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Jung and world religions

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A review article of:

Carl Gustav Jung
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Few have travelled so far or with such an original cast of mind in the realms of belief and values as Carl Gustav Jung. The son of a cold marriage between an unhappy Swiss pastor and a depressive, mediumistic mother, he was born in 1875 and grew up as a gifted and solitary child, speaking German and French, learning English, Latin and Greek, with an interest in Nietzsche, Kant and Goethe's *Faust*, little ability in mathematics, but with a capacity for self-analysis that early manifested itself by an interest in dreams. He believed himself to be possessed of two personalities, one pointing towards science and the other towards pantheism and the arts.

This background was ripe for an experience of seances with a young cousin who claimed to be able to communicate with Jung's paternal and maternal grandparents, a claim Jung, while training as a physician, explained by reference to the unconscious mind. Perhaps inevitably, then, he gravitated towards the world of mental illness and worked for several years at the Burghölzli hospital under the distinguished Eugen Bleuler treating schizophrenics, alcoholics, neurotics, amnesiacs and manic depressives. In the exciting and mysterious world of abnormal mental states, he was able to develop the notion of a *complex* or dynamic cluster of ideas that functioned as a sub-personality which could be brought into the open by the use of word association tests because the reaction to the stimulus word was either unusual or unusually delayed.

The complex, analysed in this way, was close to the Freudian notion of *repression*, located through a patient's dreams. It was not long before Freud and Jung were to meet, but, before they did so, Jung married Emma, the wealthy Swiss heiress who, for the rest of his life, gave him the financial independence he needed to pursue his work without the need to earn a living and material security that enabled him to quarrel with anyone and everyone who came to doubt his theories. Not least, though, he quarreled with Emma to whom he was rabidly unfaithful, despite the five children she bore him, and his private life, especially when he was a young man, involved a clutch of mistresses, some of whom started their sexual relationship with him while he was treating them psychoanalytically. So much, then, for the ethics of the doctor-patient relationship.

In 1906 Jung wrote to Freud and the two met in Vienna the following year. They talked non-stop for thirteen hours and the outcome of that and subsequent meetings was Freud's view

that Jung should become the 'crown prince' of psychoanalysis, the person destined to take over leadership of the new movement after Freud (Freud was 19 years older than Jung), and the 'apostle to the Gentiles' the man during Freud's life who would take the 'gospel' of psychoanalysis to the Gentiles while the 'master' worked with the Jewish community. Both Freud and Jung were dictatorial, a circumstance that indirectly encouraged the formation of the 'heretical' psychoanalytic faction led by Adler, but it is arguable that, while Freud did retain some male friendships throughout his life, Jung was unable to do so and his only lasting relationships were with women, particularly his wife and Toni Wolff, a mistress, who came to live with his family in a *ménage à trois* that lasted for many years.

The introduction of psychoanalysis to the United States took place at a conference at Clark University in 1909 where both Freud and Jung delivered papers. Jung was becoming uneasy about Freud's insistence on the all-importance of infantile sexuality while Freud worried about Jung's mystical tendencies. Relations were worsened when Sabina Spielrein, one of Jung's mistresses, became a Freudian and finally broke down in 1914 as Jung engaged in a bitter Oedipal struggle with Freud. As a consequence Jung withdrew from medical practice, battled with mental illness over a period of about four years, desperately analysed his own dreams and engaged in long conversations with the imaginary Philemon, a figure who emerged from his own unconscious and whom he considered to be an *archetype*. That Jung experienced or survived schizophrenia seems to be without question, and his cure was found in reconciling the opposites he discovered within himself, a motif that was to recur in subsequent writings. Its first outcome, however, led him to propose a theory of mind that he set up in contradistinction to Freud's.

In *Psychological Types* (published in 1921, English translation 1923) Jung contended that human beings were either primarily extravert (directed towards the outer world of people) or introvert (directed towards the inner world of feelings or ideas) and that psychological functions operated in two pairs, thinking or feeling and sensation or intuition. This results in eight basic personality types: extravert-thinking, extravert-feeling, extravert-sensation and extravert-intuitive that are matched by the corresponding introvert equivalents. He pigeon-holed Freud by assigning him to the extravert-thinking type and thus denied the Viennese school's theories any universal validity. This was not a view shared by Freudians who considered Jung a snob and a mystic.

At this point in his life Jung began a series of travels, visiting both New Mexico and Africa and later India. He wanted to speak to native peoples about their view of the world to deepen his comprehension of the human psyche and, armed with a Swahili dictionary, interrogated the Elgonyi about their dreams. To his disappointment they told him flatly that they never dreamed and that their dreaming was done for them by their British colonial rulers, but other things they said strengthened Jung's view that the unconscious was collective as well as personal. The race as a whole shares an unconscious realm and this explains why similar myths are believed by cultural groups which have had no contact with each other. Or, to put this the other way round: the collective unconscious is accessed through mythology and is the product of universal archetypes.

These archetypes are a crucial part of the Jungian thesis. They are mental images into which collective and personal meaning is poured and are analogous to Platonic forms by which we identify specific instances. Archetypes typically manifest themselves as ancestral figures - ancient sages, wise old women, priests, medicine men and even animals. In Jungian analysis it is necessary to sink into the unconscious to find the archetypes and to confront them. Indeed, the Jungian pilgrimage is one of descent past the *persona* (or public mask used in social life and associated with only one mental function, whether thinking, feeling or intuition) and the *shadow* (a dark side of the unconscious), past the *anima* and *animus* (images of the opposite sex) to the world of archetypes. These must be confronted before the *Self*, the archetype of archetypes, is found where the personal merges with the collective unconscious. Here at the centre of the maze there is the closest possible identification of the Self with God and, when the ego which has made this journey encounters this source, there are huge reserves of collective power to be imbibed.

This journey clearly has parallels with religious pilgrimages, both western and eastern, and it is worth drawing out the implications here for the study of religion. In order to do so, it is necessary first to see what Jung himself thought his map of the psyche meant for religions before sketching an evaluation of the Jungian system and its religious applications.

With regard to Christianity Jung's approach was never orthodox. Christ came to be regarded as one among many symbols of the Self. Indeed in a period of intense study of medieval

alchemy and early gnosticism, Jung ranged widely through an array of symbols, including those associated with numerology and astrology, allowing himself to interpret religious beliefs and practices in accordance with his preferred scheme. The birth, death and resurrection of Christ only spoke of the alchemical process of death and rebirth and it was the alechemical account which was fuller than the Christian one rather than *vice versa*. The crucifixion between two thieves only symbolised the warring elements of the ego that had to be integrated within the Self. Redemption is not the work of a transcendent God rescuing from sin but the redeeming of God from the darkness of matter alone. God is to be found 'within' rather than 'out there'. Indeed, the weakness of Christianity lay in its inadequate handling of evil, of darkness, of the shadow, which had to be confronted and assimilated and whose best early apologist was Origen, the proposer of an end-time reconciliation between God and Satan.

Jung's already critical Protestant readers were hardly mollified when he enthused about the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, promulgated in 1950. Jung's delight lay in his notion that the Assumption effectively brought the feminine principle within the divine sphere and, at the same time, confirmed his view about the mystical significance of the number four.

With regard to traditional Buddhism Jung was more positive, though his criticisms of Indian religions were direct. He told the Brahmans at the University of Calcutta (where he received an honorary doctorate) that 'there can be no consciousness where there is no one to say "I am conscious"'. Indeed, the pursuit of liberation by an attempt at self-emptying meditation was a mistake since true liberation is only possible through participation in the world and the union of opposites, both in terms of relations between consciousness and unconsciousness and in terms of the paired contents of unconsciousness. About the doctrine of *karma* he was agnostic, though he was careful to distinguish between metempsychosis and reincarnation since the former did not imply continuity of personality while the latter did. Jung's fiercest criticisms of Indian religions were reserved for their facile dismissal of evil as *maya* or illusion. The use of meditation or yoga as a method of escape engendered scathing comments about maharishis and gurus who attained 'serenity' by ignoring the material world.

The Jungian system thus takes precedence over the religions of the world and they are judged by the extent to which they conform to and facilitate the Jungian drive to psychic wholeness.

The extreme emphasis on symbols within Jungian thought enables religious symbols to be redefined, reinterpreted and, where necessary, reinvented from events originally seen as literal. Although Jung is pro-religion in the sense that, unlike Freud, he treats it as a vehicle of meaning and an evidence of the more than merely sexual nature of human beings, he is religious on his own terms. Although Freud considers religion to be almost entirely a neurosis and an illusion, Jung sees it as an evidence of realities about human beings and the world which its doctrines and dogmas only indirectly address. A serious Jungian approach to world religions would be at odds with a strictly phenomenological approach, for example, since Jung quickly goes beyond the consciousness of the believer into his own hermeneutic while phenomenology, particularly of a strictly Husserlian sort, stays as closely as it can within the parameters of the believer's perceptions.

McLynn's book, which is written with beautiful clarity and as the story of a life as well as the exposition of an evolving set of ideas, takes us through to Jung's final years when he became the sage of incipient new ageism and the grand old man of humanistic psychology. Though realistic claims have been made for Jung as the prophet of the current religio-technological era, he was no saint. Moreover, his status as a great psychoanalyst is constantly questioned by Freudians; his scientific credibility is questioned by those who notice his cavalier use of evidence; his view of Christianity is critiqued by those who hold any form of orthodoxy; his political views are despised by those who have examined his less than forthright condemnation of the Nazis. Yet he survives as a source of fascinating ideas, and if he reinterpreted others in a way that they would have found objectionable, it would be fitting if the same fate befell him.