

Why Can't We Be Wrong?

Archetypes, the Unconscious, Formation of the "Self," and the Adventist Church A Jungian Perspective

by Siroj Sorajjakool

One day, a student came to my office and said, "You can't be wrong and be an Adventist. If you are an Adventist, you've got to be right. That's the way it is supposed to be."

Why can't we be wrong? Perhaps our theology suggests that it is wrong to be wrong and so we have the urge to right all the wrongs. Perhaps we have to be right to belong. Perhaps we do not have the right to belong.

I grew up with a dad who was an evangelist. Although I learned many wonderful things from him about Christianity, I also inherited a certain categorical thinking that came with evangelism. "If we ain't right, we ain't nothing. If we do not have the truth we are nobody." Growing up hearing these messages, I started thinking, I am valuable because you are wrong. And you have to be wrong so that I can be valuable.

When I started taking care of my little boy, I thought that I would be the best father. I was wrong. But my son would come around giving me a hug and say, "It is okay dad." Then I started to realize that I could be wrong and be valuable at the very same time.

My hunch is that we have attached our value as a church to being the best, to being right. We can't be wrong because that is how we value ourselves. We are valuable because we are right. And we do not hear God's voice when God says, "You may be wrong, but I still love you."

I remember growing as an Adventist in Thailand, where the majority of the population was Buddhist. There were less than eight thousand Adventists at the time, while there were over 50 million Buddhists.¹ I represented the smallest minority group of the population. As a minority, my identity was being questioned. I maintained my identity through compensation. I was a part of a group that took the narrow path. I had something that the majority of the people did not have. I was right and they were wrong. I wonder if we as a church decide our value based on being right because our identity is being questioned. I do not really know the answer to this question, but if it is true that we seek self-affirmation through being right, we are faced with two complications. First, obsession with being right removes us further from truth. Second, it reinforces self-doubt.

Alienation from Truth Itself

The problem with such an obsession is in wanting to be right we move into the realm of cognition. Jung points out in his little book, *The Undiscovered Self*, that a strictly cognitive self will ultimately face self-alienation. "When any natural human function gets lost, i.e., is denied conscious and intentional expression, a general disturbance results. Hence, it is quite natural that with the triumph of the Goddess of reason a general neuroticizing of modern man should set in."² Again in *The Problem of the Attitude-Type* Jung writes, "the will

that is grounded in reason is valid only up to a point. The further we go in the direction selected by reason, the surer we may be that we are excluding the irrational possibilities of life which have just as much right to be lived."³ We hear similar concerns expressed by Raimondo Pannikar: "The holistic attitude has been lost because the person has been reduced to reason, reason to intellect, and intellect to the ability to classify and to formulate laws about how things work." Hence "We are no longer able to play because we are too occupied by the analysis of the various parts into which we have dissected reality."⁴ For Jung, pure cognition is not able to grasp the totality of the self. This is mainly because logic cannot maintain tension and life cannot be reduced to a logical conclusion. Life requires the ability to remain in chaos.

How does an obsession with being right alienate us from truth? Jung believes that the level of obsession corresponds to the level of shadows. The stronger the shadow, the stronger the obsession. Obsession also suggests one other factor: Conscious denial of shadows results in its suppression in the unconscious. Because I can't be wrong, I have to try diligently to be right and in the process I suppress all self-doubt in the unconscious mind. The problem is, what gets suppressed will be projected. The unconscious self does not remain silent. It will be projected. Projection interferes with our perception of reality. The stronger the projection, the stronger the misrepresentation. The stronger the projection, the more we become unable to see things as they are. This is so because through projection the self becomes undifferentiated. The "others" form a part of the self. Objectivity is lost. There is no real "other." There is only the "self-other." There is only the other as perceived by this self with all its complexes and we are left to deal with our projection.

Identity and Self-doubt

In addition, obsession with being right is a symptom of self-doubt. An obsessive-compulsive person who keeps washing her hands experiences an overwhelming sense of uncleanness. A controlling personality seeks controls as a way of calming the inner chaos. A self-righteous and judgmental person judges others as a way of externalizing personal shadows. The level of defenses parallels the strength of one's identity, one's ego.⁵ This symptom of "I can't be wrong" seems to suggest a weak sense of identity. I am not suggesting that we have to be

wrong to be healthy. I am suggesting that if we are obsessed with being right, there is something wrong. Obsession with being right is an attempt of the unconscious at self-assertion. Self-assertion is a compensatory process that grows out of a sense of self-doubt. As someone once said, "When in doubt, shout."

In *Stages of Life*, Jung argues that adolescents caught in self-doubt often find achievement as a way out of confusion. Achievement becomes that criterion whereby they measure themselves, whereby they validate their identity. But by such an attempt, argues Jung, "The serious problems in life . . . are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so it is a sure sign that something has been lost."⁶ He further explains:

And so it is with the ideals, convictions, guiding ideas and attitudes which in the period of youth lead us out into life, for which we struggle, suffer, and win victories: they grow together with our own being, we apparently change into them, we seek to perpetuate them indefinitely and as a matter of course, just as the young person asserts his ego in spite of the world and often in spite of himself.⁷

In finding ourselves through achievement, we are indeed losing our true sense of self. We achieve "at the cost of a diminution of our personality."⁸

Maturation and Identity

How then can one move toward maturity according to Jung? One needs to turn toward one's inner psychic reality. In turning toward one's inner psychic reality the primary archetype one needs to confront is one's shadow.⁹ Maturity is the ability to embrace oneself. Maturity suggests self-awareness. This involves awareness of one's strength and weaknesses. Maturity is the gift of freedom, the freedom from having to be apologetic or to justify the persons that we are. For Jung, the willingness to embrace our wrong moves us toward health and wholeness.

The journey toward maturity is inward. It involves listening to God's voice through symbolism. In looking at the psychic reality of the collective unconscious of Adventism, I wish to submit that the beast that we often discuss in our evangelistic meetings is archetypal.¹⁰ It is the voice of the unconscious speaking to us through symbols as a result of the religious function of the psyche.¹¹ It emerges from the

unconscious mind making us aware of our shadows so we can learn to withdraw our projection. It plays a special role in calling us toward wholeness. The beast that symbolizes the possibility for untruth is calling us to look into ourselves, to recognize that the possibility for untruth remains within each of us.

The symbolism of the beast is God's voice that calls us to look inward and locate the beast within ourselves. It is God's way of saying that we have the potential within us to persecute, to set ourselves as judges over others, to change God's law by thinking that interpretation is fact. It is God's way of saying that we may be wrong but that does not make us any less valuable. Due to our inability to embrace this beast and recognize that we can be wrong, we project this beast onto others.¹² Perhaps it is easier to deal with the beast that has been externalized, projected. But, for Jung, this is not the path toward maturity. When we can embrace this possibility within us, we no longer need to suppress. Without suppression there is no projection. Without suppression we can see more clearly and be closer to truth itself.

Identity Formation: Taming the Beast

How do we move toward identity formation without sacrificing our personality, our sense of self? Edinger's understanding of archetypes as described by Ann and Barry Ulanov offers an insight into this process.

Edward F. Edinger, a Jungian theorist and practitioner, addresses his attention to the subjective experience of religious symbols. . . . Through attention to the psychological equivalents of religious themes, we come to understand certain objective and typical psychic themes as they are represented by religious symbols. For Edinger, the figure of Jesus Christ symbolizes the archetype of the individuating ego; that is, he is a model for an ideal ego that separates itself from the larger, unconscious "objective psyche," and, once firm in its own ego identity, finds a way back into relationship with this larger self. The incarnation, for example, is achieved by an emptying process, the kenosis of Phil. ch. 2. . . . It is this emptied ego state, Edinger says, that is praised by Christ in

the Beatitudes. Only the emptied ego is blessed because it alone can be filled. Only by seeing its proper but limited place in the psychic universe can it be connected to the riches of the deeper psyche.¹³

Jung's interpretation of the symbol of Christ offers us great insight into the process of identity formation. We are often seduced by the idea that forming identity involves being the best, being right, making no mistakes. However, for Christ, identity is formed through emptying. Identity is formed when we are able to look into ourselves and be present in the midst of our weaknesses, failures, and infirmities. This, to me, is the process of taming the beast. We tame the beast by becoming aware of its presence in our lives. Awareness, for Jung, takes away the power of the beast to assert its influence on our lives.¹⁴ And the symbolism we need in order to remain in the presence of the beast, of our infirmities, of our possibilities for untruth, is the cross. Perhaps this beast, which is archetypal, is God's way of calling us back to the cross. The more ferocious the beast, the more grace we need.

Over the past hundred years or more the Adventist Church has grown in various ways. The Adventist Church has contributed much to the society in research, theology, medicine, humanitarian outreach, and education. A couple of years ago, I worked for a small college in Thailand. We provided education for a few hundred students who otherwise would not have had an opportunity to receive college education. Many of these students were children of poor farmers or tribal villagers. They moved from remote villages to becoming professionals through Adventist educational systems.

We have come a long way in defining our place in the ministry of Jesus Christ. There is a wonderful self emerging from the historical movement of the Adventist Church. Through our involvements we spell out our self-definition. I have a hunch that perhaps we do not see who we really are because we get caught up in wanting to be right. Perhaps what we need is to move into the chaos of uncertainty and struggle with grace existentially. Perhaps what we need is the imprint of the cross on our psyche that we may sit in the presence of the beast. And when the symbol of the cross sinks deep in our psyche and our projection is lifted, we will wonder why we ever wanted to be right.

"Why can't we be wrong?" This question does not seem to make sense any more.

Notes and References

1. A 1992 official list places the total number of Adventists in Thailand at 9,470. Yvonne Terry, *The Bestowal of Blessings: A Journey into the Meaning of Mission* (Bangkok: Thailand Publishing House, 1994), 242.

2. Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 7.

3. Carl Jung, *Collected Works* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 7:490.

4. Raimon Pannikar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, trans. Annemarie Kidder (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 10.

5. Ego is not something stagnant or immutable but a function or a process that emerges from the interaction between the unconscious and the external environment. It evolves from childhood in response to existential demands. Carl Jung, *Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Penguin, 1971), 139-44.

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 12.

9. Shadow is often referred to as the dark side of each of us that we seek to hide. The ego seeks to delineate the shadow from consciousness because of its unwillingness to incorporate and acknowledge the shadow as part of the self. This unwillingness is derived from our sensing that there is something "evil" about us that need to be covered. It is "evil"

because it contains culturally undesirable attributes such as primal feelings, aggression, hate, envy, and antisocial qualities. The shadow does not seem compatible with our ego-image. In covering, we repress. In repressing, it is no longer present in the consciousness of our ego. It remains in the unconscious and is typically projected onto others. The shadow as an archetype seeks to tell us that we need to recognize and acknowledge the shadow as an essential part of us. David Rosen, *Transforming Depression: Healing the Soul through Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 67.

10. The collective unconscious is not made up of individual contents but represents something universal. Within the collective unconsciousness resides instincts and archetypes. "In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited."

Archetypes refer to the typical modes of apprehension, to the patterns of psychic perception and understanding common to all human beings as members of the human race. An archetype is the voice of the unconscious that speaks through symbols calling us back toward wholeness. Siroj Sorajjakool, "Ontology and Spirituality: A Jungian Perspective," *Pastoral Psychology* 46, no. 4 (1998), 276-78.

11. Jung was the first among the pioneers of depth psychology to point out that the psyche has a religious function. This religious function aims at restoring wholeness to the self. Psyche is structured in polarities. In order to achieve wholeness, the ego must recognize and reconcile these polarities. The process of reconciliation occurs through conscious participation in symbols that emerge from the unconscious and brings together two opposing poles in a third form. This new symbol puts consciousness in a deeper level by helping one to be in touch with the rest of the psyche and therefore enhances the relationships with others and the self. The religious function therefore is the capacity of the psyche to produce symbols that have this reconciling effect and stirring presence. Religious function seeks to restore balance. For further discussion see Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Religion and the Unconscious* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 25-42; Carl Jung, *The Transcendent Function*, *Collected Works* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 8:67-91; Carl Jung, *Autonomy of the Unconscious*, *ibid.*, 11:5-33.

12. See popular beliefs expressed by A. Jan Marcussen, *National Sunday Law: Forces Unite Amid Stupendous Crisis* (Thompsonville, Ill: Amazing Truth), 1983, 1-22.

13. *Religion and the Unconscious*, 109-10.

14. Jungian therapy consists mainly of methods that move one toward the awareness of the unconscious process within oneself. Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Meridian, 1973), 83.

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