

# The Role of the Unconscious in Religion and Art

( NOTE: Eugene Halliday's 'psycho-graphic' illustrations show evidence of the importance of the role of the unconscious in both religion and art).

We say we are "conscious" of something when we have some awareness of it. For example we can say we are aware of the presence of a book upon the table when in the field of our awareness we have a relatively clear image of a thing that we call a 'book' resting on another thing that we call a 'table'. If this thing has come into our field of awareness through our eyes, we call it a visual image. If we have become aware of the thing through our sense of touch we call it a tactile image. So also with our other senses.

Because our eyes give us the clearest evidence of the shapes of things, so that we can recognise them at a distance, and so make whatever adjustments of behaviour we decide to make before we actually come into contact with them, we have come to value our visual images more highly than our other sense data.

Next in importance to our visual images most of us would place our tactile images, because by these we are able to verify what we call the 'reality' of our visually presented objects by touching them with our hands or other parts of our body.

We also find important our sound images, which come to us through our ears, because these also may give us information about things before we actually contact them, and so allow us to make needed behaviour adjustments which might aid our survival and development.

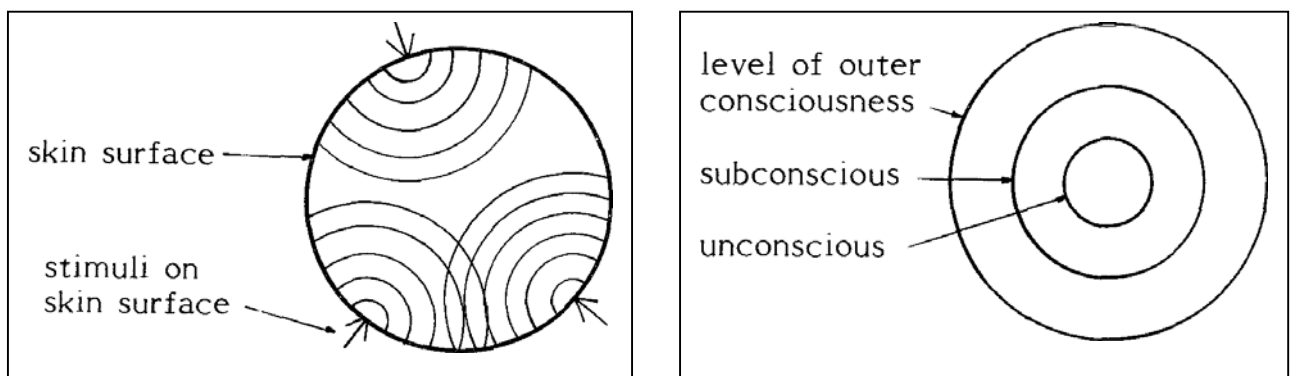
Our other senses, taste and smell, are very valuable for our survival and enjoyment but give us less clearly defined images to manipulate. Our sense of smell can give us some information about distant objects, but our sense of taste generally requires us to place the thing about which we wish to require some knowledge actually in our mouth.

All our sense organs convey information to us only if stimulated and so of themselves could not help our survival, development or enjoyment. But our five special sense organs are but specialisations of a generalised sensitivity which is a property of ourselves as living beings. This generalised sensitivity is the basis of all our knowledge of the things we encounter in the world. Sensory deprivation experiments of recent years have shown that this sensitivity is not in itself entirely passive to, and dependent on, external stimuli. Under certain circumstances it can give rise to sensations and images in the absence of external stimuli. This is a fact of great importance for the understanding of mental phenomena, pathological and normal.

Our physical body is covered by a fairly tough skin, an integument which holds in or contains and protects our inner organs from invasion by external organisms, bacteria etc. This integument is one of the bases of our potentiality of integration.

Stimuli from the external physical world impinging upon our outer skin surface give rise to electrical-chemical charges in nerve endings in the skin and so send messages along our nerves to certain centres in the brain.

What do the external stimuli striking our skin surfaces inside our being? The answer is energy. All so called 'matter' is energy. Our being is really an enclosed zone of energy. Energy impinging on us from outside we call stimuli. An external stimulus acting upon our substance is an energy input, and, as energy, must produce some change within our substance. This change we experience as an alteration in the content of our consciousness, subconsciousness or unconsciousness. Whether we are aware of this change of content depends on the strength of the energy input, our existing energy content, its condition, and our attention.



Within our substance we have certain internal energy levels which we may represent diagrammatically by circles drawn within the larger circle which represents our skin surface. The actuality is, of course, much more complex than our diagram shows, but the general notion is useful as a starting point for understanding our various levels of being.

The level of our outer consciousness is that level in which the external stimuli from our five special sense organs dominate our awareness and direct it towards the outer world, holding it in the waking condition.

The level of the sub-conscious is that level in which ideas not actually present in the waking consciousness are sufficiently near to it to be able to be recalled with relative ease. It is also the level in which under certain conditions our dreaming is conducted.

The level of the unconscious is that level in which we have no experience of particular images or of sequential thinking processes. But we are not to assume because of this that nothing is operative there. Our dreaming subconscious and our waking consciousness are confined in general to sequential or serial thinking processes which present images one after the other, in what we call a "train of thought". Thinking which is confined to serial images cannot comprehend the simultaneously presented operations of the unconscious.

The level of the waking consciousness is that in which the so-called objective scientist conducts his researching. It is the level at which a mechanistic behaviourist psychologist investigates human and animal behaviour. It is also the level at which we conduct the business of common-sense daily living. When our mental processes are confined to processes of examining the material things of the external world, their operational possibilities and events connected with them, we say that we are being 'objective'. Materialistic thinkers believe that only that which is 'objective' is really 'true'. They think that whatever mental phenomena we experience that is not 'objective' in this sense is 'subjective' and therefore not 'true'. 'Subjective' means "pertaining to the knower himself".

But in the subconscious zone, where rest the ideas we are not immediately using in consciousness, and where we dream, there are no 'objective' external things on which to focus our attention. Our mental processes in the dreaming state are therefore called 'subjective', that is, they refer to events in the subconsciousness of the knower himself, and have no necessary 'objective truth or reference to external things of the material world.

But although the subconscious zone in which we dream has no external 'objective' reality, its processes are of immense importance for the survival, development and enjoyment of human life, for it is in this zone that the great symbols of religious life receive their first expression.

The great Religious Contemplatives, in their investigations of the depths of the human soul or psyche, have found forms of mental activity quite different from those of the waking state.

In these so-called 'subjective' phenomena of the psyche, below the waking conscious level, are found various forms which recur so often that it becomes clear that they must have some very special significance. These special forms we call "symbols".

We use the word "symbol" in a special way to distinguish it from the word "sign". By a "sign" we mean a form that indicates some external thing, relation or event to which we wish to relate our external activity; e.g. a "road sign" indicates that we may not park our car in a certain place, or may not exceed a certain speed, or may not make a "U-turn" and so on.

By the word "symbol" as we use it in the context of our present study, we mean a form, either visual or verbal, or other, that has a special power to visualise or stimulate our inner subjective psychological processes in certain special ways.

Let us take an example of a simple symbol and see how we can use it to stimulate our subjective mental processes. We will select first, as the least mark we can make, a dot, like a full stop on the paper. We put down this dot and then proceed to use it as a symbol. We gaze at the dot and, without making any willed attempt to make it signify anything, we simply contemplate it as it is in itself. If we do this with the right attitude of mind there arises from some level of our being a feeling of "location". Our mind uses the dot as a "centre"

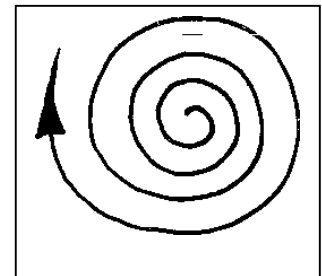
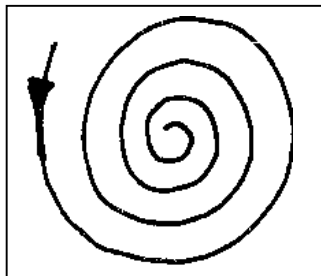
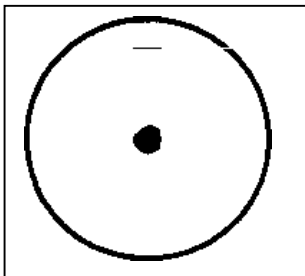
of awareness. The dot provides us with a point of anchorage for our feeling. We have gained from it a possibility of fixating the psyche's zone of awareness upon the least possible mental formal content.

Now let us take another symbol, hardly less simple than that of the dot. We will take a circle. Again we contemplate the symbol, and this time there arises within our zone of awareness a feeling of cyclic continuity. "I saw eternity the other night, like a great ring of pure and endless light". Here the poet-mystic has felt the power of the circle to stimulate in our depths the feeling of endlessness, of being, of unbrokenness, and of perfection of form.

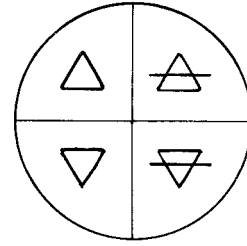
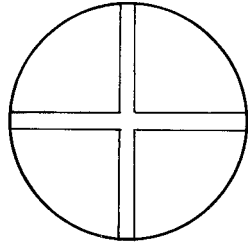
If we place the dot at the centre of the circle we have a relatively complex symbol the meaning of which arises in our contemplation. The dot gives us the feeling of centredness within the circle which conveys the feeling of cyclic continuity. All the repetitive cyclic processes of life are felt within the circle, and the dot suggests the centred individual who observes the cyclic processes, the being around whom all events circulate.

In astronomy the circle with a dot in its centre symbolises the sun as central body with orbiting planets moving round it. In depth psychology it symbolises the formed ego centred in its environment. In religious symbology it means that all things cyclic arise from a central point of initiation

Let us now look at another symbol, that of the spiral, a symbol of very great power. We can view the spiral as drawn either from the outside, gradually closing in as it moves, till it finishes at the centre (we call this the 'involutionary' spiral, which symbolises the gradual condensation of the creative spirit as it moves towards more and more egoic formation); or as drawn from the centre outwards (we will call this the 'evolutionary' spiral, symbolising the gradual development of ego consciousness towards more transcendent states).



A more complex symbol is that of the cross in the circle. This is often called a 'mandala', a quartered circle used in certain contemplation exercises to aid release of awareness of certain basic sub-divisions of the psyche, certain fundamental differentiated functions. We may place in the four quarters of the mandala the symbols of 'fire', 'air', 'water', and 'earth', as used by alchemical philosophers. These then symbolise the four basic energies that constitute the human being, and their correspondences in the universe as a whole.



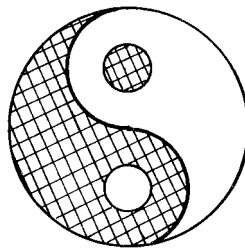
'Fire' (top-left) symbolises the prime energy of the human organism, which in modern times we call 'nervous energy'.

'Air' (top-right) symbolises the energies which operate in our intellect to form ideas and conduct our thinking processes that we call 'reasoning'.

'Water' (bottom left) symbolises the feeling and emotional states of our being.

'Earth' (bottom right) symbolises our physical body as a material organism.

By contemplation of such a mandala the depth processes of the psyche may be persuaded to give up the secrets of humanity's most mysterious properties.



The Chinese Yin-Yang symbol, divided in half by a letter 'S' form (which artists call the 'life-line') has a very complex symbology covering many different levels of being. The light half represents consciousness and the male principle of activity; the dark half represents the subconscious and female receptive principle. In the light half is a dark dot symbolizing the hidden female component inside the male. In the dark half is a light dot representing the male component within the female. This symbol reveals that in every man there is a hidden woman; in every woman, a hidden man. The whole human being is an androgyne, a man-woman, in whom male processes of intellectual or rational activity live side by side with female processes of feeling and emotion. If this were fully and generally understood, there would be no "war of the sexes" no "Woman's Lib", no "Male Chauvinistic Piggery". The non-dual original life force has polarised itself into two forms of organism, not two essentially different beings, for the acceleration of its evolutionary processes.

The letters of our alphabet, which derive from primary ideographs, were anciently used as symbols, and are still so used in certain areas of thought, e.g. we use 'Alpha and Omega' to symbolise the beginning and end of the cosmic creative process. 'Alpha' is the first and 'Omega' the last letter in the Greek Alphabet. In Christian symbology, 'Alpha' symbolises the Infinite Creative Origin of all beings, and 'Omega' the Incarnation of this creative

power in Christ.

We may take two Greek words 'Mythos' and 'Logos' and disclose their symbolic values as used in certain areas of thought. Most of us know that in the Fourth Gospel the word translated as 'Word' in the sentence:- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", is the Greek word 'Logos' which is used as a symbol of the second person of the Holy Trinity. 'Logos' means 'Word' but specifically 'Rational Word', 'Ratio of all Things', The creative formative force which made all things, without which nothing was made. The 'Logos' in Christian thought is equated with God Incarnate in Jesus Christ. 'Logos' here symbolises the formative ratio of all things, the Word every part of which presupposes every other part. From this come the words spoken by Jesus: "Inasmuch as you do it to the least of these little ones, you do it to me". The same idea is expressed in his seamless garment, which symbolises the unbroken continuity of his being.

The word 'Mythos' also means 'Word' but in a quite different sense. 'Mythos' symbolises "that of which no part pre-supposes any other part".

Whilst the Logos gives rise to logical thought, Mythos springs up from unknown sources in the unconscious. Logos symbolises all truly ordered structures inorganic and organic. Mythos symbolises the non-ordered power of the unconscious depths, which rises through the subconscious, producing as it rises all kinds of emotionally charged non-rational forms, strange, unordered, chimerical images, the substance of dreams.

The Logos has given us our rational theologies, philosophies and sciences. The Logic derived from it has given us our 'objective' view of reality, our conviction that only that which can be given a logically consistent form is 'true'.

The Mythos has permeated our mental and emotional life with non-logical possibilities, with strange creatures, half-man, half-beast, centaurs, satyrs, and a host of incompletely formed and inconsistent poetic fantasies.

The Logos obeys the Law of Self-consistency. The Mythos obeys nothing but its own innermost upwelling urge to expression. The uprising Mythos provides the artist and poet with myriads of unordered incomplete forms. The Logos provides an ordered rational structure upon which the mythic forms may be crucified and brought to order. Raphael, 'the Painters' Painter', combines Mythos and Logos in perfect harmony.

In the great religious symbol of the Cross we see the reconciliation of Mythos and Logos, of the unconscious and the conscious, of Nature and Art, the Infinite and the Finite, and the Key to the solution of all mankind's problems, physical, psychical and spiritual.

The subconscious zone stands in between the conscious and the unconscious. By practice in meditation and contemplation it is possible to extend one's awareness from the level of the externally orientated consciousness, and to turn our attention inwards so that we enter the subconscious dreaming zone. Here we can gain the

power to manipulate dream images and to re-pattern them in various ways. This is the process of what we call 'creative imagination'.

Further investigation into deeper and deeper levels of awareness can lead us into the deepest realm of the subconscious, into the zone of the unconscious in which all our mental contents have their source.

Using the metaphor of 'light' for understanding, we may say that the subconscious is a twilight zone, an area in which two kinds of 'light' exist, one from the outer world of objective sense-stimuli, and one from the innermost world of the deepest unconscious. If we practise living in this 'twilight zone' we can gain the power to look both ways simultaneously, like the double-headed eagle of heraldic symbology. Then we will be able actually to observe mythic subjective images arise, and how they become mingled with the 'objective' images arising from the stimulation of the outer sense organs.

Our externally derived 'objective' images are appropriated by our male component. Our internally derived 'subjective' images well up from the female component of our being. The ability to give to each of these its proper place and to hold them together in harmonious interplay, without condemning either and with full appreciation of the value of both, confers upon us the right to view ourselves as members of the divinely polarised hermaphroditic community of enlightened human beings, in whom universal love and wisdom are mutually permeable.

In such beings there can exist and operate only those energies which make for health, happiness and the power to become whatever the Innermost freewill shall choose.