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Comment:
Remembering Victor White

Victor White edited this journal, briefly. For her Oxford D.Phil. dissertation, now published as *Fr. Victor White, O.P.: The Story of Jung's 'White Raven'* (University of Scranton Press, £20.99) Clodagh Brett worked through the ten boxes of his papers in the English Dominican archives, including copies of Jung's replies. As it happens, the Jung-White correspondence has also just appeared: *The Jung-White Letters*, edited by Ann Conrad Lammers and Adrian Cunningham (Routledge, £50.00).

In Thomistic theology, evil is regarded as absence of good, *privatio boni*, a doctrine never easy to accept. On the other hand, what is the alternative? Are we caught up in a cosmic struggle between two evenly matched principles, one good and one evil? Should we settle for some Gnostic dualism? Or stick to faith in the goodness of divinely created reality, accepting the corollary that evil is not something positive?

The letters exchanged between Victor White and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) show with painful clarity the difficulty, and perhaps the impossibility, of bridging the gap between those who accept the doctrine and those who regard it as unintelligible.

Born in 1902, Victor White was the son, nephew, grandson, and brother of Anglican priests. His relationship with his father, so he once said, prevented him from following the same course. He was received into the Catholic Church at Begbroke, six months short of his nineteenth birthday. Accepted for ordination in the Plymouth diocese he spent two years at the English College in Valladolid. In 1923 he joined the Dominicans. From 1929 until 1956 his base was Oxford. The dissertation that he wrote in 1930 on the Platonism of Saint Thomas Aquinas questions the then dominant Aristotelian Thomism. In the collection *God the Unknown and other Essays* (1956) he argues that Thomas's theology of the divine nature is 'apophatic' and even, in a sense 'agnostic'.

In 1945 Victor White sent Jung offprints of his recent essays on psychology and theology. Jung was delighted. Much of their correspondence is devoted to telling one another their dreams. Jung tried hard but in vain to persuade White that *Aurora Consurgens*, a 15th century manuscript in Zurich (Glasgow University Library has another copy), was a work of alchemy composed by Thomas Aquinas.

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These were, however, increasingly troubled years in the history of Catholic theology. The authorities worried about the implications of Jung's psychology for Catholic dogma. In a splendid letter dated 14 January 1958, the then prior provincial of the English Dominicans, Hilary J. Carpenter, stalwartly defended Victor White's orthodoxy in response to an inquiry by the Holy Office. An even better letter, dated 19 September 1959, was written by Carpenter's successor, Henry St John: being authoritatively informed that the Holy Office never explains what is wrong with a book he writes back to Rome as follows: "I have felt justified in assuring him [White] that since he is not to be told what, in the content of his book, has moved the Sacred Congregation to take this action there can be nothing in it even remotely dangerous to his own faith and morals or to those of any of his readers capable of understanding its subject matter'. The book was *God and the Unconscious* (1952), the action required was that sales should be suspended — the book had been out of print for two years.

Jung's book *Answer to Job* came out in 1952. White was at first delighted ('the most exciting and moving book I have read in years'). Three months later, however, he asks how Jung could be so dismissive of the *privatio boni* doctrine. In *Blackfriars* March 1955 he published a review, 'merciless' as he later admitted, accusing Jung of bad faith, ignorance and paranoia. He cut out these savagely personal remarks when he reprinted the review in *Soul and Psyche* (1960). In May 1955, he wrote to say that he now agreed with Jung's opponents, enclosing a detailed refutation of Jung's interpretation of Job. While insisting on his affection he now proclaims 'our ways must part'. He is off to be 'a very independent Catholic priest in California'.

Jung did not reply until October 1959, prompted evidently by a nun, who was trying to re-establish the friendship. (Her identity is sedulously concealed by Lammers and Cunningham but revealed by Brett as Mother Michael of the Blessed Trinity, prioress of the Carmelite nuns then at Presteigne.) Victor White had suffered serious head injuries in a motorcycle accident. Not until March 1960 was he able to write to Jung, who wrote back at once and again shortly afterwards, enclosing a snapshot and wishing he could come to England. In May 1960, knowing that he was dying, Victor White dictated the final two sad letters. It is unclear whether he understood that Jung loved him, appreciated his help in theological matters, yet remained unpersuaded on the contentious issue: evil as absence of good.

Fergus Kerr OP

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