

Psychoanalytic Pastoral Theology: An Oxymoron?

by Pamela Cooper-White

(excerpts from Cooper-White's book, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective*)

I enter a doctor's consulting room to arrange for my surgery. I am dismayed when he tells me that this will be a very long procedure. The anesthesiologist has said that I will have to be under for a very long time.

This was my “initial dream” when I entered analysis in 1991 with a Jungian analyst who incorporated a rich blend of Jungian archetypal and British object relations theory and technique. I had recently made the decision to re-enter ordained ministry after a period of disengagement (coinciding with exploration of other unfinished vocational avenues). I had engaged in a number of years of solid, ego-psychology oriented pastoral counseling. But the dream was clear: to get further on this journey of psychological and spiritual discernment, it was necessary to “go under.” Nothing less and nothing easier would do. So I came to the work of pastoral psychotherapy, both as patient and later as therapist, with the assumption that psychological growth and spiritual formation—the dimension that distinguishes pastoral psychology from all other secular psychologies—belong together.

This may seem obvious, a truth that has become cliché in many counseling and pastoral care circles. In my own professional and personal development, however, I have not found it so easy to reconcile psychology with theology or religious belief. Specific schools of psychological theory conflict both with a Christian identity and with each other. The spiritual and the psychological cannot be conflated quite so easily or uncritically.

The most obvious contradiction would seem to lie with Freud's seemingly resolute atheism. Jung has sometimes been appropriated by theologians, pastoral counselors, and spiritual directors as an alternative to Freud, serving as a bridge figure between psychoanalysis and religion. But Jung offers no easy panacea for a pastoral psychotherapist. Jung's attitude toward organized religion *per se*, particularly the constricted moralistic Christianity of his own Protestant upbringing as a Swiss minister's son, was conflicted at best. Jung longed for authenticity against blind obedience to external authorities, especially western Christian institutions. An anti-Christian bias has at times filtered into Jungian practice as a (probably mostly unconscious) privileging, even romanticization, of Eastern spiritual practices and symbols and ancient pre-Christian mythology, while ignoring or even de-valuing western Judeo-Christian images and stories. Elements remain in Jung's writings that utilize and re-mythologize Judeo-Christian symbols, and have been appropriated by Christian theologians in an effort at rapprochement between analytical psychology and spiritual care.

There remains, nevertheless, a significant conflict between Jung's thought and mainstream Christian *doctrine*, which deserves serious consideration. For example, there is a profound dissonance between Jung's concept of the archetype of Wholeness vs. Christianity's moral emphasis on *purity and goodness*. Jung conceived of the process of “individuation” as a journey toward Wholeness, which also requires embracing one's “Shadow.” Even God, Jung posited in *Answer to Job*, must have a Shadow if God is to be whole. This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified in Jung's writings than in his famous childhood fantasy, recorded in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, in which he imagined God letting loose “an enormous turd” that shatters the sparkling cathedral, symbol of orthodox Christian religion. God for the boy Jung became a maddening paradox: “God alone was real—an annihilating fire and an indescribable grace.” This ambiguous view of God's nature flew in the face of his father's rigid Christian convictions that God was omnipotent, pure goodness, and that the goal of Christian living was purity and obedience.

Jung's attitude toward the question of God's existence, then, represents a departure from Freud's defensive atheism. Jung was agnostic about the question of God's *objective* existence, but remained open to the traces of the divine in the *subjective* experience of psychic life. It was in this sense that Jung said in a radio interview in 1955, “All that I have learned has led me step by step to an unshakeable conviction of the existence of God. I only believe what I know. And that eliminates believing. Therefore I do not take his existence on belief—I know that He exists.”

For Jung, the image of God was an archetypal symbol, closely related to the archetype of Wholeness and its related form, the archetype of the Self. Larger than the conscious ego, the Self contains aspects of the “collective unconscious,” the accumulated deposit of knowledge, wisdom, and patterning of experience shared among all humanity. At its outer edges, Jung believed, the Self flows into the divine. Jung viewed Christ as an archetypal symbol for the Self (like the Buddha, and the Mandala) with the symbols of transformation in the Christian Eucharist representing the process of individuation. The ancient labyrinth, a version of the mandala and a symbol of the path of individuation, has been rediscovered and is now used in thousands of Christian churches worldwide. Jung believed that by bringing the unconscious to awareness, and owning one's Shadow, one could withdraw the projections of evil from the external world, thereby refraining from demonizing others. Although he departed from Freud's particular theories of unconscious conflict, Jung shared Freud's confidence in the freedom, including moral freedom, that could be bestowed by recognizing, and exploring the depths of the unconscious.

It would be an injustice to accuse either Freud or Jung of simplistic thinking—reading their original works reveals tremendous breadth, complexity, and also concern for social justice. I would argue, finally, that *both* Freud's hermeneutic of suspicion, and Jung's sensing of the numinous, are needed. Their theories of religion, its origins, meaning, and function, and their reflections on human constructions of the divine, deserve our continued attention. Both offer useful deconstructive (analytic) methods that search beyond the surfaces of things, and both stand in opposition to the easy answers, superficial consolations, and pathological splitting that can arise from uncritical religious belief.



The Labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, Pamela Cooper-White, 2006

It is my view, drawing on the relational school of psychoanalysis which has become my (somewhat synthetic) theoretical home, that the tension between Freud and Jung, and their very personal oedipal conflict, is finally a *relational* tension. It is in such a relational space, even as an arena of conflict, I would argue, and not in coming down firmly on one side of their debate or the other, that our own wrestling with the tension between religion and psychology, theology and psychology, can be most fruitfully played out. The contemporary, postmodern relational turn in psychoanalysis suggests a shift from the need for “a” solution to the embrace of the tension itself, from content to process, and from knowledge (as certainty) to relationship.

Ever the preacher’s son, Jung struggled inconclusively throughout his life to reconcile the competing healing claims of psychology and religion. Jungian analyst Murray Stein has even argued that Jung was not interested in demolishing Christianity, but rather, healing it from its historic complexes and transforming it “along lines compatible with the Jungian therapeutic.” In his essay “Psychotherapists or the Clergy?” Jung offered the following appraisal of spirit as universal:

The *living spirit* grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of *expression* [a reference to both religion and psychothera-

py]; it freely chooses the men [sic] who proclaim it and in whom it lives. This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind. Measured against it, the names and forms which men have given it mean very little; they are only the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree. (emphasis added)

Although Jung’s emphasis here was on the numinous as it manifests itself in ever-changing symbols across cultures and centuries, it is the relationality of the word *expression* I want to highlight here. I would propose that by standing in the tension *between* Freud’s atheism and Jung’s archetypal theories, in the realm of expression itself, we may discover a more messy but fruitful realm—a realm of relationality, a livingness of Spirit rather than a rejected totem or a carefully defined archetype. Here we may find, congruent with the more postmodern context of our own time, a “third” domain, always in flux, of creative tension, and sacred imagination.

Notes:

(For more complete notes for this article, including full citations for the notes below, see Cooper-White, Many

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Voices, *Introduction*.)

- ¹ e.g., Jonte-Pace and Parsons, Eds., *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain—Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
- ² Critiques of Jung's attitudes toward God and religion have been advanced beginning with writers in his own lifetime, such as Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, and Victor White, *Soul and Psyche*, in which White broke with Jung over Jung's *Answer to Job*. For more recent critique, see Browning and Cooper, Ch. 7 in *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 2nd ed.; see also Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*.
- ³ e.g., Jung, "Christ, a Symbol of the Self" in *Aion*, CW 9/2: 36-71; and "A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity," CW 11:152-57. For authors who sought a rapprochement between Jung and Christianity, see Victor White, "The Frontiers of Theology and Psychology"; Murray Stein, *Jung's Treatment of Christianity*; John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within and Mystical Christianity*.
- ⁴ *Answer to Job*, CW 11:358. See also Peter Homans, "C.G. Jung: Christian or Post-Christian Psychologist?" and "Psychology and Hermeneutics: Jung's Contribution," in Moore and Meckel, Eds., *Jung and Christianity in Dialogue*.
- ⁵ McGuire and Hull, *C.G. Jung Speaking*, 251.
- ⁶ Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*; Cooper-White, "Praying with the Labyrinth," online at <http://www.holytrinitydecatour.org/files/trumpet/Trinity-Trumpet-Lenten-Companion-2011.pdf>, pp. 2-3.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Ann Danto, *Freud's Free Clinics: Psychoanalysis and Social Justice, 1918-1938*; Robert Coles, *Anna Freud and the Dream of Psychoanalysis*.
- ⁸ e.g., Lewis Aron and Stephen Mitchell, *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition*. Relational psychoanalysis is applied to pastoral theology, care, and psychotherapy in my books *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (2004), and *Many Voices*.
- ⁹ Stein, *Jung's Treatment of Christianity*, 193.
- ¹⁰ Jung, "Psychotherapists or the Clergy?" (1932), CW 11:347.