracelets, and so-called Christian dating services promising to ‘find God’s match for you!’ Or, even more sinister, helping to win wars and political contests. Both Jesus and the *Christ* image deserve better, and so do we.

I am also aware that the traditional, unreflective references to Jesus as “Jesus Christ” or “Christ” may not be possible to alter at this stage of history and collective Christian consciousness. Or, if in doing so Christianity could or would survive. However, unless the unconscious issues beneath the mistaken proper names are addressed, Christianity will likely continue to decline in its capacity to address the modern mind, to feed the ancient soul, and to promote the peace and justice which its founder envisioned and for which we all long.