

Jung and Religious Experience

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I. Religion as Creed vs. Religion as Experience

Jung distinguishes between religion as a creed or dogma (a matter of belief) and religion as the experience of a transcendent reality. Following Rudolf Otto, Jung understands religious experience to be an experience of the *numinous* or *numinosum*, which Jung broadly describes as any experience that is powerful and overwhelming to consciousness.

II. The Numinosum and the Unconscious

Jung locates the numinosum in the deeper strata of the unconscious. It characterizes some of the complexes of the personal unconscious, such as the anima (for the man) and the animus (for the woman). It does so, though, only because personal complexes have archetypal cores, and so the numinosum ultimately derives from the archetypal content of the collective unconsciousness.

III. The Unconscious, Symbol, and the Numinosum

Jung maintained that the contents of the unconscious cannot be directly known. It can only be known through its appearance in the form of archetypal images, expressed as symbols. These symbols appear in waking fantasies, dreams, and the therapeutic activity Jung called “active imagination.”

It follows that the numinosum, originating as it does from the deeper strata of the unconscious, cannot be directly known. We only know its effect in consciousness of unconscious material. Indeed, the term “numinosum” is a placeholder for whatever it is (unknown in itself) causes “numinosity,” a term that designates the direct experience of the individual.

It follows that “God,” a name given to the cause of numinous experiences, cannot be directly known. We can only know God as God *appears* through the symbolic, in the form of images that express and evoke the numinous.

Since the symbolic is found in waking fantasies, dreams, and active imagination, we may look for the appearance of God in these experiences. It was natural for Jung to speak of the “religious tendencies of the unconscious mind” (Psychology and Religion, p. 27).

IV. Case Study: Jung’s Analysis of Scientist’s Religious Dreams

As an exploration of the religious tendencies of the unconscious, Jung analyzes the content of the dreams of a scientist Jung treated for various neurotic symptoms. There were over 400 dreams recorded by the patient, but Jung focuses on a

particular sequence to highlight religious motifs: (i) dream of an ape being rebult, (ii) a church dream, (iii) dream of animals being transformed into humans, and (iv) a second church-like dream that appears later in the sequence.

A. The First Church Dream is an odd mixture of worldly elements in a religious setting at church. Jung takes the dream to simultaneously show the return of the scientist to the religion of his childhood (Catholicism) at a time of moral conflict and psychological turmoil, but also an acknowledgement by the unconscious of a religion corrupted by worldliness. Not surprisingly, the dream offers the subject no psychological help because it offers nothing more than a religious sentimentality, not the numinosum.

Of particular significance is the presence of a female character in the dream (who had appeared in other dreams of the subject) who abruptly disappears when the atmosphere turns worldly. This woman represents the dreamer's feminine side, his anima, which Jung treats as the soul or life force in the man. The woman's disappearance suggests the retreat of the potential for spiritual illumination in the face of worldliness.

B. The first church dream is preceded by a dream in which an ape is being reconstructed, and it is followed by a dream in which animals are being transformed into humans. Jung takes it that the ape dream represents the dreamer's instinctive personality (and hence what is unconscious) since it has fallen apart. The implication is that its absence or being apart is playing a role in his present neurosis. The dream thereby calls for an assimilation or integration of unconscious contents to balance the one-sidedness of the scientist's otherwise "intellectual" outlook. The dream following the church dream points to the human, after his more primitive nature has been reconstituted. The animal must be acknowledged and then integrated into a developed an evolved human nature.

C. The Second Church Dream (pp. 42-52), which takes place later in the sequence of dreams, is much like the first dream in its religious orientation, except that worldly or secular elements have been subtracted. The result is a dream with powerfully numinous qualities, which not surprisingly match the subject's recovery at the time of the dream.

D. Important Features of the Second Church Dream: (1) It is called "house of self collection", (2) an old man who is a sage appears, (3) a disembodied voice directs the dreamer to take account of "the image of the woman" and not substitute "religion" for her, and (4) a set of candles in the form of four pyramid structures form a sacred quaternity, similar to sacred mandalas (representing the Self and God), at the location where the alter with sacred images should be found.

Jung takes the later Church Dream to point the dreamer to the numinous in contrast to mere creed. The numinous appears as the Self (symbolically represented by the quaternity), the basic organizing archetype of the psyche, in contrast to the dreamer's ego. The numinous is also conveyed by the voice (the unconscious) that

directs the dreamer to the life force, his anima, which has been drained or dissolved, in consequence of which he suffers neurosis. In short, in the dream the unconscious is portraying the need of the dreamer to become conscious of what is center to the psyche, namely the Self or God.

See especially pp. 64-66, 71, and 73 for Jung's specific statements on the religious implications of the dreamer's dream and his psychological development.

V. Jung's Psychology of Religion

A. Jung develops the idea, earlier affirmed by William James, that the God-idea or God-image (cf. James' "over-beliefs") in consciousness originates from the unconscious. Jung bases this on a very general hypothesis that the unconscious material appears or manifests in conscious life in the form of images or symbols.

B. It follows (also in accordance with James) that there is an important distinction between creed (constituted by symbol and its reflective elaboration) and religious experience (the experience of the reality signified by the symbol and that gives rise to it).

C. Jung articulates the experience that gives rise to religious symbols in terms of Otto's numinous, what Jung calls the numinosum. This is roughly equivalent to James's "reality of the unseen." Also, like James, Jung sees "overly" religious imagery as a particular expression of a universal experience: the manifestation or appearance of archetypes of the collective unconscious, especially the most powerful, the Self (the organizer of our entire psychic life). Jung finds this archetype and its power expressed in the cross-cultural and cross-religious phenomenon of the mandala: the circular image (often imposed on the quaternity) that reveals that which is central in human experience. Jung calls the center of human life "the Self" or "God," often using these terms interchangeably.

D. From a Jungian perspective, all God-images may be false, in the sense that there is no ontologically real being who corresponds to the idea itself. However, the false God-image is like dream imagery, the revealer of profound psychological truth. Thus, there must always be a truth that corresponds to the fact of the God-image, even if this truth isn't the truth of the precise content of the God-image. Yahweh, Allah, Vishnu, etc. are terms that ultimately designate the numinous appearing in and filtered by the human mind.

E. Like many subsequent "pluralists" in religion, Jung based his approach to religion on the same foundation as his general psychology, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which draws a sharp distinction between things as they are in themselves (noumena), which are inaccessible to the intellect or mind, and things as they appear to us (phenomena). The reality of God cannot be known as it is itself. God can only be known as God appears in various symbols or archetypal images.