

Psychology and Religion

In *Psychology and Religion*,¹ Carl Jung attempts to establish his methodological foundation on strict empiricism, firmly adhering to the phenomenological standpoint and thereby ensuring that his inquiry into psychological matters remains scientific and not philosophical (1, 2). This empirical focus, for which he is often criticized, means that his psychology is not concerned with the ultimate truth or falsehood of religious doctrines, but solely with their existence within the human mind. This concept is termed psychological truth: an idea is deemed true "in as much as it exists" in the mind of the individual (3). For example, the idea of the Virgin birth is examined only for its presence and impact within the psyche, not its historical veracity (3). For Jung, the psyche is an existent reality, and he pushes back on the "ridiculous prejudice to assume that existence can only be physical" (11). He notes that powerful imaginations and differences of opinion can be just as real and dangerous as physical conditions (11).

Jung defines religion as a psychological attitude, specifically "the attitude peculiar to a consciousness which has been altered by the experience of the numinosum" (6), an experience characterized by a mixture of awe, fascination, and dread. In contrast to this direct experience, *creeds* are viewed as codified, dogmatized, and ultimately "congealed" forms of the original religious encounter (6). The task of the psychologist is to "disregard the claim of every Creed to be the unique and eternal truth" (7). While dogma can endure for centuries, Jung notes that it "precludes immediate experience" (58). Rather, the life-changing force necessary for personal development is the genuine immediate experience, which "changes a person's consciousness and

attitude toward life" and fundamentally drives the lifelong journey toward individuation, or psychological wholeness (5).

The book thoroughly addresses psychological illness, arguing that neurosis is a condition rooted in "demoralization" (8) and caused primarily by psychological factors rather than organic processes (10). A major contributor to neurosis is repression, which Jung identifies as an "immoral choice to get rid of disagreeable decisions" (91). This is sharply contrasted with suppression, which is a conscious moral choice that, while it may cause suffering and conflict, "never causes a neurosis" (92). Neurosis is thus seen as a substitute for legitimate suffering. Various complexes may exist within the psyche, which behave like "autonomous being[s]" or "secondary or partial Personalities" capable of interfering with the intentions of the ego (14).

Furthermore, the individual carries a Shadow, which is the psychological residue of the "primitive and inferior man with his desires and emotions" (93). Jung insists that the mere suppression of the Shadow is futile (93). The therapeutic work, therefore, requires the reconciliation of opposites and the acceptance that the Shadow is complex; "somewhat inferior, primitive, unadaptive, but not wholly bad" (94). This individual psychic change is critical for collective transformation, as "changes in society begin with a change in individuals" (95).

Crucially, Jung explores the dynamics of the unconscious mind, which he observes is capable of expressing an intelligence and purpose "superior to actual conscious insight" (45, 49). The language of the unconscious is revealed through dreams, which Jung views as mirroring its "underground processes" (26). For him, "the dream is its own interpretation," and dreams "belong in a series," acting as "visible links in a chain of unconscious events" (30-31, 38).

Exploring the deepest structures of the unconscious, Jung argues that the continuity between modern and ancient symbolism, such as those found in Gnosticism and alchemy (108, 109), is not established through direct tradition but through a continuous unconscious condition "carried on by biological inheritance" (111-112). These recurring, universal images are the archetypes, defined as "forms or images of a collective nature" (63-64) and which function as "mental preconditions" of the cerebral function (112). These archetypes manifest in universal symbols, such as the quaternary (73) and the mandala, which symbolizes either the divine being within or the vessel of human transformation (112). Jung concludes that a profound religious experience is absolute for the individual, providing a "source of life, meaning and beauty" (113). Ultimately, the process of healing a neurosis requires finding an experience that is "of equal reality" to the suffering itself, thereby providing the necessary cure (114).

1. Jung, C G. *Psychology and Religion*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992.