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The Concept of Gnosis

The Lack of Specificity in the Most Recent Determinations of the Concept and Essence of Gnosis: Neander and Matter

IN SURVEYING THE PREVIOUS investigations into Gnosis and the various Gnostic systems, it is in fact not easy to form a clear concept of how the essence of Gnosis originated.

Mosheim and his immediate successors have been criticized and found wanting for having no better way to characterize the essence of Gnosis than by employing the general and indefinite idea of an Oriental philosophy. With our present knowledge of the Orient, it is in any event quite possible to differentiate the various Oriental religious systems that have influenced Gnosis. As a result of more recent investigations we now know what in fact is to be added to Mosheim's description and conceptual determination when it comes to the essence of Gnosis as a whole, and to gaining as clear and definitive a concept of it as it is possible to have. So, might the more correct and more well-grounded approach, the more advantageous one—as Neander for instance prefers—be to speak not of an “Oriental philosophy,” but instead of an “Oriental theosophy”?

The consensus is that the Gnostic systems inherently have a predominantly Oriental character. Yet as soon as we ask for a more specific feature that is recognizable as Oriental, no one feature can be pointed to that fits all the Gnostic systems, that can be viewed as a general and essential feature or indicator of Gnosticism. If the doctrine of emanation is said to preeminently express the Oriental character of Gnosticism, then right away comes the significant reservation that the very Gnostic whom Neander considers to be the main representative of a distinctive class of Gnostics, namely Marcion, completely excluded from his system the doctrine of emanation and the doctrine of Aeons that depends on it. Equally so, one cannot take the dualism of Gnostic systems, the antithesis of a good principle and an evil principle, to be a basic Oriental element common to all Gnosticism. That is because not all Gnostic systems are comparably dualistic in nature, and also because the simple antithesis of spirit

and matter, something on which all Gnostic systems agree, has nothing about it that is essentially Oriental. Finally, the docetism that one thinks of here is in any case not common to all the Gnostic systems, and in those where it is undeniably recognizable it appears with very different modifications. Docetism presents only a single and rather subordinate aspect of Gnosticism. When it is supposedly traced back to a specific Oriental religious doctrine where it seems to be ultimately rooted, namely Indian religion, there is largely disagreement as to how far one might go in accepting its influence on Gnosticism's origins and configuration.

From this we indeed see how the general designation as "Oriental" is hardly suited for providing an appropriate and specific concept of the essence of Gnosticism. Nevertheless we want to give somewhat closer consideration to the interpretations of Gnosticism made by more recent researchers.

In explaining how the most prominent Gnostic systems originally developed, Neander has placed the most weight on Philo, by locating him at the head of the series of Gnostics.¹ Philo is the one who provides the most material for seeking out the elements of Gnosis in the Alexandrian religious philosophy.² For this purpose the following principal theses exemplify the way Neander explains the connection between the Gnostic systems and the teaching of Philo:

1. Philo's distinction between the spirit and the letter, in other words, between certain higher truths and the shell or husk in which they are contained or expressed in the scriptures and formal religious practices of the Old Testament, involves the beginning of a polemic, not against Judaism as such, as divinely instituted, but instead against a misunderstanding of Judaism by a multitude attuned to matters of the flesh.

2. Philo distinguishes a sublime essence of the deity, which is hidden, self-enclosed, incomprehensible, beyond every description and depiction, from God's revelation as the initial crossing over to the creation as the basis for the unfolding of all life. Revelation is most closely connected with Philo's doctrine of the divine powers that go forth like rays from the transcendent deity as the original source of all light.

3. The human spirit, which is itself the image and likeness of the heavenly and eternal revealer of the hidden deity, of the eternal Logos, of the highest, divine reason, also has this same character of revealing God, of receiving divine life within itself and disseminating it from itself.

4. Philo's perspective on religious knowledge is twofold. There is perfect knowledge, which God himself reveals through himself, and there is imperfect knowledge, coming to human souls via spirits or angels as God's representatives, knowledge that guides and saves them.

1. [Ed.] August Neander, in his *Genetische Entwicklung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme* (Berlin, 1818), devotes the introduction (pp. 1–27) to "Elements of Gnosis in Philo." Baur summarizes this material below.

2. [Ed.] Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–AD 50) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher. He used allegory to harmonize Jewish scripture with Greek (Stoic, Platonic) philosophy. His method was more important for Christian and Gnostic thought than for Rabbinic Judaism.

5. According to Philo, the individual peoples and individual human beings in the sacred history are, as such, only appearing as symbols and visible representatives of universal spiritual forms of humanity, as certain eternal qualities or characteristics. Thus the people Israel is the symbol by which to contemplate the most highly dedicated spirit. While the other peoples only have higher spirits, God's angels, for their overseers, the Jewish people is the lineage directly overseen by God.

6. With Philo we already find the seeds of the view, based on the occurrence of theophanies and angelic appearances in the Old Testament, that God and higher spirits reveal themselves concretely to our human senses in apparently sensible forms that have no real existence.

Thus it is hardly deniable that all these ideas recur in the Gnostic systems and are to be viewed as a not-inessential foundation of Gnosticism as such. On the other hand, we can hardly overlook the fact that we find these ideas in a very different form in the case of the Gnostics, and that is why they cannot fully suffice for a comprehensive explanation of the essence of Gnosticism. What a great distance there is between the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, by rejecting reliance on the letter of the text, and the manifest polemic that so many Gnostics present in opposition to the entirety of Judaism. What a great distance one has come from drawing a distinction between the absolute God and the Logos mediating God's revelation, to the idea of a supreme God who is utterly foreign even to the Demiurge [world creator or artisan] that hostilely strives against him, a Demiurge who gets identified with the God of the Jews simply in order to demote both Demiurge and Jewish God to the lowest level. While all that we behold in the Gnostic systems and in Philo's religious doctrines is of course definitely related, at the same time these are two quite different phenomena. So that weighs against any sufficiently satisfactory derivation of the one from the other. If we wish to understand the very broad domain of Gnostic systems and ideas as being based on the limited standpoint of Philo, taken simply in its own terms, then we will forever encounter too large a gap between them, one that is unbridgeable, a striking mismatch between cause and effect.

As another discerning researcher in this domain has maintained, a full understanding of Gnosis comes from considering it to be a new development of Philonic Platonism via its combining with the Christianity that, in Syria, had been modified by Persian dualism.³ Thus the essence of Philonic Platonism had, first of all, to be reduced to its pure form and reiterated from a general perspective, in order to gain the true concept of how Gnosticism arose from this Platonism by being a new development of it. However, in concert with singling out Philo, Neander reminded us that, in pursuing this investigation, we always have to consider the fact that Platonism was the foremost thing in Philo's mind, and that he often treated the received doctrines of Jewish theology as just allegorical versions of Platonic ideas; whereas for the Gnostics, in contrast,

3. J. C. L. Gieseler, review of works by Schmidt and Matter, *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* (1830), pt. 2, 378.

their predominant interest was in Oriental theosophy. Neander says that they used this theosophy to shed light on Platonic philosophy and to fill in its gaps; that they sought to give this philosophy greater impetus and vitality, for they contended that Plato did not have an in-depth understanding of the spirit world. Accordingly, this would simply be to dismiss the general and indeterminate concept of Oriental theosophy, so as to fill out completely the sought-for principle of explanation that one still failed to find in Philo. This is the very same Oriental Gnosis that Neander sets forth for us in his new presentation of Gnosis and Gnostic systems in his church history,⁴ a presentation comprehensive in many respects and one in which Philo now moves into the background.

Neander reminds us of the remarkable era of fermentation from which the Gnostic systems emerged, and the lively and extraordinary exchange of ideas that took place between the peoples of East and West. He reminds us of the ardent desire with which the unsatisfied spirit mixed many different religious elements together by drawing upon Greek mythology and the answers provided by the Greeks' philosophical systems, and sought to reassemble from all this the fragments of a lost truth. Hence in the Gnostic systems, with their elements of ancient Oriental religious systems (in particular, Persian, but also surely East Indian ones), Jewish theology, and Platonic philosophy, all blended together, one can at the same time detect a distinctively animating principle that invigorates the majority of these components. Not only has the time at which they emerged given them a stamp all their own, the basic tenor of an unsatisfied longing they would fulfill, but also the idea of salvation or deliverance, which forms the distinctive essence of Christianity, has been attuned to this basic tenor or longing. What we get from this depiction [by Neander] of the character of the Gnostic systems is the concept of a religious syncretism linked to Christian ideas.

Matter's characterization of Gnosis⁵ does not go any further than this. Matter explains that, in joining the Christian religion, the Gnostics did of course sincerely intend to renounce their previous beliefs. However, owing to this syncretism they were, so to speak, molded and swayed by habits of heart and mind that were stronger than their new convictions. Initially and unconsciously, with some reservations, and in the end quite eagerly, they mixed the new with the old, religion with philosophy, exoteric church teaching and esoteric traditions. Gnosis is none other than the attempt to introduce into Christianity all the cosmological and theosophical speculations that have shaped the greater part of the ancient religions of the East, and have also been accepted by the Neoplatonists in the West. However these speculations have not merely been copied, as a kind of mosaic. It would be a serious misunderstanding

4. Neander, *Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche* (Hamburg, 1825–31), vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 627ff.

5. [Ed.] Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1828). Matter (1791–1864) was a professor of church history in the Protestant Theological Faculty at the University of Strasbourg.

of the human spirit if one wanted to compare its endeavors with ordinary mechanical processes, and could, not incorrectly, pass judgment on Gnosis as though one considered it from this perspective—as has simply been the case for too long a time.

Gnosticism is perhaps the most original of all the systems that antiquity has produced. At least it is the most copious one of them all. What in fact constitutes its spirit, the predominant feature in its ideas, sets Gnosticism apart from every other kind of teaching precisely because Gnosis owes its origins to a wholly distinctive need or desire. This need in fact results from spirit's unbridled striving to finally break through the confines of the sensible world. The ancient mysticism of Asia had doubtless had an entirely analogous orientation, but it only drew upon the existing mythology. In contrast Gnosis, by at most adopting a few ideas providing the main foundation for the ancient mythologies, at the same time discarded all their forms and traditions. By avoiding on the one hand all the anti-philosophical features of mythology, and on the other hand all the anti-dogmatic features of philosophy, Gnosticism adopted a few of the most robust doctrines of Christianity. In five or six articles of faith it created a system, or rather systems, that extended over all that the human spirit might embrace. These articles furnished a series of dogmas linked together in the most remarkable way.⁶

Oriental theosophy, syncretism, unbridled striving on the part of spirit—these and similar designations for the essence of Gnosis are obviously very general and tenuous indicators that can give us no clear and satisfactory concept. In part these terms are attached to features that do not even seem to be mutually compatible. If Gnosis is simply a blend of cosmological and theosophical speculations from the ancient religions of the East, then how can it at the same time be called the most original of all the systems of antiquity? And if this originality is located in the unbridled striving on the part of spirit to break through the confines of the sensible world, cannot this same originality also indeed be ascribed to the ancient religions of the Orient themselves, the ones from which Gnosis is said to have acquired its content? What concept of the essence of Gnosis are we supposed to form if, of course on the one hand, it is mainly related to the ancient, mythic mysticism of Asia, and on the other hand, however, it is said to have discarded all those forms and traditions? Furthermore, one must also remember here that all these features either do or do not exactly fit one of the noteworthy Gnostic systems, or at least do so only very imperfectly. However, the Marcionite system is so negatively related to everything pre-Christian that, because of this it does not share in the Oriental theosophy or the syncretistic character of the other Gnostic systems. Also, it is in any event quite free of the unbridled striving to break through the confines of the sensible world. However, all the major Gnostic systems must themselves include the features said to make clear the essence of Gnosticism as

6. Matter, *Histoire critique*, vol. 1, p. 12. See vol. 2, p. 191: "It certainly bears repeating that the Gnostics are not theologians, nor moralists, nor philosophers. They have much higher aims than these do. They are theosophists in the more exclusive sense that one can give to this term."

such. One of these systems that is distinctive and noteworthy as such can hardly be disregarded in determining the general concept of Gnosticism.

The Relation of Gnosis to Religion: Religious History and Religious Philosophy as the Essential Elements of Gnosis

Of all the characteristic features that Gnosis presents to us, none stands out more clearly or lets us see, at first glance, more deeply into the essence of Gnosis, than does its relation to religion. Religion is the topic Gnosis is in fact dealing with, although this is not first of all religion as abstract idea but instead is religion in the concrete shapes and positive forms in which it has objectified itself historically at the time when Christianity appeared.

Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity are the integral elements that constitute the material contents of Gnosis in all of its main forms. However negatively and harshly the individual Gnostic systems may see their relation to one or another of these religious forms, the task they have is always to spell out how these three religious forms are mutually related in terms of their character and their intrinsic value. The Gnostic systems do this critical comparison as their way of arriving at the true concept of religion. Hence if, as so often happens, the essence of Gnosis is located in philosophical or theological speculation, this specification is directly emended to saying that we are not to regard the subject matter of Gnosis as what is speculative in and for itself, in the way that philosophy takes up the business of speculation. Instead its subject matter is speculation only to the extent that speculation is something given via the contents of the positive religions to which it attaches itself.

It is from this perspective that we can readily evaluate the accuracy of the contention—already found in ancient writers, and often repeated by more recent ones who follow their precedent—that the actual problem Gnosis was attempting to solve is the question about the origin of evil.⁷ It is true that the contents of the Gnostic systems can for the most part be traced back to that question. Since the Gnostic understands evil not merely in the moral sense but most especially in the metaphysical sense, such that evil is the finite that is distinct from, and separated from, what is absolute, the issue comprises none other than the major problem as to how the finite comes forth from the absolute, or how the world proceeds from God. And since the descent or

7. See Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 7: “The same subject matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved. Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted?” [ANF 3:246]. Also, *Against Marcion* 1.2: “Marcion (like many persons now, and especially heretics) broods about the question of evil: What is its origin?” [ANF 3:272]. In his *Ecclesiastical History* 5.27, Eusebius speaks of “the problem of the source of evil, so much traversed by the heretics” [LCL Eusebius, 2:514–15]. In *Against Heresies* 24.6, Epiphanius says, in speaking of the sect of Basilides: “This evil doctrine originates with the inquiry into the origin of evil; the kind of evil that is displayed in the whole of one’s own life. The doer of evil is in truth a purveyor of evil and does nothing good. As it is written, ‘Do no evil, and evil will never overtake you’ (Ecclesiasticus 7:1).”

falling-away from the absolute cannot be conceived of without a future turning-back to, and reacceptance into, the original principle of being, that single question embraces both aspects of the sphere within which all the Gnostic systems operate, whether describing a larger or a smaller orbit.

But if this were the only principal issue that prompted the quest for a solution by the Gnostic systems, then their inherent character would lack a satisfactory explanation. Since this very question that occupied them is a purely philosophical question, it had to give them far more the shape of philosophical systems, and thus one could not rightly conceive why, for such a purpose, they had to locate themselves so specifically in relation to the positive, historically given religions. They could support this way of answering the question only if they considered these systems from a more general perspective, as the necessary mediation of what is said to be recognized as truth in philosophy and religion.

Sufficient attention has been given to the fact that the three forms of religion existing in mutual contact at the time when Gnosticism came on the scene are elements constitutive of the acknowledged foundation and material contents of Gnosis. So in this sense we have to consider Gnosis from the perspective of the history of religion. But this is only one aspect of the essence of Gnosis, and it must be linked to another aspect essentially belonging to Gnosis. That is to say, Gnosis is a matter of religious history (*Religionsgeschichte*) only inasmuch as it is at the same time religious philosophy or philosophical religion (*Religionsphilosophie*),⁸ such that we gain a proper concept of the essence of Gnosis from the distinctive way in which these two elements and orientations—the historical and the philosophical aspects—have become intermixed and combined in one totality. Each Gnostic system contains pagan, Jewish, and Christian elements. Yet in each system these elements at the same time appear to us as mutually related in a specific way, such that the nature of the religious form to which they belong is determined by the position given to them in the arrangement of the whole system.

Over and above the merely historical way of considering these systems there stands the philosophical or reflective perspective, which, in the combination of components from the historically given religions, catches sight of an organic whole in which one and the same living idea moves forward in its concrete configuration, through a series of forms and stages of development. In the idea of religion, all religions are one; they are related to it as appearance or form relates to essence, the concrete to the abstract, what mediates to what is immediate or unmediated. The entire history of religion is none other than the living concept of religion, unfolding and advancing itself and, in doing so, realizing itself. In other words, by doing so, religious knowing first becomes an absolute knowing, a knowing about the absolute religion, so that it is also self-aware of its own mediation. This is the perspective from which Gnosis considers the historically given religions in their mutual relationships. But at

8. [Ed.] On the translation of these terms, see the Editor's Foreword.

the same time the idea of religion fully unites with what it has for its essential and necessary content, with the idea of the deity (*Gottheit*). Hence for the idea of religion, the history of religion is not merely the history of divine revelations, for these revelations are at the same time the process of development in which the eternal essence of deity itself goes forth from itself, manifests itself in a finite world and produces division with itself in order, through this manifestation and self-bifurcation, to return to eternal oneness with itself.

This is the explanation for the strict antithesis found in all the Gnostic systems, the antithesis between the absolute God and the self-revealing God. The more abundantly the deity manifests itself in its unfolding life, and the more varied is the series of divine powers into which the eternal one spreads out, the greater too is the effort to hold fast to the idea of the absolute in its purely abstract character. The Gnostics have insufficient expressions to designate the self-enclosed and concealed essence of the deity, what is nameless and unnamable, what utterly transcends every conception and description. Yet if the deity is supposed to be characterized as going outside itself, then one must be able to conceive of the determinative cause for this. The cause is matter, and the antithesis between spirit and matter is therefore the factor that conditions and determines the divine self-revelation in its various moments.

The entire divine revelation and world-development becomes a struggle of two mutually opposed principles, one in which the supreme task of the deity, or of the absolute spirit, is to overcome, and put an end to, the antithesis owing to matter. Matter can of course be related to God in different ways. Matter can be thought of as outside God, as an eternal principle equal to deity. Alternatively, matter can be posited within the divine nature itself. Or else matter is not in fact anything substantial, but is only the negative principle that—as soon as the deity reveals itself and establishes the antithesis of infinite and finite—cannot be separated from the finite world in which the deity reveals itself, for it functions as what limits and confines the complete expression of the divine essence. Yet even in the latter case, where the concept of matter is reduced to this more minimal factor, the antithesis between spirit and matter remains, in itself, completely the same. If matter is conceived of as an independent principle over against God, then God can only reveal himself in a contest that limits his absolute being and subjects it to finitude. Thus, although matter does not stand over against God as an independent principle, that nevertheless leaves us with the deity as forever having the not-further-explainable tendency to go outside itself and reveal itself in a world where the completeness or perfection of the divine essence can only present itself as something limited and finite. The same higher necessity that sets matter over against God also holds sway because the deity cannot withstand the inner pressure of its nature to reveal itself in a world that can only be a material world, a world with matter.

However if, in the creation of the world, we might even conceive of matter as in this way having control, so to speak, over God, as a principle negating the absoluteness

of the divine being, this is nevertheless just always a negation that is in turn itself negated and must be canceled out. For the moment of redemption, and of the return of the finite to God, stands over against the moment of world creation through which God makes himself finite. The spirit given over to matter and held captive by matter must be freed and delivered from its power. The divine self-revelation turns back once more to that from which it has gone forth, although in doing so the end is not completely the same as the beginning. For, since spirit once again resists the domineering influence of matter, spirit has gathered itself within itself and withdrawn itself from matter, and is now, for the first time, truly conscious itself of its independence from matter, of its absolute power. Even if matter, as an independent principle, stands over against spirit, with the two principles resuming their former positions (the Gnostic *ἀποκατάστασις*, the complete restoration, or return of all things), there no longer exists the same relationship as before. Instead, the outcome of the struggle is spirit's newly-born consciousness of their true relationship. So these are the principal moments of the self-revelation of the divine being, and of the world's development, the moments through which all the Gnostic systems, with all their variant forms, make their way.

When we consider Gnosis in this way, it appears with the higher meaning that in almost all cases had to be recognized in it if one could form any clear concept of the distinctive nature of Gnosis. Gnosis is the remarkable attempt to grasp nature and history, the entire course of the world, together with all that it comprises, as the series of moments in which absolute spirit objectifies itself and mediates itself with itself. This is all the more remarkable since, in the entire history of philosophical and theological speculation, there is nothing more related to, and analogous with, Gnosis than the most recent religious philosophy [Boehme, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Hegel].

The Components of Gnosis from the History of Religion Are Derived from Three Main Forms of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity

There are two questions we have to consider first of all, with regard to the two elements to be distinguished in the essence of Gnosticism: the historical and the philosophical elements, or the historical-religious aspect (*Religionsgeschichte*) and what we call religious philosophy or philosophical religion (*Religionsphilosophie*).

First, what components in the material contents of the Gnostic systems are traceable to the individual forms of religion that constitute the historical-religious aspect of Gnosticism?

Second, what is the inherent nature of the religious philosophy overarching the historical elements and interrelating them in a specific way?

The answer to this first question directly presents us with the three principles that, in addition to the supreme and absolute principle of the deity, all the Gnostic systems share: matter, the Demiurge, and Christ. From this it is self-evident how these

three principles relate to the three religions in question here. Since Christianity is represented by Christ and Judaism is represented by the Demiurge, only matter is left for the pagans. These pairings fully correspond to the successive stages or levels assigned to these three religions. Christianity stands higher than Judaism, and Judaism is acknowledged to have undoubted precedence over paganism.⁹ On this view, the well-known Gnostic classification of human beings into πνευματικοί, ψυχικοί, and ὕλικοί or χοϊκοί (people of spirit, of the psyche, and of matter or earth respectively)—which is analogous to the trichotomous division of human nature into πνεῦμα, ψυχή, and σὰρξ (spirit, psyche, and flesh or body)—also carries over to the followers of the three religions. This is the sense in which Valentinus and Marcion, for instance, explain that the Jews are the realm of the Demiurge, the pagans are the realm of matter or of Satan, and the Christians, as people of spirit, are the people of the supreme God.

Since pagan religion stands at the lowest level, matter forms the most extreme antithesis to the deity. Indeed the concept of matter itself wholly belongs in principle to pagan religion, and simply stems originally from it. There are numerous reasons why it cannot be deemed inappropriate to look upon matter as the principle pagan religion represents in the Gnostic systems. They include the facts: that the idea of a God creating by the power of his word remains completely foreign to pagan religion; that paganism has everything issuing forth from a primordial chaos wildly driven by blind forces; that most of the pagan deities are just personifications of the material elements and forces of nature, or of the sensuous urges dominating human life; and moreover, that the idea of Satan, which in the Gnostic systems is so closely linked to the idea of matter, with Satan as the prince of darkness and the ruler of matter, is in any event an idea belonging to pagan religion certainly inasmuch as Zoroastrian dualism is simply one of its various forms. This makes it obvious that, with such a way of looking at things, where one is only dealing with the most prominent and characteristic concepts, and can fix one's eyes only on the extreme position without regard for intermediate cases and nuances, there must always be a certain one-sidedness. So it is only in this one-sided sense that matter, the most extreme concept from which pagan religion proceeds, can be regarded as the signature concept belonging fundamentally and pre-eminently to it.

While the pagans occupy the lowest place, Christians belong to the highest one. Hence Christianity stands at the level of humanity's course of religious development where the idea of a redemption, consisting of purification and liberation from everything of a material nature, is not merely something one is conscious of, but is

9. [Ed.] It is difficult to avoid the negative connotations of "paganism" or "heathenism" (German *Heidentum*, the term used by Baur). Jews and Christians used these words to distinguish their own religion from non-Jewish, non-Christian, and mostly Eastern religions. The word "pagan" comes from the Latin *pagus*, "country," with its Indo-European base **pak-*, "to join, enclose, fasten." "Heathen" is traceable back to a Gothic root meaning "heath." Perhaps a more neutral version of the term would be "indigenous religion." Baur includes under this category Greek religion, Pythagorean-Platonic philosophy, Indian religious systems (Hindu and Buddhist), and Zoroastrianism.

also realized. Therefore, however freely and arbitrarily the Gnostics might proceed in determining the true content of Christianity, they see it as the religion having the absolute truth about, and knowledge of, the return from the world of antithesis and estrangement, and back to oneness with God. This exalted status and significance had to be ascribed to Christianity if, as the more perfect and consummate religion, as the religion of the pneumatic or spiritual people, it was said to be the successor to the subordinate levels at which the still-so-imperfect religions stand, the limited and one-sided religions of paganism and Judaism. Accordingly, everything the Gnostic systems embody concerning the idea of redemption, all the teachings related to it, all the practices and institutions the Gnostics have introduced among themselves supposedly for the purpose of realizing the idea of redemption—all this is either directly borrowed from Christianity or else modeled after Christianity. In any event all this shows what influence Christianity had on Gnosticism, and what an essential contribution it has made to the material contents of Gnosticism in its various forms.

Judaism is the intermediary or intermediate form of religion between paganism and Christianity. In the series of Gnostic principles, the Gnostic Demiurge occupies a comparable position. Since the Gnostics generally understood the Demiurge to be the God of the Jews, it quite clearly indicates the element of Gnosis deriving from the Jewish religion and, as such, points to the position that Judaism itself has within the context of the system. The various predicates the Gnostics assign to the Demiurge, by portraying it sometimes in more brilliant terms and sometimes in darker tones, as befits the twofold nature of such a being, are by the same token judgments about the inner worth of Judaism and its religious laws and institutions. However, with all their disparaging depictions of the Demiurge's essential nature and all the even more petty notions they therefore harbor about Judaism itself, for all of the Gnostics the main idea—as the idea that had to be made known to religious consciousness first of all by Judaism—forever remains the idea of a world-creator and a world-ruler. [As inferior to Judaism,] pagan religion had never actually risen above the concept of matter, because all of its divine figures, which paganism conceives of as arising in unruly confusion from the obscure, dark fermentation of chaos, can still always fall back again into chaos, for none of them can gain an existence and consistency that is independent of chaos. Yet at the same time the concept of matter itself, as a principle distinct from divinity and standing independently over against the divine, spiritual principle, had for the Gnostics a truth and reality, so that there was also no mistaking the intrinsic religious value belonging to pagan religion. Likewise, because of its distinctive idea of redemption, Christianity maintains a position in the Gnostic systems that gives the most convincing testimony to the inner power of its religious truth. Thus Judaism too lays claim to a recognition that even no anti-Jewish Gnostic could have denied or wished to deny, in virtue of the idea Judaism first brought to consciousness and expressed, the idea of a world-creator transcending matter and working, or creating, according to specific ideas and purposes.

So each of these three religions has its own place in the process of religious development that humankind has to pass through on the path prescribed for it by the history of religion. The three principles that indicate the stage and sphere of each religion are the most essential and necessary moments through which the concept of religion progresses in order to attain its true significance and inclusive specificity, such that a prior moment is the necessary presupposition for the one that follows it. However, this is also the reason why the subordinate moments must have their own immanent truth.

The Actual Character of the Religious Philosophy Organically Connecting These Historical Elements

The three principles we have traced back in this way to the three religions to which they belong, initially are not reciprocally related in the way they appear to us in the Gnostic systems. They first acquire this interconnection from the religious philosophy added or applied to these elements from religious history. But what is the character or nature of this religious philosophy itself when we subject it to closer examination?

It soon becomes evident that, howsoever subordinate the position of pagan religion with matter being assigned to it, it plays a very important part in the philosophy that links those elements and pervades them with its spirit. This philosophy proceeds from the same outlook that still always makes pagan religion the foundation in the same way—that is, pagan religion in its various principal forms, although with different modifications. God and world are conceived as mediated by the elements of a process, one embodying more or less the characteristic of a natural process conditioned by physical laws. The main difference here concerns that process or sequence being either from above to below or from below to above, either from what is perfect or complete to what is less so, or from the imperfect to the perfect. The downward direction can generally be called “emanation,” and the upward direction “evolution.”

The evolutionary view posits an imperfect state as the first and original condition, one that does indeed contain within it all the elements for a higher development. But this state or condition is only the foundation for a higher spiritual life, one that can only develop via a series of configurations in which the material principle is conceived of as in an ongoing struggle with the spiritual principle. This is the standpoint of Greek religion, which for that reason has a theogony instead of a cosmogony, and only at the highest level has free, self-conscious spirit soaring above the material world.

The view proceeding from the concept of emanation is typical of the Oriental religious systems that posit the purely independent spirit as the first principle, and have the material world initially resulting from the fact that spirit comes into contact with matter via a series of potencies and natures issuing from spirit like rays of light, but whose inner power diminishes the more distant they become from spirit as the original or primordial light, and that give way to the eclipsing power of a dark

principle within them. In any event the term “emanation” designates this view only imperfectly and in a one-sided way, since it embraces quite different modifications of this position. Above all, the cosmogonies of the Indian religious systems cannot be assigned to the emanation idea as legitimately as can the Zoroastrian doctrine of Ormazd and the beings of light in which he reveals himself. However, we may always regard the most essential and universal point here as the fact that the mediation or interaction between spirit and matter, between the two antithetical principles, takes place in some way based on, or arising from, spirit. The eternal, absolute spirit objectivizes and individuates itself. It lets a part of its own essential nature go forth from itself and come under the control of matter. Here we also find the conception that higher spirits, the souls of human beings, as the result of their falling from the higher region, the spirit world, have descended into the sensible world and become enclosed in material bodies just like in a prison. Caught in these bodies, they groan under this burden and long to be freed from them. This is the Pythagorean-Platonic perspective, which opposes the ideal world to the real world and considers this real world to be the dim, shadowy reflection of that ideal world. We clearly recognize that this Platonic perspective is related to the religious teachings of the East.

It is now easy to see on which of the two sides that we have distinguished we are to place the Gnostic systems. It is the Oriental standpoint from which they proceed. The doctrine of the Aeons, which occupies such an important place in most of these systems, directly shows how justifiable it is to designate their way of representing the relation of the finite to the absolute in terms of an emanation doctrine. A series of Aeons proceeds from the absolute spirit, which is itself the Primal Aeon. The more numerous and manifold the classes and levels of Aeons, the stages marking the descent from the intelligible world to the sensible world, the more assuredly are the Aeons said to mediate the transition from spirit to matter, from the ideal to the real. This is that aspect of Gnosis in which the Gnostic systems are organized in the most diverse ways and display their productive energy most abundantly, in their competitive wrestling to solve the problem of mediating an antithesis that inherently can never be mediated. Whether their solutions involve expansion to a system of thirty Aeons, or concentration in the concept of a Sophia as a mere power and property of the Supreme God, it is always the same attempt at mediation.

While this aspect of those systems takes the route from above to below with the two outermost components of the antithesis being God and matter, a philosophical examination can distinguish different perspectives on this antithesis. Since the eternal, absolute being or essence puts an end to the inexpressible stillness—the *ἄρρητον* (secrecy), *σιγή* (silence), *ἐννοια* (thought)—in which it is pure self-identity, and fully proceeds to thinking of itself, and opens out from the unfathomable, self-enclosed depths (*βυθός*) to the unfolding of the seeds of life hidden in it, to the configuration of a particular existence, this is its transition from the abstractness of its essence to its concrete determinacy. It then becomes for the first time a concrete, self-conscious

spirit. We can only understand it in this sense when the Gnostic systems, and especially the Valentinian system, which is the most thoughtful and thorough one, has the Νοῦς (Reason) or Μονογενής (Only-Begotten) coming forth from the absolute essence as the first emanation, and together with it also the Logos. It is in this way that the absolute God, remaining inconceivable in pure identity with himself, first gains the concept of his own essence or being.¹⁰ The absolute *substance*, existent in itself, becomes the *subject*¹¹ when the divine essence steps forth vis-à-vis itself and makes itself the object, in the Νοῦς or Μονογενής. Hence this is the genesis of the divine self-consciousness, which, in the first Aeon coming forth from the divine substance, is presented in a manner analogous to the form of human consciousness. That is why the church fathers, for good reasons, faulted the Gnostics for assigning human forms and conditions to the divine being.

However, the divine ideas are also these same Aeons in which the divine substance becomes the subject, the ideas according to which the world is formed and structured. By the divine essence being revealed to itself, it also reveals itself in the world. The Aeons, descending level by level from the ideal world to the real world, are at the same time the bearers of the archetypal forms and are their conveyers to the material world. However subordinate the level at which the Demiurge falls in the series of Aeons, as the one who directly makes the world, he nevertheless can impress on the world, which is his work, no other forms than the kind he himself has received from above, as conveyed to him by the higher orders of being.

But the concept of emanation, to which we must stick closely here, also ultimately involves the fact that what is emanated diminishes in reality and perfection to the degree that it becomes farther away from its original source. This too is a perspective from which the doctrine of Aeons is to be considered. The farther down the series of Aeons descends, the more power the dark principle gains over the principle of light. Spirit has gone down into the domain of matter, and already here there begins the suffering and distress of Sophia-Achamoth, the last one of the Aeons, which the

10. See Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 31.5.3–4, which introduces a statement from a Valentinian text: “the Self-Engendered contained in himself all things, things which were in him and were not known.” The *ἐννοια* or thought is also called the *σιγή* (silence), “since Greatness [τὸ μέγεθος, *das Absolute*] completed all things through a concept without speech” [ET: *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis: Selected Passages*, trans. Philip R. Amidon, S.J. (New York and Oxford, 1990), 111]. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1.1. (ch. 10 in Epiphanius), where he says about the Sige or Silence: “. . . becoming pregnant, she gave birth to Nous, who was both similar and equal to the one who had produced him, and was alone capable of comprehending his father’s greatness.” And, in 1.1.2, he writes: “They proceed to tell us that the Propator [the pre-existent Aeon] was known only to the Monogenes [Only-Begotten] who sprang from him; in other words, only to the Nous, while to all the others he was invisible and incomprehensible” [ANF 1:316–17].

11. [Ed.] Italics ours. One of the main themes of Hegel’s philosophy is that the absolute must be comprehended “as *subject* no less than as *substance*” (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister [Hamburg, 1952], p. 19 [¶ 17 in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977)]).

Valentinians in particular depict so vividly. So it is always in turn the same idea of emanation that is presented to us from different perspectives.

In any event all this just involves one side of the Gnostic system. For there must be another side corresponding to the emanation and going-forth from God: the returning, and being taken up once more, into the oneness of the divine being. In between these two antithetically juxtaposed sides then lies the entire course of the suffering-filled circumstances in which the spiritual principle is confined and constrained, and increasingly overcome, by material being. The suffering of Sophia-Achamoth, the entire period of rule by the Demiurge, and even the earthly appearance of Christ, are moments belonging to this entire course, which is wholly characterized by allowing this contest between the two principles to unfold in such a way that we can clearly see all of its more important aspects.

The world of the Demiurge has its counterpart in Sophia-Achamoth, who is suffering and downcast because of how clearly she is conscious of her descent from the spirit world. The unending sorrow of being overcome by matter is a more unfree and more unclear condition in the case of the Demiurge standing far below her. In this latter world the Demiurge no longer is very aware of his spiritual element, although at this lowest level of its self-alienation the spirit has not ceased working its way through all the obstacles and contrary influences presented by matter. At last, by gathering together all the forces of light in a unitary consciousness, spirit breaks forth all at once with a brilliant ray and ascends on the upward path to the realm of light—overcoming the final crisis in which the struggle between the two principles gets all the more fiercely aroused the more the moment of their decisive separation has arrived. In all those in whom the divine sparks of light are not completely extinguished, the longing for redemption and liberation from the bonds of matter is reawakened, and they are led upward on this path.

It is obvious that this whole domain within which the Gnostic systems operate—the twofold path they describe here, with one path downward from the spiritual world to the material world, down to the most extreme limitation and eclipse of the light principle by the material principle, and the other path upward from this extreme point to the highest region of the realm of light—has its type or model in all those forms of ancient religion that present us with deities of light and sun gods as the foundation for all the religious insights of antiquity. These religions have so many analogous shapes of the gods, of different contrasting conditions, the oppositions of light and darkness, of life and death, of struggle and conquest, as well as involving that whole series of transformations that the life of nature undergoes in its annual cycle. The basic idea and basic insight is always the same, although what appears to us in so many myths of the old religions, sticking to the narrowly confined sphere of the annual cycle of natural life, was similar or comparable to the lofty speculative standpoint of the Gnostic systems, to the great antithesis encompassing the highest principles and

the antitheses of God and world, spirit and matter, good and evil, sin and redemption, fall and return.

However, what calls for special emphasis here is the identity of the spiritual principle that the Gnostic systems presuppose as present in all those beings said to mediate or connect spirit with matter, and then in turn matter with spirit. Just as the eternal, absolute spirit objectifies itself in the Aeons initially standing with it, so too all those remaining beings, said to mediate the antithesis between the two principles, are only different forms and shapes in which spirit veils itself according to the various aspects of its relationships to matter. Spirit does this in order that, by the whole series of these mediating elements in which it has to carry out its self-revelation on this broad path, it will return to absolute oneness with itself and then for the first time attain full consciousness of itself. We must necessarily have a misguided view of the Gnostic systems if we regard the kind of beings that are the turning-points of the system—beings such as Sophia-Achamoth, the Demiurge, and Christ—as simply individual beings in their own right, and if we regard them merely as contingently and externally related to one another. Just as it is one and the same antithesis and struggle between spirit and matter running throughout the entire system, so too it is one and the same spirit appearing here as the suffering and downcast Achamoth, there as the limited Demiurge who acts unconsciously, and then in turn as Christ who, with the most brilliant light of spiritual consciousness, enters into the order or system of sensible reality. This is one and the same spirit that mediates itself with itself, and comes to consciousness of itself, in all the pneumatic or spiritual beings, when they become conscious themselves that the life of the concrete individual is related to, and identical with, the highest principle of spiritual life. The task of Gnosis is to comprehend and explain this point. Even in the kind of Gnostic systems that, like Marcionism, with their predominant dualism, seem to completely dismantle this bond of identity, running through all of them, it still cannot be entirely overlooked, as will later become evident.