
Jung the Gnostic?

This paper will attempt to analyse the relationship between Jung and Gnosticism in some detail. In the first half we will examine the question of whether Jung can himself be considered a Gnostic. The second half of the paper will consider the attraction Jung felt for ancient Gnosticism, examining in particular the personal support Jung appropriated from Gnosticism.

Is Jung a Gnostic?

To begin, we shall tackle the question of whether Jung can himself be considered a Gnostic. At first sight there are striking similarities between Jung's system and the passing acquaintance that many people have with ancient (2nd/ 3rd century) Gnosticism. Gnosticism is known for its affinity for symbolism and the importance of opposing pairs (good/evil, male/female). In addition, the individual path of spiritual ascent in which knowledge (gnosis) is the key and for which an enlightened guide is required is also well known.

All of these aspects have parallels in the thought of Carl Jung - the archetypes "speak" through symbols, the tension inherent in pairs of opposites is crucial to Jung's thought, and the path of ascent can be seen as the journey of individuation in which psychological knowledge is key and along which a Jungian therapist guides the neophyte. It is also common knowledge that Jung was well read in ancient Gnostic texts and his writings are peppered with references to specific Gnostic passages and concepts. However, as Robert Segal (1992) points out:

It is one thing to maintain that Jung was entranced by Gnosticism. It is another to say that he was a Gnostic himself. Jung himself invokes this distinction and vigorously, even bitterly, rejects the epithet "Gnostic". (p.43)

We shall continue with our investigation, despite Jung's protest. However, since the term Gnostic has several different meanings, at the very start of this process we are faced with one essential question - what is the nature of "Gnosticism"? For convenience, we shall divide Gnosticism into two varieties - ancient and modern - and consider each of them in turn to see if Jung fits comfortably under either heading.

Firstly, then we turn to ancient Gnosticism. Without a detailed knowledge of the most recent scholarly literature surrounding ancient Gnosticism, it is tempting to define it by providing a number of commonplace Gnostic beliefs. Segal does just this in his own definition:

Gnosticism here is the belief in an antithetical dualism of immateriality, which is good, and matter, which is evil. Gnosticism espouses radical dualism in human beings, the cosmos, and divinity; the primordial unity of all immateriality; the yearning to restore that unity; the present entrapment of a portion of immateriality in human bodies; the need for knowledge to reveal to humans that entrapment; and the dependence of humans on a savior to reveal that knowledge to them. (p.3)

However, the ability to encapsulate the exceptionally varied schools of Gnostic thought in such a neat definition has come under attack in recent years. Even over 50 years ago, Victor White (1949) pointed out that Gnosticism was an exceptionally broad and ill-defined category:

Dr. Jung follows common usage in speaking of “*The Gnosis*”. This must not mislead us into supposing that there was only one gnosis: in fact there were almost as many gnosés as there were people who called themselves gnostics or who have been called gnostics by later historians. (p.200)

More importantly, in more recent years, a number of Gnostic scholars have begun to criticise the *very term* Gnostic and the phenomenon of Gnosticism. Michael Allen Williams (1996), for example, calls for the “dismantling of a dubious category”, arguing that the umbrella term of Gnosticism is simply too broad and encompasses groups with very different and sometimes contradictory beliefs (see Chapter 10 in particular). Williams demonstrates that, depending on which “Gnostic” group(s) one chooses, it is possible to show that the Gnostics were ascetics or libertines, elitist or inclusive, world-hating or intent on reducing the tension between religion and society. Karen King (2005) also calls for the a reappraisal of Gnosticism, arguing that it is a modern construction as well as the product of “the ancient Christian discourse of orthodoxy and heresy” (p.4).

So, given the contemporary debates around the nature of ancient Gnosticism (or even whether there was such a thing) attempting to assess Jung as an ancient Gnostic is found to be even more of a perplexing question! However, in order to make progress, we shall assume that Segal’s simplistic definition is sufficient from this point onwards.

Returning to the question, can Jung be considered as an Gnostic in the metaphysical sense - did he “believe” in the ancient Gnostic myths as being descriptions of reality? The simple answer has to be “no”. As Segal points out:

Jung himself ... rejects the epithet “Gnostic” - not on the grounds that he disagrees with any Gnostic tenets but on the grounds that he is an empirical scientist rather than a metaphysician. (p.43)

Throughout Jung’s career, and especially his dialogue with representatives of various religious traditions, Jung constantly affirmed the (*psychological*) reality of religious terms such as “God”, whilst at the same time affirming that their (*metaphysical*) reality was outside of his remit as an empirical scientist. Repeatedly, Jung appealed to his work as an exploration of experience (his own and that of his patients) - his concern was solely with psychic “facts”.

It is worth pointing out at this juncture that, as Palmer (1997) has argued, Jung does appear slightly disingenuous on this issue, since his own theory of archetypes is *itself* metaphysical speculation! However, laying this objection to one side, Jung does make much of his stated aversion to metaphysics and on this point, I agree with Segal who finds that “In short, Jung is no metaphysical Gnostic” (p.44).

An alternative approach would be to try to see Jung as an ancient Gnostic, understood in *purely psychological* terms. Just as Jung found it possible to understand orthodox Christian doctrine in solely psychological terms (e.g. the Trinity) might he have been able to align himself *entirely* with ancient Gnostic thought in psychological terms? Jung undoubtedly did provide a psychological account of the various Gnostic myths, including the chief Gnostic creation myths. Segal summarises Jung’s interpretation thus - “Creation” is to be understood as the development of the human psyche (p.19), “The godhead symbolizes the unconscious” (ibid.), “The ego emerges ... with the creation of individual human beings” (p.20) and the Gnostic’s secret knowledge is the existence of, and the need to cultivate, the unconscious (p.24).

However, despite it being possible to understand Gnostic texts from a Jungian perspective, Segal ultimately sees a sharp, indeed opposite, teleological focus between Jung’s psychological system and Gnosticism (as psychologically understood). Segal makes the important point that Gnostic myths urge the return of the divine spark to the godhead, which in psychological terms would be understood as a return to sheer unconsciousness. This is the *precise opposite* of Jung’s therapeutic end which Segal states is “the integration of the unconscious with ego consciousness” (p.25).

In short, Segal summarises by saying that “Gnosticism, interpreted psychologically, violates rather than supports the Jungian ideal” (p.32) and once again, I find myself in agreement with him - Jung is no ancient Gnostic whether understood in purely metaphysical or psychological terms.

We now turn to modern Gnosticism to see whether Jung can be understood any better in these terms. Unfortunately, in this area too, the common definitions are broad and seemingly all-encompassing with figures as diverse as Hegel, Blake, Byron, Doris Lessing and Jack Kerouac all being tagged as Gnostic at one time or another (Segal, p.4). Segal cites Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin as “the pre-eminent authorities of modern Gnosticism” (ibid.) and summarises Voegelin’s six characteristics of modern Gnosticism as follows:

Dissatisfaction with the world, confidence that the ills of the world stem from the way it is organized, certainty that amelioration is possible, the assumption that improvement must “evolve historically,” the belief that humanity can change the world, and the conviction that knowledge - gnosis - is the key to change. (p.5)

Jung’s system and his approach would certainly fall under this definition. However, it must be pointed out, that on these terms Jung would share the epithet “Gnostic” with a large number of other worldviews, including Marxism, any system based on an existentialist/ humanist philosophy, or even the modernist project of “Science”.¹ At this point, the definition has become too broad for my liking and so inclusive that it loses any specific meaning.

More satisfyingly, Segal concludes that Jung could be considered as a modern Gnostic, albeit with qualifications:

Like ancient Gnostics, Jung seeks reconnection with the lost essence of human nature and treats reconnection as tantamount to salvation... reconnection is a lifelong process and typically requires the guidance of one who has already undertaken it... Knowledge for both Jung and ancient Gnostics is the key to the effort... In these respects Jung can legitimately be typed a Gnostic. He is, however, a contemporary Gnostic because the rediscovered essence is entirely human, not divine, and lies entirely within oneself, not within divinity as well. (p.48)

¹ See Midgley, M. (1994). *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning*.

It does seem somewhat ironic, however, that in the process of defining the contemporary Gnostic, Segal fails to realise that he has created a definition of “Gnostic” *around Jung himself!* Segal has effectively picked just those aspects of the (exceptionally broad) Gnostic identity which appealed to Jung, assembled them together and declared that if that’s how we define a “Gnostic” then Jung is one. A Gnostic is what *Jung* says he is. The Master himself could not have played his own game any better!

In summary, to my mind, Jung cannot be considered an ancient Gnostic. Nor do I think he can simply be considered a modern Gnostic under Voegelin’s definition of the term, since his definition is simply too vague. Instead I find Segal’s explanation of Jung as a contemporary Gnostic the most satisfying (with the above caveat). This is perhaps because of the emphasis on what we might call the “spiritual” task of “reconnection as tantamount to salvation”. It seems to me that some such similar aspiration is required to make any schema or person worthy of the title “Gnostic”.

The Attraction of Ancient Gnosticism

We now turn to the peculiar attraction which ancient Gnosticism possessed for Jung throughout his life. We shall consider this topic under three headings - the support for his psychological approach provided by Gnosticism (and the contemporary Gnostic scholarship of his day), two intense concerns he shared with “The Gnostics”, and the role I believe Gnosticism played in his emerging identity formation.

Firstly, then we shall address the support provided by Gnosticism (and especially by the changing face of Gnostic scholarship in his early years) for Jung’s particular approach. The most important point to note here is that the scholarly perspective on Gnosticism was undergoing a radical shift in ways which matched and supported the grounds of Jung’s own psychological investigations.

In the late 19th century, the perspective of Adolph von Harnack (1851 - 1930) was in vogue. Following the Church Fathers, von Harnack’s simplistic perspective was that “Gnosis is the Hellenisation of Christianity” (Rudolph, 1987, pp.31-2) - simply a later, heretical perversion of pure original Christianity. However, by the time Jung began investigating Gnosticism (c. 1916), the “history of religions” school was in the ascendancy. This new approach provided support for Jung’s own psychological enterprise in three distinct ways.

Firstly, the history of religions school promoted a different perspective on the origins of Gnosticism which they sought to trace back to “a pre-Christian mixture of Babylonian and Iranian religion” (Rudolph, 1987, p.32). In addition they placed great store in tracing the genealogy of motifs (such as the Son of Man) across time, geography and through various religions (King, 2005, p.92). This task was not undertaken in a reductionistic manner, but in order to create “a great interconnected sphere of speculation of a related kind.” (ibid.). One can imagine that such a perspective would give more support to Jung’s own nascent ideas on archetypes and their ever present expression across all religious traditions than von Harnack’s approach.

Secondly, the history of religions school and Jung shared an interest in the same types of sources. Karen King (2005) observes that the Gnostics “were fascinated by the fantastic myths and took ritual practice, no matter how crude they considered it to be, very seriously as an important generative locus of religious community.” (p.71). In addition, she states that “these scholars were very much drawn to the methods and presuppositions of the study of Germanic religion, folklore, and ethnology (race).” (p.72). Jung would therefore have found academic support for the use of the same sources with which his own work was concerned.

A third point of connection between the approach of the history of religions school and that of Jung is their shared concern for the self-consciously *scientific* nature of their investigation. Jung himself was adamant that his approach to psychology and religion was both objective and scientific - a perspective shared by history of religions scholars, as King points out:

They expressly promoted their scholarship as a science, *Religionswissenschaft*, which would free the study of Christianity from dogmatic limits by making it the object of scientific-historical investigation. (2005, pp.72-3)

This close connection with the approach of the history of religions school is not merely speculative, but has been noted by, for example, Steven Kings (1997) who observes that Jung “made use of the research into the history of religions by Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reizenstein” (p.236). Moreover, this interaction was two way as evidenced by Mircea Eliade’s comment in his retrospective on the history of religions, in which he states that Jung’s contributions “stimulated the researches of many historians of religion” (1963, p.102).

The history of religions school, its approach, and the sources used clearly have a close affinity with Jung’s own approach and he would have found much in contemporary Gnostic scholarship with which his own emerging approach would resonate and by which he would have been encouraged.

Gnosticism also provided support for Jung's approach in other ways. The broad and ill-defined nature of ancient Gnosticism, which as we have seen is a source of frustration for modern scholars, actually suited Jung's pick and mix approach to justifying his own ideas perfectly. Jung was in need of "objective" evidence to confirm his own subjective psychological intuitions and the broad and symbolically rich nature of Gnostic source material provided perfect pickings which, as Jung says, "gave substance to my psychology" (MDR, p.231).

We now turn to the second of our three headings under which we shall consider Jung's attraction for Gnosticism, namely two specific intense concerns he shared with "The Gnostics". Firstly, Jung and the Gnostics both possessed a preoccupation with the problem of evil. As Williams (1996) points out, key drivers for the creation of gnostic myths were "concerns over ... hermeneutical difficulties or embarrassments ... as well as related general concerns about explaining the presence of evil or imperfection in the cosmos." (pp.220-1). Dissatisfaction with orthodox Christian teaching (or perhaps rather a lack of such in the 2nd century) on the topic of theodicy is therefore seen as a driver for the flourishing of gnostic myth as an alternative path.

Jung's own dissatisfaction with traditional Christian responses to the problem of evil is also well known,² with his response summarised in the words "evil can no longer be minimised by the euphemism of the *privatio boni*." (MDR, p.360). Jung himself wrestled with this problem in a number of works, including *Answer to Job* (1952) and *Psychology and Religion* (1938) in which he suggests that the Trinity should be reconfigured into a quaternity incorporating evil as an essential fourth element. Jung's therapeutic work also displays a constant concern with, and a plea for the recognition and integration of, the darker, shadow side of human nature.

That Jung therefore found an ally in the ancient Gnostics on this topic is plain, especially since he expressly aligns himself with them in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* - "The old question posed by the Gnostics, 'Whence comes evil?' has been given no answer by the Christian world" (pp.364-5).

A second concern shared with the Gnostics is the importance, indeed primacy, of religious experience. The idea that the Gnostics held religious experience in high esteem was championed by Gilles Quispel whom Stephan Hoeller (1982) describes as "[Presenting] the thesis that Gnosticism expresses, neither a philosophy nor a heresy, but a *specific religious experience* which then manifests itself in myth and (or) ritual." (p.20).

² See Philp, H. L. (1958). *Jung and the Problem of Evil*.

Quispel was an acquaintance of Jung and his attitude to Gnosticism aligns perfectly with Jung's personal stress on the primacy of experience - the raw empirical material with which he claims to work. With Quispel's scholarly backing, Jung was therefore justified in seeing the Gnostics as people who shared his own approach - religious experience comes first, with text, myth, ritual and doctrine later outworkings attempting to capture this.

So far, we've seen how contemporary Gnostic scholarship provided support for Jung's own approach, and also surveyed two of his intense personal concerns which were shared by the Gnostics. We shall conclude by considering the personal importance of Gnosticism for Jung, especially during what Peter Homans (1979) calls his "Critical Years" of 1913-18.

Homans rightly highlights this period as being of great personal importance for Jung, describing him as suffering from "an intense, long-term inner crisis - a period of turmoil and confusion in which he was beset by bizarre visions, dreams, and thoughts that he at first could not in the least comprehend." (p.74). Jung's own account in MDR describes this phase of his life as a "confrontation with the unconscious" (Chapter 6).

Homans (Chapter 4) provides a convincing psychological evaluation of Jung in these critical years, portraying him as engaged in a struggle for personal identity, having sloughed off the identity of first physician, then Freudian psychoanalyst. Now, through processing and documenting his own experiences, Jung was not merely creating a new system, but adopting a new personal identity as founder and prophet of this system. My own sense is that Gnosticism played an important supporting role in this process, a point which Homans would appear to have overlooked.

Jung's study of Gnostic writings began in 1916 and so would have provided fresh content and inspiration for his personal reflections at precisely this crucial time. Quispel (1978) provides a useful clue, explicitly connecting Jung's exploration of Gnostic literature with the period after the break with Freud:

Jung studied the then available Gnostic literature, especially after his rupture with Freud, when he had terrible experiences and the Gnostics were his only friends.
(p.244)

The most important piece of direct evidence for the impact of Gnosticism on Jung's emerging identity is his remarkable short text the *Seven Sermons to the Dead*. According to Hoeller (p.7) this text was composed over three nights between December 15th, 1916 and February 16, 1917 - towards the end of Jung's turbulent 5 year period of wrestling with the unconscious. The text is written in a cryptic style and packed with the language of, and allusions to, 2nd century Gnosticism. The author is named as Basilides of Alexandria, one of the best known figures of ancient Gnosticism who flourished during the reigns of emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, 117-161 AD (Rudolph, 1987, p.309).

Various interpretations have been made of this rather obscure text, but for our purposes, there are two key points to note. Firstly, the text is written in a Gnostic "tone", showing Jung's deep personal connection with Gnosticism at the time. Secondly, and most importantly, the text commences with "the dead" (symbolising Jung's own unconscious) coming to Jung for help. To me, this scene represents the (Gnostic) commissioning of Jung the Prophet. As Segal observes:

In Basilides' day it was Gnostics who tackled the questions either missed or ignored by others. Jung sees himself as a Basilides for the contemporary world: it is he and his patients who face the current questions either missed or ignored by others. (p.38)

The *Seven Sermons to the Dead* represents Jung's own proclamation (in Gnostic terms) of himself as the heroic and persecuted prophet of the unconscious. I suggest that there are two reasons why Jung makes this announcement in specifically Gnostic terms, both of which are connected with common perceptions of the Gnostics, and hence, I would argue, with Jung's personal identification with them.

Firstly, as is well known, the Gnostics were opposed/ persecuted by the orthodox Christian Church. In his personal journey up to this point, Jung could easily portray himself as facing opposition from the established medical profession (due to his depth psychological interests) as well as more recently from Freud. In the *Seven Sermons*, do we perhaps hear the persecuted minority of "the Gnostics" siding with Jung?

The second reason why Jung might be encouraged by specifically "Gnostic" authority is due to his fervent anti-dogmatic stance. The Gnostics are often (perhaps romantically) portrayed as free-thinkers who highly prized experience and suffered persecution at the hands of an authoritarian and dogmatic orthodoxy which exalted the primacy of (sterile) dogma. Such a description also perfectly fits the Jung who railed against dogma wherever he found it. For example, Jung spoke out against the

damage religious dogma caused his own father (MDR, p.113) and also lambasted Freud for his dogmatic stance:

I can still recall vividly how Freud said to me, “My dear Jung, promise me never to abandon the sexual theory. That is the most essential thing of all. You see, we must make a dogma of it, an unshakable bulwark” ... This was the thing that struck at the heart of our friendship. I knew that I would never be able to accept such an attitude. (MDR, p.173)

In contrast to such a dogmatic stance, it is easy to see Jung embracing the “Gnostic” path:

It ... appears to be a risky experiment or a questionable adventure to entrust oneself to the uncertain path that leads into the depths of unconscious. It is considered the path of error, or equivocation and misunderstanding... Unpopular, ambiguous, and dangerous, it is a voyage of discovery to the other pole of the world. (MDR, pp.213-4)

In the above passage, Jung expressly mentions his Gnostic forebears and aligns himself with them, drawing strength from their courage in undertaking the common (lonely and misunderstood) task in which he himself was also engaged.

Jung therefore clearly found a personal ally in the Gnostics at this crucial time of emerging identity formation. As I have suggested, he was able to identify with this persecuted, anti-dogmatic, minority and take not just comfort, but also a personal prophetic commission from the (Gnostic) voice of his unconscious which helped to kick start his emergence from the critical years with new found purpose and direction. I suggest that this is how best to understand the *Seven Sermons*.

Given the above account of the close connection between Jung and Gnosticism in this section of the paper, the question arises as to why Jung later chose to focus on alchemy as the primary forerunner to his own psychological system instead of Gnosticism. Four points can be made in reply, the first two by Jung himself.

Firstly, Jung describes the Gnostics as “too remote for me to establish any link with them in regard to the questions that were confronting me.” (MDR, pp.226-7). Instead, medieval alchemy provided a more accessible domain as well as the link in the chain between the Gnostics and his own “modern psychology of the unconscious” (MDR, p.227).

Secondly, Jung highlights the paucity of Gnostic accounts of their experience of the unconscious, making the very valid point that there are few extant accounts and those that have survived often only exist in the writings of their adversaries, the Church Fathers (MDR, p.226). The alchemical literature, on the other hand, provides a much more substantial base from which to find evidence to justify Jung's own perspective.

Thirdly, as Segal has observed, alchemy provided a much more suitable metaphor for what Homans terms Jung's "core process" of individuation. Earlier in this paper we saw Segal's objection that a psychological interpretation of Gnostic creation myths would be in teleological opposition to Jung's goal of the integration of ego consciousness with the unconscious. Segal therefore suggests that the alchemical process of transformation of a base metal into gold (with the latent gold inherent in the starting material being realised by a process of transformation) is a much better and more consistent metaphor for the Jungian ideal of individuation (p.31).

Finally, and returning to the aspect of Jung's personal identification with the Gnostics, we might speculate that with increased time and distance from Freud, and as his own ideas gained greater acceptance, he identified less with the persecuted lone Gnostic hero battling bigger forces, and identified more with the merely marginalised scholarly alchemist diligently working away by himself on his experiments with the unconscious.

Conclusion

We will conclude with a brief recap of the paper. We commenced by examining the question of whether Jung could be considered a Gnostic, dismissing him relatively quickly as an ancient Gnostic (whether taken in a metaphysical or psychological sense). Jung as a modern Gnostic is a more difficult question, and to my mind can only be answered in the affirmative if one effectively chooses to provide a definition of a Gnostic shaped around Jung himself.

The second part of the paper pursued what I consider to be a more fruitful approach of examining Jung's deep personal attraction for ancient Gnosticism, which lies in three areas. Firstly, his own psychological approach resonated with, and was supported by, the contemporary history of religions movement. Secondly, and more personally, he shared two intense concerns with his friends the Gnostics. Thirdly, Jung's identification with the Gnostics played a vital role at the end of his critical years, especially in his personal prophetic commission in the *Seven Sermons to the Dead*.

Finally we suggested some reasons as to why Jung ultimately switched his attention to alchemy as the prototypical model of his own psychological system. This last section naturally prompts the further question - Was Jung an alchemist? That, however, is an entirely different question...

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