

The Religious Function of the Unconscious in Human Development

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to analyze the role of the religious function in psychological development and in the establishment of a sense of meaning in life from the perspective of analytical psychology. Taking into account Jung's distinction between confession (a system of beliefs) and religion (religious experience), the importance of symbols produced through the activity of the religious function of the unconscious for psychological development was discussed. According to Edward Edinger, religious symbols, whether collective or produced by the unconscious, enable the ego to establish a connection with the archetypal ground of the psyche, a process that is essential for psychological health. For Erich Neumann, religious symbols also allow individuals to withdraw archetypal projections from their parents, thereby enabling the natural transition toward maturity in human development. Thus, according to Jung, the loss of religious symbols prevents a deeper psychological separation between the individual and their biological family. At the individual level, the loss of symbolic contact with the archetypal ground of the psyche may lead to a loss of meaning in life, ego inflation, or dependence on an inadequate substitute for this lost relationship. The concepts of analytical psychology and the clinical example presented in this paper were used to demonstrate how symbols produced by the unconscious may facilitate the continuation of psychological development, thereby enabling the establishment of a sense of meaning in life.

Descriptors: Jungian psychology, symbol, religion, individuation (psychology), collective unconscious.

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The author states no professional or personal interest that may create a conflict of interests regarding this manuscript.



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A função religiosa do inconsciente no desenvolvimento humano

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo foi analisar o papel da função religiosa no desenvolvimento psicológico e no estabelecimento de um sentido para a vida, a partir da perspectiva da psicologia analítica. Levando em conta a diferenciação feita por Jung entre confissão (sistema de crenças) e religião (experiência religiosa), discutiu-se a importância dos símbolos produzidos por meio da atividade da função religiosa do inconsciente para o desenvolvimento psicológico. De acordo com Edward Edinger, os símbolos religiosos, coletivos ou produzidos pelo inconsciente, possibilitam a ligação do eu com a base arquetípica da psique, processo essencial para a saúde psicológica. Para Erich Neumann, os símbolos religiosos também permitem o indivíduo retirar dos pais projeções arquetípicas, possibilitando a passagem natural no desenvolvimento humano para a maturidade. Por isso, segundo Jung, a perda dos símbolos religiosos impossibilita uma separação psicológica mais profunda entre o indivíduo e sua família biológica. No nível individual, a perda do contato simbólico com a base arquetípica da psique pode causar a perda do sentido da vida, a inflação do eu ou a dependência de um substituto inadequado para essa relação perdida. Os conceitos da psicologia analítica e o exemplo clínico apresentados neste trabalho foram usados para demonstrar como os símbolos produzidos pelo inconsciente podem facilitar o prosseguimento do desenvolvimento psicológico, possibilitando o estabelecimento de um sentido para a vida.

Descritores: psicologia junguiana, símbolo, religião, individuação (psicologia), inconsciente coletivo.

La función religiosa del inconsciente en el desarrollo humano

Resumen

Este artículo se propone, desde la perspectiva de la psicología analítica, analizar el papel de la función religiosa en el desarrollo psicológico y en establecer un sentido para la vida. Teniendo en cuenta la diferenciación de Jung entre confesión (sistema de creencias) y religión (experiencia religiosa), se debatió la importancia de los símbolos producidos por medio de la actividad de la función religiosa del inconsciente para el desarrollo

psicológico. De acuerdo con Edward Edinger, los símbolos religiosos, colectivos o producidos por el inconsciente, posibilitan la conexión del yo con la base arquetípica de la psique, proceso esencial para la salud psicológica. Para Erich Neumann, los símbolos religiosos también permiten al individuo retirar proyecciones arquetípicas de los padres, viabilizando el pasaje natural para la madurez en el desarrollo humano. Por eso, según Jung, la pérdida de los símbolos religiosos hace imposible una separación psicológica más profunda entre el individuo y su familia biológica. En el nivel individual, la pérdida del contacto simbólico con la base arquetípica de la psique puede ocasionar la pérdida del sentido de la vida, la inflación del yo o la dependencia de un sustituto inadecuado para esa relación perdida. Se usaron conceptos de la psicología analítica y el ejemplo clínico presentado en este trabajo para demostrar cómo los símbolos producidos por el inconsciente pueden ayudar a continuar el desarrollo psicológico y a establecer un sentido para la vida.

Descripciones: psicología junguiana, símbolo, religión, individuación (psicología), inconsciente colectivo.

Introduction

The present article aimed to analyze the role of the religious function in psychological development, with an emphasis on the psychic separation from parents and the construction of a sense of meaning in life, from the perspective of analytical psychology. According to Jung, the absence of meaning constitutes one of the main factors underlying the emergence of various psychopathologies and developmental difficulties (Jung, 1934/2013). From this perspective, the loss of the symbolic dimension of existence is deeply associated both with a sense of existential emptiness and with obstacles in the individuation process (Jung, 1939/2013). Accordingly, this study sought to investigate the role of religious symbols in human life throughout history, the psychological effects resulting from the absence of such symbols, and possible psychotherapeutic approaches to the challenges arising from this empty space.

The Importance of Religious Symbolism in Human Life Throughout History

One recurring characteristic of societies around the world is the presence of some form of religious activity. Rituals such as funerals, for example, may have emerged even before the appearance of *Homo sapiens*, with the earliest records dating back 400,000 years (Carbonell & Mosquera, 2006). The existence of this type of symbolic

behavior implies a belief in the reality of a spiritual dimension of life beyond purely material existence.

Some of humanity's oldest constructions, such as Göbekli Tepe (Turkey, 9500 BCE) and Nevalı Çori (Turkey, 9000 BCE), served religious purposes, functioning as sites of worship and pilgrimage (Tobolczyk, 2016). At these sites, the architecture can be seen to have been organized symbolically, reflecting the months and seasons of the year. The meaning of the T-shaped pillars found in these constructions is clearly astrological (Sweatman, 2024). This demonstrates the existence of an intimate relationship between the symbolism embedded in religious worship and the temporal and spatial organization of human consciousness.

The historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1957/2018), an important exponent of the so-called phenomenology of religion in the twentieth century, also recognized the symbolic importance of these sacred pillars as a means of establishing a connection with the transcendent. From an ancestral worldview, human existence was possible only through this permanent communication with the "sky." As an example of this worldview among traditional societies, Eliade highlights the Australian Achilpa tribe:

The 'world' of the Achilpa becomes truly their world only insofar as it reproduces the Cosmos organized and sanctified by Numbakula. One cannot live without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, one cannot live in 'Chaos.' Once contact with the transcendent is lost, existence in the world is no longer possible—and the Achilpa let themselves die... The sacred pole of the Achilpa 'sustains' their world and ensures communication with Heaven. Here we have the prototype of a cosmological image that became widespread: that of cosmic pillars that sustain Heaven while simultaneously opening the way to the world of the gods (Eliade, 1957/2018, p. 36).

In other words, according to Eliade (1976/2010), losing the symbol that enables contact with the transcendent means losing the meaning of life. These symbols, such as the sacred pole, were not restricted to places of worship but were also part of ordinary dwellings. The sacred pole, or *axis mundi*, was one of the most archaic means of transforming a dwelling into an image of the cosmos, which is created by the gods from a center. "In other words, cosmic symbolism is revealed in the very structure of the dwelling. The house is an *imago mundi*. Religious man wants to live close to the center of the universe because he thirsts to be in contact with ultimate reality" (Eliade, 1976/2010, p. 13).

From the ancestral worldview, the sacredness of space is a necessary condition for contact with reality, since only the sacred can be considered strictly real:

In mythical geography, sacred space is the real space par excellence, because, as has recently been demonstrated, for the archaic world myth is real because it recounts the manifestations of true reality: the sacred. It is in such a space that one is directly in contact with the sacred—whether it is materialized in certain objects (tchuringas, representations of the divinity, etc.) or manifested in hierocosmic symbols (Pillar of the World, Cosmic Tree, etc.) (Eliade, 1979, p. 39).

According to Eliade (1957/2010), in traditional communities, not only the organization of space but also all human activities acquire meaning only when they become repetitions of archetypal acts performed by the gods and depicted in myths. In this sense, the primary function of myths is to establish the exemplary model for meaningful human activities, such as eating, sexuality, marriage, education, work, and so forth.

At the most archaic levels of culture, living as a human being is itself a religious act, for eating, sexual life, and work have a sacramental value. In other words, to be—or rather, to become—a man means to be religious (Eliade, 1976/2010, p. 13).

In traditional communities, the notion of the sacred distinguishes things that are genuinely meaningful from those that can be disregarded because they lack meaning, or that act as forces of chaos leading to human dissolution. The search for meaning in life was intimately related to establishing a connection with the transcendent through symbolic acts, understood as repetitions of archetypal acts performed by the gods. To remain close to these archetypal images was to live a meaningful life and follow the natural course of development; to distance oneself from them was to become submerged in chaos. Given this centrality of religion in the organization of human life and in the establishment of meaning throughout history, it is to be expected that religion would emerge as a matter of primary importance in psychological research.

Religion in Analytical Psychology

Religious themes occupied a central place in Jung's thought even before he began his work in psychology. The son of a Protestant pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church and the nephew of other pastors and theologians, Jung encountered the problem of the state of religion in the West at an early age, having grown up

surrounded by discussions on the subject (Miranda, 2019). However, the traditional religious aspect of his family appeared to him as a kind of purely external formalism. Recognizing that the importance attributed to religious symbols and complex religious questions was very limited within his father's Christian denomination, Jung decided to distance himself from this milieu (Jung, 1961/2017).

Nevertheless, the religious question remained important to Jung and gradually returned to the center of his attention. One of his earliest works, *On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena* (Jung, 1902/2013), for example, consisted of a psychological analysis of a case of mediumship. However, the central role attributed to religious symbols in analytical psychology became firmly established only after the publication of *Symbols of Transformation* (Jung, 1912/2013), a work in which Jung drew upon various mythological parallels to formulate his concept of libido and his interpretation of the function of symbols in the human psyche.

It is worth noting that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, a movement toward applying the phenomenological approach to the study of religion emerged, beginning with Chantepie de la Saussaye's comparative studies of religion. However, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the work of the Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw, that the phenomenology of religion made the transition from an interpretive/descriptive method toward an approach aimed at understanding religious experience (Torres Neto, 2023). This movement had a profound influence on the work of Jung and other authors, such as Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto (Torres Neto, 2023).

The establishment of the concept of the collective unconscious—the psychic structure responsible for the spontaneous formation of mythological and religious themes (Jung, 1954/2014)—developed from this phenomenological perspective, which focuses on identifying universal aspects of religious experience regardless of the particular differences between traditions (Torres Neto, 2023). This approach subjected Jung to numerous attacks and accusations of mysticism. Nevertheless, he continued to address the religious question from an empirical, psychological, and phenomenological perspective. After decades of clinical practice, Jung observed that the problem faced by all of his patients who had passed the midpoint of life was related in some way to their religious attitude:

Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them

has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook (Jung, 1932/2012, p. 88, para. 509).

It is necessary here to clarify what Jung understood by religious attitude. In analytical psychology, religion is approached as religious experience, taking into account its effects on the human being from a phenomenological and descriptive perspective:

Religion is—as the Latin word *religere* indicates—a careful and conscientious observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly called the 'numinosum,' that is, an existence or dynamic effect that is not caused by an arbitrary act. On the contrary, the dynamic effect seizes and dominates the human subject, who is more its victim than its creator (Jung, 1937/2012, p. 9, para. 6).

Here, emphasis is placed on the individual's immediate experience and on the feelings arising from it as the basis for what Jung calls religion. These ideas reveal the influence of thinkers such as Schleiermacher (1799/1990, p. 33), who described religion not as the product of thought or morality, but as "intuition and feeling of the Infinite." The influence of the phenomenological approach to religious experience is evident throughout the development of analytical psychology.

Thus, in Jung's work, the term religion is distinguished from *confession*, a term referring to an organized system of beliefs within a particular tradition. Confessions are generally formed from the original religious experiences of a founder, which are subsequently transmitted to others (Jung, 1937/2012). It is entirely possible to have a religious experience within a confession, but this is not necessarily the case. "As long as religion is confined to faith and external form, and the religious function is not an experience of the soul itself, nothing essential can happen" (Jung, 1944/2012, p. 24, para. 13).

Jung also recognized that religion, as defined within analytical psychology, was not an optional dimension of human life, but rather a vital function for psychological health, because religious symbols, insofar as they remain psychologically active, enable ego consciousness to reconnect with its instinctual and unconscious foundations, serving as a source of guidance and correction for one-sided conscious attitudes (Jung, 1954/2013). In this sense, he referred to a natural religious function within the unconscious (Jung, 1944/2012).

When these collective symbols are lost, the unconscious attempts to reestablish its relationship with consciousness through the spontaneous production of images. It is the psychologist's role to help the patient understand these spontaneously produced

symbols so that the reconnection between consciousness and the unconscious can become effective (Jung, 1935/2013).

Ultimately, the purpose of the connection between consciousness and the unconscious is to establish an axis linking the ego to the Self, the principal archetype of the collective unconscious and the organizing center of the entire psyche:

The Self is the ordering and unifying center of the total psyche (conscious and unconscious), just as the ego is the center of conscious identity. Or, in other words, the ego is the seat of subjective identity, whereas the Self is the seat of objective identity. The Self therefore constitutes the supreme psychic authority, keeping the ego subject to its dominion. The Self is most simply described as the empirical inner deity and is equivalent to the *imago Dei* (Edinger, 1972/2020, p. 19).

Jung observed a correspondence between the archetype of the Self and an image of God that exists universally within the human psyche, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, when human beings become unconscious of the existence of this archetype, they may simply lose their sense of meaning in life (Edinger, 1972/2020), or they may project this archetype onto an inappropriate object, which then becomes that person's "god," generating a form of "psychological idolatry" (Edinger, 1972/2020). As Saint Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*:

I sinned because, instead of seeking in God the pleasures, greatness, and truths I desired, I sought them in His creatures: in myself and in others. Therefore, I plunged myself into pain, confusion, and error (Augustine, ca. 397/2024, p. 39).

In such cases, the psychologist's task is to help the patient establish an appropriate relationship with the Self through the analysis of symbols produced in the unconscious. Jung called the establishment of this interaction between contents emerging from the unconscious and the conscious dimension of the psyche the *transcendent function* (Jung, 1958/2013). By reestablishing contact with the Self, the ego moves away both from a state of inflation and from excessive dependence on external and internal objects.

The development of an axis connecting consciousness and the Self is the central aim of analytical psychology and the *conditio sine qua non* for the development of the individuation process, understood as a continuous progression toward the expression of psychological wholeness. According to Edinger (1972/2020), the success of psychotherapy depends upon the establishment of a

connection between the ego and the Self, the archetypal image of God.

Establishing this axis connecting the ego and the Self is analogous to erecting an *axis mundi* that enables a connection with the transcendent. This connection gives meaning to the individual's life by linking them to the archetypal foundations of their psyche. Hence the importance of working with these symbols in psychotherapy.

Religious Symbolism and Psychological Development

As stated above, the function of religious symbols is to connect consciousness to its archetypal ground, which, within a traditional worldview, is what gives meaning to life:

From a psychological standpoint, the central aim of all religious practices is to maintain the individual (ego) connected to the deity (Self). All religions are repositories of transpersonal experience and archetypal images. The original purpose of religious ceremonies of all kinds seems to be to provide the individual with the experience of a meaningful relationship with these categories of a transpersonal nature (Edinger, 1972/2020, p. 85).

However, a developmental process of consciousness must take place before this type of connection becomes possible. In other words, before it can relate to the unconscious and the Self, the ego must establish itself as a differentiated psychic structure. "The current operational formula is therefore: pre-adult phase—the separation of ego and Self; adulthood—the reunion of ego and Self (Edinger, 1972/2020, p. 21).

The Jungian analyst Erich Neumann (1968/2022) used the image of the Ouroboros, a serpent biting its own tail, to represent the first stage in the development of consciousness, as this is a stage in which the individual is self-contained. This means that there is not yet a separation between ego and Self, between the infant and the mother, or between the external and internal worlds. At this point, the notion of the ego has not yet been formed.

In the second phase, when a sense of self begins to emerge, the Self is projected onto the parents, particularly the mother, at least during the initial stages: "Thus, the initial stage of the developing ego-Self axis may be identical with the relationship between the parents and the child" (Edinger, 1972/2020, p. 57). It is important to be careful here and to clarify that the parents receive the child's projection of the Self, which exists *a priori* and unconsciously, but they are not the source of this archetype.

Thus, as the individual matures, they are expected to withdraw the projection of the Self from the parents and establish a new relationship with this archetype. Otherwise, they may become an adult dependent on their parents, or on any other object onto which this projection is transferred. The withdrawal of the projection of the Self archetype from the parents is described by Neumann (1968/2022) as a painful and difficult symbolic patricide, which is also represented by the hero's struggle against a dragon or a hermaphroditic sea serpent. Likewise, it should be emphasized that this primary conflict occurs with the transpersonal and archetypal element projected onto the parents, rather than with the personal parents themselves:

Even in cases in which the personal parents play a role—and in practice they always do—their personal participation is relatively small, whereas that of the transpersonal parental imagoes acting through them is decisive and of greater significance (Neumann, 1968/2022, p. 167).

Within this context, the function of religious symbols is precisely to withdraw the projection of the Self from the parents, so that the individual can establish a new way of fulfilling the needs represented by this archetype. For this reason, Jung considered the function of religious symbolism indispensable to the individual's development:

Where this religious symbolism is lacking, or where it falls victim to misunderstanding, things will not go well. In the absence of guidance from religious truths, there will be nothing left that can free human beings from their biological attachment to the family. They will then transmit their uncorrected childish principles to the rest of the world (Jung, 1924/2013, p. 95, para. 159).

In the analytical process, it is the patient's own unconscious that provides the symbols that make this type of psychological expansion possible. Jung also argues that this religious symbolism, which points beyond the merely natural human being, is essential for the establishment of meaning in life:

However important it may be for human beings to earn their livelihood and, insofar as possible, to establish a family, they will nevertheless have achieved nothing if they fail to realize the meaning of their lives... A spiritual goal that points beyond the merely natural human being and earthly existence is an unconditional requirement for the health of the soul (Jung, 1924/2013, p. 95, para. 159).

The following case example, drawn from clinical practice, may illustrate how symbolism produced by the unconscious participates in the conflicts faced by the ego during the therapeutic process and contributes to the psychological separation from the parents, thereby making the continuation of development possible.

Clinical Case Example

The patient is a woman in her mid-thirties, single. She sought psychological treatment after the end of an abusive relationship, reporting that she felt disoriented and without energy. During this relationship, she reported having lost her sense of identity. At that point, her life had been reduced to working at her father's company and returning home to distract herself in some way. The case involved the analysis of more than 350 dreams over a period of slightly more than three years. Some of these dreams were selected and presented in chronological order by way of illustration. Before the first session, the patient had the following dream:

Dream 01: The patient's heart transformed into an emerald because she had loved too much, and now there were people who wanted to steal it.

The precious stone may be regarded as one of the symbols of the Self, or of the image of God (Jung, 1946/2013), which is being stolen by other people. This suggests that the patient tended to project the Self onto other people in her relationships, expecting the relationship to provide a sense of wholeness. When these relationships were lost, her sense of meaning in life disappeared. Thus, her excessive capacity for love may be understood as what attracts the thieves in the dream. Saint Teresa of Ávila refers to this treasure of precious stones as a symbol of the soul itself.

I received what I am about to say as a starting point: let us consider our soul as a castle made entirely of diamond or of very clear crystal... But we rarely think about what treasures may exist within this soul, who dwells within it, or what its great value may be; thus, little importance is given to carefully preserving its beauty (D'Ávila, 1588/2022, pp. 14–15).

What Saint Teresa (D'Ávila, 1588/2022) describes resembles the patient's experience because, by failing to recognize the value within herself, she sought this value in others, becoming dependent and vulnerable to abuse. At that time, she was beginning a new relationship with a dynamic similar to that of the previous one, which may be represented in the dream as the risk of having her Self stolen. From this point onward, therapeutic work focused on reintegrating the contents projected onto this relationship. After

experiencing several episodes of indifference, she decided to end the relationship and had the following dream:

Dream 02: The patient arrives home arm in arm with an unknown man. She feels safe and loved beside him.

Paradoxically, the end of the relationship gave rise to an image of a safe and stable union. The unknown male figure is frequently a symbol of the *animus*, the unconscious masculine aspect of a woman (Jung, 1950/2013). In other words, the end of the relationship may have initiated a renewed encounter with the unconscious, marking the beginning of a process of introspection and self-knowledge.

As we explored her potentialities, the patient became aware of forgotten aspects of her personality, such as personal and professional interests, while also beginning to organize aspects of her daily life more generally. The exploration of these potentialities was expressed in the following dream:

Dream 03: The patient finds several gold jewels on the ground, covered in mud. Later, she finds silver jewels.

Jung observed that shining points within black matter were a common theme in alchemy, representing fragments of consciousness existing within the unconscious that would later be integrated into consciousness (Jung, 1946/2013). They also involved prefigurations of the archetypes and of the Self that would become evident throughout the process.

I consider such parallels to be of great importance, particularly in relation to the existence of a multiple consciousness and its phenomena, inasmuch as the characteristic vision of the alchemists—that of sparks shining within the black substance—becomes, according to Paracelsus, the spectacle of the 'inner firmament' and its stars. He regards the dark psyche as a night sky scattered with stars, whose planets and fixed constellations represent the archetypes in all their luminosity and numinosity (Jung, 1946/2013, para. 392).

Through the analysis of the contents emerging in these dreams, the patient continued to expand her consciousness, taking more active control of her daily life while simultaneously moving closer to the archetypal foundations of the psyche, which may have been prefigured by the jewels in the dream. This contact with the archetypes began to modify elements of her family relationships.

Dream 04: The patient's father is about to die in a nearby bed. However, a voice tells her that everything is fine and that everything

will work out, and that the best thing to do is to enjoy the last moments with him.

One possible interpretation of this dream would be the process of replacing external authority, represented by the biological father, with internal authority, represented by the Self, which often appears in the form of a voice (Jung, 1950/2013). This voice reassures her and confirms that the process is moving in the right direction. Neumann discusses the conflict between the father and the inner voice:

In this conflict, the 'inner voice,' the command of the transpersonal archetypal father, who desires that the world be transformed, clashes with the personal father, who speaks in the name of the ancient law. We know this conflict most clearly from the biblical story of the command given to Abraham by Yahweh: "Go forth from your land and from your kindred, and from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you" (Neumann, 1968/2022, p. 155).

Thus, a new internal authority emerges, enabling the patient to move out of the state of psychological dependence that had placed her in abusive relationships. The emergence of this new authority continues in the following dream.

Dream 05: The patient is performing a ritual to summon a new leader. She is lying down, floating, and red crosses appear in the place. At the end of the ritual, she leaves the room, at which point the former leader and a witch appear. The witch attempts to take the elevator to the place where the ritual took place but is killed. The former leader attempts to punish the patient for this by hitting her as if she were a child, but the patient feels no pain. He is astonished by this, and a magician appears, claiming responsibility for reducing the impact. The two men begin talking while she goes to a ball.

The ritual to replace the leader may represent the shift from external to internal authority, a process that occurs within psychotherapy. The appearance of the cross indicates the religious nature of the transformation, toward an authority that reflects the Self, the archetype of the image of God. The witch and the tyrant may be regarded as symbols of the negative parents identified by Neumann (1968/2022), who attempt to resist change and keep the ego in a childlike state. This is why the man attempts to hit the patient as if she were a child.

Shortly after this dream, the patient found the courage to leave the family business and begin working in her field of training, which generated conflicts with her father. The fear of these conflicts, which had previously paralyzed her, gradually lost its influence. The

diminishing influence of external authority progressively strengthened the image of internal authority, which assumed the archaic characteristics of the archetypal foundations of the psyche. The following dream was transcribed by the patient herself.

Dream 06: "I was in an old library; it seemed to have been built inside a cave. The books were very old, with leather covers, and there was also a tall man in the library. The librarian told this man to go and look at the new books that had arrived. I became curious and went to look as well. A short man with pointed ears was going to pick up the books. In one of the boxes there was a book whose cover was the face of a boar. When I saw the book, I exclaimed in admiration. I kept looking at the little man's ears, wondering whether he might be an elf. In my mind, I was in a Celtic library."

In the dream, the unknown man in the library may be interpreted as a representation of the *animus*, who leads her toward the figure of the old elf, an archetypal image appearing in the form of the guiding spirit, the Wise Old Man (Jung, 1945/2014). Thus, after the organization of practical aspects of the patient's life, such as her routine, habits, and profession, the process began to move toward spiritual themes. One possible interpretation of the role of the Wise Old Man archetype in the dream is that it reveals the relationship between the archetypal contents of the psyche and the collective representations produced by human beings throughout history, combining elements of civilization (the library and books) with instinctual and wild elements (the cave and the boar-skin cover). The patient reported a vague interest in this type of mythological and mystical literature, which seemed to be reawakened by the unconscious. From that point onward, she decided to return to reading about these subjects. After a period of sporadic study, she had the following dream:

Dream 07: The patient is hiding in a house from a possessed adolescent who wants to kill her. She enters a room where there is an empty Nativity scene, without Christ. The person beside her opens the door to look at the Nativity scene, but a sinister voice orders them to close it.

The dark adolescent may represent the egocentric attitude characteristic of this developmental stage, which is focused on the formation of the ego. For this reason, he attempts to prevent the patient from looking at the empty Nativity scene, a symbol of the lack of a relationship with the Self. Entering into a relationship with the Self implies a certain submission of the ego, something that is abhorrent to the adolescent. Based on her own associations with the symbolism contained in the dream, the patient decided to begin a routine of prayer and to read the Bible (2002). Religious symbols moved from an archaic level and became more

contemporary through Christian symbols, indicating a greater awareness of the religious function.

Dream 08: The patient encounters Jesus. He asks her what she had asked for, and she answers: protection. Jesus tells her that she is protected. She extends her hand to touch him but hesitates, and he takes her hand and blesses her. She asks about the other people, but Jesus tells her that she is very generous and that it makes no sense for her to worry about them.

The patient once again had an inner experience, but this time it was represented through a Christian religious image. According to Marie-Louise von Franz (1970/2021), this type of experience was essential for preventing the loss of the meaning of the Christian symbol:

Only if we understand the Christian symbol in a more complete manner will it be able to survive, for if it is not anchored in the depths of the soul, it will be discarded, and there will be a return to atheism and neo-paganism (von Franz, 1970/2021, p. 288).

Following this dream, which deeply affected her, she began to reflect more carefully on her relationship with spiritual life and started watching sermons and religious services online. At the same time, the dream instructed her to focus more on her own process, directing her attention toward her own development. The dream compensates for the sense of guilt the patient carried as she distanced herself from certain relationships in order to focus on herself. Her personal relationship with Christianity, grounded in an inner experience, becomes evident in the following dream:

Dream 09: The pages of the Bible are entering the patient's body and emerging with a different layout.

The dream may represent a personal relationship with the Bible (2002), which gives the text a new configuration related to the patient's own experiences. As in the combination of the library and the cave in Dream 06, there is a merging of collective representations and individual experience. Jung argued that establishing this type of parallel between religious symbols and an individual's experiences was useful, since a merely intellectual understanding of metaphysical ideas is insufficient:

I consider such parallels important insofar as they make it possible to relate certain metaphysical representations, which have lost the natural foundation of their experiences, to a living and universally given psychic event, thereby enabling them to recover their original and living meaning. In this way, the connection between those contents projected and "formulated" as "metaphysical"

intuitions and the ego is reestablished (Jung, 1950/2013, p. 48, para. 65).

Upon having this final dream, the patient experienced a synchronicity, which may be summarized as “the almost simultaneous occurrence in time of two events, one internal and the other external, that appear to have the same meaning” (Hall, 1983/2021, p. 156). Feeling distressed about a particular situation, a verse from the Bible (2002) came to her mind, although she was not even sure whether it actually existed. When she searched for it, she discovered that it did indeed exist and corresponded exactly to her situation. This left a profound impression on the patient. According to James Hall (1983/2021), synchronicities may indicate the need to deepen a relationship revealed through them.

The patient began to think symbolically and to understand the relationship between biblical stories and her own experience. She reported, for example, having cried intensely when she realized the analogy between the story of the Exodus, in which the Israelites flee slavery in Egypt and enter the desert to encounter God, and her own process of leaving the dependent dynamic in which she had lived, embracing a period of solitude, and undergoing a conversion that gave a deeper meaning to her life. In the patient’s own words:

I spent my life diminishing and devaluing myself so that someone could love me in return. I became so lost that I no longer knew who I was. I was suffering because I did not know that the only one who should have been loved in this way was God. I was already loved, and I had not realized it. When I realized this, I cried a lot. (Patient)

The patient’s thinking echoes the words of Saint Augustine (ca. 397/2024), cited above, even though she was unaware of them. Thus, the patient’s developmental process may be interpreted as the withdrawal of the projection of the Self from her parents and from the people with whom she had relationships, allowing this need to be fulfilled through her relationship with the Self. This inner experience opened the possibility of a new understanding of Christian symbols, which emerged spontaneously in her dreams. In addition to her conversion through her pursuit of the sacraments, throughout the therapeutic process the patient explored other potentialities: she began exercising, returned to work in her field of training, resumed her studies, and began to exercise her creative talents through writing and painting. All of these transformations that took place over the years were mediated by the symbolism of her dreams, some of which have been presented above.

According to Edinger (1986/2024), from an empirical psychological perspective, the Bible (2002) could be regarded as a “self-revelation of the soul,” serving to address the problem of loss of meaning, alienation,

and despair arising from lost faith. For those who already possess faith, this approach, which connects religion with inner experiences, represents an interesting complement rather than a contradiction.

However, for those who, consciously or unconsciously, have already slipped from the summit of faith and find themselves in the dark valley, the discovery of the psychological approach may be a lifeline (Edinger, 1986/2024, p. 14).

It may be said that all of these areas of the patient's life acquired a symbolic character, as she began to perceive them as tasks given to her by God. She now felt that she was an active participant in a drama involving divine elements. Jung describes this as the foundation of symbolic life:

This brings peace when people feel that they are living the symbolic life, that they are actors in the divine drama. Only this gives meaning to human life; everything else is trivial and may be dispensed with. A career or having children—all of this is *maya* compared with this one thing: that our life should have meaning. This is the secret of the Catholic Church: to a certain extent, it can live a life of meaning. For example, if a person can attend the sacrifice of the Lord daily and partake of its substance, he or she becomes filled with divinity and repeats the eternal sacrifice of Christ every day. What I am saying is only words, but for the person who actually lives this, it truly means the whole world. It means more than the whole world because it has meaning for that person. This expresses the desire of the soul; it expresses the real facts of our unconscious life (Jung, 1939/2013, p. 293, para. 630–631).

Final Considerations

Religious symbols have occupied a central place throughout human history, serving as instruments for self-knowledge and for understanding the universe. These symbols were embedded in astronomical phenomena, nature, human constructions, human relationships, and behavior as a whole, conferring meaning upon various spheres of life while simultaneously providing a unifying axis connecting these different levels of reality. The work of historians such as Mircea Eliade (1979, 1976/2010, 1957/2018) shows that these symbols are not constituted arbitrarily, but rather display recurring patterns that can be identified throughout the world.

It was Jung who discovered that these symbols are also expressed as patterns within inner life, reflecting structuring elements of the psyche

itself and emerging spontaneously in dreams and other products derived from unconscious activity. This discovery, which may seem obvious, is nevertheless shocking to many people. This is because the symbolic apprehension of the world lies at the foundation of the psyche, functioning implicitly most of the time. To use a metaphor, it is like the eye, which, despite seeing many things, cannot see itself unless it looks into a mirror.

Archetypal symbols are like a mirror that enables human beings to become aware of the foundations of their consciousness. Therefore, without the use of these symbols, it is very difficult to reach truly profound levels of self-knowledge. These archetypal psychological foundations continue to operate even when the individual does not understand their influence. Thus, the individual finds himself or herself caught in recurring patterns of events or behaviors from which he or she cannot seem to escape and which, in some way, feels destined to repeat. However, by learning to listen to the inner voice expressed through symbols, the individual can gain a better understanding of what is involved in the conflict. When a person, particularly an adult, hears an external individual telling them what they should do, there is an almost instinctive tendency to rebel in order to preserve their individuality. The situation changes significantly, however, when the message comes from within, even if it is exactly the same message. Hence the importance of including the analysis of unconscious contents in the therapeutic process.

The case analyzed as an example demonstrates that incorporating the analysis of these symbols produced by the religious function can assist in a process of transformation, even if subtly and over an extended period. This process, however, did not develop linearly and involved many progressions and regressions, as well as repetitions. There were major turning points that had to be patiently cultivated before they could emerge. Only when we look back in retrospect can we clearly perceive the direction of the process and the changes that were taking place in the patient.

It is common for an archetypal symbol emerging in a dream to be understood only gradually, over the course of years. However, the more this contact with symbols increases, the more the individual strengthens their sense of identity, as if it were gradually revealed through their relationship with the unconscious, helping to organize the different areas of life. This establishes a new axis of stability and orientation, no longer supported solely by the external world or by the ego itself, but by a transcendent center between consciousness and the unconscious. Establishing this transcendent axis is the cornerstone that makes genuine self-knowledge and maturation possible, from which all other development can unfold.

Therefore, do not worry, saying, "What are we to eat?" or "What are we to wear?" (. . .) Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:31–33).

Through this type of experience, the individual also comes to understand why humanity has attributed such importance to religious symbols, because they now possess experiences that provide a basis for such an understanding. This enables the individual to move beyond a state of wandering and isolation and to understand what it means to be human, what it means to unite with individuals from all historical periods, while simultaneously understanding their particular vocation. However, it is important for the psychologist to work with the symbols that emerge spontaneously from the patient's unconscious in order to preserve the integrity of the process. This synthesis may represent a possible path toward combating the state of meaninglessness in which modern societies find themselves.

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