Editorial: Apologia Pro Vita Divina

Greg Mogenson

The essays collected in this volume, written by authors inside and outside the pastoral fold, bear witness to the value of dreams for our religious and spiritual life. Though the Judeo-Christian tradition, as far back as Abraham's dream encounter with Yahweh (Gen. 15:1), has valued the dream as a source of religious experience, it has also questioned it. In Deuteronomy, for instance, a rule of law is articulated in order to protect the Israelites from false prophets. By decree of law "a prophet or a dreamer of dreams" was to be identified as false and put to death if he spoke to the people saying, "`Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them'" (Deut. 13 1-5). Though this law seems clear enough, it is easy to appreciate the bind in which it placed the prophetic dreamer. How could he know if his dream experiences were revelations of God's nature, will and purpose, or revelations of the nature, will and purpose of another deity? If he lacked sufficient criticism he might err by embracing a false god, and if he was overly scrupulous he might err by failing to embrace the true--especially if the current revelatory image was discontinuous with any previously held conception of God. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah all grappled with this problem, but far from resolved it (Jer. 14:14, 23:16--32, 27:9, 29:8; Ezekiel 13; Isaiah 28:15, 29:10, 30:9).

In the centuries that have elapsed since the biblical patriarchs dreamed their dreams and struggled over the issue of their religious value, much has happened. On the one hand, the descendant's of Abraham have elaborated a rich and diverse civilization, as promised in his dream, and on the other hand, the dream itself has been legitimated in this century by psychology and psychoanalysis. Where

our forebears were as uncertain about the nature of God as they were about the value of dreams, we today are perhaps too certain about both. Our tradition tells us all about God and our psychologists tell us all about dreams. The corollary is also true. Today, one is as likely to learn about God from his psychotherapist as he is to learn about the psyche from his pastor or priest. As Jung (1958) put it (and we can hear in this quotation a resonance with the antique worry over true and false dreams), "It is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions emanate from God or from the unconscious..."(p. 468).

Perhaps this uncertainty about the religious value of dreams weighs in their favour even as doubt has been called the growing edge of faith. After all, why bother with dreams at all if they lacked the power to shake up our convictions?

But *do* dreams shake us to the quick any longer? Ironically, it is our contemporary belief in dreams that most severely delimits their re-visioning power. After a century of psychoanalysis dream interpretation has tamed the dream to the point that the analyst's couch has become an all too comfortable pew. So comfortable have we become in our modern cult of dreams that it seems naive to wrestle with that old law of Deuteronomy concerning true and false dreams. But if we are to find a dream's angelic value this is exactly what we must do. Does my dream blaspheme what is actually sacred or, like Christ tearing apart the temple, does it challenge my debased spiritual values?
Is my dream leading me to other (false) gods, or by appearing it the shape of another deity is my God initiating me into other archetypal aspects of His/Her nature?[1] To these questions there are no easy answers. Dreams, as Jung noted, mislead us as much as they lend guidance.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake (1953) makes a succinct critique of organized religion. After the "ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses," he

writes,

> system was formed, which some took advantage of, & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood; Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales (p. 127).

This passage applies as well to the dream. Just as the dreams and visions of the old biblical patriarchs have been turned into forms of worship, the dreams and visions of our analytic forebears have been turned into psychoanalysis. Whether the dreamer is an analysand in psychoanalysis or a parishioner in pastoral counseling he may find that his dreams are simply reduced, again and again, to forms of worship that are a part of the tradition in which he dreams. How easy it is to forget that the dream, regardless of the fact that it is dreamed in a tradition, addresses the dreamer personally in a manner that may well bring him into odds with his tradition even as it did for the ancient dreamers and poets whom our priesthoods now lionize.

Though Freud (1966, p. 19) said that "One learns psychoanalysis on oneself," it may actually be harder to learn about *oneself* today precisely because of what he and others after him have had to say about that process. This is not merely a problem of psychology, but of religion as well, for as Clement of Alexandria said, "...the greatest of all lessons [is] to know oneself, for if one knows oneself, he will know God." But in classical psychoanalysis one does not come to know oneself, and thereby God, but rather, the Oedipus-complex, and thereby the infantile illusions about one's own father.

Likewise, though Abraham has demonstrated by example that one can encounter God in one's own depths, the content of his encounter, reified into a form of worship, may actually delimit our

relationship to our own depths. If we render our imagery answerable to his, we may spoil the new wine by placing it into the old wine's skins.

Perhaps what our dreams are doing is attempting to turn the forms of worship into which our souls have become imprisoned back into the poetic tales of a vitally creative, religious imagination. Though we might like to leave matters of faith and religion for Sunday worship, or matters of our psychic life for our therapy sessions (preferring, as it were, to see through a glass darkly than face to face), perhaps the dreams that come each night are trying to de-institutionalize and individualize our psychological and religious life. If we open ourselves to this possibility no longer will it seem naive to struggle, as did Jeremiah and the other patriarchs, with the problem of true and false dreams. Once more we will become frightened by our dreams, frightened and inspired. But if we fail to wrestle with the angel of heresy, if we fail, that is, to grapple with the uniqueness of our own imagery, we may miss a vital encounter with the living God.

In *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung (1956) tells a story about the pious priest Abbe Oegger.

> This priest was something of a dreamer, and much given to speculative musings, particularly in regard to the fate of Judas: whether he was really condemned to everlasting punishment, as the teaching of the Church declares, or whether God pardoned him after all. Oegger took up the very understandable attitude that God, in his supreme wisdom, had chosen Judas as an instrument for the completion of Christ's work of redemption. This necessary instrument, without whose help humanity would never have had a share in salvation, could not possibly be damned by the all-good God. In order to put an end to his doubts, Oegger betook himself one night to the church and implored God to give him a sign that Judas was saved. Thereupon he felt a heavenly touch on his shoulder. The next day he went to the archbishop and told him that he was resolved to go out into the world to preach the gospel of God's unending mercy (pp. 30-31).

Commenting on the personal stake that Oegger had in the question of Judas' forgiveness, Jung tells

us that this experience of divine reassurance was followed not long afterward by Oegger leaving the Catholic Church and becoming a Swedenborgian. Psychologically, Oegger had identified with Judas. Put another way, Judas personified a current in Oegger's own psychology, a current that would cause him to betray one understanding of God and to replace it with another. Like a Jeremiah struggling with the issue of true and false dreams, Oegger struggled with the issue of whether the Judas in him would be forgiven for exploring the truth of what his traditional theological commitment viewed as false. As if testing out for himself Clement of Alexandria's maxim that to know oneself is to know God, Oegger asked forgiveness from the God he knew in order that he might leave Him to explore the part of himself he did not know, and thereby come to another, more personal, understanding of God.

Perhaps, our dreams touch us upon our shoulders with a heavenly touch. Perhaps, they both invite and forgive the heresy of breaking from the fold and travelling that least of travelled roads, the road of our own selves, that we might come to know ourselves more completely and thereby God more too.

References

Blake, W. (1953). *Selected poetry and prose of Blake*. N. Frye, ed. New York: Random House.

Freud, S. (1966). *Introductory lecture on psychoanalysis*. J. Strachey, trans. New York: Norton.

Jung, C.G. (1956). *Symbols of transformation* in H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler, eds., *The collected works of C.G. Jung* (vol. 5). Princeton: Princeton University Press/Bollingen Series XX.

Jung, C.G. (1958). *Answer to Job* in *The collected works of C.G. Jung* (vol. 11, pp. 357-470).

1. In a number of works David L. Miller has drawn attention to to the pagan background that still animates the theological discourse of Jewish and Christian monotheism. For a lucid discussion of this theme the reader is referred to his *The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1981) and his *Christs: Meditations on Archetypal Images in Christian Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).