

Christ, a Symbol of the Self

by Jerry Wright

Carl Jung's ideas and writings about God, religion, Christ, Christianity, and the Christian Church are some of his most challenging, controversial, and fruitful. His approach was to take ancient "thought forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate *experience*." (CW:11:par.148) Jung's own *experience* of the numinosum (holy) was a lifelong passion and most of his major written works in the last third of his life were devoted to some aspect of religious experience and religious symbols, with particular attention to the symbols of the Christian myth.

In Aion (Collected Works, Vol. 9,11) Jung addresses Christianity's central figure, *Christ*, and unpacks the meaning of Christ as a symbol of the Self. At the request of many of his readers who asked for a more comprehensive treatment of the Christ/Self relationship, and apparently inspired by a dream during a temporary illness, Jung worked on the project for several years, completing it in 1951. Aion remains a "sacred text" for many of us who are intrigued by the convergence of religion and analytical psychology.

One of the most significant insights of the project, which will be the main thrust of this brief article, is the differentiation between Jesus, the historical figure from Nazareth, and the archetypal Christ, the Redeemer. This distinction between the historical and the symbolical is essential if the Christian symbols are to retain their power to touch the inner depths of the modern person. As we know, Jung's diagnosis of modern men and women was a spiritual malnutrition bought on by a starvation of symbols. He called for a recovery of the symbolical

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life which had been abandoned to a one-sided literal, rational approach to religious matters.

The Jewish rabbi and reformer, Jesus, lived a personal, concrete, historical life. However, it was the archetypal image of a Redeemer slumbering, so to speak, in the collective unconscious, which became attached to that unique life. This powerful collective image made itself visible, so to speak, in the man Jesus, so that seeing him people glimpsed the greater personality which seeks conscious realization in each person. Jung notes that it was not the man Jesus who created the myth of the "god-man." Other Redeemer myths existed many centuries before his birth. Jesus himself was seized by this symbolic idea, which, as St. Mark tells us, lifted him out of the narrow life of the Nazarene carpenter. (Jung, Man And His Symbols, p.89)

Briefly stated, at an early stage Jesus became the collective figure whom the unconscious of his contemporaries expected to appear and Jesus took on those projections. In this way, Jesus' life exemplifies the archetype of the Christ, or in Jung's psychological language, the Self, which is a more inclusive word for the inner image of god, the *imago Dei*, which resides in every person.

Writing from a psychological perspective, Jung was interested in the archetypes of the collective unconscious which were constellated by the presence of the historical person, Jesus. He examined the Christ-symbolism contained in the New Testament, along with patristic allegories and medieval iconography, and compared those with the archetypal contents of the unconscious psyche which he had observed and experienced. He noted that the most important symbolical statements about Christ in the New Testament revealed attributes of the archetypal hero: improbable origin, divine father, hazardous birth, precocious development, conquest of the mother and of death, miraculous deeds, early death, etc. Jung concludes that the archetypal symbolizations of the Christ-figure are similar to the Self which is present in each person as an unconscious image. It was the archetype of the Self in the psyche/soul which responded to the Christian message, with the result that the concrete Rabbi Jesus was rapidly assimilated by the constellated archetype. In this way, Jesus realized the idea of the Self. Most importantly for this article, Jung notes that the *experience* of the Self and what the New Testament describes as the "Christ within" are synonymous. (CW:11:par.229-231) As an empiricist, Jung was not interested in how the two entities may be different along rational theological lines.

As noted earlier, the differentiation between Jesus and the archetypal Christ highlights the distinction between literal truth and symbolic truth, or between historical fact and myth. Other descriptive distinctions include the difference between outer and inner, visible and invisible, material and spiritual. In a culture which elevates the literal, outer, visible, and material aspects of life (that which is measurable) and tends to denigrate that which is symbolic, inner, invisible, and spiritual, preserving the value of the latter seems especially significant.



Risen Christ as symbol of the *filii philosophorum*
Final Emblem of the Rosarium Philosophorum, 1550

There are multiple implications of preserving the distinction between the historical Jesus and the archetypal/symbolic Christ, both for individuals and religious institutions and groups. For the individual, the archetypal Christ is not limited to one man, Jesus, but can be seen as the potential “greater personality” in every individual. Understood psychologically, the life of Christ represents the various phases and expressions of the Self as it undergoes incarnation in an individual ego, that is, the various stages of the process of individuation.

Jung speaks to the necessity of withdrawing our projections from a historical or external Christ figure (Jesus, in this case) if we are to discover experientially the “Christ within,” or the Self. He writes, “The Self or Christ is present in everybody *a priori*, but as a rule in an *unconscious* condition to begin with. But it is a definite *experience* of later life, when this fact becomes *conscious*... It is only real when it *happens*, and it can happen only when you withdraw your projections from an *outward* historical or metaphysical Christ and thus *wake up* Christ within.” (CW:18:par.1638) If Christ remains outside us, either as an example of an ideal or as an external object of worship only, the deeper levels of the soul are never engaged. The result is that religion and religious practice may deteriorate into adherence to rational dogma and trying to follow a set of external rules.

From this psychological perspective, the classical “imitation of Christ” would not mean that we are to try to “copy” Jesus, but that we are to live our individual lives as fully, as authentically, and as obediently (to a greater Source) as Jesus lived his. Psychologically, this is the individuation process; theologically, it is the process of redemption and sanctification.

Applying this perspective to what it might mean to take up one’s own cross as Jesus invited his followers to do, Edward Edinger suggests: “To take up one’s own cross would mean to accept and consciously realize one’s own particular pattern of wholeness.” (Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, p.135) This invariably involves being suspended between successive pairs of opposites (like a veritable crucifixion), with its attendant suffering, and repeated death/rebirth experiences of the ego as it learns to bow to the demands of the Self. However, consciously “carrying one’s life” in this way also provides the possibility of discovering the meaning of one’s unique, individual life and participating in life’s larger purposes. It means the possibility of discovering one’s vocation and one’s own myth, that story which helps to make meaning out of the mystery of existence.

Differentiating the historical Jesus and the archetypal Redeemer (Christ) has implications for religious groups and institutions, as well. With the recognition that the archetypal Redeemer has multiple -- perhaps unlimited -- manifestations, the Christian Church, as well as other religious groups and institutions, are cautioned against exclusive claims to truth. A literalistic understanding of Jesus (or any other central religious figure/leader) leads to lethal divisions through claims that “God is our God and has no other children but us,” which Jungian analyst Murray Stein calls a transference illusion. In our highly pluralistic society, and a world shrinking every day, it is imperative that religious people of every stripe break through that illusion and consider that God is not bound to a particular tribe, nor confined by the dogmatic boxes of any religion. The divine Spirit is not a commodity controlled by religious corporations; instead, as Jung poetically writes, “a living spirit (which) grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of expression... This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind... the names and forms which men have given it mean very little; they are the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree.” (CW:11:par.538)

Without a symbolic appreciation of Christ, or any other religious figure or leader, religious concerns are made small by literalism. This in turn is the spawning ground for fundamentalism which, in spiritual matters, is tantamount to the death of the soul. In addressing Christ as a symbol of the Self, Jung challenged the Church to recover its symbolic life. Failing to do that, the Church will remain a minor voice in speaking to the deep spiritual longings of modern men and women. Furthermore, it may unwittingly undermine the reconciliatory and peace-making processes it desires to promote in the world.

(Author's Postscript: This article was written and submitted

prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. In light of this horrific tragedy, some of the implications of the article take on greater urgency. We have experienced the power of religious ideas and belief, and the destructive/deadly consequences when religious ideas are perverted. Identifications with God through claims that "God is our God and has no other children but us" results in the need to eliminate all those who think, believe, and live differently; in other words, a need to identify, externalize, and attack the personal and collective shadow.

As the nations espousing the three great monotheistic religions -- Christianity, Judaism, and Islam -- make plans to identify and eliminate those who actively rain terror on others (a necessary undertaking), it is incumbent on each and all of us to identify and eliminate any personal and collective attitudes which might perpetuate religious exclusivity or intolerance. In addition to finding the terrorists out there, we have to search out and make peace with the terrorists within. In the long run, I believe, this will be the best offering we can make to each other and to our world. JW, September 18, 2001) ■