

Christianity's 'Occult' View of the Mind's Depths

by: Douglas Lockhart

There is an opening downward within each moment, an unconscious reverberation, like the thin thread of the dream that we awaken with in our hands each morning leading back and down into the images of the dark.

James Hillman: *The Dream and the Underworld*

Depth

In his paper "The Ominous Numinous", the research psychologist J.A. Cheyne draws our attention to what he terms "a more sinister and primordial other ... at the most fundamental biological roots of our being."¹ That sounds scary, and it is scary, for Cheyne's contention is that the presence of this psychic "other" is so radically different from the ordinary self that it can dominate consciousness. We can experience a psychic tap on the shoulder that sends a shudder right down to the core of our being; and it isn't just our imagination playing tricks. There *is* "a primordial core consciousness", and it has a nasty habit of surprising us as we walk down a dark street, or pass through a shadowy wood, or as we *descend* into sleep and dream.

Experiences of a "sensed presence" resulting in visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations are also known to erupt during "sleep paralysis," an awake condition of physical immobility during which only the eyes can be opened or closed. Estimates suggest that 30% of young adults report such experiences, and that out of this frightening condition "grow elaborate and complex ... accounts of incubus attacks, demonic possession, old hag attacks and, more recently, alien abductions."² Although experienced while awake, such encounters are classified as "dreams" due to what is termed "the superpositioning of dream imagery and affect on waking consciousness," a condition believed to originate in the limbic system. This is associated with a "vigilance system" that activates in relation to possible danger.

Another explanation is that these experiences are supernatural, yet another that they are purely natural, evolutionary and related to our primordial past. The second explanation sounds right to our modern ears, but in what sense are such experiences evolutionary? A strong sense of "evil" accompanies experiences of sleep paralysis (between 78% and 98%), and that is an anomaly that cannot be ignored. Feelings of threat and fear are one thing, but a "sensed malevolence" in connection with a strong "presence" is quite another. One respondent described the experience as "fear for his soul," another as "an intense feeling of indescribable evil," and such descriptions are common. So has the Church been right all along about sentient evil (the Devil and his hordes waiting in some dark domain to attack us), or are churchmen today simply bamboozling us and themselves due to the state of deep psychological conflict they are in over the question of evil? They have after all been proffering the notion of evil as an independent force or energy for centuries, and this notion, deeply embedded as it is in our culture, hangs around at the back of our minds like an empty cobweb. The web is empty, but the very existence of the web suggests it could be otherwise.

The Creative Unconscious

We are all adept at imaginatively constructing scenarios out of thoughts, memories or external sounds as we slip into sleep at night, and slip out of sleep in the morning. What makes sense one minute is recognized the next as a subtle creation of our half-awake mind, a clever incorporation of external events into our inner psychic space. Through acts of association we create elaborate plots out of dream images, physical sensations and memories, psychological research even suggesting that our habit of talking to ourselves while awake generates the illusion of self-continuity spoken of by the philosopher David Hume. Awake, or asleep, we compulsively fill in the mind's blanks in an attempt to explain what we feel or sense, the sensation of threat during sleep-paralysis and nightmare being attributed to an ancient biological sensibility in relation to predators. Modern humans we may be, but we carry an instinctive capacity for survival laced with primitive interpretations of reality that can run out of control.

Western culture absorbs such ideas through the bombardment of horror films and popular books that the Church, privy as it is to modern knowledge, coyly ignores for reasons best known to itself, and the result is psychological and spiritual confusion on a mass scale. Enter the Jungian-oriented psychologist James Hillman with this observation:

Christianism, in a two-sided masterstroke, both did away with the underworld and horrified it as the perpetual alternative to the Christian path. Christianism or underworld: one had to choose, and who would choose the horror?³

I have in other writings drawn attention to Hillman's ideas,⁴ but will recap due to their being among the best I've come across in relation to above issues. In *The Dream and the Underworld*, for instance, Hillman explores the connection between psychology and mythology with this penetrating result: "Mythology is a psychology of antiquity. Psychology is a mythology of modernity."⁵ The ancient world did not have a psychology in our sense of that word, but it did have a system of myths that showed the relationship between humans and forces and images of a "more than human" capacity. We in the modern world work in reverse: we have our fields, instincts, drives and complexes to help us deal with inner forces and images, but no mythology to speak of.

Drawing our attention to Eugen Bleuler's early 20th century invention of the term "depth psychology", Hillman speaks of our shift from "the activity of taking things apart to the vision of seeing them in depth,"⁶ a change in perspective that carries us back to the ancient definition of the human soul as "bathun" – *depth*. We owe this definition to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who believed the soul to be a hidden, invisible dimension of the human without limitation that had to be descended into. And not just the soul, as it turns out. In this scheme everything that existed had its own soul, its own "darkness" or "depth", and could be fathomed only through an "entering" that revealed its hidden nature. The truth of a thing was not *in* its depths, but in the fact that it *was* "depth", a concept we will return to.

The ancient Greek god of "depths" was *Hades*. No temples or altars were raised to him, no artistic form created to represent him. There was no trace of him in the upper daylight world, and he had no descendants. Hillman notes that he was also referred to as "Pluto" (wealth), or as "Trophonios" (nourishing), and speculates that these names or disguises were a subtle reference to the hidden wealth and nourishment enjoyed by those who made this challenging descent. There is an interiority or depth that cancels out as "a hidden presence – even an invisible fullness."⁷

Another factor in the myth of Hades is the underworld's lack of time. Time is an upperworld concept and has no role to play in the House of Hades. There is no time

element, but there is “limitless depth”, this “underground” (*ge*) of the self being altogether different from the cold, dark realm of the “underworld” (*Chthon*).⁸ The “underground” (instinctual body or earthly soil) is fertile; the “underworld” (what is below the earth and of the dead) is infertile. Well, not quite. The polytheistic mind often merged these terms, as in *ge-Chthon*, and in doing so added a *ge* perspective to *Chthon*. And to further complicate matters there was *zoe*, a vitality belonging to *all* underworld phenomena. Here then is the mythological series of levels, fields, instincts, drives and complexes, a “fantasy of structural levels”⁹ gleaned by Sigmund Freud from his study of mythology.

So what’s my point? Have we not rightly replaced mythology with psychology? What is the benefit of retracing our steps into this murky area of the ancient imagination? What is to be gained from translating what we now know about the human psyche back into these archaic levels and terms? Well, there’s a double reason: (1) it could be said that we have been hoodwinked if we think present-day psychology’s grasp of the human psyche is in any way complete; and (2) the influence of Christianity on the psychology of religion has been such that our greatest fear is of our own psychic depths. Modern humans we may be, but our collective attitude toward the mind and its deeper, darker aspects in our Christianized cultures is one of educated horror. We have developed an “occult” view of the mind’s depths, and through fictions such as *The Exorcist* and the novels of Stephen King have come to view the deep end of psychophysical experience as spiritually dangerous. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung explains why this is unacceptable:

In reality we can never legitimately cut loose from our archetypal foundations unless we are prepared to pay the price of a neurosis, any more than we can rid ourselves of our body and its organs without committing suicide.¹⁰

Arrowing in on this neurosis, James Hillman castigates Christianity for its role in changing the underworld into a place of horror. He tells us that the Church, in a two-sided masterstroke, both did away with the underworld and horrified it as an alternative to the Christian path. The taboos against psyche were in place, and they would be endlessly refined until even the slightest indication of underworld experience would be interpreted as evidence of satanic activity. But is this altogether fair? Is Christianity solely to blame for how psyche came to be viewed? Given what we now know about our primordial past, and about the nature of dream, is it any wonder that

early Christianity interpreted things the way it did? We can get spooked on a dark street, or by a film or book with an occult theme, but in this day and age wouldn't that more properly be interpreted as the result of our ability to suspend disbelief than to Church teaching? We *choose* to be afraid; we are actually free of all that silly stuff. We've outgrown the idea of the demonic with its dreadful presences and spooky happenings. Spirits and demons have been eradicated from our world view due to sound intellectual thinking and common sense. Really? Can we be absolutely sure about that? The historian Morris Berman has his doubts:

It became 'irrational' to have irrational fears. Hybrid monsters and fabulous beasts seemed to vanish under the glaring light of the new science. In reality, they only scurried away, found a place to hide in the recesses of the mind. The language of psychoanalysis and depth psychology ... now starts to make much more sense. Fear expressed is very different from fear repressed.¹¹

Carl Jung agrees. We are often moved by forces from a deep source that is not conscious, and is not under our control. Such forces were once referred to as demons or gods, and they are as active today as they were in our distant past. The old theology got routed with the rise of science, but it was not eradicated. The legacy of science over the last few hundred years has been that of a distancing effect between our conscious mind and our so-called unconscious mind. So entrenched has this distancing effect become that *any* intimation of a subjective nature is treated as potentially unreliable.

But what exactly is it that's untrustworthy in such moments? What *is* a subjective response in itself? Does our heart lie when it misses a beat, or our liver lie when it's on its last legs? Would it not be more accurate to say that it is our conscious ineptness in relaying what is going on in our interior depths that constitutes the problem? If our conscious minds scramble the deeply evaluative sensations presented by our bodies, then shouldn't we be paying closer attention to why that is the case?

As a result of science's search for clarity and exactness, and the unrecognised influence of Christianity's phobia about the mind's depths on science's formation, we have developed a fear of interiority that drives us to accept often limited intellectual arrangements of thought alongside religious beliefs that annul any desire to explore our inner natures. We are, in other words, continually avoiding ourselves; or, more

accurately, *voiding* ourselves without realising what it is we are doing to ourselves. The experience of ourselves as *depth* has got lost among theoretical constructions and theological imaginings. In science's scheme soul has been abolished; in Christianity's scheme soul is an object dished out by God at birth and taken away at death to enjoy either the rewards of heaven or the torments of a now ambiguous hell.

Hell is of course in the cellar, Latin *cella* (subterranean storeroom), and that requires a descent into Hell (Hades) if we die without accepting the Christ formula. In Christian terms it is then too late to make amends, and in depth terms equally too late to be of psychological benefit. The "opening downward" referred to by Hillman in the quote prefacing this essay has been successfully closed off, the *thin thread of the dream we awaken with in our hands each morning* exchanged for a view that robs us of even the inclination to pursue our deeper feelings to source. Soul has been exchanged for a pneumatic spirit that rises to meet Christ in the air," (1 Thess. 4:17) and the reason for this is that in Christian tradition Christ has already descended into hell and forced Thanatos (death) to hide behind his own door. Christianity's consciously directed mission has been successful: polytheism (the old mythology of the soul) has been wiped out, our interior darkness flooded with an upperworld light (theology), its sacred purpose scrambled beyond recognition, or destroyed. Progressive ensoulment through descent has been exchanged for a seductive magical formula: Christ as dying savior.

In contrast to this, the controversial Catholic mystic Bernadette Roberts signals that we should be travelling in the opposite direction. "The tendency," she says, "is to be afraid of interior darkness, [and] have wrong views or interpretations of it. Instead of going down into their own emptiness, people ... run from darkness, nothing and emptiness."¹² Even more to the point is a statement made by Roberts in relation to Jesus' own consciousness:

God does not know himself as God nor know he is God. Thus neither in his humanity nor divinity did Christ know he was God. That we claim Christ knew he was God attests only to our ignorance regarding self or consciousness and our limited understanding of Christ, human and divine.¹³

The Body's Question

It is in and through the physical body that we wake up to the fact that our primordial selves are still active, but it is also the medium through which soul as depth (*bathun*)

can be intercepted. Hence Christianity's taboo against any form of descent into the self that removes Christian markers such as Jesus as God, or God as Jesus. Prayers for the sick, or for the world in general, are acceptable, but any journey inward that lacks theological overlay is considered dangerous and to be avoided. Why so? Because our inner depths have been equated with the Underworld and the mythology that goes along with it, and that disallows it as a spiritually nourishing source. This is of course to sidestep the process that could be said to *make* soul; experiences that usher us into *our own presence as if into the presence of a stranger*. On one level, that sums up our condition: we are strangers to ourselves and desperately in need of an introduction. On another level it intimates what Christianity has come to fear most: the presence of something in our depths that is *more* than the conscious self. This *something* has no name and no history; it is a *hidden presence, an invisible fullness* that blossoms out of our attempts to comprehend real interiority. And it is not a presence in the sense of an entity; it is the *depth of our depths* registering in a manner beyond normal articulation. It is, in other words, the body's question, not ours in any conscious sense, and it is a question we have to learn to live with rather than answer.

Christianity Without Incarnation

Before going more deeply into this issue, we have to get something problematical out of the way: the idea that Jesus as the "Christ" is the only legitimate route we have when approaching *the truth of being*. The late Robert Funk, co-founder of the Westar Institute and the infamous Jesus Seminar, sums up this problem with pugnacity:

It is a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the Christ of Christian orthodoxy, the Christ of the Creeds. The creedal Christ ... is an idol that invites shattering.¹⁴

Worship of the man Jesus *as if* he were somehow Israel's God come down to Earth in person has to be seen through for what it is: a mistaken theological construction. Jesus needs to be liberated from this kind of projectionism and reinstated in his proper historical context. Only by doing this can we learn to face the creative darkness of our own depths without distortion and distraction. Facing those depths *without* Jesus is the spiritual challenge of our age, just as interpreting the Eucharist as not involving an transformation of the bread and wine into the blood and flesh of Jesus in some psychic sense was the challenge facing Christians during the Reformation.¹⁵ Our theologically driven notions about Jesus need to be reconsidered and adjusted in the light of the

available historical evidence, for as a result of those notions we have become subject to absurd literalisms and have come to believe that God manipulates history and much else for his own ends. Or we play theological games with the material in an attempt to hold the whole crumbling edifice of Christianity together. Such stretchings of the imagination are unworthy of serious consideration. In this sense Christianity has completely lost track of its original premise: greater *awareness*.

In his essay "Christianity Without Incarnation", Maurice Wiles explores the possibility of a Christianity in which Jesus' divine status is abolished. The sensitivity with which Wiles approaches this thorny question is not surprising, for at the time of writing he was Regius Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, as well as chairman of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission. And yet he can argue for the abandonment of the Church's metaphysical claim that Jesus was the Second Person in a Holy Trinity. Believing there to be a strong case against such a view, Wiles considers the complex weave of ideas associated with incarnation and in conclusion points out that "the precise way in which Jesus is understood ... has been a constantly changing phenomenon in the history of the Church."¹⁶ But he cannot predict in advance how this change in attitude towards Jesus will come about, for abandonment of the divinity model will entail more than logical deduction, more than the correction of historical distortion and theological exuberance: it will also mean engaging the Church in a dynamic discourse around this issue.

Wiles' account of how the doctrine of the Incarnation came about starts with the observation that it is not something directly presented in Scripture. He tells us that it is "a construction built on the variegated evidence to be found there."¹⁷ The New Testament writers were interpreters, not reporters. Jesus is variously described as eschatological (end time) prophet, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Logos and Messiah. He is seen by some as the pre-existent wisdom of God spoken of in the wisdom literature of the Jews, and by others in the more personal sense of God's pre-existent Son come down to Earth. But all four gospels (even John's) stop short of saying that he was actually God. It was one thing to personalize the wisdom literature, to poeticise its meaning, it was quite another to transform this strictly Jewish conception of the pre-existent wisdom of God into a human being.

The Jews never intended their notion of Sophia (wisdom) to be interpreted in such a literal manner, and later Christian insistence that Sophia be amalgamated with the idea of Jesus as Logos (the Word of God) is a travesty of their sublime vision. As a concept,

Sophia was feminine, Logos masculine. It could be claimed that Sophia had descended on Jesus at his baptism, but it could not be claimed that Jesus *was* Sophia dropping in physically from the transcendent realm in the form of a flesh-and-blood man. Such a claim is nonsensical. Yet such a claim was eventually made for Jesus, and diverse opinions arose because of it that worried the evolving Church from the end of the 1st century until the end of the 4th. Jesus was untainted divine will. Jesus as the Christ was distinct from Jesus the man. Jesus the man was limited to normal human development, but as the Christ he was the recipient of knowledge directly communicated to him from God. Jesus was *all* God. Jesus was *all* man at the same time as he was *all* God.

All in all a series of mixed messages that led the Council of Nicea to demand creedal standardisation, for by then no one either knew, or could remember, or perhaps even cared, what it was Paul or the original Apostles had believed about Jesus. And anyway, had not the Jerusalem Church lost track of what it stood for and returned to Judaism?

In her essay "A Cloud of Witnesses", Frances Young makes the point that titles such as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord and Logos were all in existence *before* Christianity appeared on the scene. They were standard titles used among the many Jewish groups, and they were not always properly understood by later Christian exegetes. Some titles carried a different emphasis, some projected different Christological structures, some were influenced by differing linguistic and cultural environments.¹⁸ Gaining additional importance in a Greek environment, some became a standard way of referring to Jesus, but it was a standard of usage amputated from its Jewish-sectarian roots. Jesus' message had been about the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. The Church's message, based loosely on Paul's epistles and on the fact that God's kingdom had not arrived, was that Jesus was himself the central issue. Paul's evocation of the mystic Christ progressively hardened into an ecclesiastical literalism that swept away all previous conceptions of Jesus as a normal human being. But what had actually made Jesus special was not that he was God, but that he had surrendered himself to his conception of God. He had not surrendered to Judaism, or to Jewish sectarianism, but to God alone. And done without an intermediary like himself to offset the pressure of confronting God as *formless* void.

When dealing with the thorny question of Jesus' supposed divinity, Frances Young completes her observations in a reference note by pointing out that the fullness of God experienced by Jesus was the result of choice, will, purpose and election, rather than essential derivative nature.¹⁹ He was a man like any other man, and as such

extraordinary for that very reason. Our hope, therefore, is not in his supposed divinity, but in his humanity, in the fact that he could laugh and weep, thirst and be hungry, and still manage to plumb his own depths in such a startling manner. That is the connecting point between him and us. It was out of his all-too-human nature that he stepped into the fullness of an awareness that eclipsed the awareness of his time. And so Frances Young is forced to say that the reduction of all of God to the level of human incarnation is beyond our conceptual capacity.²⁰ It may be comforting to have a faith complete with a doctrine of atonement and the idea that God has dealt with evil, but that, she suggests, is the language of poetry. Ultimately, all language about God is analogical; it is "the expression of the unknown and inexpressible in terms of the known."²¹ The "unknown" is our own depths, and it is only in our own depths that we can find out what having such depths means experientially.

References and Notes:

- 1) Cheyne, J.A., *The Ominous Numinous*, a paper in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol 8, No. 5-7, 2001, p 148.
- 2) Ibid, p 134.
- 3) Hillman, James, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Perennial Library, Harper & Row, New York, 1979, p 88.
- 4) Lockhart, Douglas, *Jesus the Heretic*, Element Books, Wiltshire, England, 1997.
- 5) Hillman, James, *The Dream and the Underworld*, (as above), p 23.
- 6) Ibid, p 24. Here, once again, we are presented with the idea of mechanistic thinking allied to attitudes estranged from *sense of being*, plus the handy notion of "soul" as "depth" (bathun). Hillman also suggests that the descriptive terms such as Freud's "unconscious" and Bleuler's "depth psychology" reflect those very processes. It is, he says, "as if the archetypal material chooses its own descriptive terms as one aspect of its self-expression." In other words, the name chosen carries us towards the experience in itself. Which is to say that language can carry not just the idea of psychophysical depth, but can also function as an entry point into an experience of such depth. Language is therefore not as circumscribed as we may have thought.
- 7) Ibid, p 28.
- 8) Ibid, p 35.
- 9) Ibid, p 16.
- 10) Jung, Carl, *Psychological Reflections: A New Anthology of His Writings 1905-1961*, Selected and edited by Jolande Jacobi in collaboration with R.F.C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, reprint 1974, p 46.
- 11) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, Bantam Books, New York, 1990, p 76. There is a sense in which our

self-conscious life is no more than a veneer – hence the frequency of “unity experiences” with nature, experiences where the self-other boundary lessens or disappears altogether

12) Roberts, Bernadette, *What is Self? A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness*, Sentient Publications, LLC, 2005. 1113 Spruce

Street, Boulder, CO 80302. www.sentientpublications.com p 62.)

13) Ibid, p 154. Bernadette Roberts' view of Jesus is, however, complex; it straddles points of view that at times appear to be contradictory. For instance, Part Three of her book, *What is Self?*, (see above for details) deals with what she terms the 'Eucharistic Christ' (p 136), and in spite of saying that Jesus did not conceive of himself as God, she nevertheless argues that the incarnation “has a dimension beyond that of the historical Christ who appeared in human form and consciousness.” Human beings can experience what Christ manifested, but they are not that manifestation in their own right – that's the difference between the two. Prior to making this point Roberts' contemplative exposition is exemplary in its clarity, after this point, however, (p 204) it takes on a theological edge that many will find overly indebted to the Catholic scheme of spiritual reality. My own immediate reaction was to ask: How does Roberts differentiate between the historical Jesus and St. Paul's theological 'Christ'? If the Christ was made manifest by God, what exactly was the physical Jesus' relationship to this august figure? Roberts attempts to answer this question, but her answer becomes, for the first time, mired in what looks like theological sleight-of-hand. This is perhaps due to her background and training as a Carmelite, for in referring to the historical Jesus, she calls him the 'historical Christ', *not* the 'historical Jesus', and in doing so ignores Jesus the Jewish Messiah figure, his siblings (particularly James), and the dynastic background from which he sprang. 'Christ' is after all merely the Greek term for Messiah; it only becomes equated with divinity in Paul's theology, and that theology was radically different in conception from what was believed about Jesus by the early Jerusalem church of the apostles.

14) Funk, Robert, *Honest to Jesus*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, p 20.

15) Wiles, Maurice, “Christianity Without Incarnation”, an essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, CSM Press, Ltd., 1977, p 2.

16) Ibid, p 9.

17) Ibid, p 3.

18) Young, Frances, “A Cloud of Witnesses”, an essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, CSM Press, Ltd., 1977, p 15-16.

19) Ibid, p 45

20) Ibid, p 35.

21) Ibid, p 34.

