

# GNOSTIC AMERICA

A Reading of Contemporary American Culture & Religion  
according to Christianity's Oldest Heresy



Peter M. Burfeind

## Gnostic America

After nihilism: As the West drifts away from “theology” (a logo-centric orientation) toward a “theognosis” (a gnosis-oriented cosmos), what does this portend for culture, politics, and religion?

Peter M Burfeind

# Outline of Presentation

- The state of the situation/preliminaries
- Resources
- The Gnostic Myth as cosmic archetype
- Gnosticism in Culture, Politics, and Religion
- Some thoughts/questions going forward

# **Part I: The State of the Situation/ Preliminaries**



# A Quote from my Chaplain:

After quoting the annunciation narrative:

[What we celebrate at Christmas is] “nothing less than bringing God to earth in the form of a brilliant, compelling teacher, dynamic worker of miracles, and savior for humanity.”



# A Quote from my Chaplain:

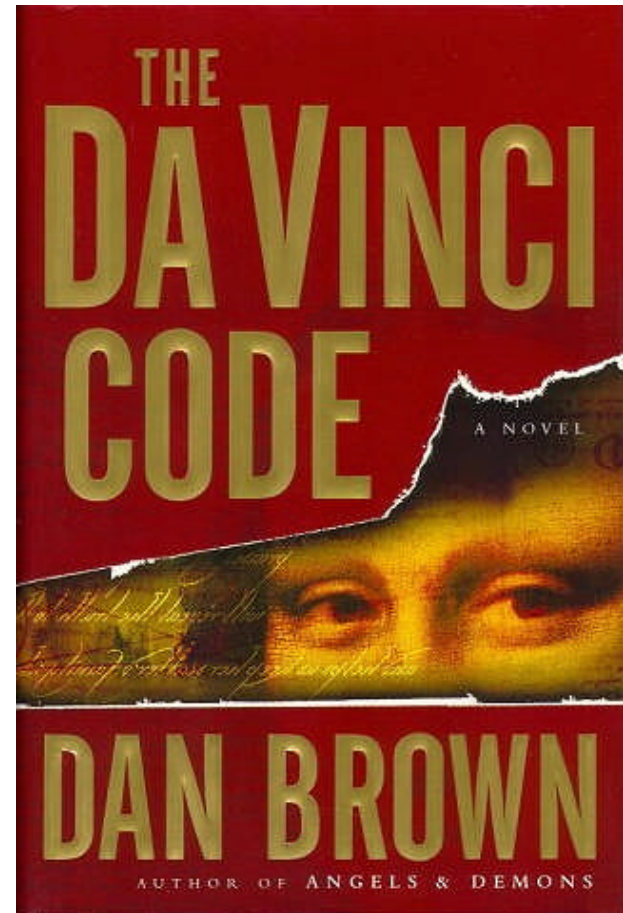
After quoting the annunciation narrative:

[What we celebrate at Christmas is] “nothing less than bringing God to earth in the form of a brilliant, compelling teacher, dynamic worker of miracles, and savior for humanity.

“The lesson for me is that, to truly experience God's presence in our lives and understand what that demands of us, we must open ourselves to a heightened awareness of messages we receive.”

# Pop Culture

- DaVinci Code
- “New Gospels”
- “Spiritual but not religious”  
as fastest growing creed
- Massive decline in adherence  
to Church (Mega-churches  
are half way houses for  
movement into complete  
New Age spirituality)



# Guess the Source...

“It is by being born again that one should will be saved. And this is due not to rote phrases or to professional skills are to book learning.”

- (1) Any number of evangelical thinkers?
- (2) A successful LCMS pastor?
- (3) The Gnostic “Exegesis of the Soul”

# After Nihilism

- The apotheosis of Nietzsche and Heidegger: the quest for a “new revelation of being” after iconocastically destroying the heritage. (Nietzsche re-reading Self Reliance at time of writing *Thus Space Zarathustra*; Sartre’s socialism; Heidegger’s fascism; Camus, Kerouac into eastern religion; Jung. These are the “cloud of witnesses” of the dawning new spirituality.)
- A battle of the Gods (the Judeo-Christian one vs. the outside-of-cosmos God to which the Self has access).
- Pop culture vs. traditional culture
- The end of “Churchianity” (but also the materialistic reductionism, categorization, and rationalism marking Western thought, in general, the “Institutionalization of thought.”)

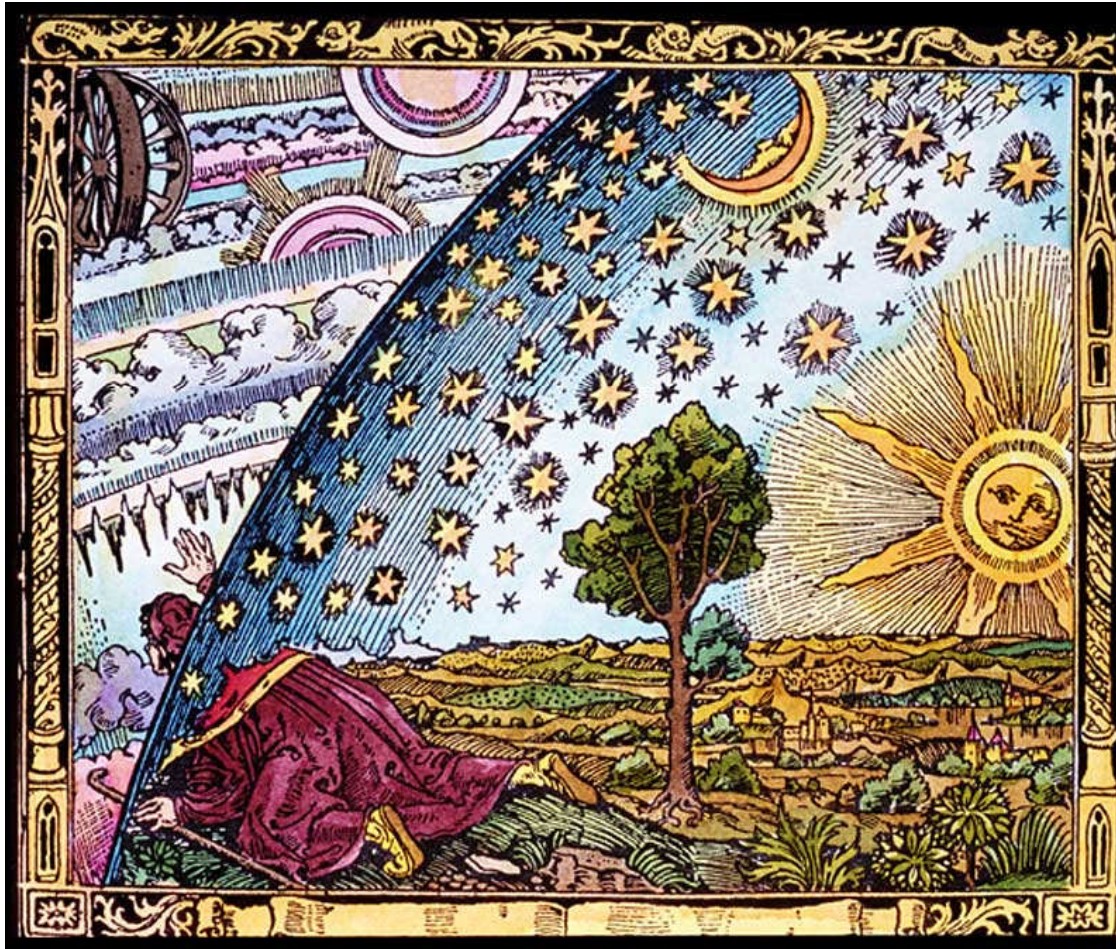
# Preliminary # 1: No Logosphere

Gnostics believe the entire “logo-centric” arrangement of western thought is false or evil. It cannot be engaged either on theological terms (as if it were a “system” with doctrines that we can counter with the Scriptures or Irenaeus’ regula fidei) or scientific terms (as if anything in the material order could prove or disprove it: their unnamed “God” is completely outside the material world or this cosmic arrangement!)





# The Gnostic



The Gnostic claims to see everything “sub species aeternitatis.” This is why he is elite. He is “in the know” about how the world truly is. What does he discover by gnosis?

1. The forms of this world are deceptive
2. The names which mentally delineate these forms are deceptive
3. The God which goes by a name, is localized, or comes in flesh, is the opposite of the true God, who is beyond names and has no relation to this world.

# Preliminary # 2

Outlining the various distinctions of ancient Gnostic sects is academic, therefore logospheric, therefore useless. (Because in the Gnostic world gnosis takes us beyond book-learning.) There is no record of debates among Gnostic sects, despite apparent differences in practice or teachings.

- They fit in the syncretistic milieu of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Rome. They were also “parasitic” (Rudolph), drawing from whatever religions or philosophical movements were out there.
- The proper way to analyze Gnosticism is the way scientists study black matter, by positing its properties through its effects in history, or in the human soul. Gnosticism is the “black matter” of Christian theology. Best to deal with it in terms of traits seen throughout the history of Gnostic movement.
- Hannegraaff’s threefold distinction in Western thought: Faith, Reason, Gnosis (the esoteric traditions). \*\*If we don’t get a handle on the esoteric tradition, we’re handing our heritage away! People don’t care about doctrine, culture is their catechist, and the culture is Gnostic. (Innovation is divinized IF we are at the dawn of a “New” Age.)

# Gnosis and Deconstructionism

*The Gospel of Truth:* “This is the knowledge [i.e. gnosis] of the living book which he revealed to the aeons, at the end, as [his letters], revealing how they are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of something foolish, but they are letters of the truth which they alone speak who know them.”

*The Tripartite Tractate:* The Logos caused divisions in the world (thus language). The “original sin” is the desire to “grasp the incomprehensibility.” Language can only be corrupt.

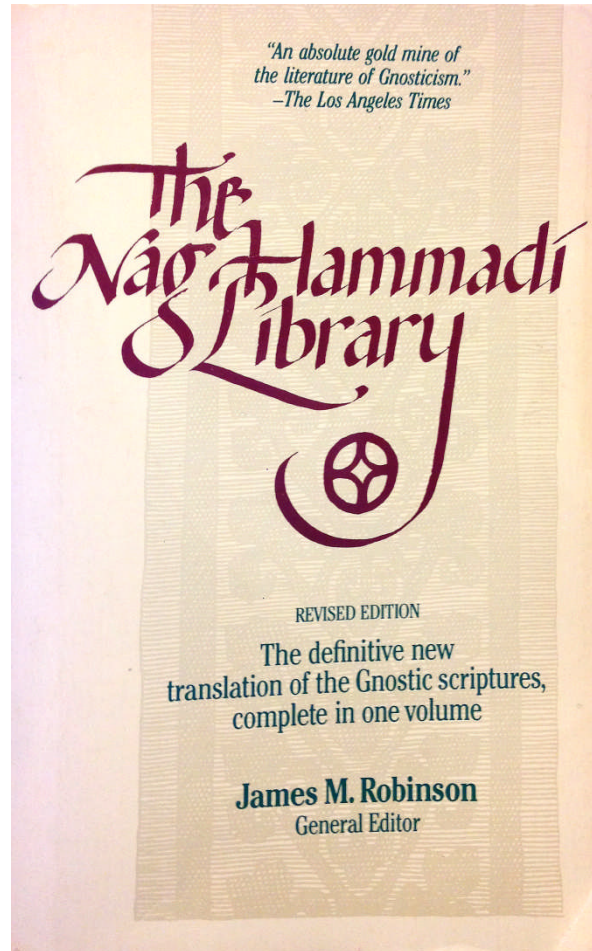
Gospel of Philip: “Names given to the world are very deceptive, for they divert our thoughts from what is correct to what is incorrect. Thus one who hears the word ‘God’ does not perceive what is correct... So also with ‘the father’ and ‘the son’ and the ‘holy spirit’ (sic).” (Also adds the words “church,” “resurrection,” “life,” and “light.”)

A Sufi (Islamic Gnostic) question: “Why is the sound of an onion?”

Deconstructing language related to deconstructing of gender: tearing down the mundane institutions and replacing them with Self-inaugurated, universalistically-oriented systems. Music (or dance, poetry, etc.): Word // Transgenderism: Gender

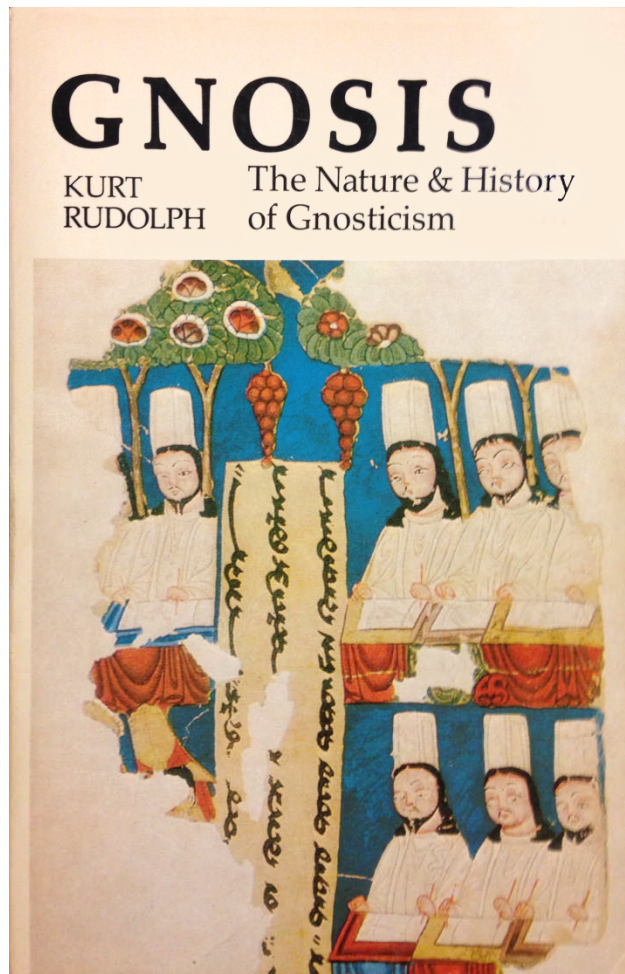


# Resources



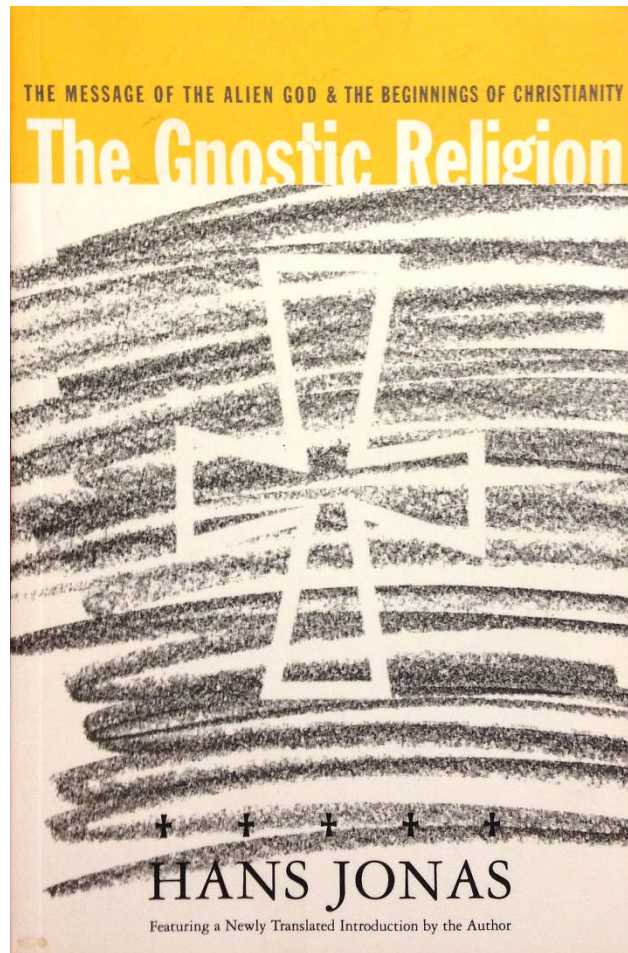
## The Nag Hammadi Library

- Discovered in 1945; story of its discovery is straight out of “Indiana Jones” (or maybe “Casino”)
- Mystical interpretation: The West (as defined by rationalism and dogma) had only produced the A-Bomb and devastation. Was the divine moving history in a new direction with the discovery of the *Nag Hammadi*, the “original Christianity”?
- Carl Jung saw his psychology in it (a sizeable codex named after him)
- Beatniks and existentialists learned it (eg. Kerouac, Ginsberg)
- It culminated and seemed to validate the sort of esotericism which began with the Romantic movement



## Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism

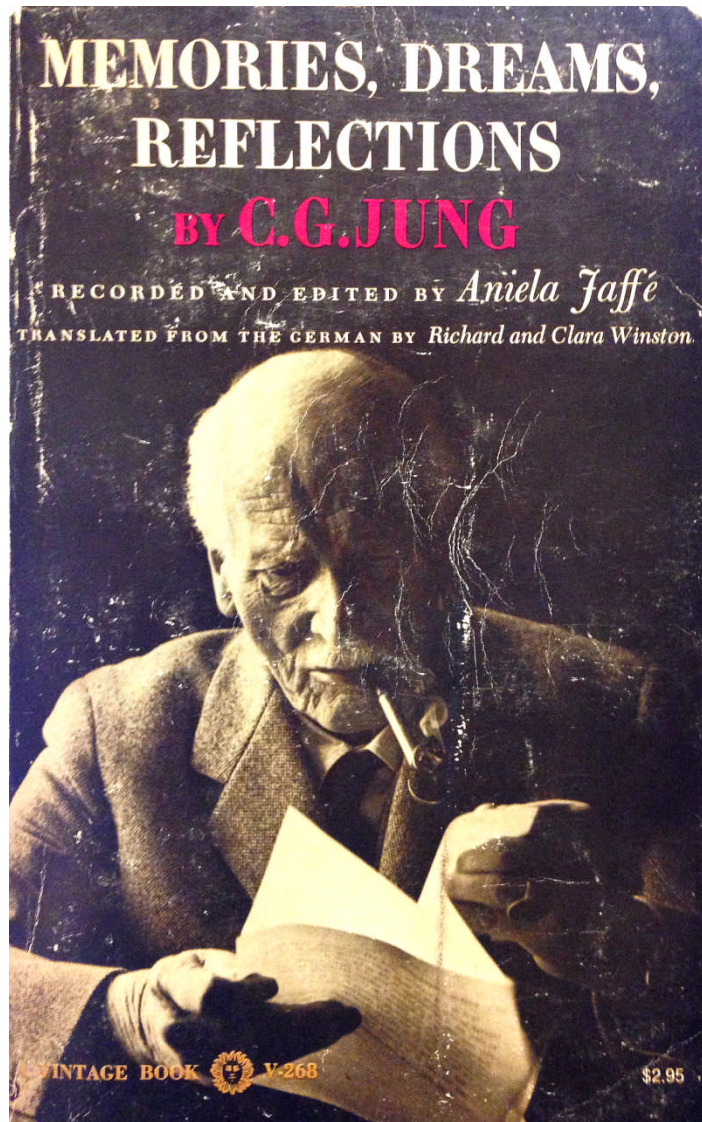
- Perhaps the most definitive treatment of Gnosticism
- Draws from *Nag Hammadi* as well as patristic writings, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and other ancient sources



## The Gnostic Religion (Hans Jonas)

- Instrumental in seeing connections between modern existentialism and ancient Gnosticism
- “Nietzsche indicated the root of the nihilistic situation in the phrase ‘God is dead,’ meaning primarily the Christian God. The Gnostics, if asked to summarize similarly the metaphysical basis of their own nihilism, could have said only ‘The God of the cosmos is dead’ – is dead, that is, as a good, has ceased to be defined for us and therefore to afford the lodestar for our lives.”
- Jonas’ insight help us understand the true religiosity of our current “spiritual but not religious” times. “God is dead” is not an atheist anthem. It’s the rejection of “old paradigms” of spirituality (with dogmas, rituals, names, sacraments, labels, etc.) in favor of a “beyond this cosmos” spirituality centered in Self.

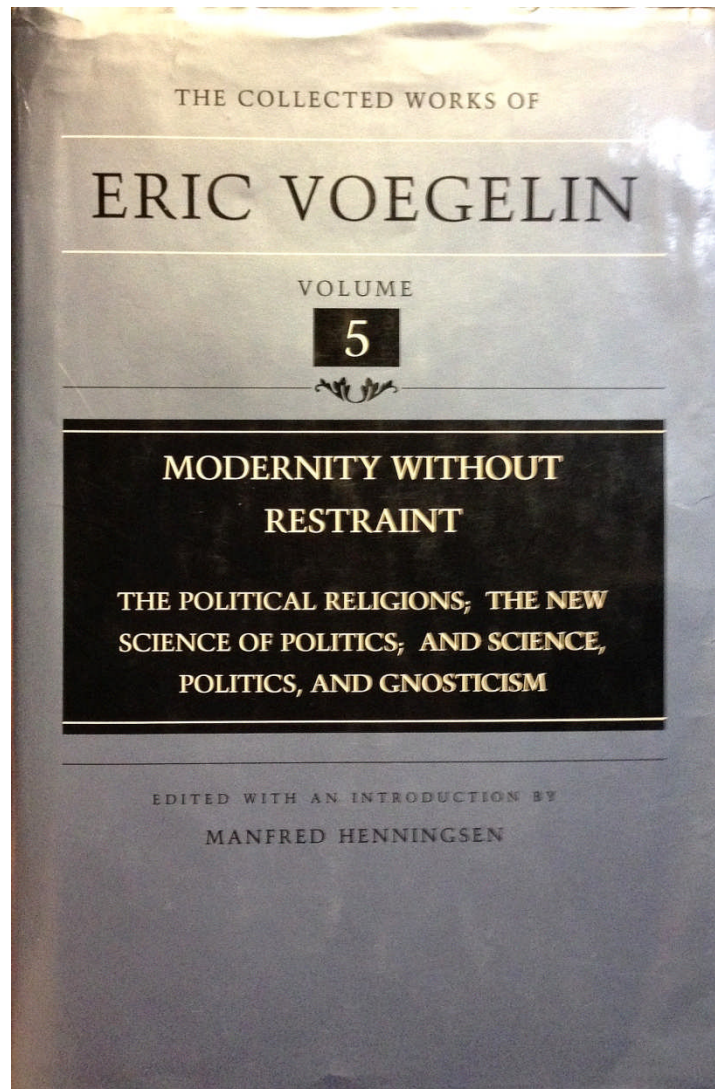




## Carl Jung

- A father of modern (depth) psychology
- Saw in ancient Gnosticism echoes of his own psychology
- Helps us understand that the proper way to read Gnosticism is archetypically, or phantasmically
- A pop culture icon.





## Eric Voegelin

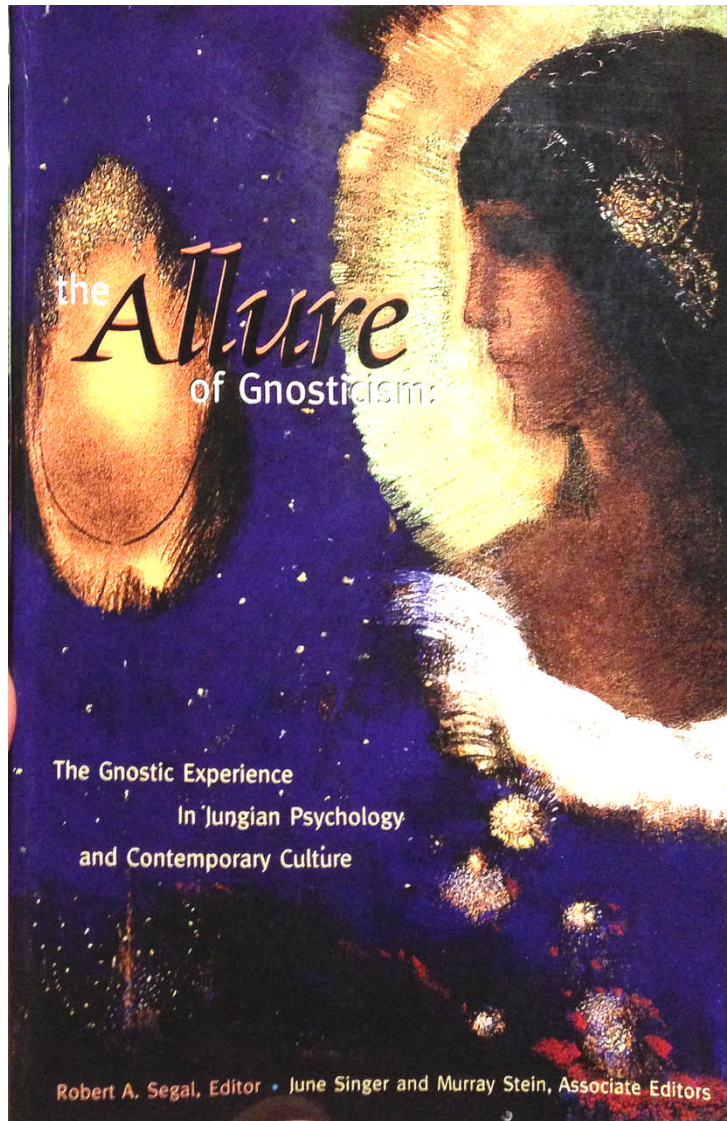
- At first glance, he seems to misunderstand Gnosticism, which eschews anything of this natural order like politics. Yet, as philosopher A. O. Lovejoy, because “nature becomes too potent” a reality to simply ignore; Gnosticism takes on a political component or works out politically.
- Hermeticism: “proletarian Gnosticism”
- Millenarianism: Fusion of apocalypticism and Gnosticism, or the blending of vertical and horizontal dualisms regarding the interpretation of history.
- “Immanentizing the eschaton.”
- Gets into psychological mechanisms of political totalitarianism. (The light/dark orientation of the mind: All that was before is systemic, oppressive darkness; all that is possible is light and freedom.)





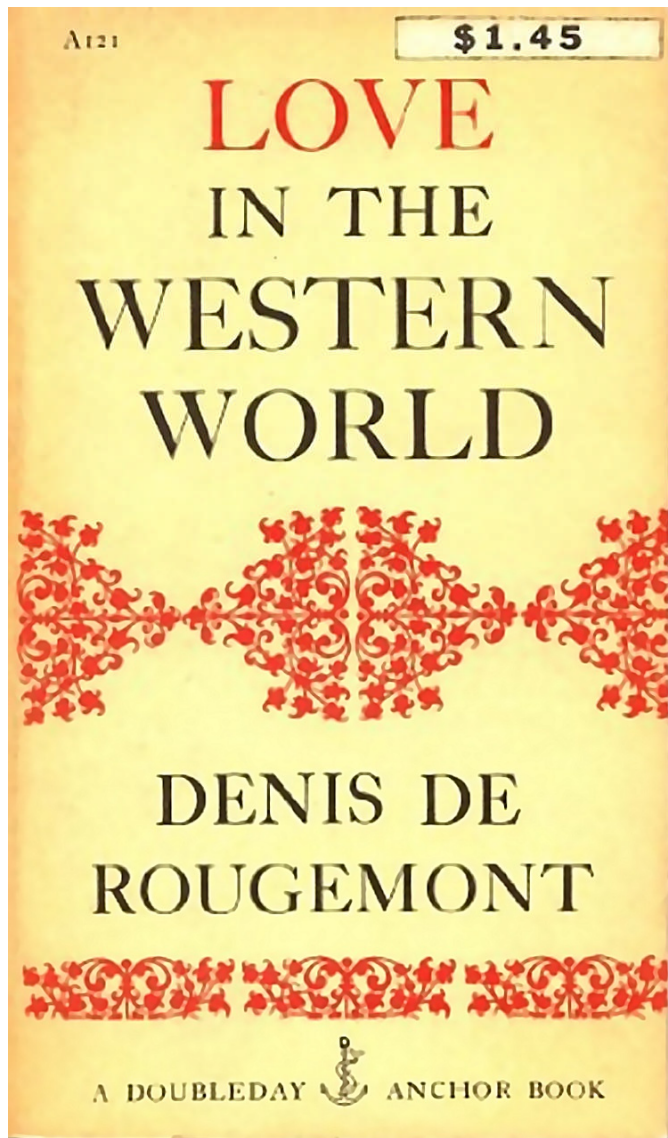
## **The Pursuit of the Millennium (Norman Cohn)**

- An excellent history of millenarian movement.
- Articulates the role of Joachim of Fiore and his modalism in laying the foundation for the quest for a “new age” of the Spirit.
- His dividing history into three eras was taken up by Hegel, Marx, Comte, and even Hitler.
- Laid foundation for the “changing paradigms” or New Age understanding of history vs. the dictum: “Human nature knows no history.”
- Fits in nicely with an evolutionary view of human nature (trans-humanism).



**The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology (edited by Robert A Segal)**

- A great compendium of how those friendly to Gnosticism understand its influence in culture today, in terms of sexuality, gender, the New Age, eastern religion, textual history, and existentialism



### **Love in the Western World (Denis de Rougemont)**

- A nuanced treatment of the role of Eros in western mysticism, song, and literature: the eros-death relation (contra Christian agape).
- Argues for the connection between Sufism, Catharism, and troubadour literature: troubadour literature was sublimated Catharism.
- Probes the erotic and psychological roots (i.e. Gnostic roots) of Medieval mysticism
- A Catholic, he's friendly to Luther. Helps us wonder if a big part of Luther's impact was his reaction against the Medieval version of the Self Help movement.
- Introduces us to the possibility that the Western world is ready for another reprieve from exhausting Self-absorption and Self-actualization. I.e., is the West ready for Lutheranism again, just at his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

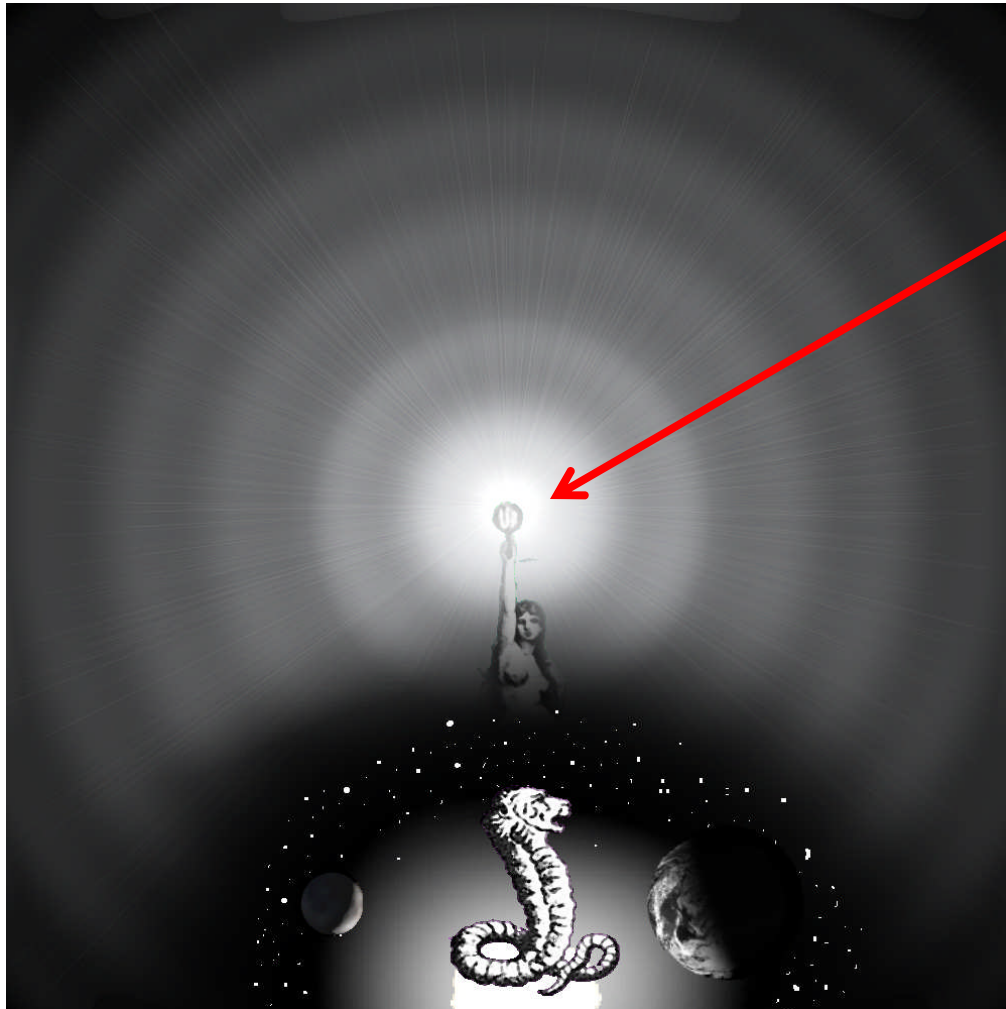


## Part II

# The Gnostic Myth as Cosmic Archetype



# The Gnostic Myth



Monad

Aeons

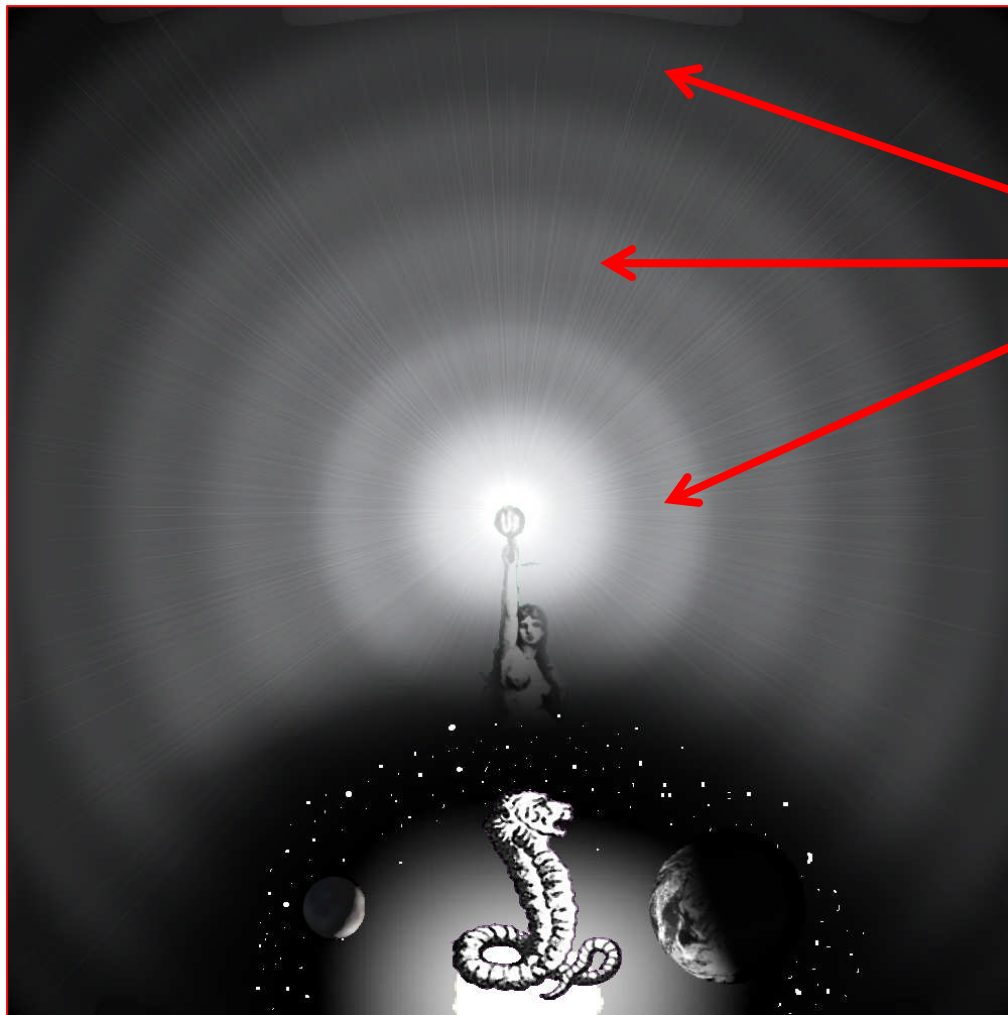
Pleroma

Sophia

Yaltaboath (Demiurge)

Archons

# The Gnostic Myth



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Aeons

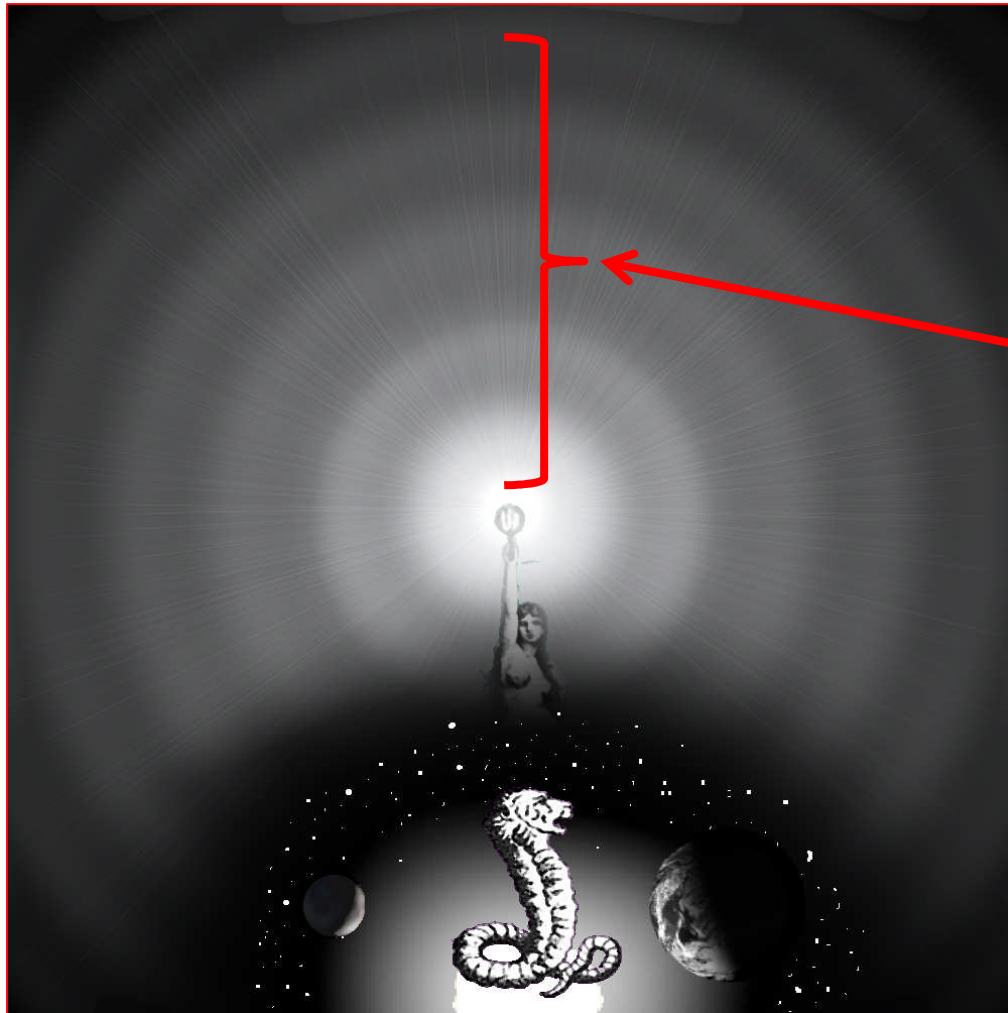
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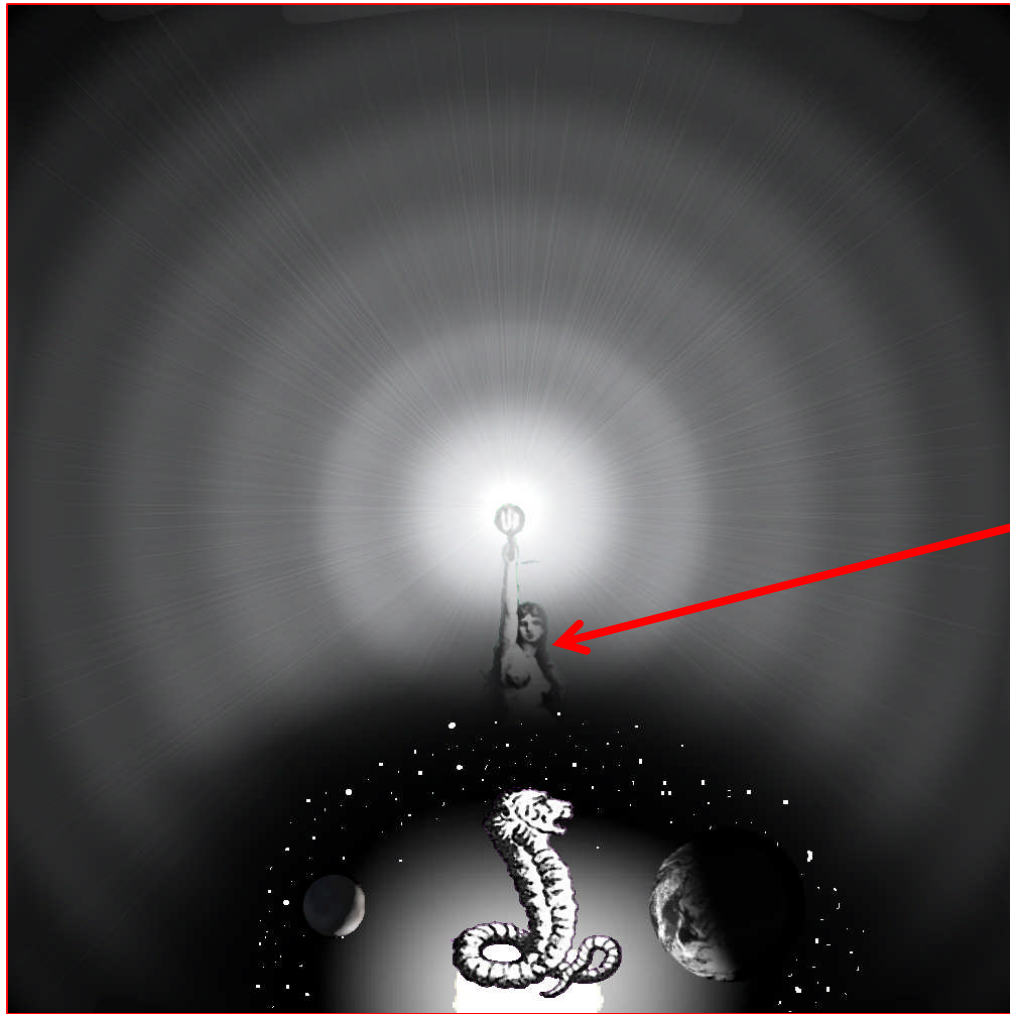
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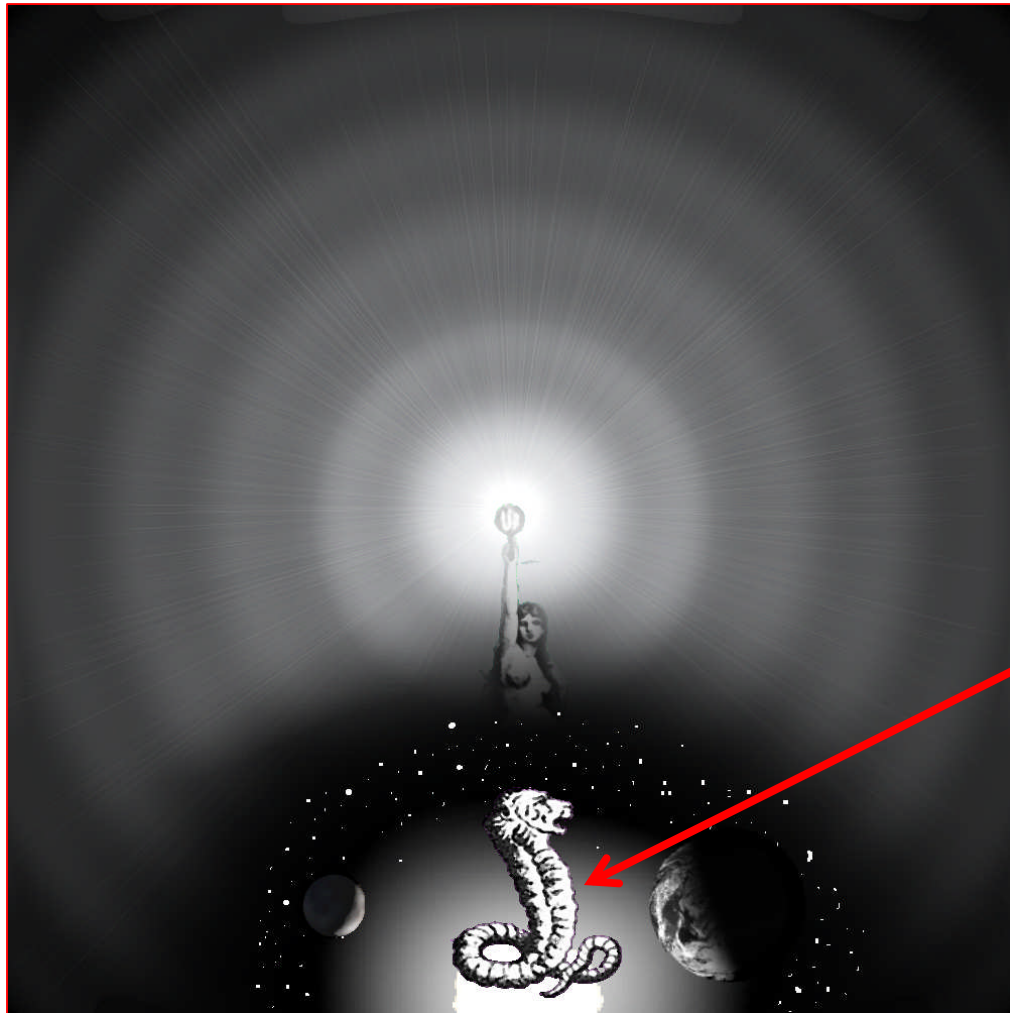
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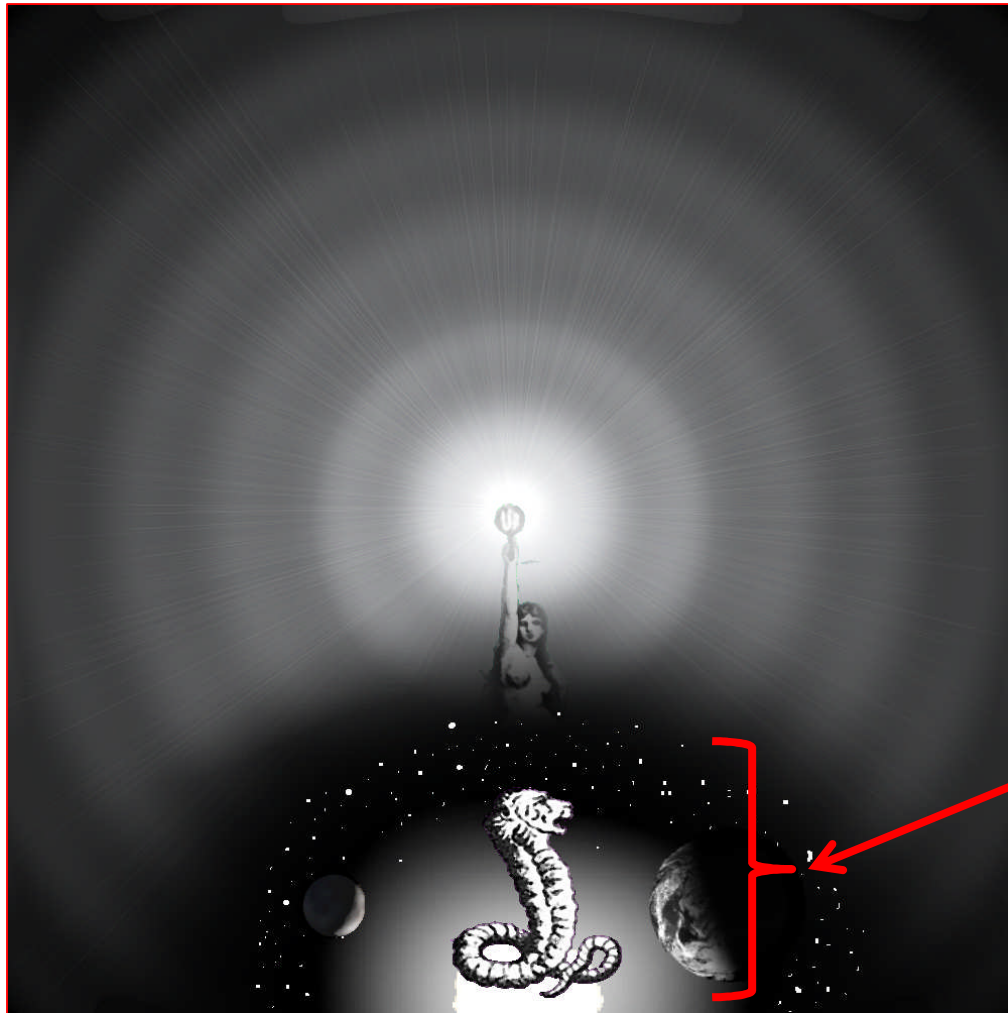
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# The Gnostic Myth



Monad

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# The Gnostic Archetypes

Monad	The “unnamed” One. He is beyond names and language. He represents the possibility of a new understanding of God, a non-God God, one not bound by culture, language, or local rituals.
Pleroma	The pleroma is the essential collectiveness of all humanity. It represents humanity’s truer, more authentic , pre-creation source of personhood, away from the “individualism” of the old order. For Jung it was the source of the higher Self.
Sophia	Her desire to act outside of the pleroma represents the essential evil of the assertion of individuality, the Fall. Her desire to restore what she had lost – by reuniting with her male counterpart – represents the power of (non-procreative) love (eros) to restore broken humanity.
Yaltabaoth	Yaltabaoth represents the “God of the old order,” the author of a delineated creation of distinct, named forms. He traps us through subservience to these formal principles, binding us to the false belief that we can articulate or discover “truth” through human language, discussion, or through this created order. (i.e. The Gods of religion; the implicit assumption of science)
Archons	These are the “powers that be,” the guardians of the gates, the masters of the universe. They rule the world through their “systems” like capitalism, individualism, patriarchalism, national boundaries, language, etc. (eg. Church, State, family, the father, the Koch brothers; Halliburton; etc.)



# Gnostic Salvation: the “old order”



## Gnostic salvation in juxtaposition to the orthodox Christian worldview:

1. God actively involved in creation, seeking to redeem it.
2. God works through created order to save us.
3. Each element of the salvation event is nameable, delineable, debatable.
4. Everything is a *redemption* of the created forms/order.

# Gnostic Salvation: the “old order”



**Such a world only leads to:**

- Conflict
- Localization
- Culture-bound religion
- Debate about words

# Gnostic Salvation: Escape



Salvation occurs when one can escape the old world order into the pleroma.

Salvation is outside of this cosmic realm.

The current world order and all its “systems” are seen as dark, deceptive, and even evil.

The Self becomes the locus of the salvation moment.

# Gnostic Antinomianism

**The Gospel of Philip: “Love [never calls] something its own... It never [says ‘This is yours’] or ‘This is mine.’”**

- Certain Gnostic sects (the Carpocratians) practiced property sharing
- For the millenarians, the Law (the Ten Commandments) was a post-Fall accommodation of the new reality. They sought a pre-Fall condition.
- The Ten Commandments exist because of the distinguishing (separating of) going on with the Creator and the created order (the basis of holiness):
  1. One God separate from others.
  2. Name separate from others.
  3. Day separate from others.
  4. Parental authority separate from others.
  5. My individuality separated from Other, granted dignity.
  6. My spouse set aside from others.
  7. My property bordered and separated from others, belongs to me.
  8. My reputation is protected.
  - 9/10. Don't even think about thinking differently.

# Gnostic Antinomianism (cont.)

**Gnostic antinomianism is about rebelling against the various implications of the Ten Commandments, all of which are seen as a post-Fall accommodation:**

1-3, God has no name. God transcends names, days, rituals, and doctrines.

4, Parental authority sets up “systems of patriarchalism.” (Rand Paul: “Parents own the children.” Joan Walsh, “‘Parents own the children’ is kind of creepy and paternalistic, a staple of right-wing thinking.”)

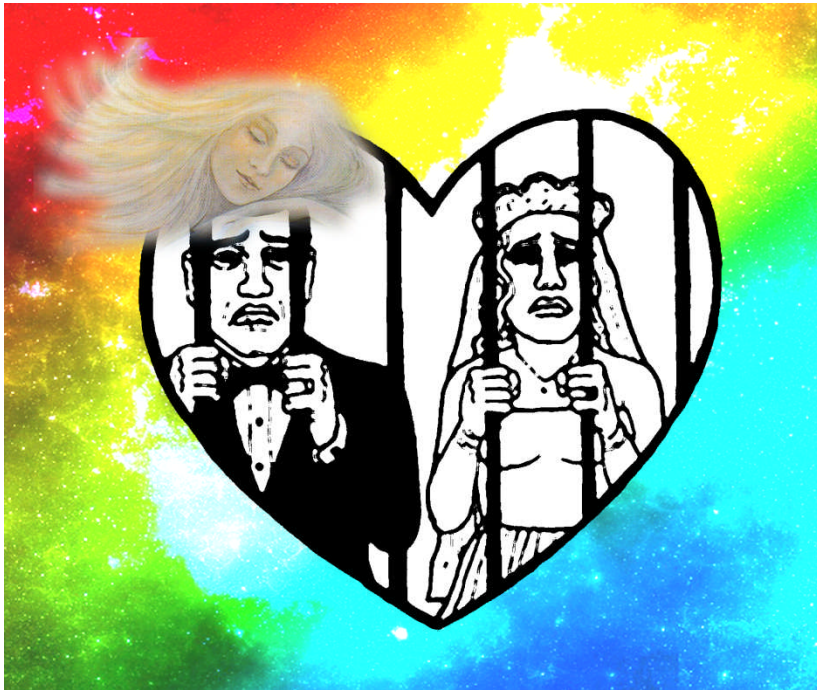
5, Death as escape, a good thing; the death cult; the love-death motif; cremation; body art, etc.

6, “New paradigms of marriage,” etc. Wife-sharing among Carpocratians, Cathars, et. Al. Obviously gay marriage. Gender abstracted from the physical person. (The homo-erotic element of Gnostic movement: Apocryphon of John’s androgyny, Gospel of Thomas’ biseuxality, Socrates, Bogomils, Free Spirit, etc.)

7, Property sharing; communalism, communism, collectivism. Individualism seen as a result of the Fall.



# Eros vs. Agape (Amor v. Roma)



## Eros vs. Agape: Why the Gnostics rejected marriage:

1. The Bridal Chamber ceremony represented a new understanding of love: a ritualized reunion of Sophia and her male counterpart, a very participation in the restoration of the cosmic disorder.
2. Marriage is an institution of the earth, binding us to an arrangement built on earthly rules.
3. Eros is the inner longing (passion) for the one who represents the pleroma for us (Sophia). Eros is liberation. Eros draws us into ourselves and out of our world. Sophia can have stand-ins, another human. Music best parallels eros (Schopenhauer, Wagner, troubadours, Sufis)
4. Agape requires a neighbor. It requires a neighbor. It creates a neighbor. It draws us into our world. But if the very existence of separate beings constitutes the Fall, this cannot be what true love is all about.
5. Marriage also perpetuates procreation, which only continues the cosmic breach, creating new neighbors.



# Case Study: Two Words

Romance: How a word meaning “languages derived from Latin” came to mean “a feeling of excitement and mystery associated with love.”

Passion: How a word meaning “suffering” came to mean “a very strong feeling about a person or thing.”

This is all about the transition of the meaning of love, from “the sacrificial giving of Self for the sake of Other” to “the yearning for return to Sophia and the Pleroma.”

# The Role of Eros in Antinomianism

The case of Donna Minkowitz: “I take sex as a sign of radical disobedience. Though I believe I’m obeying the Sublime One when I have sex, I also feel intensely that I’m fighting back, that each caress is a blow of sorts. But who is it a blow against? It’s a whack at all the forces that want to deprive me, want me to be...caged in... I love disobedience as much as I love sex itself, the rebel-god who topples earthly rules. Sexual chaos fights the ‘principalities and powers’ St. Paul warned about, ‘the rulers of the darkness of this age, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.’ Religious-right people love this verse and quote it all the time because at bottom their religion is, like mine, a Manichaean one.”



The surprising context of this quote...

# Iconoclasm Vs. “The Systems”

Gnostic salvation calls for liberation from all the mundane “systems” that define our world:

- (1) Gender constructs
- (2) Individualism; property rights
- (3) National borders; ethnicity
- (4) Marriage; family; patriarchy
- (5) Religion; rituals; dogma







BASKETBALL  
WITHOUT  
BORDERS

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# **classrooms without borders**

Open Minds. Open Hearts.



***MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES***  
***DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS***







*Musicians  
without  
Borders*





**SPORTS**  
**WITHOUT BORDERS**  
we're all on the same team



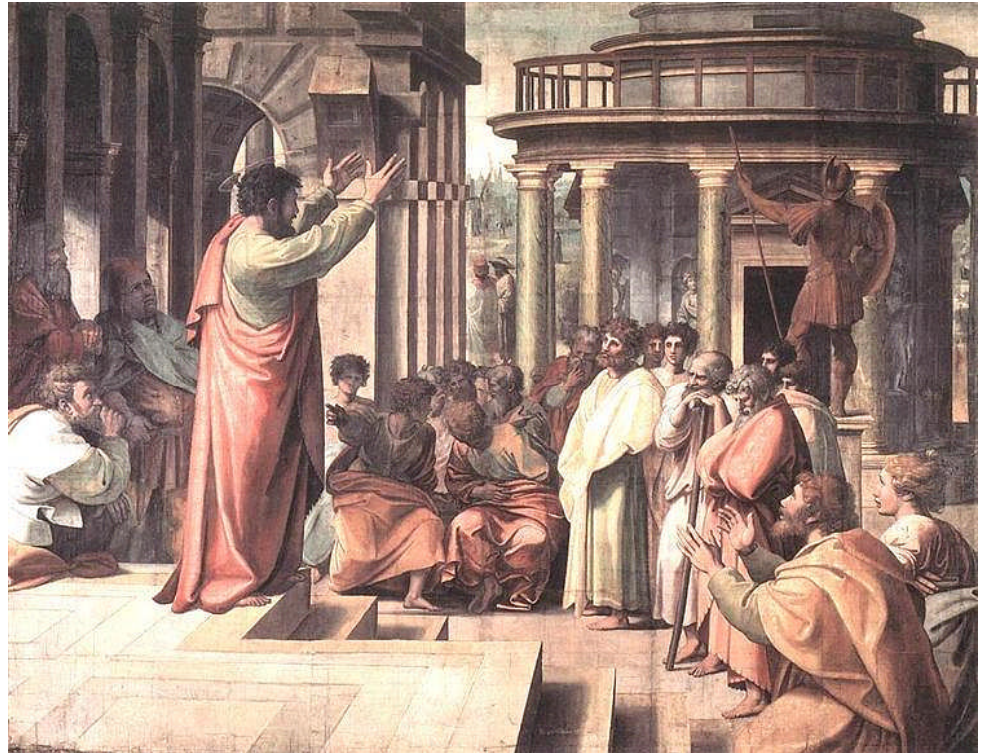
Development Through Service





# Acts 17: 26-27

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the **boundaries of their dwellings**, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”



# Part III

## **Gnosticism in culture, politics, and religion**



# Gnosticism and Culture

Culturally speaking, Gnosticism has reshaped what it means to be human in society. This has been an emerging story going involving the following chapters:

- (1) The emergence of the Self (late Middle Ages; early modernity: cogito ergo sum)
- (2) The Self as distinct and alienated from Other and Ego (“the Other in us”) (Ref. Existentialism)
- (3) The Self as tapped into the Pleroma (collective unconscious) through universal archetypes (phantasms) we see in myths, legends, novels, movies, music, etc. (Ref. Carl Jung)
- (4) Pop culture and consumerism become divinized, the Pleroma drawing egos into universal movement (though choice), the manifestation of their collective unconscious.
- (5) This turns the pop culture elites – the manipulators of the phantasoms – into magicians.



From a random blog entry (where I found this image):

“Watch out guys, I’ve got a theory... I propose that personality is like an onion - there is a core and layers built up around it, as shown below. So first up, the core: this is the raw person, who you really are. This may be formed when you are conceived or born, either way, it’s formed very early on. It is the true reason for the way you do things and why you do them... [etc. etc.]

***But onions have no core!***





# Re-constructing the Self

“At the threshold of his existence, standing with his back to the artificial past and his face toward absolute darkness, he finds his life, his very Self, to be a blank canvass. He is the artist. He must create who he will be and what will have meaning for him. Guiding his behavior are not commandments from Mt. Sinai... What matters most is not any sort of divine end or goal of all things, a telos, but the Will. Willing alone makes meaning, not the object of that will... my Self making choices.” (Gnostic America, 127)

# Who Chooses?

- (1) The archetypes living through me (manipulation of “new man” archetypes from media through me)
- (2) Marketing, the use of covetousness (Gnostic erotic longing) for a phantasm. (cf. Edward Barnays’ *Propaganda* (1928))
- (3) Music. From John Lennon: “We all want to change your head.” Hendrix: “Our music is shock therapy to help them realize a little more of what their goals should be. ...We’re making our music into electrical church music – a new kind of Bible, one you carry in your hearts...”
- (4) The Personality Test, from Gurdjieff: “Essence is the truth in man; personality is the false.”

# Gnosticism and Politics

Gnosticism in politics is the story of how apocalypticism fused with Gnosticism and yielded millenarianism, the belief that God's kingdom is emerging at a "new age" point in history through an elite group of saints in whom God communicates himself outside the context of the Church.



# Major Characters in this Story

Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202)

- The “New Age” prophet
- Divided history up into ages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- The “new age” of the spirit, his age, would be a time of immediate contact with the Lord, outside of the context of the Church

Bohemians, Anabaptists, Pietists, Puritans

- Millenarian movements gather around cult figures
- Iconoclasm toward “age of the Church” and its doctrines, symbols

Hegelianism and German Idealism; Prussia

- History is about the emergence of freedom in the conscience
- Reformation huge in his thinking; priesthood of all believers liberates the mind from ecclesiastical mediation
- Eventually, Christian ethics/teaching can be abstracted from doctrinal forms and reconstituted through political movement.

Revivalism, Communitarianism, the Social Gospel, and Progressivism

- Government is where the kingdom becomes manifest
- Government is the organic movement of freed, Christian consciences

# Gnosticism and Religion

## **Is Evangelicalism the Christian wing of the new age movement?**

- (1) All the “new paradigms” talk suggests a modalistic, new age understanding of the Trinity (cf: Joachim of Fiore)
- (2) The consumeristic focus, seeing worship as a product tailored to different stylistic “choices” evinces an existentialist “initiation” sacrament, that of the primacy of choice.
- (3) The ecstatic moment is manufactured with music. Music becomes the new sacrament of communion. (Cf. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wagner, etc.)
- (4) “God is bigger than the perfect tense.” Once the formal principle is removed (regula fidei, confessions, tradition, magisterium, etc.), idiosyncratic readings rooted in the Self dominate.
- (5) The natural evolution of evangelical movement into universalism: the abstracting of the “essence” of Christianity as the quixotic quest for “authentic” or primitive Christianity.



# Thoughts/Questions Going Forward

## (1) Theologian as exorcist

Dealing with Gnosticism almost requires a form of cultural exorcism. A “spirit” has possessed our Church and culture, and there doesn’t seem to be anyway to stop the movement.

In exorcisms, one of the steps requires “naming the demon.” Demons, like Gnosticism, hate being named. To name is to control (see Adam), something the Gnostics realize and hate.

Our task is to identify and label what these movements are, and counter them with our confession of the incarnate (shaped, formed, designated, NAMED) Logos.

(2) Was Luther dealing with a Gnostic movement, in terms of a heightened attention toward the Self, a universalist political movement (the papacy), and the lurking enthusiasm of the mystics?

(3) To what extent does the decline of fatherhood and the rise of single-parent led families parallel the spiritual changes of our culture?

# Thoughts for Further Study

- (1) Egypt (hieroglyph) vs. Israel (letters) as typological enemies.
- (2) The development of the concept of daimones in Hellenistic thought.
- (3) Luther and the Rosicrucians. Is it a non-starter? (Hermeticism + Lutheranism = Pietism)