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# Gnostic Dilemmas in Western Psychologies of Spirituality<sup>1</sup>

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Early Gnosticism is identified as a form of Weber's inner-worldly mysticism that, following the critique of Plotinus, entailed spiritual metapathologies of inflated grandiosity, despair, and/or social withdrawal. These vulnerabilities re-emerge in the naturalistic psychologies of spirituality begun by Emerson, Nietzsche, Jung, and Maslow and more implicitly within contemporary personality and neuropsychological research on numinous/transpersonal experience. An updated version of Gnostic dilemma and its conflicted dualism may be endemic to any would-be science of the spiritual and to much current transpersonal psychology as well.

## Gnostic Dilemmas in Western Psychologies of Spirituality

From the perspective of the sociology of world religions developed by Max Weber (1963), figures such as Nietzsche, Emerson, Jung, Heidegger, and Maslow—in their overlapping attempts at a broadly “naturalistic” understanding of spirituality—are exemplars of a contemporary “inner-worldly” mysticism. It is “inner” or “this-worldly” in terms of their attempts to understand an experiential core of spirituality as a specifically *human* capacity. Inner-worldly mysticisms are directly cultivated while living within the everyday social world, in contrast to the ashrams, monasteries, or caves of the classical “other-worldly” mysticisms. Weber's colleague Ernst Troeltsch (1960) anticipated that naturalistically understood inner-worldly mysticisms would emerge as the “secret religion of the educated classes,” consequent on the continuing secularization of the more prophetically based, mainstream Judeo-Christian tradition. This development is well illustrated in both “New Age” spiritualities and in the emergence of transpersonal psychology itself (Hunt, 2003).

To paraphrase Weber on the Protestant Reformation as one source of the “spirit of capitalism,” we could now say that just as historical capitalism needed the ethical attitude to one's vocation as sacred, so our current society of individuals, autonomous and separate to the point of isolation, may not be fully liveable without the sense of presence, felt reality, or Being

cultivated by the more contemplative spiritual traditions. However inevitable and needed this development, such a direct consciousness of the immediacy of Being seems especially vulnerable to the emotional trauma and frustration attendant on any radical personal openness in the midst of a less than supportive utilitarian society—and especially where vulnerabilities in sense of self and self esteem are so widespread. Weber, for instance, spoke of the attitude of “broken humility” associated with inner-worldly spirituality, while Jung saw dangers of a defensive, compensatory “inflation” in modern self-realization. It may not be an accident that recent transpersonal psychology has been increasingly exploring the close interrelationship between spiritual experience and character “metapathologies” related to narcissistic grandiosity, schizoid withdrawal, and despair (Almaas, 1988; Hunt, 1998, 2000, 2003).

Inner-worldly mysticism in the modern west has its historical “shadow” in Hellenistic Gnosticism, for Weber the multifaceted spiritual response of disenfranchised educated classes to Roman hegemony. “Gnosis” comes from the Greek *Nous*—for intelligence/universal mind—and referred to a knowing of the divine by direct experience and acquaintance rather than by any received doctrine. Its various forms include but are hardly exhausted by the Egyptian Hermeticists, heterodox Christian Valentinians, Persian Manichees, and heretical Sethians. Its multiple forms are so diverse that some have doubted whether Gnosticism could have any defining essence (Williams, 1996). Indeed, some Jungian scholars have rather loosely generalized the

term into an equivalent of any directly experiential inner-worldly spirituality (Avens, 1984; Segal, 1995). Yet in his *Enneads*, Plotinus, the very exemplar of a fully developed Neo-Platonic unitive mysticism, was clear that the “so-called Gnostics” represented a “something” he did not like, based on a spiritual pathology of psychic inflation—which in hindsight may well indicate some of the difficulties of expanding consciousness while in the everyday social world of Roman rule. Perhaps it is not so different today.

In contrast to the all-inclusive One or Absolute of Plotinus, the Gnostics, to the extent we can generalize about them in the manner of Jonas (1963) or Filoramo (1990), were thoroughly dualist. The creation of the world and ordinary humanity is the work of a Demiurge—a lesser god variously characterized as malevolent, demented, or simply ignorant. The task of the Gnostic adept—the pneumatic—is to bypass this lesser god of lower humanity and regain his/her original condition as a pure being of light on the level of the Absolute. This original human condition is alternately understood as the primal Anthropos and/or the spiritual nature of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Most Gnostic groups provided elaborate mytho-poetic accounts and secret rituals to bypass the cosmos of the lower creator god in visionary states and after death. The result, in terms of the ordinary social world, was a nihilist and essentially paranoid attitude and a personal elitism and grandiosity of self—what Maslow (1971) would later term spiritual “metapathologies” and William James (1902) “theopathies.” We will see later how similar frustrations are implicit within contemporary New Age “idealizations” of a world-rejecting “transcendence” and in the parallel psychologies of its corresponding “new science.”

### **Some Specimens of Gnostic Vulnerability and Metapathology**

1) Consider first the Judaic books of Enoch, ranging between 100 B.C. to perhaps 400 A.D., and often seen as precursors to the early Kabbalah. Here it is as if a layer of visionary shamanism has been laid over the more prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Enoch is suddenly raised through the seven heavens to behold Yahweh face to face, which would of course have annihilated even Moses. To ensure that ordinary mortals later seeing Enoch will not themselves be destroyed by his necessarily transformed visage, which must other-

wise mirror the sight of Yahweh, his face is first frozen by an angel of ice. God then uses him to rebuke the angels as now lesser than this fullest potential of natural humanity. Later Enoch is also shown Satan and the fallen angelic “watchers,” who had sinned with human women and brought forth giants. These are imprisoned in the lower heavens. By Enoch II, Enoch has been raised permanently to the heavens as the “son of man,” while in Enoch III he has become Metatron—the lesser Yahweh—and finally presides with God over heaven and earth (Charlesworth, 1983).

This typically Gnostic equation of humanity and God is also echoed in Egyptian Hermeticism in increasingly grandiose terms:

For the human is a godlike living thing, not comparable to other living things of the earth but to those in heaven above, who are called gods. Or better—if one dare tell the truth—the one who is really human is above these gods as well....For none of the heavenly gods will go down to earth, leaving behind the bounds of heaven, yet the human rises up to heaven and takes its measure....Therefore, we must dare to say that the human on earth is a mortal god but that the god in heaven is an immortal human. (In Copenhaver, 1992, p. 36)

2) It is but a short step from Enoch and the Hermetic Anthropos to the Sethians, Ophites, and Barbélos (Layton, 1987). The creator god is now a Satan-like monster, Ialdabaoth, who creates the world and most of humanity out of his demented ignorance and delusional omnipotence. Sophia (Barbélo), the feminine aspect of the light of the Absolute, so the elaborate mytho-poiesis goes, finds herself temporarily separated from the One. Out of her sense of loneliness and abandonment, she creates a new being entirely out of herself, i.e. narcissistically. Because of her separation from the Absolute, this turns out to be the monster, Ialdabaoth, with the head of a lion and a body of serpents—perhaps itself a satire of the Roman Mithra. Horrified by her creation she flings it into the abyss. Coming to himself, Ialdabaoth assumes he is omnipotent but alone and so creates his own cosmos, with the archons, or planetary gods, to help in its rule, and human beings as a replica of himself—in some accounts creating Eve first, in others Adam. Accordingly, the first human is made of clay and wormlike, but Sophia secretly imbues and redeems it with her higher pneuma. Dimly sensing her inner

superiority, Ialdabaoth and his Archons pursue Eve and rape her, thereby giving rise to Cain and Abel. The pure pneuma of Eve escapes into the serpent, in these satiric inversions of Genesis, who later instructs her as to her true spiritual nature—thus the Ophites, or serpent worshippers.

Meanwhile only Seth and his descendants are truly born of the higher Adam and Eve, so only these are predestined in terms of their pneuma to ascend to the level of the Anthropos and reunite with the Absolute. All other human beings are thereby of a lower order and lost, remaining under the sway of Ialdabaoth, who in a later terminology is the equivalent of a Satanic ruler of the world—all this in hyper-detailed versions of what Jung would term “active imagination.” The “deficitly motivated” non-Sethians, in other words, lack the genetic capacity for any full Maslowian “self actualization” or Jungian individuation.

3) The key distinctions, then, for the later Christian Valentinians, as with the Sethians, become those between the spiritually elect “pneumatics,” vs. the more ordinary “psychics”—who can have no direct experience of the numinous but only an indirect access through the ethical teachings of the Bible—vs. the lowest “people of clay.” Pneumatics are already pure and so not bound by ordinary ethics—in Nietzsche’s later version they are “beyond good and evil.” No conduct can sully such inherent purity, as reflected in the words of Ptolemy, the major student of Valentinus:

Just as the element that consists in “dust” cannot have a share in salvation—for ...it is not capable of receiving it—so also the spiritual element ...cannot receive corruption, no matter what sorts of behavior it has come to pass its time in company with. For a piece of gold does not lose its beauty when it is put into filth but rather keeps its own nature, since the filth cannot harm the gold. (Layton, 1987, p. 294)

Thus follow the “antinomian” tendencies of at least some of the Gnostics, so notorious to both Plotinus and the early Church Fathers (Jonas, 1963; LaCarriere, 1989). They proclaimed themselves free of traditional ethics, as in Simon Magus, who wandered through Palestine in the years after the death of Jesus, accompanied by Helena, an ex-prostitute whom he claimed to be the incarnation of Sophia, and preaching free love as the closest earthly parallel to the realms of light. There would be echoes of similar accusations with the medieval Brethren of the Free Spirit and the

later heretical Ranters and Levellers of the English civil war (Cohn, 1961).

4) Related suspicions of “libertinism”—the sexual acting out of spirituality—were directed toward Valentinus and his “mystery of the bridal chamber”. This was the sacred marriage of the adept’s pneuma—considered here as feminine—with one’s corresponding male angel, thereby undoing the separation of Adam and Eve and reconstituting the original spirit of humanity as the Christos. It is unclear in these heterodox Christian groups whether this “sacred marriage” remained an interior symbolic imagination, a purely ritual expression, and/or an actual ceremonial sexuality. We will see a similar ambiguity in Jung’s 1920s understanding of the inner marriage of anima and animus as constituting the higher, individuated Self.

From the point of view of the unitive, nondual mysticism of Plotinus, those he called Gnostics were unwittingly enshrining and fixating a spiritual pathology. He sees them as under the sway of Narcissus, when the more appropriate model would be Odysseus—who on completing his worldly task simply turns and sails for Ithaca as his true home. Plotinus locates in Gnosticism a grandiosity—or in Jung’s terms an “ego inflation”—that will block the humility and surrender needed for the full numinous experience of an all-unifying Absolute:

We must not exalt ourselves in a boorish way, but with moderation, and without raising ourselves higher up than our nature is able to make us rise; we must not rank ourselves alone after God, but recognize that there is room for other beings in his presence....If a person who had been previously humble...were to hear “You are the son of God; those others, whom you used to hold in awe, are not sons of God” ...then do you really think other people are going to join in the chorus? (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, in Hadot, 1993, p. 67)

Plotinus also attacks the Gnostics for their dualism, which leaves them paradoxically over-involved in the very social world they would flee as a cosmos of pure evil. For them the starry night is an emblem of evil, in contrast to the more inclusive pantheism of Plotinus, wherein the beauty of nature foreshadows the higher aesthetic impact of Divine Light. For Plotinus, Gnosticism is an incomplete spirituality that necessarily imbalances its followers.

Jung too acknowledged the dangers of inflation and splitting as attendant on contemporary spiritual

self-realization, which certainly did not mean he himself escaped them. The classicist Arthur Darby Nock (1972) locates a similar danger: For all the Gnostic claims of the experience of mystery—the willingness to abide in not-knowing and ineffability since the full numinous is outside all categories—they are curiously lacking in “negative capability.” The heavens are instead astonishingly hyper-detailed, with ornate mythologies of Sophia, intricately nested levels, evil archons, and bridal chambers. Jung had spoken of the ease of confusing ego and self in self-realization, and the Gnostics often show an active imagination overspecified to the point of delusive paranoia. Mythopoetic imagination and transpersonal states certainly open awareness, but also have the potential for an unintended expression and expansion of ego, thereby enshrining the anxiety over dissolution (Rank, 1941) and defensive schizoid hatred (Guntrip, 1968) that are at its contracted core. Accordingly it may not be too extreme to see in the elitism and insistent dualism of some Gnostics a “metaphysics of hate.”

**Manifestations of Gnosticism in  
Early America:  
Anne Hutchinson,  
Puritan “Antinomian”  
and R.W. Emerson,  
The First Transpersonal Psychologist**

Harold Bloom (1992,1996), who also traces extensive parallels between Gnosticism and contemporary “new age” spirituality, sees an incipient Gnostic element throughout early American religiosity. From Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy to Pentecostal glossolalia and snake handling sects, there is the tendency to pass over “the Book” in favor of immediately transcendent states—by implication leaving Satan, like Ialdabaoth, to preside over all that is *merely* of the world.

Our Gnostic predilections began well before the LSD-like death-rebirth paroxysms of the tent revivals and “great Awakening” of the 1740s. They surface first in Puritan Massachusetts in 1637 with the heresy trial of Anne Hutchinson before the ministers and civil government of the Bay Colony (Adams, 1965). In what seems to have been a latter-day pneumatic heresy, Hutchinson, a charismatic figure who might today be seen as strikingly high on the personality trait of

“imaginative absorption,” drew her own conclusions from the more radical forms of Protestantism soon to fuel the Ranters and Quakers. It is only the inner light of God’s Grace, whose aura she could sense in herself and see in others, that determines who is saved and who not. To their extreme annoyance, all but two of the Massachusetts town ministers turned out to be mere “preparationists,” teaching only a Covenant of Works and Faith rather than an inwardly illuminated Covenant of predestined Grace. These became, so to speak, the Massachusetts equivalents of Valentinian “psychics,” restricted to only the derived spirituality of the Bible. For Hutchinson, as she was finally goaded into directly stating at her bullying, hectoring trial, most of the local ministers had “only” the understanding of the Apostles *before* the final direct teachings of Christ—i.e. after the Resurrection (Hutchinson, 1936). Dubbed an “antinomian” by the outraged clerics, she believed that the soul of man dissolves at death, much as with animals. Only the living spirit of Christ within is saved, where the “inner light” reveals its presence.

Of course they expelled her and a small like-minded group, from whom she later split as well, after she had re-settled in a more tolerant Rhode Island. Her trial paved the way for Boston’s later executions of the Quakers and the Salem witch trials. Perhaps actually confirming her views of them, the Massachusetts ministers finally settled for a compromise “half-way” Covenant for full church membership, in the face of lower and lower church attendance as the younger generations fell demonstrably short of the “living saints” status of the first emigrants. That did not prevent, however, the worthy ministers from declaring the later massacre of Anne Hutchinson and her children at the hands of rebelling Indians a “Providence of God” and so rechristening her “the American Jezebel,” based on the original Jezebel’s Old Testament annihilation.

From the present perspective, we could say that Ralph Waldo Emerson drew the fuller conclusions of Hutchinson’s pneumatic protest. Still a young man, he resigned his Boston ministry on concluding that there could have been no original Fall, and so there was no need for a redemption in Christ. Each of us in our heart is already the potentially perfect Adam/Eve (Emerson, 1940abc). There is something God-like in anyone who completely trusts their own immediate experience. This cultivation of an immediate consciousness of Being in each situation—very much in anticipation of Heidegger—is the closest we can come

to God. Indeed, our own individual experience, totally trusted without reservation, is the most direct expression of Divinity. The ecstasies marking that realization—and he describes his own as “volcanic” (Richardson, 1995)—are naturalistic states, as later with Nietzsche, Jung, and Maslow. Anticipating current chaos modeling of the brain, these states are a resonance within us to the dynamic principles of flow in nature (Emerson, 1963). Every person in this dawning “age of the first person singular” is thus potentially a pneumatic, however rare must be the total giving over of oneself to the expansive fullness of our immediate experience. Emerson, here, with Plotinus, does avoid the Gnostic view of nature as evil, and anticipates also the later Jung—recovered from his own excesses of the 1920s and 30s—who found in the dynamic patterns of alchemy a mirror approximating the totality of Self.

Yet in this view that human consciousness fully realized is God, there are also echoes of the Gnostic Anthropos and its incipient inflation and world rejection:

A man is a god in ruins...Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and the moon...The laws of his mind ...externalized themselves into day and night, into the year and the seasons. But having made for himself this huge shell, his waters retired; he no longer fills the veins and veinlets; he is shrunk to a drop. He sees that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, once it fitted him...Yet sometimes he starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it. (Emerson, 1963, p. 35)

Here may be the first broadly naturalistic restatement of Gnosticism—a relation to become more obvious in Nietzsche, Jung, Maslow, and transpersonal psychology. What makes this Gnosticism is our de facto indistinguishability, as human persons, from the Absolute—to the extent that our consciousness is fully open. Yet note the paradox: how can we, as beings also finite, and this even at our most expanded and fulfilled, be that numinous which phenomenologically at least is felt exactly to utterly encompass and transcend us? Is there not a potential temptation here to the defensive grandiosity and antinomianism of the Gnostic Anthropos?

## Nietzsche—and Abraham Maslow—on Spiritual Superiority

The ambiguity fully emerges with Nietzsche, who cites Emerson as one of his few precursors, and had a direct influence on the understanding of self actualization in Jung and Maslow. For Nietzsche, the Judeo-Christian God is dead, along with all other nonperspectival conceptual absolutes. Yet since that God was a projection of our own nature, the way is also open for a more direct, naturalistically understood reengagement of the energies of the ecstatic states that once conferred a sense of meaning and purpose in our existence.

Where is God gone?...we have killed him, you and I....Has it not become colder? does not night come on continually darker and darker? How shall we console ourselves?...Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? (Nietzsche, 1960, pp. 167–168)

It is the overman—the creative individual of the future—who will evoke the ecstatic experience at the core of all religion and its inherent “yes” to the totality of Being and Becoming, but without projecting that into a supernatural realm. Instead these states are to be understood as the highest capacity of the human being—become thereby a naturalistic Anthropos.

Behold I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth. I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of other-worldly hopes. (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 125)

Indeed, Nietzsche called for a “physiology of ecstasy,” and might well have been fascinated with the era of laboratory LSD research. The living God is within the brains and bodies of those who projected it, and so the energy of that pure aliveness can be reappropriated and experienced directly—as the expression of a “higher” humanity. This will be the new creative elite for Nietzsche—the path for latter day pneumatics.

Here is the core of the Gnostic paradox and dilemma: If we follow Rudolf Otto’s (1958) purely descriptive phenomenology of the numinous—as the cross-cultural experiential source of spirituality—then Nietzsche’s “ecstasy” is the felt encounter with a “wholly other,” sensed but ineffable, and so beyond us in pure mystery and unknowing. How can *that* be understood

as *human*? How do we experience the numinous as us, *without* thereby sliding into the inflation and narcissistic distortion of the Gnostics? Certainly Jung (1988) found a worrisome defensive inflation in Nietzsche's idealized figure of Zarathustra as overman.

There is a similarly split and dualistic idealization in Maslow's portrait of the "self actualizer," who has transcended all ordinary, henceforth "deficit," motivation. Maslow (1971) cited Nietzsche as a major influence, and late in his life admitted that his portrayal of Being-values was in part a reaction against his hated mother—ascribing to his self-actualizer the opposite of all the features of a mother he despised with a passion reminiscent of Nietzsche's own hatred toward his sister and mother. Maslow describes his reactions:

I was a terribly unhappy boy....My family was a miserable family and my mother was a horrible creature ...I grew up in libraries and among books, without friends. With my childhood, it's a wonder I'm not psychotic. (Hoffman, 1988, p. 1)

I've always wondered where my utopianism,...stress on kindness, love, friendship ...came from. I knew certainly of the direct consequences of having no mother-love. But the whole thrust of my life philosophy ...has its roots in a hatred for and revulsion against everything she stood for. (Lowry, 1982, p. 245)

There is a similar split in both Maslow and Nietzsche between an inner doubt and despair and a rhapsodical, Dionysian affirmation. Maslow was also tempted, like Nietzsche, to view his self actualizer/overman as showing the marks of "superior biological specimens" (Maslow, 1971)—positing a pneumatic superiority of genetics and temperament. It is this split between transcendence and ordinary living that also predisposes to the moral ambiguities of spiritual antinomianism—a would-be "beyond good and evil" that is actually their confusion and inversion.

## The Gnostic Dilemmas of Carl Jung

Already the childhood dreams and visions depicted in Jung's autobiographical *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961) had put Jung into direct contact with a lower god of both good and evil. He was right to call his psychology of the 1920s "Gnostic," as his explicit equation of a higher, integrated Self with the Anthropos makes clear (Jung, 1959). On a more personal level, there were his "self-deification" experiences, in the visionary crisis period after his split from

Freud, in which he experienced himself as Abraxas, the Demiurge of the Gnostic Basilides—hermaphroditic, lion-headed, and encircled by serpents (Jung, 1989).

Some of the published reactions in Jungian circles to the curious books of Richard Noll (1994, 1997), who describes Jung's group in the 1920s as a "Nietzschean cult," seem oversimplified (Grimaldi-Craig, 1998; Shamdasani, 1998)—part of an unfortunate attempt to sanitize Jung and thereby miss the deep conflicts that such a this-worldly spirituality must inevitably face. Of course Noll does hate Jung, and he unfairly omits Jung's own view of his struggle with inflation. Yet if we set aside four or five paragraphs of pure character assassination from each book, we are left with much of value on the cultural context of both the early Jung circle and his own initial attempts to develop a naturalistic psychology of a numinous/archetypal imagination. Some current Jungians are indeed embarrassed by this earlier, wilder Jung of the 1920s and 1930s, but that period both attests to the tensions within the naturalistic inner-worldly mysticism that is our topic and was the prelude to his later more fully realized approach to a unitive spirituality. Noll of course allows the term "cult" in his text to be taken in an ostensibly pejorative fashion, while also mentioning that he intends it in the manner of contemporary sociologists, influenced by Troeltsch, who divide "new religious movements" between "sects"—reviving prophetic fundamentalism—and mystical "cults." The latter usage is indeed based on their direct experiential emphasis and an etymological root based on the imagery of organic growth (as in "cultivation") (Dawson, 1998).

So Jung's early circle *was* a kind of Nietzschean cult—more specifically a Gnostic one. Like much contemporary transpersonal psychology, there was both a personal and group cultivation of the "transcendent function" *and* an attempt at an empirical, and so broadly scientific, understanding of "the God image in the human psyche." The contemporary equivalent of Jungian "psychics" remain uncomfortable with the antinomian tendencies of those years and the false grandiosity of an unleashed archetypal imagination. Indeed there were casualties. First, there was Jung's own equivalent of the Valentinian bridal chamber, conducted both symbolically and physically in his specially built stone tower with several apparent paramours, muse figures, and/or externalized anima personifications. Whatever we end up thinking of this

period, we must be less sanguine about the imitation of Jung undertaken with the latter's active encouragement by the influential Harvard psychologist Henry Murray and Christiana Morgan in their own stone tower in Massachusetts. However begun, it ended in sado-masochistic ritual and her ultimate suicide (Douglas, 1993).

If it is true that the "shadow," in Jung's terminology, must first be directly known and experienced in order to be assimilated and truly integrated into a more inclusive and balanced Self, there is no point in any "half way covenant" seeking to turn Jung, as naturalistic pneumatic, into a contemporary clinical psychologist. With Valentinus and Basilides, Jung had concluded that metabolizing the shadow-side of Self required a knowledge of direct acquaintance: So in the Valentinian Gospel of Phillip we find:

Let each of us burrow for the root of evil that is within....It will be rooted up when it is recognized. But if we are ignorant of it, it sinks its root within us, and yields its crops within our hearts; dominates us; we are its slaves....Lack of acquaintance is a slave; acquaintance is freedom....If we join with [the truth], it will receive our fullness. (Layton, 1987, p. 352)

Meanwhile, in a late letter to his Jewish colleague Erich Neumann, Jung says:

It is certain that no one is redeemed from a sin he has not committed, and that a man who stands on a peak cannot climb it. The humiliation allotted to each of us is implicit in his character. If he seeks his wholeness seriously, he will stray unawares into the hole destined for him, and out of this darkness the light will arise. (Jung, 1975, 34–35)

It was Jung's own unconscious indulgence of shadow in the mid 1930s that had exposed his own character in just this way.

Jung's initial response to Nazism during these years found him embroiled in a historically significant struggle with grandiosity, antinomian shadow, and an ego imbued over-specificity of archetypal imagination. Emerson's comment on the highly elaborated visions of Swedenborg seems appropriate here: "It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescent images of thought. True in transition they become false if fixed" (Emerson, 1912, p. 65). This may be clear enough in UFO abduction cults, past life regressions, and astral travel scenarios in out-of-body experience, but it manifested more fatefully in Jung's combination of his early self-deification experiences with his theory of a

"collective unconscious" as having "ancestral" and "racial" levels. Jung later overcame this Lamarckian biologism by recasting his collective unconscious as "objective psyche," with its cross-cultural parallels based on universal features of physical metaphor—much as with Emerson himself. But from the late 1920s through the mid 1930s his "racial" psychology lent itself to a romanticized Nazi ideology, to which he himself was briefly drawn.

Fascinated by his own pagan and gnostic visionary experiences and captured by a false biologism that would root all this in an ancestral unconscious, it was but a small step—supported by the same pan Germanic *volkische* romanticism that for a time also drew Heidegger—to basing archetypal identity on race:

The differences which actually do exist between Germanic and Jewish psychology and which have long been known to every intelligent person are no longer to be glossed over, and this can only be beneficial to science. (Jung, 1933, p. 533)

Because ...of their civilization more than twice as ancient as ours, [the Jews] are vastly more conscious than we of human weaknesses, of the shadow-side of things....The "Aryan" unconscious, on the other hand, contains explosive forces and seeds of a future yet to be born....The still youthful Germanic peoples are fully capable of creating new cultural forms that still lie dormant in the darkness of the unconscious of every individual—seeds bursting with energy and capable of mighty expansion. (Jung, 1934, p. 165–166)

Jung's persistence in these comments into the mid 1930s shows a complex mix of political naivete, opportunism in taking on the presidency of the Nazified society for psychotherapy for which the first quotation was written, and an unconscious inflation whose later understanding led him to describe the second quotation as "embarrassing nonsense" and say of the whole episode: "I slipped up." Jung's Germanic unconscious brought forth a Faustian element in his own development which by 1936 he understood enough to diagnose more accurately in its political manifestations:

The impressive thing about the German phenomenon is that one man, who is obviously "possessed," has infected a whole nation to such an extent that everything is set in motion and has started rolling on its course towards perdition. (Jung, 1936, p. 185) Certainly Jung was not personally anti-Semitic, and he



did later help Jewish colleagues to escape Germany, but his overall obtuseness attests to his own collusion with shadow—to his own inflation and splitting—which to their credit contemporary Jungians have led the way in documenting and understanding (Maidenbaum & Martin, 1991).

The ultimate proof, however, and contra Noll, that Jung's was not simply a fascist spirituality is that there actually was such a thing—a hyper-specified Gnostic mytho-poesis of Aryan occultism (Goodrick-Clarke, 1985). Happily it bore no similarity to Jung's thoughts, even at its most oracular—as in his visionary "Sermons to the Dead" (1961). Instead, we find a kind of archetypal imagination gone wild in paranoia and hatred, and best illustrated, in passing, by Himmler's favorite, Karl Maria Wiligut. Wiligut was an aristocrat and hero of World War I, whose trance visions revealed him to be the last descendant of ancient Aryan sages. His ancestral memories went back to 228,000 B.C., when there were three suns in the sky, giants, dwarfs, and Aryan God-men. As head of the "Prehistoric Research Division of the S.S.," Wiligut dispatched suitably attuned teams for confirmatory trance-channeling at various Teutonic ruins—in short, a Jungian "active imagination" practised by the grandiose and deeply disturbed.

Much of this Nazi occultism rested on the earlier visions of Lanz von Liebenfels, which revealed the prehistoric struggle between Aryan God-men, gifted then with clairvoyant and telepathic powers, and various "sub-men" or "ape-lings." These latter subverted Aryan purity by means of erotically gifted "love pygmies," leading to a fatal inter-breeding and a loss of the spiritual powers of this Aryan Anthropos. Only the extermination of racial inferiors and careful genetic engineering could restore Aryan purity. Nonetheless, Lanz von Liebenfels deserves our grudging respect for the title, at least, of his 1905 masterwork: *Theozoology: The Lure of the Sodom Ape-lings and the Electron of the Gods*. Apparently it was the pineal glands of the Old Aryans that contained the n-rays (x-rays having been recently discovered) that gave them their omniscient powers. Thousands belonged to such groups, while apparently not enough laughed. Instead these would-be Aryan pneumatics anticipated ascension past mere biological "psychics"—to be tolerated or enslaved—and lower people of clay—to be exterminated. In their baroque excess these myths are the closest modern equivalent to the Sethians and Ophites. The fixed

specificity of their imagery is as far as possible from Jung's (1959) later insight that the realized Self could only be "circumambulated," but never attained.

### **Gnostic Ambiguities in Current Personality and Neuropsychological Research on Spirituality**

It may be that the inflation, splitting, and ethical ambiguity endemic in the various gnosticisms must re-emerge in any naturalistic, empirical understanding of spirituality as a human capacity. The spiritual implications of recent research on the psychology and neuropsychology of transpersonal states, while obviously better science, may not be as far from n-rays of the pineal gland, and their all-too-human control, as we might wish.

Current personality research locates numinous/archetypal experience as the furthest development of one major pole of individual difference widely termed "imaginative absorption" (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), as the directly experiential dimension of a broader "openness to experience" (McCrae, 1994) and with its opposite pole an attitude of valuing practicality and utility over immediate states of consciousness. Lower levels of absorption would be related to sensation and thrill seeking and drug experimentation, higher levels to aesthetics, vivid dreaming, and proclivity to spontaneous altered and transpersonal states, while its highest expression would be the sense of the numinous described by James, Otto, and Jung. Recent questionnaire-based attempts to establish spirituality as its own separate dimension find its directly experiential component most related to various measures of "absorption" and "openness" (MacDonald, 2000; Piedmont, 1999). High levels of absorption/openness have two faces: a positive, integrative one as "mysticism" and a negative one as "dissociation"—where absorption overlaps with measures of neuroticism and psychoticism (Hunt et al, 2002). Personality research has come to see absorption/openness as one of the major three or five dimensions needed to describe individual variability statistically. For Eysenck (1995) these are introversion-extraversion, neuroticism, and creativity/psychoticism—as the positive and negative forms of openness. For Costa and McCrae (1995; McCrae, 1994) they are introversion-extraversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—each with some genetic

component. Our Gnostic pneumatics then can be understood as strikingly high on absorption/openness, valuing the fullest unfolding of consciousness for its own sake and above all else. Jung was such a person—with his early childhood dreams and visions perhaps illustrating its genetic component. So also were Emerson, Nietzsche, Anne Hutchinson—commenting on the missing auras of the Massachusetts ministers—and more unfortunately, Karl Maria Wiligut.

This research presents us with an updated version of the Gnostic dilemma: First, it makes spirituality real in terms of its effects on experience, and so as something utterly *human*. It is then like any other dimension of human cognitive faculties and individual differences—like introversion-extraversion. Second, and especially given our culture's strong value of creativity and its imaginal components, it makes high absorption an elite (pneumatic) temperament—restricted to some and not others. Finally it makes absorption/openness antinomian—with no essential relation between this generic, bipolar experiential core of spirituality and any particular values or ethics. In other words, of these five, or three, dimensions, either end of any other dimension can be associated with the highest levels of absorption/openness, i.e. with highest or lowest neuroticism, with highest introversion or extraversion, with highest social agreeableness or its paranoid opposite, and with conscientiousness or its sociopathic opposite. We see then not only the possibility of a Jesus—lowest neuroticism, and highest extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, if that be not too absurd—but also of the revolutionary Ranters—and Charles Manson.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the traditionally religious nor the anti-religious want to hear this. For the religious, spirituality has been made into a faculty, a cognitive-affective process—the all-encompassing and transcendent reduced to a variation on the merely human. Yet the anti-religious should find just as deep an implicit offense: From a naturalistic perspective, the numinous is utterly real in terms of its human effects, both as a self-validating experiential state whose impact affects the sense of purpose and meaning in life for individuals and societies, and as an empirical phenomenon open to scientific study—as James and Jung originally stated. Antireligious humanists are thus forced to treat spirituality as a central part of the human life they so value. It is not something that can simply go away through “rationally” chosen disbelief.

Current neurophysiological research showing a shifting activation in the temporal and parietal regions of the neocortex, especially in the right hemisphere, associated with spontaneous ecstatic states and deep meditative states has similarly Gnostic implications. Of course the era of LSD research had already implied that God, in addition to being Jung's “God image in the human psyche,” was also “in” biochemical brain processes probably related most directly to dopamine, but because of our present cultural valuation of all things neurophysiological these more recent findings have received widespread popular attention. It seems to be DMT—the “spirit molecule”—that is now secreted by the pineal gland (Strassman et al., 1994).

*The Globe and Mail*, a Toronto newspaper, began a recent article, “Is God all in the brain?” as follows:

God lives somewhere in the temporal and parietal lobes of the brain, along with aliens, angels and dead relatives. To find them at home, put on Michael Persinger's God helmet and ring their doorbells with a magnetic buzz. This is neurotheology—the scientific mapping, understanding and accessing of the location of spirituality in the brain. Even more boldly, it is an exploration of what it takes to prod God into action. (Valpy, August 25, 2001, p. F7) Persinger's (1987) research on ecstatic states had found lower arousal, EEG theta patterns, and subthreshold seizure-like spiking in and around the right temporal lobe, which he also induces experimentally with a helmet applying electro-magnetic fields to these areas.

While Persinger's work is avowedly reductionist, understanding spirituality as a kind of illusion based on a neural anxiety buffer, Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili (2000) reach a more complex understanding in their related work on the role of the right parietal regions—associated with spatial patterning and body image—in ecstatic states. In a cover story in *Newsweek* (May 7, 2001) titled “God and the brain: How we're wired for spirituality,” Newberg insists that it is an open and undeterminable question whether lower levels of parietal activation simply cause mystical experiences of dissolution of self into space and light, or instead allow us to perceive the spiritual reality to which they refer. I have written similarly of my own cognitive model of transpersonal experiences as based on complex or abstract synesthesias that exteriorize the (largely parietal) cross-modal translation processes at the core of all intelligence, but here expressed presentationally and for their own sake—rather than in the

more instrumental forms of ordinary representational intelligence (Hunt, 1995).

Yet if we accept the spirit of these recent “theories” of the transpersonal and posit some sort of “spirituality module” in the brain—and one that can be directly stimulated—are we not also returned to an updated version of Gnostic paradox and all its metaphathological risks and ambiguities? For we are then positing a potential scientific and personal control over a capacity to attune experientially to that which utterly and intrinsically encompasses us—as outside any control as the mystery of Being itself. This is Gnosticism cubed: Not only does western science in its understanding of the very principles of creation thereby rise above the Demiurge, but now the response to the ultimate mystery of Being itself becomes a human capacity with human cause and effect. A new vision of Anthropos/overman arises: the self-stimulating master of the “God response.” Truly then nothing would be beyond us.

Of course a transpersonalist like Ken Wilber (1995), working from the more inclusive spiritual monism of Plotinus and Vedanta, rightly labels all such cognitive and neuropsychological approaches as a “subtle reductionism”—or worse—since they falsely subordinate the primacy of direct experience to materialism. Yet our civilization, for good or ill, is based on science and technology, and likely to remain so. Accordingly, scientific research on absorption and the neurophysiology of spiritual experience are the cutting edge of an inevitable interface of science and religion that will not go away. On the constructive side, that will involve attempts to assimilate the numinous to a broadly pragmatic and humanist perspective, in part conserving classical spiritual traditions in re-stated forms. Yet in so doing, as a culture, do we not also face some new equivalent of the Gnostic dilemmas of dualism and spiritual inflation? Transpersonal psychology is necessarily at risk of unintentionally stumbling into a post-Nietzschean spirituality that is both “human all too human” and “beyond good and evil.” And we cannot simply wish that away in the name of a higher consciousness that we also purport to “explain.”

## Conclusions

Put otherwise, our era of a physical science, now including the human brain, primarily values an “objectivity” that has inevitably consigned “spirituality” to a

“consciousness” generally regarded as a mere and residual “subjectivity.” This implicit understanding of a purely immanent deity split off from a more objective reality remains inescapably dualistic. This is a Gnostic dualism of spirit and world inverted, but with the same need for pneumatic high absorbers to escape—an escape now that must go “inward” rather than “upward.”

True, the more completely realized mysticisms, along with the later William James and later Jung, show that if a pure phenomenology of immediate experience is carried far enough, it reveals consciousness itself as something all-inclusive—the thatness or suchness of James (1912) and Buddhism, Heidegger’s Being, and Jung’s psychoid dimensions, equally basic to mind and matter. The later Jung collaborated with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli (Meier, 2001) in suggesting that the presence of the same dynamic patterns in consciousness and quantum physics make world and consciousness ultimately indistinguishable—a view also implied in the organicist philosophy of Whitehead (1929). Here may well be a way forward for a contemporary experiential spirituality that will not be falsely inflating and antinomian. After all, if a mathematical faculty of the brain can intuit principles of nature years before they can have any actual scientific application, which as Penrose (1997) points out is a widely overlooked mystery, why should not a spiritual faculty intuit its own equally mysterious objectivity?

It may be true that if we go far enough “in” we come “out” again, but the passage was never easy or automatic, and especially so in an era where consciousness is a logically residual category. So for the foreseeable future we *are* stuck with a science and humanism purporting to explain and so encompass a sense of the sacred that itself phenomenally encompasses and contextualizes our humanity. The core of the numinous for Otto and James is an immediate response—with acceptance and surrender—to that which is utterly beyond our control—creation, life, and death. Yet our civilization acts on the premise that all is potentially under our control. There is a cultural collision here that can only work itself out very very gradually.

Heidegger (1962) understood the core of numinous experience as a direct awareness of Being as such, in its inherent mystery, a view also basic to the spiritual psychology of Almaas (1988). Yet Heidegger regarded our era as “too late for God and too early for Being”—since for us Being is still something primarily for our

worldly utilization rather than for a more primary contemplation for its own sake and ours. Any shift from worshipping a creator God—also implicated by omission or commission in Auschwitz, mass starvations, and Bin Laden—to the openness and letting-be of Being seems destined to remain incomplete and partial in our time.

After the New York Trade Towers attack it took over three hours for the phone lines to clear enough so that I could learn that my Manhattan-based son had been nowhere near the disaster site. But I could not bring myself to thank God since that same God had not spared all those other sons and daughters. *That* seemed monstrous, and so there was the sudden realization that I had no one to thank. “Thy will be done” implied a will and intention, and by implication a desperate begging, that seemed grotesque. Yet despite years of meditation and spiritual practice, I was equally distant from any Buddhist acceptance or Heideggerian Gelassenheit/releasement. I bore no resemblance to a Taoist sage, nor did I want to. Knowing better than God, I was happy to be psychically inflated, if that is what it was theologically, and a dualist who simply wanted certain people dead as soon as possible. For me, the God of Creation had obviously got it very wrong and so seemed closer to Ialdabaoth, Jung’s antinomian Yahweh in his Answer to Job, or a fundamentalist Satan left to preside over human history.

Plotinus’ critique of the Gnostics was correct, but most of his contemporaries remained within dualist and partial spiritualities. This seems equally true today. Certainly mainstream transpersonalists may view the spiritual metapathologies I am herein describing as “Gnostic dilemmas” as instances of a pre-trans fallacy, confusing ego-transcending unitive states with pre-ego dynamic conflicts, and supposedly easily identified and avoided. However, any naturalistically understood inner-worldly mysticism of the future, unfolding in our very material and self-aggrandizing culture, will continue to face an inherent interpenetration of transcendent states of consciousness and the narcissistic/schizoid conflicts that can cyclically lead back and forth into each other (Almaas, 1988). It is not just Nietzsche, Jung, Heidegger, and Maslow who oscillated between consciousness expansion and despairing futility, and who remained caught within a confusion of self and ego. Nonduality seems far more frequently talked than walked. Such issues may be intrinsic to any experiential spirituality but they are all

but pervasive, *and* largely unconscious, in the this-worldly transpersonalism of the modern and post-modern West.

## End Notes

1. This is an expanded version of a presentation to the Analytical Psychology Society of Western New York, November, 2001. I thank Douglas MacDonald for several clarifying suggestions.

2. See Piedmont (1999) for a similar treatment of major religious figures

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