

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON  
THE GNOSTIC JUNG AND THE SEVEN SERMONS TO THE DEAD

RUNNING HEAD: Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I summarise then reflect on a book by Stephan Hoeller entitled The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead. Hoeller's book is a Gnostic interpretation of Jung's sermon-poem, Seven Sermons to the Dead, found at the end of his autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections. In my opinion the author does a remarkable job in elucidating the meaning of the enigmatic symbols found in the tract and the significance of Jung's message. His well reasoned contention is that Jung's approach to psychology is based on the truths of Gnosticism and is, in fact, a Gnostic psychology and a path of knowledge of the heart. Although I appreciate Hoeller's presentation, I argue that Jung's mature approach to psychology is based on alchemy even more than Gnosticism. In fact perhaps his psychology is ultimately a synthesis of seeds strewn by both alchemy and Gnosticism.

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON THE Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead. by Dr. Stephan A. Hoeller. A Quest Book published by the Theosophical Publishing House.

## SUMMARY

### Introduction

For lovers of Jung, and for those who have puzzled over the highly paradoxical and mysterious treatise, VII Sermones Ad Mortuos [Seven Sermons to the Dead], found at the end of his autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, I highly recommend The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead. Stephan Hoeller, the author, manages to penetrate to the depths of Jung's psychology in an unusually brilliant and knowledgeable manner. He gives us a picture of a psychology that is, in truth, an all encompassing path of knowledge.

The author contends that Jung's scientific work is based on visionary revelations that he had had between the years 1912-1917 during his nekylia or descent into the underworld, and during which time he wrote and painted his inner fantasies in his famous Red Book. One part of this book that Jung had privately published and distributed to a few selected people is the Seven Sermons to the Dead. Jung wrote this tract, in the manner of the ancient Gnostics, under the pseudonym of Basilides [AD 125-140], a Gnostic heretic from Alexandria, clearly linking him to this tradition. He later said that he regretted having distributed the pamphlet and that it was youthful folly to have done so. Yet the sermon-poem itself is of great interest and Dr. Hoeller elucidates its depth of meaning in his

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

discussion of the Gnostic symbolism found in each of the seven sermons. Coincidentally, the author describes the Gnostic path for the modern person; the road of conscious individuation that requires one, albeit responsibly, to go contrary to the world and to its notions of what is both reasonable and even probable. Hoeller contends that it is no exaggeration to state that the impetus behind the events and periods that significantly contribute to the differentiation of the individuating psyche is based on freedom and the law of synchronicity and not statistical probability.

What then does it mean to be a Gnostic? The following two lines of the sermon give us a clue, while indicating the inner meaning and approach to be taken towards Jung's Gnostic psychology:

To name is not to know  
To know, one must experience

The idea that knowledge is primarily gained through experience and reflection on experience, along with spiritual aspiration, is similar to the central message found in India's great scripture The *Bhagavad Gita*. Jung was a Gnostic, that is to say a man of knowledge, and he has graced the world with a psychology and a mystical path that rings true because it is genuinely based on phenomenological experience, Jung's own and then others. The goal of all Gnosticism, including Jung's psychology, is fullness of being and not moral perfection, a point that Jung repeated on endless occasions. Undoubtedly he was obliged to do so in order to

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

get his position across, as it is so much at odds with conscious Western tradition and practice.

The First Sermon:  
The Empty Fullness

Jung addresses the sermon-poem to the dead. In Gnostic language, the dead refers to the non-Gnostic, all of us who are spiritually dead and who identify with the *hylic* [material and vital worlds] to the exclusion of the *psychic* [religious] and *pneumatic* [spiritual] natures.

Basilides begins by describing the Gnostic *Pleroma*, which is both emptiness and fullness, differentiated and undifferentiated, containing all the opposites in a state of equilibrium. In fact the Pleroma has no qualities, and these are created by our thinking. Not thinking but being is differentiation, and therefore the needful is to strive after one's true nature, not discrimination and differentiation as they are known by the mind. The natural tendency of the incarnated soul is to differentiate itself from the *Pleroma* and to learn discrimination and discernment. Differentiation is the essence of the created world including man. Thus the *Principium Individuationes*, the Principle of Individuation, meaning differentiation of being, is a fundamental motive-force in Jung's system of psychology. The danger confronting the human being is the seductive pull back into the abyss of the Pleroma in that it is nothingness and dissolution, while giving up the light of consciousness and the urge towards individuation.

The Second Sermon:  
Helios-Image of God and the Devil

God, says Philemon, in the second sermon is the created world in as much as He is differentiated from the Pleorma. He is, as such, quality of the Pleorma. We are then presented with the differentiation of the two great polar opposites, Helios, that is to say God the Sun, the summum bonum (supreme good) representing, fullness, generativity and Eros or relatedness, and the Devil, the inifinum malum (endless evil) representing emptiness, destruction, dissolution and Thanatos or death. In the created world, these two stand together as active opposites, each with discernible effect. There is yet another God, differentiated from the Pleroma, yet its closest approximation. He is difficult to know as man does not perceive his power and he seems less effective than either Helios or the devil. His name is Abraxas, and he represents the power of reconciliation of all existential force and activity, transcending both the God Helios and the Devil.

The Third Sermon:  
 Part 1-Abraxas: The Heavenly Chanticleer

Abraxas is the supreme power of being in whom light and darkness are each united and transcended. It contains all the opposites of creation in a state of

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

unconscious complementarity. Life is generated and regenerated by the power of Abraxas, which is impersonal, amoral, non-discriminating and merciless. It is both the instinctual depths of the erect phallus of Priapos, and the archetypal heights of the spirit. Abraxas is the closest approximation to the active manifestation of the Pleroma being force, duration and change. As universal, undifferentiated psychic energy Abraxas generates both truth and falsehood, good and evil. It is the life of creation and both deceitful reality and powerful in the world of unreality. Above all, counsels Philemon, this God is terrible, demanding fear and admiration.

#### Part II-Jung's unknown God

Jung's unknown God, Abraxas, appeals to three principles of Jungian psychology: [1] the concept of libido: [2] the union of opposites that require differentiation through the individuation process and: [3] the natural urge towards individuation that demands gradually assimilating aspects of the unconscious Abraxas to consciousness. Life is generated and regenerated by the power of Abraxas, which is impersonal, amoral, non-discriminating and merciless. He is both the instinctual depths of the erect phallus of Priapos, and the archetypal heights of the spirit.

At the beginning of a more consciously inclined life, traditional moral law and a dogmatic spiritual discipline are helpful to accomplish a specific goal, namely the strengthening of the power of the will against Abraxas, the naturalistic psyche.

## Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

Once that specific goal is met, normal dogmatic morality must be transcended to allow for a higher ethic. In the process of individuation, the psyche is often forced into situations where there is a real “conflict of duty” and an ethical dilemma.

When faced with such “conflicts of duty,” the individual must appeal to the transcendent function, a higher principle, which contains a wider view than either of the two opposites in conflict. Not to do so, means falling over into one or the other side of the conflicting opposites which, in Jung’s terms, is the cause of neuroses. To be influenced by the transcendent function, on the other hand, opens one to a deeper, more contemplative life and the assimilation of aspects of the unconscious, the terrible Abraxas, into consciousness and life.

### The Fourth Sermon: The Burning Bush and the Tree of Life

The further we go along, the more we are impressed with the depth and complexity of Jung’s thought, as he attempts to give voice to his experience of the mystery of existence. In the Fourth Sermon, which Hoeller sees as being one of the most significant, we are again confronted with the paradoxical and mysterious nature of the psyche. There is, in addition to Helios, that is to say God the Sun as the highest good and its opposite the Devil, a great many goods and evils, a multiplicity of gods and devils, including two god-devils, the “Burning one,” or Eros, and the “Growing one,” or The Tree of Life and Logos. As

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

god-devils, Eros and Logos are not only opposites but they each contain within themselves oppositional powers. It is in the mutual co-existence and interpenetration of these two great powers of being that the secret of wholeness must be discovered.

The “Growing one” represents the spirit of civilisation, the Logos of the zeitgeist. It continually creates institutions, regulations, codes, laws and forms in order for life to build and expand on stable and secure ground. In Western Christianity, there is tradition, dogma and doctrine that can aid one’s religious growth, but also stultify, limit and encourage conformity. In addition to essential cultural expressions and the development of civilization, and the regularity of cyclic patterns, there is the shadow of sclerotic conservatism, triviality and repression.

The “Burning one” or Eros, on the other hand, seeks life in creativity, change, the lure of adventure, challenge and battle and, according to the witness of history, conflict and violence. It rebels against the restrictions of civilization as well as any ascetic life negating quest for high-culture, knowledge and task specialization. Eros also represents the horizontal impetus towards knowledge of and relationship with others. . Eros is also the horizontal impetus towards knowledge of and relationship with others. The “Burning One” thus represents the individual creative spirit and the impetus for individual truth, but also the

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

shadowy wildness below the veneer of civilization and culture, both the joy and suffering of life.

The Fifth Sermon:  
The Two Communities:  
Mother City and Father Fortress

Although today many people are quick to criticize Jung on his appreciation of women and the feminine principle, the fifth sermon points to a paradoxical dark mystery behind the intuitive concepts he refers to as Eros and Logos. Reversing most contemporary understanding, yet following ancient myth, Jung understands the feminine to be Mater Coelestis, the Heavenly Mother, who comes as a dove and the masculine to be Phallos, manifesting as a serpent, the Earthly Father. Thus the dove is ostensibly feminine and represents the spiritual power that receives and most importantly comprehends, while the serpent ostensibly represents the giving and generating male principle of procreation, which must receive in order to give.

Thus, in addition to Logos, the masculine principle possesses all the characteristics of Eros and the feminine principle, in addition to Eros, contains all the characteristics of Logos. Logos or meaning governs the spiritual in men and the sexual and instinctual connectedness in women, while Eros or relatedness governs the spiritual in women and the sexual and instinctual in men. Each gender is blessed with one Logos and one Eros principle but in an opposite

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

manner. This is the basis for the mutual attraction and unconscious projections between men and women.

The conscious male consequently identifies with the mind, law and order, and is directly connected to the feminine *Mater Coelestis*, the Goddess *Logos*. Since his spirituality, according to the sermon, "moves in the direction of the greater and is heavenly," there is a tendency in a man's thinking, therefore, towards abstraction, spirit and the realm of ideas. The principle of *Phallos* and the god *Eros*, meanwhile, tends to act upon the masculine nature from the unconscious, a reflection of the fact that a man's sexuality [and instinctuality], says the sermon, "moves in the direction of the smaller and is earthly." Being in touch with his sexuality and instinctual nature, therefore, keeps a man related and connected to earthly reality.

In contrast to the male psyche, where the Goddess *Logos* rules his conscious life, the great carrier of meaning for the feminine psyche is the god *Eros*. This allows women to be more conscious in relationship and relatedness. Her sexuality [and instinctual relatedness], accordingly, "moves in the direction of the greater and is heavenly." Thus a woman is more likely to find meaning in sexuality and instinctual relatedness than a man, where these dynamics of life lay in the unconscious and are blind.

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

For women, where Eros rules her conscious life, the Goddess Logos, on the other hand, acts from the unconscious. This allows the feminine psyche to function in the world, but without her perceiving meaning there as a man does. Despite the fact that woman's Logos functions unconsciously, she often does the right thing through woman's intuition. Moreover, In contrast to men, a woman's spirituality "moves in the direction of the smaller and is earthly." This means that a woman's thinking tends to be practical and down to earth, even when it turns to philosophy and psychology or yoga, or any other discipline requiring mental competence.

It becomes evident from this discussion that the dynamics of the psychic energy lying in the male psyche differ from those which lay in the female psyche. The requirements of individuation, which aim at wholeness, are therefore, typically, quite different for men and for women, although the principium individuationis or principle of individuation is identical. The goal of individuation is androgyny and not a monotonous unisex, although, in either case, there is a need to come to terms with both spirituality and sexuality. Spirituality and sexuality [and the instinctual nature] are manifestations of the Gods and exist objectively in their own right. Thus, the individuating psyche must learn to detach itself from these daemons, yet not repress them, as the psyche is subject to their laws.

Men and women must become conscious of both the God Eros and the Goddess Logos that lay in their respective unconscious, or else remain victimized by them.

## Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

In psychological terms, there is a need, in other words, for men to become conscious of, first their personal shadow, and then their anima, the feminine mediatrix and bridge to the deeper unconscious in men. There is, likewise, a need for women to become conscious of their personal shadow and then the animus, the masculine beacon and bridge to the collective unconscious in women. In the measure that this is not done, one is possessed by unconscious complexes.

Humankind requires both community as well as solitude, each ideally in harmony with both Logos and Eros. Community gives "warmth and depth", while solitude "gives light and height." From a psychological perspective, community serves the purpose of generating human warmth and depth through relationships and work in the community, while solitude engenders the light of consciousness and spiritual elevation. Jung reverses the normal view of life as he states that community requires abstinence, while solitude, through such activities as active imagination and the direct engagement of the multiple psyche, requires the "squandering of abundance." In addition to the proper attitude towards both solitude and community, the consciously individuating psyche needs to find a judicious balance between the two. Too much or too little of either is evil, which is to say psychologically unhealthy, while the just balance purifies. Jung's insights expressed here on the nature of intrapsychic dynamics and both the

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

interplay between men and women and community and solitude are invaluable to the contemporary seeker for community in a New World.

Always cognitive of the opposites at all levels of being, according to the meaning Jung attributes to the serpent, it is outwardly masculine and phallic, but inwardly feminine and enkindles or is receptive to desire. In a similar way, the dove, which is outwardly feminine, is inwardly masculine and represents conscious thought and messages from the spirit and transcendence. The serpent and the dove, therefore, each make up half the human psyche of which one must become conscious for the sake of Gnosis [Knowledge]. Although it is normally accepted that messages of transcendence and the spirit can be helpful to leading a meaningful spiritual life, it is not so well understood that acceptance of one's instinctual force and desire nature is also a sine qua non for coming in touch with one's wholeness.

Following the way of the serpent does not mean to do so blindly or unconsciously and without discipline, which would only lead to further unconsciousness. In the language of Indian psychology it would involve becoming further enmeshed in the kleshas of existence. But it does mean that there is a need to consciously follow the instinctual forces of desire, even, to allow oneself to be lead by them. This inevitably involves conflict and the need to experience and hold in consciousness a tension of opposites, even at times apparent chaos, in order to

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

gain consciousness of Eros or relatedness. Like Goethe's Mephistopheles, the serpent shows us the way in a manner one would never chose by one's own wit. In Gnosticism, the serpent is both wild beast and holy counselor, the symbol of supernal wisdom. Not repression, but loving regard for one's nature, consciousness of one's desires and creative imagination connects one to the path of Knowledge.

The Seventh Sermon:  
Homeward Bound Among the Stars

There is a need not to mistake change, which is a movement of nature *per se*, with transformation, which requires the opus contra naturam, the transformational work against nature of the alchemists. In the alchemical view, individuals are the unique link between the microcosm, which includes their personal experiences and the world inside themselves, and the macrocosm, the world of transcendental being and the world outside themselves. One is confronted here with two aspects of the mystery of Existence that meet in the human psyche and,

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

consequently, relate directly to what Jung refers to as synchronicity or the meaningful coincidence of outer and inner events. Jung understands synchronicity to involve observable conscious experiences of general acausal orderedness, which implies that the manifestation involves the unfolding of a superior divine Will, the divine *Shakti* as manifestation of the *Purusha*. At times, one can experience this reality through conscious archetypal experiences and synchronicity, as light penetrates the darkness of the Shadow existence.

According to *Basildes*, Individuals have the task of following their own inner star, which is their God and *Pleroma* and the goal of individuation. The implication of this statement is that God or the God-Image is an existential reality that can be experienced in one's psyche. Indeed, individuals need to attend to increasing the light of this star, or God-Image, which is to say become more conscious of the God-Image in their own soul through *Tapas*, or the application of will. As Jung argues in *Answer to Job* and elsewhere, not only does man need God but God also needs man in order to fulfill His purpose and to effect His transformation. Engaging the power of imagination through dynamic meditation approaches such as Jung's methods of Active Imagination can allow one to become more aware of the indwelling Godhead and Its realization in life.

Humans can be turned away from their own God and conscious engagement in the individuation process by the "fiery spectacle of *Abraxas*," which is to say by

Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

the naturalistic psyche of worldliness, gross materialism, sensuality and even false optimism and idealism, among other things. The great danger to spiritually inclined people, however, is that they can too easily sacrifice Abraxas or life to the star, which is to say spiritual ambition. Humankind is placed between life and spiritual reality and one should not identify with either. *The principium Individuationes* always insists on the continual refinement of individual consciousness and not dissolution of being in the Pleroma or non-differentiation of being swallowed up in Abraxas. Life in the material world, in Jung's way of thinking, is indispensable to spirit, for spiritual truths are irrelevant, he believes, if they cannot be incarnated in life. Consciousness is not enough; individuation means consciousness-life.

### Epilogue

True gnosis is knowledge of the heart and not that of the head or ego. This is the real goal of individuation and Jung's Gnostic psychology. A Supreme example of this gnosis is Jung himself, about whom the author comments: "there is a mysterious, indefinable greatness." He further states: "the ineffable greatness of the Pleroma, the fullness of being may be seen clearly present in souls such as Jung's who to a considerable measure restored that fullness within themselves." Hoeller's view parallels that of Edward Edinger who, in his recent book, The Creation of Consciousness, goes so far as to suggest that Jung may be the most conscious person to have ever lived.

## Reflections

The great merit of this book is that the author unequivocally and courageously places Jung's psychology on a genuine spiritual Gnostic foundation. With this perspective one can only view with circumspection those who claim to have gone beyond Jung, however brilliant they may be. Is it possible that they have not really understood the profound mystery behind Jung's psychology and, in their frenzy to dethrone the king, are simply debating a modern version of how many angels dance on a pin? Parenthetically, I will note here that I am fully sympathetic to the view held by both Hoeller and Edinger on Jung's spiritual pre-eminence, especially in the West. He was, in my opinion, one of the most conscious individuals to have ever lived. To assert, along with Edinger, that he was the most conscious, however, would be to ignore the reality of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and their realizations.

At the very least, Hoeller's attitude should remind us of the great debt we owe to Jung, to whom we can now turn in a more humble spirit. The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead rates in my mind with the very best of the books on Jung and his psychology. Not only does the author himself write with a highly developed intuitive intellect, but gratitude and warmth of feeling to the living Jung breathe through every line.

## Jung and Seven Sermons to the Dead

There is still, in my opinion, a shortcoming to this fine book. Not enough attention or even acknowledgement is paid to the fact that Jung eventually left Gnosticism behind and spent most of his energy studying alchemy. Indeed, he came to believe that it was in alchemy, even more than Gnosticism, where the contemporary psyche can find the key to the deeper realms of inner transformation. Here it is worthwhile noting that if Gnosticism has a certain affinity with Hindu scriptures like *The Bhagavad Gita*, then alchemy is akin to *Tantra*.

Briefly stated, the reason that Jung became increasingly involved with alchemy is that, here, there is complete acceptance of the earthly feminine and concretization of the spirit, which one does not find in Gnosticism. Not only is there a Heavenly Mother who gives birth to the male *Logos*, but there is also a *Chthonic* Mother, who gives birth to the *filius philisophorum* or son of the philosophers, that is to say the incarnation of Divine Will. Perhaps, in the final analysis, it is in the synthesis of Gnosticism and alchemy where one can find the true seeds of Jung's mature psychology and not in either discipline alone.