

## **Jung and Dogma**

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These writings of Jung are excerpted as part of a conversation about religion, spirituality and dogma on the listserv for Division 36 – Psychology and Religion, of the American Psychological Association, in September, 2009. I promised my colleagues to research Jung's views to help clarify that discussion. Here's what I found.

Jung saw dogma in complex ways as:

1. Paired with skepticism as opposites in a continuum
2. Helping contain and channel potentially overwhelming experience
3. Emergent from the collective unconscious, and in its wholeness facilitating its psychological containing function better than the more limited theories of science
4. Something that eventually becomes outmoded and superseded by the emergence of the living creativity of the psyche
5. A collective portrayal of archetypal imagery, and a thing of beauty
6. A defensive recourse of mediocre minds, where it signals repression of doubts that would be better explored
7. A barrier to direct experience

Here are some quotations to illustrate these aspects of dogma in Jung's own words.

1. Dogmatism paired with skepticism as opposites in a continuum:

“... the forceful way in which an unconscious idea realizes itself gives outsiders the impression that the idea-oriented thinker starts out with a dogma that squeezes experience into a rigid ideological mould. It is equally clear that the object-oriented thinker will be sceptical about all ideas from the start, since his primary concern is to let every object and every experience speak for itself, undeterred by general concepts. In this sense

scepticism is a necessary condition of all empiricism. Here we have another pair of opposites .... “ *Psychological types*, paragraph 537 (Jung, 1971)

2. Helping contain and channel potentially overwhelming experience:

“For without the existence of conscious concepts apperception is, as we know, impossible. This explains numerous neurotic disturbances which arise from the fact that certain contents are constellated in the unconscious but cannot be assimilated owing to the lack of apperceptive concepts that would “grasp” them. That is why it is so extremely important to tell children fairytales and legends, and to inculcate religious ideas (dogmas) into grown-ups, because these things are instrumental symbols with whose help unconscious contents can be analyzed into consciousness, interpreted, and integrated. Failing this, their energy flows off into conscious contents which, normally, are not much emphasized, and intensifies them to pathological proportions.” *Aion: researches into the phenomenology of the self*. Paragraph 259 (Jung, 1979b)

When analyzing a mystic’s metabolizing of a terrifying vision, Jung writes: “This vision, undoubtedly fearful and wholly perturbing, which burst like a volcano upon his religious view of the world, without any dogmatic value and without exegetical commentary, naturally needed a long labor of assimilation in order to fit it into the total structure of the psyche and thus restore the disturbed psychic balance. Brother Klaus came to terms with his experience on the basis of dogma, then firm as a rock; and the dogma proved its powers of assimilation by turning something horribly alive into the beautiful abstraction of the Trinity idea. But the reconciliation might have taken place on a quite different basis provided by the vision itself and its unearthly actuality – much to the disadvantage of the Christian conception of God and no doubt still greater disadvantage of Brother Klaus himself, who would then have become not a saint but a heretic (if not a lunatic) and would probably have ended his life at stake.” *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*, paragraph 17 (Jung, 1959)

“In my profession I have encountered many people who have had immediate experience and who would not and could not submit to the authority of ecclesiastical decision. I had to go with them through the crises of passionate conflicts, through the panics of madness, to desperate confusions and depressions which were grotesque and terrible at the same time, so that I am fully aware of the extraordinary importance of dogma and ritual, at least as methods of mental hygiene. If the patient is a practicing Catholic, I invariably advise him to confess and to receive communion in order to protect himself from immediate experience, which might easily prove too much for him.” *Psychology and religion: West and East, 2nd ed.*, paragraph 76 (Jung, 1969)

3. Dogma is emergent from the collective unconscious, and in its wholeness facilitates its psychological containing function better than the more limited theories of science:

“In itself any scientific theory, no matter how subtle, has, I think, less value from the standpoint of psychological truth and religious dogma, for the simple reason that a theory is necessarily highly abstract and exclusively rational, whereas dogma expresses an irrational whole by means of imagery. This guarantees a far better rendering of an irrational fact like a psyche. Moreover, dogma owes its continued existence and its form on the one hand to so-called “revealed” or immediate experiences of the “Gnosis” ... and on the other hand to the ceaseless collaboration of many minds over many centuries. It may not be quite clear why I call certain dogmas “immediate experiences,” since in itself a dogma is the very thing that precludes immediate experience. ... Ideas like these are never invented. They came in to being before man had learned to use his mind purposively. Before man learned to produce thoughts, thoughts came to him. *He did not think – he perceived his mind functioning.* [Jung’s emphasis] Dogma is like a dream, reflecting the spontaneous and autonomous activity of the objective psyche, the unconscious. Such an expression of the unconscious is a much more efficient means of defence against further immediate experiences than any scientific theory. The theory has to disregard the emotional values of the experience. The dogma, on the other hand, is extremely eloquent in just this respect. One scientific theory is soon superseded by another. Dogma lasts for untold centuries. The suffering God-man may be at least 5000 years old and the Trinity is probably even older.” *Psychology and religion: West and East, 2nd ed.*, paragraph 81 (Jung, 1969)

4. Dogma eventually becomes outmoded and superseded by the emergence of the living creativity of the psyche

“The ultimate fate of every dogma is that it gradually becomes soulless. Life wants to create new forms, and therefore, when a dogma loses its vitality, it must perforce activate the archetype that has always helped man to express the mystery of the soul.” *Mysterium coniunctionis*, paragraph 488 (Jung, 1963)

“Religions are the great healing-systems for the ills of the soul. Neuroses and similar illnesses arise, one and all, from psychic complications. But once a dogma is disputed and questioned, it has lost its healing power. A person who no longer believes that a God who knows suffering will have mercy on him, will help and comfort him and give his life a meaning, is weak and a prey to his own weakness and becomes neurotic.” *Freud and psychoanalysis*, paragraph 751 (Jung, 1961)

5. Dogma as a collective portrayal of archetypal imagery, and a thing of beauty, but he puts this in context:

“Faith is certainly a splendid thing if one has it, and knowledge by faith is perhaps more perfect than anything we can produce with our laboured and wheezing empiricism. The edifice of Christian dogma, for instance, undoubtedly stands on a much higher level than the somewhat wild ‘philosophoumena’ of the Gnostics. Dogmas are spiritual structures of supreme beauty, and they possess a wonderful meaning which I have sought to fathom in my fashion. ... But since the ecclesiastical cure of souls does not always produce the desired results, we doctors must do what we can, and at present we have no better standby than that modest ‘gnosis’ which the empirical method gives us. Or have any of my critics better advice to offer?” *The symbolic life: miscellaneous writings*, paragraph 1511 (Jung, 1976)

6. Dogma as a defensive recourse of mediocre minds, where it signals repression of doubts that would be better explored:

“It is a somewhat curious fact in the history of science – but one that is in keeping with the peculiar nature of the psychoanalytic movement – that Freud, the creator of psychoanalysis (in the narrower sense), insists on identifying the method with a sexual theory, thus placing upon it the stamp of dogmatism. This declaration of 'scientific' infallibility caused me, at the time, to break with Freud, for to me dogma and science are incommensurable quantities which damage one another by mutual contamination. Dogma as a factor in religion is of inestimable value precisely because of its absolute standpoint. But when science dispenses with criticism and scepticism it degenerates into a sickly hot-house plant. One of the elements necessary to science is extreme uncertainty. Whenever science inclines towards dogma and shows a tendency to be impatient and fanatical, it is concealing a doubt which in all probability is justified and explaining away an uncertainty which is only too well founded.” *Freud and psychoanalysis*, paragraph 746. (Jung, 1961)

7. Dogma as a barrier to direct experience:

“It is true that an overwhelming majority of educated people are fragmentary personalities and have a lot of substitutes [neuroses and self-deception -- GS] instead of the genuine goods. ... What is ordinarily called “religion” is a substitute to such an amazing degree that I asked myself seriously whether this kind of “religion,” which I prefer to call a creed, may not after all have an important function in human society. The substitute has the obvious purpose of replacing immediate experience by a choice of suitable symbols tricked out with an organized dogma and ritual.” *Psychology and religion: West and East, 2nd ed.*, paragraph 75 (Jung, 1969)

“It is high time we realize that it is pointless to praise the light and preach it if nobody can see it. It is much more needful to teach people the art of seeing. For it is obvious that

far too many people are incapable of establishing a connection between the sacred figures and their own psyche: they cannot see to what extent the equivalent images are lying dormant in their own unconscious. In order to facilitate this inner vision we must first clear the way for the faculty of seeing. How this is to be done without psychology, that is, without making contact with the psyche, is frankly beyond my comprehension. Footnote: Since it is a question here of human effort, I leave aside acts of grace which are beyond man's control." *Psychology and alchemy*, paragraph 14 (Jung, 1980)

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