

The Gnostic World View: A Brief Summary of Gnosticism



GNOSTICISM IS THE TEACHING based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. Although Gnosticism thus rests on personal religious experience, it is a mistake to assume all such experience results in Gnostic recognitions. It is nearer the truth to say that Gnosticism expresses a specific religious experience, an experience that does not lend itself to the language of theology or philosophy, but which is instead closely affinitized to, and expresses itself through, the medium of myth. Indeed, one finds that most Gnostic scriptures take the forms of myths. The term “myth” should not here be taken to mean “stories that are not true”, but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy.

In the following summary, we will attempt to encapsulate in prose what the Gnostic myths express in their distinctively poetic and imaginative language.

The Cosmos

All religious traditions acknowledge that the world is imperfect. Where they differ is in the explanations which they offer to account for this imperfection and in what they suggest might be done about it. Gnostics have their own -- perhaps quite startling -- view of these matters: they hold that the world is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner.

Like Buddhism, Gnosticism begins with the fundamental recognition that earthly life is filled with suffering. In order to nourish themselves, all forms of life consume each other, thereby visiting pain, fear, and death upon one

another (even herbivorous animals live by destroying the life of plants). In addition, so-called natural catastrophes -- earthquakes, floods, fires, drought, volcanic eruptions -- bring further suffering and death in their wake. Human beings, with their complex physiology and psychology, are aware not only of these painful features of earthly existence. They also suffer from the frequent recognition that they are strangers living in a world that is flawed and absurd.

Many religions advocate that humans are to be blamed for the imperfections of the world. Supporting this view, they interpret the Genesis myth as declaring that transgressions committed by the first human pair brought about a “fall” of creation resulting in the present corrupt state of the world. Gnostics respond that this interpretation of the myth is false. The blame for the world’s failings lies not with humans, but with the creator. Since -- especially in the monotheistic religions -- the creator is God, this Gnostic position appears blasphemous, and is often viewed with dismay even by non-believers.

Ways of evading the recognition of the flawed creation and its flawed creator have been devised over and over, but none of these arguments have impressed Gnostics. The ancient Greeks, especially the Platonists, advised people to look to the harmony of the universe, so that by venerating its grandeur they might forget their immediate afflictions. But since this harmony still contains the cruel flaws, forlornness and alienation of existence, this advice is considered of little value by Gnostics. Nor is the Eastern idea of Karma regarded by Gnostics as an adequate explanation of creation’s imperfection and suffering. Karma at best can only explain how the chain of suffering and imperfection works. It does not inform us in the first place why such a sorrowful and malign system should exist.

Once the initial shock of the “unusual” or “blasphemous” nature of the Gnostic explanation for suffering and imperfection of the world wears off, one may begin to recognize that it is in fact the most sensible of all explanations. To appreciate it fully, however, a familiarity with the Gnostic conception of the Godhead is required, both in its original essence as the True God and in its debased manifestation as the false or creator God.

Deity

The Gnostic God concept is more subtle than that of most religions. In its way, it unites and reconciles the recognitions of Monotheism and Polytheism, as well as of Theism, Deism and Pantheism.



In the Gnostic view, there is a true, ultimate and transcendent God, who is beyond all created universes and who never created anything in the sense in which the word “create” is ordinarily understood. While this True God did not fashion or create anything, He (or, It) “emanated” or brought forth from within Himself the substance of all there is in all the worlds, visible and invisible. In a certain sense, it may therefore be true to say that all is God, for all consists of the substance of God. By the same token, it must also be recognized that many portions of the original divine essence have been projected so far from their

source that they underwent unwholesome changes in the process. To worship the cosmos, or nature, or embodied creatures is thus tantamount to worshipping alienated and corrupt portions of the emanated divine essence.

The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully. The Fullness stands in contrast to our existential state, which in comparison may be called emptiness.

One of the aeonial beings who bears the name Sophia (“Wisdom”) is of great importance to the Gnostic world view. In the course of her journeyings, Sophia came to emanate from her own being a flawed consciousness, a being who became the creator of the material and psychic cosmos, all of which he created in the image of his own flaw. This being, unaware of his origins, imagined himself to be the ultimate and absolute God. Since he took the already existing divine essence and fashioned it into various forms, he is also called the Demiurgos or “half-maker” There is an authentic half, a true deific component within creation, but it is not recognized by the half-maker and by his cosmic minions, the Archons or “rulers”.

The Human Being

Human nature mirrors the duality found in the world: in part it was made by the false creator God and in part it consists of the light of the True God. Humankind contains a perishable physical and psychic component, as well as a spiritual component which is a fragment of the divine essence. This latter part is often symbolically referred to as the “divine spark”. The recognition of this dual nature of the world and of the human being has earned the Gnostic tradition the epithet of “dualist”.

Humans are generally ignorant of the divine spark resident within them. This ignorance is fostered in human nature by the influence of the false creator and his Archons, who together are intent upon keeping men and women ignorant of their true nature and destiny. Anything that causes us to remain attached to earthly things serves to keep us in enslavement to these lower cosmic rulers. Death releases the divine spark from its lowly prison, but if there has not been a substantial work of Gnosis undertaken by the soul prior to death, it becomes likely that the divine spark will be hurled back into, and then re-embodied within, the pangs and slavery of the physical world.

Not all humans are spiritual (pneumatics) and thus ready for Gnosis and liberation. Some are earthbound and materialistic beings (hyletics), who recognize only the physical reality. Others live largely in their psyche (psychics). Such people usually mistake the Demiurge for the True God and have little or no awareness of the spiritual world beyond matter and mind.

In the course of history, humans progress from materialistic sensate slavery, by way of ethical religiosity, to spiritual freedom and liberating Gnosis. As the scholar G. Quispel wrote: “The world-spirit in exile must go through the Inferno of matter and the Purgatory of morals to arrive at the spiritual Paradise.” This kind of evolution of consciousness was envisioned by the Gnostics, long before the concept of evolution was known.

Salvation

Evolutionary forces alone are insufficient, however, to bring about spiritual freedom. Humans are caught in a predicament consisting of physical existence combined with ignorance of their true origins, their essential nature and their ultimate destiny. To be liberated from this predicament, human beings require help, although they must also contribute their own efforts.

From earliest times Messengers of the Light have come forth from the True God in order to assist humans in their quest for Gnosis. Only a few of these salvific figures are mentioned in Gnostic scripture; some of the most important are Seth (the third Son of Adam), Jesus, and the Prophet Mani. The majority of Gnostics always looked to Jesus as the principal savior figure (the Soter).

Gnostics do not look to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather from the ignorance of which sin is a consequence. Ignorance -- whereby is meant ignorance of spiritual realities -- is dispelled only by Gnosis, and the decisive revelation of Gnosis is brought by the Messengers of Light, especially by Christ, the Logos of the True God. It is not by His suffering and death but by His life of teaching and His establishing of mysteries that Christ has performed His work of salvation.



The Gnostic concept of salvation, like other Gnostic concepts, is a subtle one. On the one hand, Gnostic salvation may easily be mistaken for an unmediated individual experience, a sort of spiritual do-it-yourself project. Gnostics hold that the potential for Gnosis, and thus, of salvation is present in every man and woman, and that salvation is not vicarious but individual. At the same time, they also acknowledge that Gnosis and salvation can be, indeed must be, stimulated and facilitated in order to effectively arise within consciousness. This stimulation is supplied by Messengers of Light who, in addition to their teachings, establish salvific mysteries (sacraments) which can be administered by apostles of the Messengers and their successors.

One needs also remember that knowledge of our true nature -- as well as other associated realizations -- are withheld from us by our very condition

of earthly existence. The True God of transcendence is unknown in this world, in fact He is often called the Unknown Father. It is thus obvious that revelation from on High is needed to bring about salvation. The indwelling spark must be awakened from its terrestrial slumber by the saving knowledge that comes “from without”.

Conduct

If the words “ethics” or “morality” are taken to mean a system of rules, then Gnosticism is opposed to them both. Such systems usually originate with the Demiurge and are covertly designed to serve his purposes. If, on the other hand, morality is said to consist of an inner integrity arising from the illumination of the indwelling spark, then the Gnostic will embrace this spiritually informed existential ethic as ideal.

To the Gnostic, commandments and rules are not salvific; they are not substantially conducive to salvation. Rules of conduct may serve numerous ends, including the structuring of an ordered and peaceful society, and the maintenance of harmonious relations within social groups. Rules, however, are not relevant to salvation; that is brought about only by Gnosis. Morality therefore needs to be viewed primarily in temporal and secular terms; it is ever subject to changes and modifications in accordance with the spiritual development of the individual.

As noted in the discussion above, “hyletic materialists” usually have little interest in morality, while “psychic disciplinarians” often grant to it a great importance. In contrast, “Pneumatic spiritual” persons are generally more concerned with other, higher matters. Different historical periods also require variant attitudes regarding human conduct. Thus both the Manichaean and Cathar Gnostic movements, which functioned in times where purity of conduct was regarded as an issue of high import, responded in kind. The present period of Western culture perhaps resembles in more ways that of second and third century Alexandria. It seems therefore appropriate that Gnostics in our age adopt the attitudes of classical Alexandrian Gnosticism, wherein matters of conduct were largely left to the insight of the individual.

Gnosticism embraces numerous general attitudes toward life: it encourages non-attachment and non-conformity to the world, a “being in the world, but not of the world”; a lack of egotism; and a respect for the freedom and dignity of other beings. Nonetheless, it appertains to the intuition and wisdom of every individual “Gnostic” to distill from these principles

individual guidelines for their personal application.

Destiny

When Confucius was asked about death, he replied: "Why do you ask me about death when you do not know how to live?" This answer might easily have been given by a Gnostic. To a similar question posed in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus answered that human beings must come by Gnosis to know the ineffable, divine reality from whence they have originated, and whither they will return. This transcendental knowledge must come to them while they are still embodied on earth.

Death does not automatically bring about liberation from bondage in the realms of the Demiurge. Those who have not attained to a liberating Gnosis while they were in embodiment may become trapped in existence once more. It is quite likely that this might occur by way of the cycle of rebirths. Gnosticism does not emphasize the doctrine of reincarnation prominently, but it is implicitly understood in most Gnostic teachings that those who have not made effective contact with their transcendental origins while they were in embodiment would have to return into the sorrowful condition of earthly life.

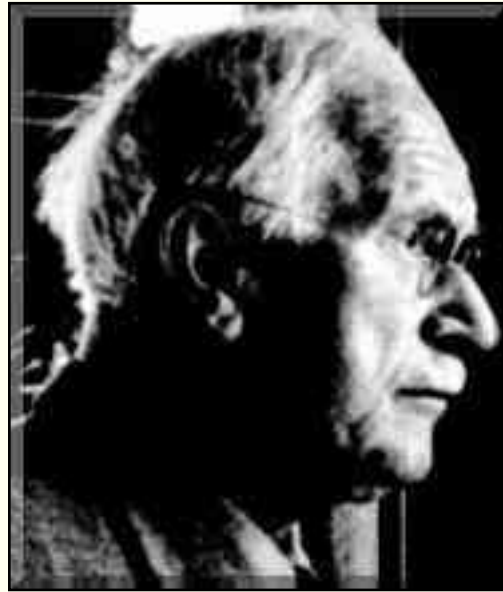
In regard to salvation, or the fate of the spirit and soul after death, one needs to be aware that help is available. Valentinus, the greatest of Gnostic teachers, taught that Christ and Sophia await the spiritual man -- the pneumatic Gnostic -- at the entrance of the Pleroma, and help him to enter the bridechamber of final reunion. Ptolemaeus, disciple of Valentinus, taught that even those not of pneumatic status, the psychics, could be redeemed and live in a heavenworld at the entrance of the Pleroma. In the fullness of time, every spiritual being will receive Gnosis and will be united with its higher Self -- the angelic Twin -- thus becoming qualified to enter the Pleroma. None of this is possible, however, without earnest striving for Gnosis.

Gnosis and Psyche: The Depth Psychological Connection

Throughout the twentieth Century the new scientific discipline of depth psychology has gained much prominence. Among the depth psychologists who have shown a pronounced and informed interest in Gnosticism, a place of signal distinction belongs to C. G. Jung. Jung was instrumental in calling attention to the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic writings in the 1950's

because he perceived the outstanding psychological relevance of Gnostic insights.

The noted scholar of Gnosticism, G. Filoramo, wrote: "Jung's reflections had long been immersed in the thought of the ancient Gnostics to such an extent that he considered them the virtual discoverers of 'depth psychology' . . . ancient Gnosis, albeit in its form of universal religion, in a certain sense prefigured, and at the same time helped to clarify, the nature of Jungian spiritual therapy." In the light of such recognitions one may ask: "Is Gnosticism a religion or a psychology?" The answer is that it



may very-well be both. Most mythologems found in Gnostic scriptures possess psychological relevance and applicability. For instance the blind and arrogant creator-demiurge bears a close resemblance to the alienated human ego that has lost contact with the ontological Self. Also, the myth of Sophia resembles closely the story of the human psyche that loses its connection with the collective unconscious and needs to be rescued by the Self. Analogies of this sort exist in great profusion.

Many esoteric teachings have proclaimed, "As it is above, so it is below." Our psychological nature (the microcosm) mirrors metaphysical nature (the macrocosm), thus Gnosticism may possess both a psychological and a religious authenticity. Gnostic psychology and Gnostic religion need not be exclusive of one another but may complement each other within an implicit order of wholeness. Gnostics have always held that divinity is immanent within the human spirit, although it is not limited to it. The convergence of Gnostic religious teaching with psychological insight is thus quite understandable in terms of time-honored Gnostic principles.

Conclusion

Some writers make a distinction between "Gnosis" and "Gnosticism". Such distinctions are both helpful and misleading. Gnosis is undoubtedly an experience based not in concepts and precepts, but in the sensibility of the heart. Gnosticism, on the other hand, is the world-view based on the experience of Gnosis. For this reason, in languages other than English, the

word Gnosis is often used to denote both the experience and the world view (die Gnosis in German, la Gnose in French).

In a sense, there is no Gnosis without Gnosticism, for the experience of Gnosis inevitably calls forth a world view wherein it finds its place. The Gnostic world view is experiential, it is based on a certain kind of spiritual experience of Gnosis. Therefore, it will not do to omit, or to dilute, various parts of the Gnostic world view, for were one to do this, the world view would no longer conform to experience.

Theology has been called an intellectual wrapping around the spiritual kernel of a religion. If this is true, then it is also true that most religions are being strangled and stifled by their wrappings. Gnosticism does not run this danger, because its world view is stated in myth rather than in theology. Myths, including the Gnostic myths, may be interpreted in diverse ways. Transcendence, numinosity, as well as psychological archetypes along with other elements, play a role in such interpretation. Still, such mythic statements tell of profound truths that will not be denied.

Gnosticism can bring us such truths with a high authority, for it speaks with the voice of the highest part of the human -- the spirit. Of this spirit, it has been said, "it bloweth where it listeth". This then is the reason why the Gnostic world view could not be extirpated in spite of many centuries of persecution.

The Gnostic world view has always been timely, for it always responded best to the "knowledge of the heart" that is true Gnosis. Yet today, its timeliness is increasing, for the end of the second millennium has seen the radical deterioration of many ideologies which evaded the great questions and answers addressed by Gnosticism. The clarity, frankness, and authenticity of the Gnostic answer to the questions of the human predicament cannot fail to impress and (in time) to convince. If your reactions to this summary have been of a similarly positive order, then perhaps you are a Gnostic yourself!

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