

themes—notably some references to the Gnostic archetypal god Abraxas, which closely resemble Jung's treatment of the same figure in the *Sermons*. While Gnosticism was definitely in the air during the two decades between the two world wars, the kind of Gnosticism espoused by Hesse in *Demian* appears so uniquely Jungian that many suspected a connection. In fact, a Jungian analyst by the name of Lang treated Hesse around the year 1916 and may easily have passed a copy of the *Sermons* to the then-unfolding young literary genius. A sympathetic connection continued to exist between Jung and Hesse for many decades and was subsequently immortalized by the Chilean diplomat and poet Miguel Serrano in his lovely volume *C. G. Jung and Hermann Hesse*. It would seem that the little book of poetic Gnosticism, occasioned by the visit of the dead to Jung in 1916, had a greater influence and elicited more response than even Jung thought likely. All of these responses, however, concerned one subject, at once obscure and controversial, and this was of course Gnosticism.*

What in the World Are Gnostics?

The words *Gnostic* and *Gnosticism* are not exactly standard features in the vocabulary of contemporary people. In fact, more people are familiar with the antonym of *Gnostic*, which is *agnostic*, literally meaning a non-knower or ignoramus, but figuratively describing a person with no faith in religion who still resents being called an atheist. Yet Gnostics were around long before agnostics and for the most part appear to have been a far more exciting category of persons than the latter group. In contradiction to non-knowers, they considered themselves knowers—*gnostikoi* in Greek—denoting those who have *Gnosis* or knowledge. Gnostics were people who lived, for the most part, during the first three or four centuries of the so-called Christian era. Most of them probably would not have called themselves by the name *Gnostic* but would have considered themselves Christians, or more rarely Jews, or as belonging to

*The reader is referred to pp. 93-95 in part III of the present work for more details of the relationship of Hermann Hesse to Jung and to the *Seven Sermons to the Dead*.

the traditions of the ancient cults of Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome. They were not sectarians or the members of a specific new religion, as their detractors claimed, but rather people who shared with each other a certain attitude toward life. This attitude may be said to consist of the conviction that direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge must always constitute the supreme achievement of human life. This knowledge, or *Gnosis*, they did not envision as a rational knowledge of a scientific kind, or even as philosophical knowledge of truth, but rather a knowing that arises in the heart in an intuitive and mysterious manner and therefore is called in at least one Gnostic writing (the *Gospel of Truth*) the *Gnosis kardias*, the knowledge of the heart. This is obviously a religious concept that is at the same time highly psychological, for the meaning and purpose of life thus appears to be neither faith, with its emphasis on blind belief and equally blind repression, nor works with their extraverbed do-goodism, but rather an interior insight and transformation, in short, a depth-psychological process.

If we come to envision the Gnostics as early depth psychologists, then it immediately becomes apparent why the Gnostic teaching and practice was radically different from the teaching and practice of Jewish and Christian orthodoxy. The knowledge of the heart, for which the Gnostics strove, could not be acquired by striking a bargain with Yahweh, by concluding a treaty or covenant which guaranteed physical and spiritual well-being to man in exchange for the slave-like carrying out of a set of rules. Neither could Gnosis be won by merely fervently believing that the sacrificial act of one divine man in history could lift the burden of guilt and frustration from one's shoulders and assure perpetual beatitude beyond the confines of mortal existence. The Gnostics did not deny the usefulness of the Torah or the magnificence of the figure of the Christos, the anointed of the most high God. They regarded the Law as necessary for a certain type of personality which requires rules for what today might be called the formation and strengthening of the psychological ego. Neither did they negate the greatness of the mission of the mysterious personage whom in his disguise men

Extract from -

"The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead,"
by Stephan A Hoeller

knew as the Rabbi Jehoshuah of Nazareth. The Law and the Savior, the two most highly revered concepts of Jew and Christian, became to the Gnostic but means to an end greater than themselves. These became inducements and devices which might, in some fashion, be conducive to personal knowing which, once attained, requires neither law nor faith. To them, as to Carl Jung many centuries later, theology and ethics were but stepping stones on the road to self-knowledge.

Some seventeen or eighteen centuries separate us from the Gnostics. During these centuries Gnosticism became a faith not only forgotten (as one of its interpreters, G. R. S. Mead, called it) but also a faith and a truth repressed. It seems that almost no group has been so relentlessly and consistently feared and hated for nearly two millennia as were the unhappy Gnostics. Text-books of theology still refer to them as the first and most pernicious of all heretics, and the age of ecumenism seems to have extended none of the benefits of Christian love to them. Long before Hitler, the Emperor Constantine and his cruel bishops began the practice of religious genocide against the Gnostics, their first holocausts to be followed by many more through history. The last major persecution concluded with the burning of over 200 latter-day Gnostics in 1244 in the castle of Montségur in France, an event which Laurence Durell described as the Thermopylae of the Gnostic soul. Still some prominent representatives of the victims of the latest holocaust have not regarded the most persecuted religious minority in history as a companion in misfortune, as the attacks of Martin Buber on Jung and on Gnosticism indicate. Jews and Christians, Catholics, Protestants and the Eastern Orthodox (and, in the case of the Manichaen Gnosis, even Zoroastrians, Moslems and Buddhists) have hated and persecuted the Gnostics with a persistent determination.

Why? Was it only because their antinomianism or disregard for moral law scandalized the rabbis, or because their doubts concerning the physical incarnation of Jesus and their reinterpretation of the resurrection angered the priests? Was it because they rejected marriage and procreation, as some of their detractors claim? Were they abhorred because of licentiousness and orgies, as others allege? Or might it be that perhaps the Gnostics

truly had some knowledge, and that this knowledge rendered them supremely dangerous to establishments both secular and ecclesiastical?

It is not easy to give a reply to this question, but an attempt must be made, nevertheless. We might essay such an answer by saying that the Gnostics differed from the majority of humankind, not only in details of belief and of ethical precept, but in their most essential and fundamental view of existence and its purpose. Their divergence was a *radical* one in the truest sense of the word, for it went back to the root (Latin: *Radix*) of humankind's assumptions and attitudes regarding life. Irrespective of their religious and philosophical beliefs, most people nourish certain unconscious assumptions pertaining to the human condition which do not spring from the formulative, focused agencies of consciousness but which radiate from a deep, unconscious substratum of the mind. This mind is ruled by biology rather than by psychology; it is automatic rather than subject to conscious choices and insights. The most important among these assumptions, which may be said to sum up all others, is the belief that the world is good and that our involvement in it is somehow desirable and ultimately beneficial. This assumption leads to a host of others, all of which are more or less characterized by submissiveness toward external conditions and toward the laws which seem to govern them. In spite of the countless illogical and malevolent events of our lives, the incredible sequences, by-ways, repetitious insanities of human history, both collective and individual, we will believe it to be incumbent upon us to go along with the world, for it is, after all, God's world, and thus it must have meaning and goodness concealed within its operations, no matter how difficult to discern. Thus we must go on fulfilling our role within the system as best we can, being obedient children, diligent husbands, dutiful wives, well-behaved butchers, bakers, candlestick-makers, hoping against hope that a revelation of meaning will somehow emerge from this meaningless life of conformity.

Not so, said the Gnostics. Money, power, governments, the raising of families, paying of taxes, the endless chain of entrapment in circumstances and obligations—none of these were ever rejected as totally and unequivocally in human history as they

were by the Gnostics. The Gnostics never hoped that any political or economic revolution could, or even should, do away with all the iniquitous elements within the system wherein the human soul is entrapped. Their rejection was not of one government or form of ownership in favor of another; rather it concerned the entire prevailing systematization of life and experience. Thus the Gnostics were, in fact, knowers of a secret so deadly and terrible that the rulers of this world—i.e., the powers, secular and religious, who always profited from the established systems of society—could not afford to have this secret known and, even less, to have it publicly proclaimed in their domain. Indeed the Gnostics knew something, and it was this: that human life does not fulfill its promise within the structures and establishments of society, for all of these are at best but shadowy projections of another and more fundamental reality. No one comes to his true selfhood by being what society wants him to be nor by doing what it wants him to do. Family, society, church, trade and profession, political and patriotic allegiances, as well as moral and ethical rules and commandments are, in reality, not in the least conducive to the true spiritual welfare of the human soul. On the contrary, they are more often than not the very shackles which keep us from our true spiritual destiny.

This feature of Gnosticism was regarded as heretical in olden days, and even today is often called "world denying" and "anti-life," but it is, of course, merely good psychology as well as good spiritual theology because it is good sense. The politician and the social philosopher may look upon the world as a problem to be solved, but the Gnostic, with his psychological discernment, recognizes it as a predicament from which we need to extricate ourselves by insight. For Gnostics, like psychologists, do not aim at the transformation of the world but at the transformation of the mind, with its natural consequence—a changed attitude toward the world. Most religions also tend to affirm a familiar attitude of internalism in theory, but, as the result of their presence within the establishments of society, they always deny it in practice. Religions usually begin as movements of radical liberation along spiritual lines but inevitably end up as pillars of the very societies which are the jailers of our souls.

If we wish to obtain *Gnosis*, the knowledge of the heart that renders human beings free, we must disentangle ourselves from the false cosmos created by our conditioned minds. The Greek word *kosmos*, as well as the Hebrew word *olam*, while frequently mistranslated as *world*, really denote more the concept of *systems*. When the Gnostics said that the *system* around them was evil and that one had to get away from it in order to know truth and discover meaning, they acted, not only as the forerunners of innumerable alienated drop-outs from St. Francis to the beatniks and hippies, but they also stated a psychological fact since rediscovered by modern depth psychology. Jung restated an old Gnostic insight when he said that the extraverted human ego must first become thoroughly aware of its own alienation from the greater Self before it can begin to return to a state of closer union with the unconscious. Until we become thoroughly aware of the inadequacy of our extraverted state and of its insufficiency in regard to our deeper spiritual needs, we shall not achieve even a measure of individuation, through which a wider and more mature personality emerges. The alienated ego is the precursor and an inevitable precondition of the individuated ego. Like Jung, the Gnostics did not necessarily reject the actual earth itself, which they recognized as a screen upon which the Demiurge of the mind projects his deceptive system. To the extent that we find a condemnation of the world in Gnostic writings, the term used is inevitably *kosmos*, or *this aeon*, and never the word *ge* (earth), which they regarded as neutral if not as outright good.

It was on this knowledge, the knowledge one has in one's heart concerning the spiritual barrenness and utter insufficiency of the establishments and established values of the outer world, that the Gnostics relied in order to construct both an image of universal being and a system of coherent inferences to be drawn from that image. (As one might expect, they accomplished this less in terms of philosophy and theology than in myth, ritual, and cultivation of the mythopoetic and imaginative qualities of their souls.) Like so many sensitive and thoughtful persons before and after their time, they felt themselves to be strangers in a strange country, a forlorn seed of the distant worlds of boundless light. Some, like the alienated youth of the 1960's withdrew into communes and hermitages, marginal com-

munities on the edge of civilization. Others, more numerous perhaps, remained in the midst of the great metropolitan culture of the large cities like Alexandria and Rome, outwardly fulfilling their roles in society while inwardly serving a different master—in the world but not of the world. Most of them possessed learning, culture and wealth, yet they were aware of the undeniable fact that all such attainments and treasures pale before the Gnosis of the heart, the knowledge of the things that are. Little wonder that the wizard of Kistnacht who, since his early childhood, sought and found his own Gnosis, felt close to these strange and lonely people, these pilgrims of eternity, homeward bound among the stars.