

## BOOK REVIEWS

### GOD ON THE COUCH

*Jung's Answer to Job: A Commentary.* By Paul Bishop, Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002, 240 pp, £17.99, pb.

*Answer to Job.* By Carl Gustav Jung, (translated by REC Hull), Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, 1952 reissue 2002, 176 pp, £8.99, pb.

Any therapist who decides to take God on as a patient had better be prepared for a lengthy process. With all that God has seen and done, including some pretty unpleasant stuff, a proper anamnesis would take all of created time and then some more. Practically speaking, only a short-term problem-solving approach has a hope of getting anywhere.

Such remarks aren't just flippant. They point up the fact that reading Jung's *Answer to Job* is to enter a world of having to consider infinitude, omnipotence (both in fantasy and reality) and, above all, ambiguity. Jung makes it clear that what he is doing is analysing the psychological dimension of mankind's idea of God as displayed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but then immediately muddies the waters by talking about Yahweh *simpliciter*. That there is bound to be ambiguity can be seen by noting that whereas one cannot speak about anything without talking, and talking is a function of mind, one can point to the thing or observe it, at least in principle, without words. With God one cannot, for the very notion of God starts with the absolute transcendence and ultimate unknowability of God. Religion, along with

its *intellectual* expression in theology, has to try to express the inexpressible. So there is no getting away from the words, and there's no getting beyond concepts. What Jung is doing is in part unavoidable.

The trouble is that Jung isn't above manipulating this state of affairs. When theologians (perhaps most notably Victor White, a one-time friend of Jung, who split from Jung over just this issue) questioned Jung's assertions about God, pointing out that he was distorting Christian thought, Jung's response was to say that he wasn't talking theology at all, that he was just talking about human psychology. This is true up to a point, but it is a doomed (if tempting) manoeuvre. For what the theologians were saying was just that Jung had misunderstood the concepts and thus the contents of human religious thought. Jung would have done better to take them at face value, and say that he was pointing to the actual active contents, and that the theologians had misunderstood their own field. Of course, that is what he did think, and he implies as much, but he shied away from a debate that might have put his own interpretations under examination. In a therapist, that is not a good quality. Perhaps it is a reminder that Jung did not have a supervisor.

To see that Jung could have learned something from his critics one can start by considering Jung's principal concern in *Answer to Job*, which is to demonstrate the inadequacy of the Augustinian doctrine of the *privatio boni*. One of the bugbears of all theology is the problem of evil. How could a loving creator have given rise to a world that is full of evil? Before his conver-

sion to Christianity, Augustine had been much influenced by the religious group known as the Manichees. They took a fundamentally dualist view of the cosmos, which preserved the goodness of God by postulating an equal and opposite force of evil that manifests itself in the realm of matter, leaving the realm of the spirit as wholly good and as the province of God. By freeing oneself of attachment to matter one can fulfil one's spiritual side. This is not just an abstract piece of theology: anyone who ever split his or her psychological world into good objects and bad objects and then tries to drive out the bad to preserve the good – something most therapists have worked with in their patients – is following the Manichees. Augustine saw that this answer would not do: a split God is no God at all. Now, Jung follows Augustine thus far: a split self isn't whole, isn't even really a realized self at all.

But Augustine wanted to preserve the goodness of God, and developed the entirely logical view that evil is a radical absence of good, and therefore, ontologically even if not experientially, is literally nothing at all. Mankind becomes evil by separating itself from and so losing the source of its goodness. Psychologically, one might say that as we separate ourselves from our own authenticity and innate creativity, our psychological source, so we become disordered and behave in destructive ways.

Jung will have none of this. He regards human evil as so great, and the scale of human suffering as so enormous, that it can only be made sense of as something real, and as existing in the source itself. It is like saying that Augustine is blaspheming by refusing to recognize an ontic spiritual and psychological reality. For Jung, Yahweh's fault prior to the incarnation was a lack of awareness of his own Shadow. Yahweh was

the source of evil, through his arbitrariness and impulsiveness, and through his inability to differentiate himself from his own instinctual side. Yahweh is the great unthinking bully, capable of tenderness and terror with equal facility and with equal likelihood, as things take his fancy.

Given such thoughts, one might perhaps expect that Jung would have examined how Augustine uses the *privatio boni* in his ethics and in his political writings, for politics and ethics are one area where the operation of theological ideas in practice can be seen and tested. Augustine has a clear politics, articulated in various writings but pre-eminently in his major work *The City of God*. Augustine believes that goodness comes through an openness to the grace of God, which is received as an unmerited gift from God in response to the believer's faith, although faith itself depends on a first gift from God. Put in psychological terms, goodness arises not through the activity of the will or consciousness, but arises from the promptings of the unconscious mind. As the conscious responds to the good source of the unconscious, the unconscious offers more, leading the person towards greater fulfilment. In this sense, the *privatio boni* corresponds to the experience of self-alienation understood as emptiness and anomie. In the political sphere Augustine is led towards two realizations. The conscious will cannot ever bring about a satisfactory order of being within the world so long as it remains divorced from its source, and whatever is realized will only ever be partial. A fully satisfactory world order is as transcendent as God. It is a pessimistic view but one not without hope.

Jung does not articulate the political consequences of his position but one can surmise that he would see human evil as innate in the world, to be overcome by an action of the conscious mind in recognizing

and accepting its own evil. It has just as profound a pessimistic streak as Augustine's view but it places responsibility firmly with mankind's achievable self-awareness.

Both views have their attractions. Following Jung's cue of psychologizing Yahweh, one can see Yahweh's personality manifest in the power relations of the world. Currently, it is America that is the personification of Yahweh. It's the all-powerful superpower, that deals with the world solely on its own terms. To stay in its good books, do as it says. It is certainly given to a good deal of random smiting, its intelligence is nothing if not limited, its awareness of the consequences of its actions is defective even for its own designs, it is unpredictable, much given to vainness and self-obsessing, and it just loves to lay down the law for others while knowing no law greater than its own will. It is fond of splitting the world into goodies and baddies, with consequent (not too frequent) rewards and (rather more frequent) punishments. It needs an evil empire to compare itself to. And the reward for the rest of us is to grow ever more like it if we have faith in the excellence of its being. Not that America is unique. There was Britain before it for a while, there were the Ottomans in their sphere of influence, there was the Roman empire and so on.

Looking for a prescription for America as a patient, Augustine would say that America cannot pull itself up by its own bootstraps, that it needs to acquire humility and an openness to the other. Jung would presumably hold that America requires awareness of its own evil, and needs to reorient its consciousness. But Augustine would hold that there is a source of fundamental goodness that can be accessed – although one that is radically other than anything it can know by itself. Jung's equivalent would hold that the evil is of the

essence of America's position. For Augustine the source of good is always in the unconscious; for Jung, the source can be brought into consciousness – and in the case of Yahweh, he thought it was being. And for Augustine, America can be redeemed; for Jung, it can be cured. One may wonder how far either is ever going to be achieved.

The attractiveness of Jung's thought is that he was right that the *privatio boni* appears objectionable: evil does seem tangible. But it is arguable that he has not understood what absence can mean. As a partial analogy, consider temperature and heat. Cold is understood by physics as an absence of heat and, subject to the minimal uncertainty required by quantum mechanics, there can be an absolute cold: at  $-273^{\circ}\text{C}$  (or  $0^{\circ}\text{K}$ ) – one can get no colder, for all heat has been removed. But such cold is not without effect. As it is approached, strange things happen to matter, and life has long since ceased to be viable. Even at  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $273^{\circ}\text{K}$ ), human beings, if unprotected soon first get frostbite and then die. The analogy, admittedly, is far from exact, but it might serve to indicate that an increasing and then utter absence of an essential quality can have very marked consequences. So perhaps Jung hasn't given Augustine his due. Augustine was working 1600 years ago, and his work has still not been superceded.

Outside the *privatio boni*, Jung's other great theme in *Answer to Job* is the need for the feminine to find its place in God. He notes approvingly the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, in which God's essential wisdom, without which he does nothing, is personified consistently and solely as female. And he almost purrs with satisfaction at the Church's declaration of first the Immaculate Conception and then the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

as signs that the feminine is entering the religious consciousness. But it is not that simple.

The starting point of all Christian teaching about Mary is that however much its influenced by popular devotion, at the level of theology it's primarily and irreducibly christological: that is, the things that are said about Mary are those which are needed to bolster her son's position. Her first honorific title of 'Theotokos', literally "God-bearer" and translated in the West as 'Mother of God', came to her partly from prayers being offered to her, but, theologically speaking, its function was to assert that Jesus was already divine when he was in her womb. The Immaculate Conception serves to ensure that, conceptually, Jesus' flesh was not contaminated by original sin as he grew in her womb – which incidentally requires that woman needs to be transformed before she is fit to house the godhead. The Assumption of Mary serves, in theology, to ensure the corporeal nature of Christ's ascension. None of these doctrines is modern, and their promulgation was part of a deeply conservative agenda. So the idea that Marian doctrine is innately pro-woman has to be substantially modified. While modern feminist theologians have sometimes appropriated the figure of Mary, much of what they say about her is best seen as projection – what they want the Church to say, rather than what it does say. Among Protestants there are still many who refuse to accept the ministry of women as clergy, while amongst Catholics and the Orthodox – who between them account for three-quarters of the world's Christians – the issue is still basically out of bounds.

When it comes generally to accepting the other in society, the record of Christians is at best patchy. Only a minority of Churches will acknowledge the rights of lesbians and

gays; the Anglican Church went into paroxysms over the ordination of an openly gay bishop (as if he were the first!) and the Catholic Church regards homosexuality as 'intrinsically disordered'. It is only in recent times that race has become less of an issue for the Churches – although the number of exclusively black churches is testament to how little welcomed and valued their members have felt in the mainstream churches. Overall, it has been the secular world that has made the running on all minority issues, and the Western Churches have trailed in the wake, while the Eastern have hardly moved at all. In fact, of the major social advances of recent centuries only the abolition of slavery can be put down as originating in a shift in religious consciousness, although it was one that was much resisted.

So while Jung's characterization of Yahweh's personality is brilliant and thought provoking, and will ensure it always remains an essential work, Jung's analysis in *Answer to Job* needs a lot of qualification and thinking around before its worth can be truly appreciated.

Paul Bishop's book is excellent on the background ideas out of which *Answer to Job* grew, and in that respect indeed can hardly be faulted. His exposition of Jung's ideas is straightforward and logical, and is a good introduction. But Jung was an untidy writer and an untidy thinker, and Bishop presents him in a way which is perhaps a little too tidy. One will always have to wrestle for oneself with the twists and turns of Jung's thinking, but Bishop offers a helpful way in.

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