

Ascetic tradition and depth psychology (Ioannis Kornarakis)

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To mention just one of many examples, St. John Cassian, who lived in the 5th century A.D. and travelled to the monasteries of Egypt, the Thebaid, the Mountain of Nitria, Cappadocia, Asia Minor, and Pontus, preserves conversations and experiences of the life of Christian asceticism which point to the activities of the unconscious in the development and progress of the spiritual life. According to the account preserved for us by St. John Cassian in a letter to Leontius, the main goal of the monks of the East, in their efforts at individual introspection and knowledge of the self, was to investigate and neutralize the unconscious.

One time, St. John Cassian writes, he heard the Monk Germanos ask the experienced spiritual father Abba Moses: Please tell us, holy father, how is that various thoughts are able to often enter into our mind against our will and various wicked thoughts are able to bother us? And how is that, since we do not know exactly what is happening inside us, these thoughts are able to sneak up on us, inasmuch as they come in such a subtle manner that not only can we not block their entry, but we even encounter great difficulty in our attempt to know more about them? And, furthermore, please tell us, holy father, is it possible for our intellect to be completely freed from these evil thieves so that it is not bothered at all by them?



And the truly experienced Abba Moses answered as follows, demonstrating a perfect understanding of the operation of the unconscious.

-It is impossible for our intellect to be not be bothered by these unwanted thoughts and desires. But it is possible, for one who is experienced in this work, to receive these thoughts and desires and to accept them or to reject them. Because, while the coming of these thoughts is outside our control, their rejection is entirely our work.

This spiritual conversation, as well as countless other such dialogues and incidents in the lives of the Desert Fathers, clearly shows the ascetic's familiarity with the operation of the unconscious and its negative role. The spiritual life of ascetics does not begin from the surface but rather from the depths. Their first experiences with the depth of the life of the spirit, as well as their subsequent experiences, belong to the unconscious region of the personality. The ascetics' dialogue with their interior is, first and foremost, a dialogue with the negative role of the unconscious. Thus, this ascetic practice convincingly demonstrates to us that the unconscious, as the content and operation of the psyche, are the true starting point of the spiritual life.

Now, however, this centuries-old experience of the ascetic tradition's knowledge of the self has a credible witness: depth psychology. That is why depth psychology

has a deeply ascetic character, i.e. it seeks to awaken. Thus, depth psychology and ascetic spirituality inevitably find common ground in the experience of the negative role of the unconscious. The difference is that each of these spiritual/intellectual activities has a different assessment of the implications of this role. This certainly warrants further study of the relationship between psychology and ascetic spirituality.

Source: J. K. Kornarakis, "Psychology and spiritual life," pp. 13-18, published by Orthodoxos Kypseli [in Greek].