

THE Gnostic IMAGINATION:

SOME AMERICAN ASPECTS

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With my classical training I would not be happy if I could not divide the paper into three parts. 1. The first part, but not at too great length, shall deal with the historical reality of the gnostic mind and of what I am tonight calling the gnostic imagination. 2. In the second part I shall pay less respect to historical terms and shall deal with a more wide ranging understanding of the gnostic imagination; I shall use the historical image to create a wider image and definition of many parallel phenomena that are structurally related but that, historically, never themselves heard of gnosticism. 3. Before I come to the third section I will already have been talking of American aspects, but the whole third section will be as solidly American as the State of Maine.

Let me say this early that I think we are dealing with a question of substance, and of national substance, when we are dealing with gnosticism. I am not saying that the historical thing that scholarship calls gnosticism is that important - although although it indeed was for early Christianity. But I do think the wider sense I will give the word covers a set of facts that are critically important. Let me say that, and let you say that remainsto be seen, and let us get on with the matter.

Very well, but before we get on too fast with the matter, let us pick a genus of fact and a general image for both gnosticism and its imagination, an image and a fact that will begin to reveal the significance of our gnostic theme. The fact and the image is one of alienation. For gnosticism God is alien to the world, and the world is an alien, a hostile alien, alien to God and man. Let us

think of that thing in the middle, that is to say, the world out there, as alien and an enemy. This is a central image we may keep referring to as we get on with the subject of gnosticism.

But since this particular image is not quite sharp enough, let me choose another in the same vein, but much sharper. A scholar of the gnostic, Hans Jonas, suggests a remarkable affinity between the central drives of the original historical gnosticism and some of our existentialist tastes of existence. Acting on this clue I went looking and re - looking through some things and came up with this image from the very last lines of Albert Camus' novel The Stranger (of whose sharpness no one will doubt.) All but the last few lines I shall read as ironic, and it is important finally to think only of these last few lines, for they are the gnostic image of the hostile alien world carried to its ultimate conclusion:

Almost for the first time in many months I thought of my mother. And now, it seemed to me, I understood why at her life's end she had taken on a "fiance"; why she'd played at making a fresh start. There, too, in that Rome where lives were flickering out, the dusk came as a mournful solace. With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration. (Vintage edition: pp. 153 - 154)

Thus man is in the relationship of Stranger to a strange universe which reacts to him with howls of execration.

I

We can begin our backward movement into history by a brief look at two other cultures or ways of looking at the world that run in a very rough historical parallel with gnosticism: Greek civilization and Christianity.

Surely we can say of Greece, as we cannot say of Gnosticism, that through the substance of its growth and at the highest and clearest points of its development it never conceived of a radical gap between man and reality. The Greeks thought of themselves as a part of the Cosmos, and they thought of the Cosmos with reverence. The gnostic thought of the Cosmos as alien, and he thought of it with contempt. True, there could be vengeful and sullen parts and laws in nature that were destructive of the human. There were also blind mechanical forces that were far from human in their ways, but even such Furies did not make the Greek give up; in the Eumenides Aeschylus masters even these and turns them into gracious human spirits. They remain an expression of law and of cosmic law, but to some extent at least they are understood, humanized, and accepted. The pain remains for man, but it does not come from something that is altogether a hostile stranger:

And what exactly is the change that has taken place in the Furies, to explain this change of attitude in the play? Is it that they have given up their claim for a purely mechanical working of the Law that the Doer must suffer, and have accepted Athena's principle that not only the deed shall be considered, but everything that caused or surrounded the deed. They accept _____ the sanctity of the spirit which persuades and hears Persuasion; that is, they will listen to Persuasion and will think again. They become no longer a mechanical Law of Retribution which operates blindly; but a law which thinks and feels and seeks real Justice.

(Gilbert Murray on Aeschylus)

In Plato (in the Sophist and in the Timaeus) there is an ever more astonishing statement of the deep fundamental kinship of man and the universe. For the great categories of human knowledge (Being, The Same, The Other, Motion, and Rest) are precisely and also the fundamental structures of the cosmos.

For the gnostic not even the beginning of such a relationship could exist or develop. The thought would be unholy. Not because the cosmos was so holy that it should be approached with naked feet and bowed head, or not at all. Rather it is so evil that it should not be approached by the spirit of man at all. It has been created by lesser gods than God (the Archons or rulers). The universe is a great prison and the earth is the innermost prison. Unless indeed we shall say that the body and even the soul of man is the innermost prison. The function of gnosis and the gnostic religion is to bring two and only two pure realities together: God and an innermost point in man that we can call the spirit.

Every thing else in between these two things is an obstacle to the redemption of man and the unity of these two things. Everything else, therefore is "alien." And we must live the life of aliens within it. Man, therefore, is "lonely, unprotected, uncomprehended, and uncomprehending." I do not see how the gnostic picture of the world differs much from that of the world as devil attacking man. This then is how we begin to describe the taste things have for the gnostic imagination over against the Greek imagination. One word that will summarize its attitude toward things is the word contempt.

I will spend only a moment in the ever more extraordinary gap between this kind of imagining and what we will call the new Christian taste of the world. There are so many apparent pieties in the gnostic view of things, so much seeming virtue in its contempt of the world that it is just that much more important to realize how much, in the moment of truth, it became the great enemy of Christianity. The final opposition is total. But the superficial resemblance is still fooling us. Christianity was fighting its way toward a clearer and clearer dialectical awareness of the truth that human acts, these simplest of all cosmic acts, were acts of God

in the Incarnation. It was not even a question of what taste things had for the Divine Person, as though we were talking about things outside of Him to which He might respond in a gnostic or a Greek way. They were His own acts; He learned the alphabet, he ate, drank, used the earth properly to support His feet or else He would have fallen, he suffered and He, the Divine Person, died. The gnostic could respond by avoiding the issue, by declaring that this was only a seeming body. So Simon Magus is apparently speaking of himself and Christ when he says that "he appeared as a man, though he was not one, and was thought to have suffered in Judaea, though he did not suffer." (108)

Ever since then we too have been fighting the same gnostic battle. We say of the Gnostics, "who were they?" when the answer very often is "tu es iste vis" - thou art that man. The gnostic version of the reality is the half of the soul and the imagination of every man. It goes on in the soul of every Christian, and it still bothers every theologian. You mention the idea to many learned Christologists that Christ learned the alphabet and was helpless without his mother, and it is reasonably sure to produce an explanation that Christ really had infused ideas of all kinds, he knew everything, he knew all about the atom bomb and understood even the Gregorian calendar. We come very close to the position of Simon Magus: He learned the alphabet but he really did not; he had a mother according to the final triumphant statement of the Council of Ephesus, but he really did not need her. We must not blaspheme by thinking that he really became man, that he actually could not physically go further, that he simply had to give up under these circumstances and die.

The evidence is strong that whenever reality is or looks too difficult there is a tendency to fly into some gnostic version of reality. A scholar of gnosticism thinks that catastrophic events or the threat of them always lead to such constructions in the imagination. So far as such developments among the Jews were

concerned he points out that two revolts against the Romans had failed. "God had given no sign that he would deliver his people." There are rabbinical texts "which strongly suggest that many Jews came to doubt the cardinal attributes of God: his omnipotence, his omniscience, and his providential care."

Another factor in the historical reality of the gnostic imagination was its extraordinary mixing of the tastes of asceticism and freedom. If the world was evil then we should abstain from it; but if it is evil it is also true that its laws, then, are evil, and have no power over us. Indeed it would be a sin for us who are the children of God to observe them. Moreover, we who know, we gnostics, we the elite, we who alone have knowledge, must have these forms of knowledge too. So the gnostic must experience all things, this being the only way to destroy the wicked law of a wicked God. We can see how difficult it must have been for the young Christian Church, with this on its hands, to encourage the creative work of a free imagination.

We will see the development of many branches of this element of the gnostic imagination throughout the Middle Ages. You will find a fascinating account of many of them in Norman Cohn's book The Pursuit of the Millennium. Sometimes these elite groups are called the Brethren of the Free Spirit, or the adepts of the Free Spirit. Certainly some of them called themselves the perfect. "Many instances have been recorded," says Cohn "of heretics saying that the Virgin and Christ had stopped short of perfection required of the 'subtle in Spirit.' In England there was the set called the Ranters. Finally, many of them, released from such a world and such a law, thought they were God and omnipotent.

Such an imagination will always be extremely competent in expelling all evil from its own soul and in always finding it in a projection onto the outside. It will be a past master in inventing scapegoats. If, for example, there were not Jews to blame for everything the gnostic imagination would invent them.

II

I am beginning to make increasingly general remarks about the gnostic imagination and am fast approaching a look at some of the ways it is operative in the American imagination. I feel that not only was there a specifically historical thing called the gnostic imagination; but there always will be. The way I frequently put it to myself, in terms of historical metaphors, is that there always will be a Hebraic imagination, and there will always be a gnostic imagination, and there will always be a conflict between them. America and our generation are no exception.

If I may stick in a strict way, for the sake of clarity, to the essential structures of the historical idea, two things will summarize gnosticism. For there are two and only two points of goodness or beauty or salvation: 1. one is in man, a perfect spot, a perfect faculty, a secret gift, the place and version and imagination; 2. There is a secret place in reality which alone is good, divine, beautiful, a safe fortress if only you can get to it, whether you call it God, or beauty, or the Hebrides, or Atlantis, or Hawaii, or America. Everything else is ugly, evil, dangerous, alien. These two things take many forms. I am only suggesting a general structure for many forms.

Let me express an opinion in a very literal example of the conflict between the Hebraic and the gnostic imagination - an opinion with which some of you will disagree. It is an opinion about something that sits a few miles from here - Dali's painting of the Sacrament of the Last Supper. Obviously a painting of a Hebraic-Christian fact, it is at the farthest pole from the Hebraic imagination. The Hebraic imagination is full of reality. This phantasy dissolves reality. It is occult, a dream. No one looks at Christ and Christ looks at no one. Christ is pagan. No man like this man was ever born on land or sea. The inner imagination has substituted its own inner reality for the outer. It has overcome the alien

world. In this way it comes close to the art of Hollywood (Denis de Rougemont). And I remind myself that in his book Love and the Western World Denis de Rougemont has elaborated on this gnostic tendency not only in the western world but also in the western part of our own country.

This is one of the most recurring habits of the gnostic imagination - to be perpetually falling back on some absolutely central point in itself - deep deep deep within the psirit where it can declare an isle of safety against an alien and dangerous world. The isle and the retreat can take many forms. The most immediate and the most recent form that I have seen is the film Dr. Strangelove directed by Stanley Kubrick. The most underlying theme is that not only the crazy among the military are crazy but that everybody else is crazy - everybody, that is, save the director. He possesses an imagination superbly released from all the instinctual laws that make a good joke - anything that occurs to his holy and senseless imagination goes. Here the imagination is its own law. Another striking example of the impervious right of the inner light is After the Fall by Arthur Miller. The title should be: to hell with Marilyn Monroe that nice girl - or in the better words of Chokhov's character commenting in The Sea Gull on the death of another nice woman: "A fine subject for a short story. - That is to say again, if it occurs to the divine imagination, the damned thing, I mean the divine thing, must be said.

- So this is the divinely free imagination. Another form of the gnostic imagination is what we might call the innocent imagination. The world is mad, in fact it is mad mad mad mad mad. I alone am not. My imagination alone is a spark that cannot be quenched. I walk innocent through a world of thieves, a world of evil, and I emerge beaten but triumphant. In the theatre this is the basic assumption behind the technique and vision of such plays as Paul Green's Johnny Johnsons, or Robert Sherwood's Idiot's Delight. Others have suggested that it is one of the basic attitudes toward the world of Huckleberry Finn. I think it is the offending quality in the direction of Dr. Strangelove. Surely it is the basic characteristic

of the western, that the bad are bad and the good are good and the good guys always win. This is a pious thought, but like many pious thoughts it is not true.

Still another form, if I may continue with this enumeration, is the kind of mind and imagination that alone is in on the know. This is the high advantage of certain symbolic systems and general abracadabra, that it can be made an exclusive club. If you believe in that kind of film criticism, then you will be the only people who understand the symbolism behind the art of Ingmar Bergman - except that you are liable to be hoisted on your own petard for the simple reason that there is very little symbolism in his pictures. At any rate this is the fun of being a gnostic: Only the Freudians know what Freud meant, and only they know the symbols. Only God knows what Browning meant. This of course may also be one of the very great values of specialisation, that there you are, alone in your glory or with a few well chosen friends. This may have been the reason why I chose to work so hard on Plato's Parmenides. It may be why people in this country join the Knights of Columbus and other such groups.

I wish that all the books of the gnostic imagination were pleasant, interesting, or funny. There are a number of books which some of you know better than I and which reveal the more horrible works of the more modern gnostics - all the way from the revolutionaries who alone possess the truth or are willing to crush the other nine tenths of the world to get to it, as in the Possessed of Dostoevsky, or a Hitler who thought that if his bunker and his imagination must come down then the rest of the world should come down with it. Some of the good books on the subject of Gnosticism in politics are Eric Voegelen's The Science of Politics; Father de Lubac's The Drama of Atheist Humanism. Albert Camus' The Rebel - and that great novel The Possessed. I have gone far afield, but no more than some of these men.

I think the reality of the paper has come closer to the: Gnostic Imagination
Some American Aspects. I don't want you to conceive that I have been or will paint
a terrible picture of the American Imagination. I have been picking some aspects of
the American imagination, as I would of my own. Some tendencies in some of these
directions. It would be a natural temptation for me simply to go through a series of
American intellectuals and show that they are an elite in a certain semi-gnostic way,
but I would rather deal with some of the problems of the imagination of the
American people themselves.

There are two things in America's thinking about herself that I would like
to mention in an evening of talk about Gnosticism.

First of all there is her concept of herself in Space, and secondly there is
her concept of herself in Time.

Surely I am not going too far from the truth if I suggest that she has conceived
of herself as we have very often conceived of her, as surrounded by an alien world;
that we are a point, and how often have we not thought that we are the point of
goodness and safety-to a degree this is correct but this is all a matter of degree.
Many of us have had a tendency to think of ourselves as an eternal point as I suggested
once to someone: that the American Republic might not have the same eternity as
the Catholic Church, and he looked at me sternly and said: that is Communism! So
America is a refuge from evil. And how have we often looked on others - that others
are aliens, questionable, potentially evil. They're alone, above all everything that is
meant when we use the word alien. There is the concept of melting down everybody
into the beauty and the glory of the new melting pot - the rejection (of. American Art)
in this country of cultural pluralism for the melting pot idea - give up your
dancing - give up your music - for the melting pot. And what has often come out of
it is these tremendous sacrifices. In cultural pluralism you see, nobody would be
an alien. There is such a thing as an Americanism which we have to keep our eye on.

One therefore must become non-alien. And every generation that wins the fight tends to keep the next newcomer - what? - an alien - he is an alien - we were aliens - now, thank God another group has come along - they are the aliens - I am no longer the alien. There is a curious and historically understandable sense in which I would suspect that Protestant and Catholic Theologians have taken different parts with relation to this particular problem of Americanism. Indeed we have been a kind of Protestant country and I would say that Americans have been anxious to prove that they were Americans (cf. Catholics). The protestant theologian has if anything taken the initiative in questioning the current of any excessive Americanism moving in a religious or theological direction.

What occurs to me is the novel of Cozzens, By Love Possessed. The leading character has an ironic way of putting in reverse the truth I am at this moment trying to articulate. The character breaks out and screams out under a moment of pressure. He says, "I want to tell this country that there is only one kind of person that can be a goat in this country, that can be attacked by every other group, and he has to be American, he has to be from New England, he has to be White,, he has to be Protestant. He is the only one who can be made a villain now. The whole thing has been reversed.

Of our image in Time, Richard Lewis has suggested in a book called the American Adam that, just as we are the only point in space, so we are perpetually seeking for the only point in time, absolutely good and pure. Not from every other point in space now, but from every other point in time - from the past. And into this fits completely the spirituality of obsolescence, for example. So, Richard Lewis speaks in his book, of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure:

and an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race, an individual standing alone, self-reliant and selfpropelled, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal man. His moral

position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent.....of history.

So nobody can blame anything on us either... "And America since the age of Emerson," his opinion is, "has persistently been a one-generation culture..." constantly trying to invent a view of a new world in the complete sense. No one answers for what occurs before his time in American society. As de Tocqueville said, "In America, society seems to live from hand to mought, like an army in the field."

One burden I suggest exists in this notion of the American Adam is the notion that you have to wake up every morning completely ready to create a new world. You can fall back on nothing. We must question everything. Therefore you are on the perpetual qui vive. Therefore you get into the astonishingly ironic position of being in a completely moral world. We must question everything whether it is right or wrong. You get some of this in advertising, and mothers get in in how to take care of children...is this right? Wrong? It is not that we have simply decided that nine-tenths of what we do in our culture is this, and that's that! No we must start all over again and question everything and instead of giving us freedom it creates a totally hopelessly hoplessly moralistic world in which we have to question everything in order to get a good sleep!

There is just one other point I would suggest. The thought of the American - one of his great phrases has been: God helps those who help themselves. Let us spend a few minutes examining this imaginative American phrase. What does it involve?

I am terribly afraid it involves for one thing the concept of a jungle. God helps those who help themselves, and God help you if you don't help yourself - nobody else will. You are living in a jungle - it is the old fashioned definition of an old-fashioned captialism - not altogether old, either.

Father Lynch:

Here is the G. U. paper - please excuse the rough spots, but I assume you will want to make some changes in the form anyway, from the recording, I was unable to get everything, because there are some sound deficiencies - especially the quote from the Japanese psychiatrist - but I know that article, and can look it up and copy the citation, if you like.

JCD

There are so many suggestions in it of an evil world, of being surrounded by an evil world and of being a stranger: God Helps those who helps themselves!

I have found an interesting article by a Japanese psychiatrist on this point. The Japanese are not afraid to ask to be helped. They do not have this problem - they have others, but they do not have this one.

Certainly I would agree, and all the theologians present would agree that all the great battles around grace have certainly moved in the opposite direction and toward the absolute necessity of help even if we are to be human, much less divine.