

Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: A Critique Informed by Postmodernism

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This critique of Jung's autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, looks at the text in light of recent criticism and postmodern developments in psychology. With particular attention to Jung's position on a transcendent God, the omission of significant relationships throughout the work, and the concept of individuation in relation to the Christian notion of vocation, this paper highlights the truths that Jung's autobiography challenges pastoral psychologists and pastoral theologians to integrate into clinical work and professional literature.

You see, the archetype is a force. It has autonomy, and it can suddenly seize you. It is like a seizure.

—Carl Jung

Be anything you like except a theologian.

—advice from Jung's father

Few documents in the history of modern psychology have reached the stature of Carl Gustav Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (MDR). Called "one of the primary spiritual documents of the twentieth century" (Noll, 1997, p. xiii), the book provides remarkable access to the psychic life of the man who gave the world such psychological concepts as the collective unconscious, the shadow, the archetypes, individuation, and synchronicity, and whose thinking inspired the ubiquitous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment. Yet recent scholarship suggests the book is less a phenomenology of religious experience, as it is often portrayed, than a constructed (and limited) story woven by Jung and his

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assistant Aniela Jaffe (and, after his death, by his family and his publisher) to create a particular image of the man and his work. Noll (1997) in particular has argued that unflattering material was omitted and significant events were deleted or fabricated.

Because I am not a Jung scholar, I cannot judge whether *MDR* is an accurate or complete retelling of Jung's life. But given the impact of Jung's thought on pastoral psychology and pastoral theology, it seems fitting to revisit his autobiography in light of recent criticism and in light of postmodern developments in the field of psychology. In particular, I want to attend to Jung's position on the existence of a transcendent God; his omission of significant relationships throughout *MDR*; the teleological nature of his work and his concept of *individuation* in relation to the Christian theological construct of *vocation*; and the truths that *MDR* not only offers to the fields of pastoral psychology and pastoral theology but that may be integrated into our clinical work and professional literature. I begin with a summary of content and method in *MDR* as a whole.

CONTENT AND METHOD IN *MDR*

Jung began telling and writing the stories that would become *MDR* in 1957, when he was 81 years old. He continued to work on the final stages of the manuscript until shortly before his death in 1961, and it was published in 1963 after being edited by Jaffe and others. Thus, the text is a restorying of a life from the perspectives of both old age and a mature psychological understanding. The confusing and chaotic events that fueled Jung's ideas are reinterpreted through the lens of his overarching psychological theory. Thus, the book gives more coherence to Jung's life than must have seemed possible to him while he lived it, particularly in his younger years.

The book's title accurately reflects its contents: the memories, dreams, reflections, travels, and other life experiences that shaped Jung's understanding of the psyche and of the psychology of religion. Welch (1982) sees *MDR* as Jung's mapping of the psyche through images (p. 8). Those images are powerful, and they remain with a reader: for example, a childhood dream of a gigantic penis enthroned underground, its single eye staring heavenward (Jung, 1989, p. 12–14); the fear that gripped Jung as a boy when he saw a Catholic priest dressed in black, walking toward him as if in disguise (Jung, 1989, p. 11); baboons in Africa howling at the sun as if worshipping their god (Jung, 1989, p. 268ff); and the Judeo-Christian God defecating on a cathedral, which shattered from the impact (Jung, 1989, p. 39). In all, Jung recounts more than 42 of his own dreams in *MDR*, as well as images from more than 13 clinical cases. The book also describes the following: Jung's theological and philosophical discussions with his father, a disempowered and disappointed minister whose life turned his son away from Christianity and the church; Jung's experiences with seances and paranormal activities; his close relationship with a mother oppressed by mental illness; his "creative illness" in which he was nearly overcome by the unconscious; and his experience of his No. 1 and

No. 2 personalities, the first content with the surface of external life and the second oriented toward the inner and eternal world of the psyche.

Through exploration of these images and experiences, as recounted in *MDR*, Jung slowly developed his theories of the collective unconscious, the existence of archetypes ("patterns" of meaning that shape a person's life), and the individuation process through which "the ego, the center of the individual consciousness, is progressively pervaded by the truth and power of the Self" (Dourley, 1992, p. 43) or supreme archetype. The book reflects the two-step process of Jungian psychology: listening to the unconscious in one's life and then relating to it consciously (Welch, 1982, p. 154). Jung understood this as a life-long process, with the first half of life emphasizing identity formation and the second, individuation and integration of psychic material from the unconscious (Halligan, 1995, p. 241). Life, for Jung, was a process of discovering and understanding the archetypes and expressing them in conscious life (Vitz, 1994, p. 3). Thus, the reader comes to understand with von Franz (1975) that the basis and substance of Jung's life and work are to be found "in that primordial experience . . . : the encounter of the single individual with his [*sic*] own god or *daimon*, his [*sic*] struggle with the overpowering emotions, affects, fantasies and creative inspirations and obstacles which come to life within" (p. 14).

It is clear that Jung was a phenomenological psychologist in the European tradition. He anchored his study in his own experiences, insights, and reflections rather than in the experiences of others, as with American phenomenologists (Wulff, 1995, p. 185). This appeal to experience—be it first-hand or vicarious—has been a primary method in the psychology of religion since its earliest days (see Wulff, 1997, and Oates, 1973). The question raised by *MDR* is this: Is the text a true phenomenology of religious and psychological experience—a rational look at subjective happenings—from which a theory of psychology was developed? Or is it a social construction shaped by Jung and others after the fact to support that same theory?

It seems likely to me that *MDR* is a construction—a highly important and valuable construction, but a construction nonetheless—rather than an explicit phenomenology. Evidence of omissions and falsifications, coupled with the near impossibility of accurately reporting, but not interpreting, experiences more than a few minutes old, support this view. Understanding *MDR* as a social construction challenges Jung's lifelong assertion that he was an empiricist and not a metaphysician; in spending his life writing "his own personal myth" (Wulff, 1997, p. 451) and claiming its processes to have universal religious and spiritual significance, Jung moved beyond objective observation into the subjective realm of valuation and theology (p. 464). His psychology became a metaphysic.

JUNG AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

All of Jung's thought, even his thought about God, is rooted in the idea of the *psyche*, the interior, personal and transpersonal, universal and relative source of

all that exists. It is through the psyche that the archetypes—imprints or symbols “of an unknown and incomprehensible content” (Jung in Welch, 1982, p. 191)—become awakened and integrated into consciousness. God is mentioned often in *MDR*, especially when Jung recounts his childhood as a pastor’s son. The book also reflects that by the end of his life Jung had clarified God’s relation to the psyche, saying that

the God-image is, from the psychological point of view, a manifestation of the ground of the psyche. . . .

Our psyche is set up in accord with the structure of the universe, and what happens in the macrocosm likewise happens in the infinitesimal and most subjective reaches of the psyche. For that reason the God-image is always a projection of the inner experience. . . . (Jung, 1989, p. 334–335)

It seems that for Jung there was no such thing as an experience of a transcendent God or transcendent reality, nor was the topic suitable for psychology: “dealing with the transcendent and ‘metaphysical’ God, according to Jung, is the work of the theologian” (Bianchi, 1988, p. 27). For Jung, therefore, God was wholly intrapsychic and not at all transcendent or transpsychic—a primary difficulty faced by Christians who otherwise affirm Jung’s psychology of religion.

The conclusion that Jung rejected a transcendent God, however, is far from accepted. While Dourley (1995a, 1995b, 1995c) supports it in full, some scholars (Bock, 1995; Coward, 1995; Smith, 1996; Sorajjakool, 1998) contend that Jung left open the possibility of a transcendent God; others (von Franz, 1975; Bianchi, 1988) boldly assert that Jung did believe in a transcendent reality, if not a transcendent God. Among these scholars, Dourley’s argument seems strongest to me because of the depth and breadth of his knowledge about Jung, the sophistication of his argument, and its logical consistency with Jung’s epistemology. However, I question Dourley’s conclusion that Jung’s thought does not allow the possibility of a transcendent God.

Dourley bases his perspective on Jung’s epistemology. Jung insisted that he was an empiricist (Smith, 1996, p. 124–125), meaning that he reported “only on the observable effects of experience on the psyche” (Bock, 1995, p. 92). But for Jung, all experience was filtered through the psyche, preventing any type of transpsychic experience. (There is some evidence [Brookes, 1996] that Jung perceived even the physical world to be a particular manifestation of psychic energy.) Thus, we never have direct—that is, transpsychic or apsychic—experience of anything. As stated by Sorajjakool (1998),

there can be no knowledge without sensation and therefore all we can know is not the thing-in-itself (*noumenon*) but that which we perceive through sensations (*phenomenon*). We can never know the real thing, but only what our senses tell us. All we perceive are sensations of the thing-in-itself, but never the thing-in- itself. (p. 273)

Because “humanity is not capable of knowing anything beyond the psyche or unmediated by the psyche” (Dourley, 1992, p. 45), Dourley concludes that “the

individual's reunification with the source of personal integration and other-relatedness—the reality religionists, theologians and devotees call God—occurs entirely within the psyche of the individual” (p. 44). Therefore, he says, “Jung’s thought . . . exclude[s] in principle the possibility of supernatural agencies transcendent to the psyche, addressing the psyche from a position beyond it” (Dourley, 1995b, p. 74; see also Dourley, 1995a).

This is an accurate portrayal of the epistemology evidenced in *MDR*, but, with all due respect to Dourley, I do not think this epistemology leads necessarily to a rejection of a transcendent reality or a transcendent God. Jung’s position is that of radical constructivism; while it limits our knowledge to that which we can experience through the psyche, it does not preclude the existence of a transpsychic reality or being which may address us through the psyche. Thus, from the evidence in *MDR*, I join Bock (1995) and Coward (1995) in rejecting the conclusion that Jung denied the possibility of a transcendent God. In Coward’s words (p. 96), “This does not deny the possible existence of God as a ‘thing in itself’ separate from and beyond us—what is denied is only our ability to know God via perception.” One might even argue that the human experience of the archetypes (see the opening quote) is the experience of wrestling to consciousness an imprint God has left on the unconscious.

JUNG’S FAILURE TO ADDRESS RELATIONSHIPS IN *MDR*

The most serious weakness of *MDR*, from my perspective, is the limited account of Jung’s relationships with others. Much attention is paid to his relationship with his parents, and an entire chapter is devoted to his doomed relationship with Freud. But his wife is mentioned only once, in a footnote (Jung, 1989, p. 215), and there is no mention of Toni Wolfe, with whom he had an intense psychic and sexual relationship, or his assistant Aniela Jaffe. He does not report in a substantial way how other psychologists and thinkers influenced his work. Neither does he mention the childhood trauma of sexual assault at the hands of a trusted older man (Smith, 1996, p. 3) nor his multiple relations with women (p. 4).

It is possible to believe from reading *MDR* that Jung’s work evolved almost entirely from his own intellect. Yet we know he was deeply influenced by others, as evidenced by the large number of letters he wrote to colleagues in order not to be isolated (von Franz, 1975, p. 5) and his cultivation of relationships with people around the world. This silence is puzzling; Jung shared copiously and intimately of himself in letters and lectures, but *MDR* is “a painfully inward memoir [that] discloses Jung’s inner feelings and images to the neglect of his interpersonal relationships” (Smith, 1996, p. 5). Inner events were clearly more important to Jung than external events or relationships (Smith, 1996, p. 6).

Given the growing recognition that ideas and lives are socially constructed in relationship to others, Jung’s omission of significant relationships from *MDR* robs

us of the opportunity to understand the collaborative nature of scientific inquiry and creative activity. The social construction of religious and spiritual beliefs is largely unexplored by the psychology of religion, and, written differently, *MDR* might have contributed important material to this line of inquiry.

INDIVIDUATION, VOCATION, AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY

A second weakness in *MDR* derives from the first: In failing to address his significant adult relationships, Jung suggests that individuation—the process of following one’s destiny toward integration, wholeness, and right relationship with the world—is a solitary experience. Christian tradition, however, has always affirmed vocation as something to be discerned in community. (It is fair, I think, to compare individuation to the theological construct of vocation. Both are a calling to genuine selfhood [Smith, 1996, p. 172], and they share a teleological orientation: for Christians, God is always luring people into the future, and for Jung, the unconscious is always tugging them toward future wholeness.) Jung fails to address this communal aspect of vocation, leading Vitz (1994) to conclude that “there is with all this focusing on one’s inner life a real danger of substituting the psychological experience of one’s religious unconscious for genuine religious experience” (p. 4). While Dourley (1992) emphasizes that Jung’s thought leads one to “expanded relatedness” (p. 43) with the rest of the universe, Vitz suggests that Jung be interpreted “as the theorist who fills up the person’s empty self with a whole community of characters whose endlessly fascinating ways absorb patients for the rest of their lives. The internal psychological community . . . replace[s] external social relations” (p. 50).

CHALLENGES TO PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL PSYCHOLOGY

In describing the challenges that Jungian thought offers to the present age, Wulff (1997) summarizes Jung’s attitude toward life as

one of openness, especially to the nonrational and the mysterious, to what lies beyond the logic of the philosopher and the instruments of the scientist. It is a recognition of the infinity that stretches far beyond our understanding, of the powers that lie outside our comprehension and control. It is, then, also an attitude of humility and of awe. (p. 470)

An attitude of humility and awe, I suggest, would be appropriate as pastoral theology and pastoral psychology consider the challenges offered by Jung’s work as portrayed in *MDR*. I believe two challenges are primary: the incorporation of the shadow and the recognition of the dynamic and alarming ways of God.

Recognizing and incorporating the shadow, that dark side of ourselves and of God that we do not like to own, is a priority in Jungian psychology. Jung believed

we needed to bring our darkness, and the darkness of God, into our conscious lives and relate to it in a mature and open way. The result is a tension of opposites that helps to keep us in balance by making it difficult for the shadow to erupt from unconsciousness and upset our journeys. I am reminded of this need to incorporate the shadow as I listen to debates about homosexuality in my own denomination and as I practice (and encourage) the use of brief approaches to pastoral counseling. When we are not aware of what lies in the shadow, we can find our progress impeded for no obvious reason. Jung calls the church and its members to incorporate the hidden and upsetting aspects of their beings.

Finally, through the images, memories, synchronicities, and dreams described in *MDR*, Jung reminds us that our God is, in the words of Chris Glaser (1998), a God who is always “coming out.” God breaks into our lives—both our conscious and unconscious lives—in ways that are surprising and at times frightening. Jung’s acceptance of diverse and idiosyncratic manifestations of the divine in our psyches (even manifestations that fall outside of Christian orthodoxy), and his embrace of all of creation as a potential source of illumination, remind us that a healthy panentheism—seeing the cosmos within God—is an essential but disregarded aspect of Christian belief (perhaps part of the shadow we are called to integrate). This “vision-logical” understanding of God (see Wilber, 1995, p. 185) challenges our often mundane and static images of the Divine resulting from a near-total reliance on scripture as the source of our images of God to the exclusion of the particular experiences of a single Christian or Christian community. Jung calls us to be open to God in unexpected ways.

CONCLUSION

Despite the weaknesses described above, Jung’s autobiography stands as an important illustration of both content and methodology in the psychology of religion. It presents meaningful challenges to theological thinkers. It is also an important, though limited, model for pastoral psychology and pastoral theology as they seek to reshape themselves for service in a postmodern, post-Christian world. All three fields—pastoral theology, pastoral psychology, and the psychology of religion—are called to expand on Jung’s work by highlighting the role of relationships, community, and social constructionism in mature religious development inside and outside of recognized faith traditions and communities.

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