

JOYFUL GNOSIS: Gnostic Light on Blavatsky's Wisdom



Blavatsky Lecture 2003
by Stephan Hoeller

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*An exploration of H.P. Blavatsky's teachings
in the light of the embodiment of
the Ancient Wisdom known as Gnosticism.*

by **Stephan Hoeller**

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JOYFUL GNOSIS

The title of the present lecture alludes to three specific topics: One, the teachings of the foundress and principal teacher of what has been called Modern Theosophy; Two, the earlier embodiment of the Ancient Wisdom Tradition known as Gnosticism; Three, the character of this same wisdom tradition described here as 'joyful Gnosis'.

A word may be said here concerning the motivation of the speaker in choosing this subject. As a lecturer on esoteric and theosophically related topics who has spoken to audiences on three continents during the last quarter of a century it has increasingly come to my attention that the interest of the public has directed itself increasingly toward the subject of that early, mystical and esoteric variant of the Christian tradition that is often referred to as 'Gnosticism'.

At the turn of the twentieth to the twenty first century, we are experiencing a Gnostic renaissance that in many respects represents a parallel to the Hermetic-Humanistic Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Every year we find that the literature on this subject has grown by way of the publication of new books, often containing new translations of Gnostic texts, accompanied by often insightful commentaries. These volumes are more often than not of a content that makes them accessible to the general public possessing an interest and some basic background in religious and philosophical studies. Gone are the days when Gnosticism was regarded by virtually everyone as a matter of purely historical interest. The relevance and applicability of Gnostic teachings and practices are now frequently explored and commented upon even in the press and in the visual news media. Recently, the popular motion picture *The Matrix* and its sequel were

extolled as being based on premises that are essentially Gnostic. In contrast, the name 'Theosophy' is little known to today's public. While some decades ago people may have learned about Gnosticism by way of attending a lecture or reading a book about Theosophy, today one notices that the reverse is true. The public frequently learns about Theosophy, because it is mentioned as a modern expression or descendant of Gnosticism.

In my present lecture I intend to show the considerable similarities existing between the teachings and insights of H. P. Blavatsky on the one hand and of the Gnostics on the other. Such comparisons and recognitions of connections have of course been noted at various times, primarily in academic works. As early as in 1930, in a work published by Columbia University in the U.S.A., the late scholar and member of the Theosophical Society, Dr. Alvin Boyd Kuhn, identified Theosophy as a modern way to propagate the 'secret Gnosis'. Kuhn's work was the very first academically recognized book on Theosophy in the United States, its publication being a special project of Columbia University, dealing with spiritual movements that were founded in the United States. Fully fifty years later, another pioneering work, written by Prof. Bruce Campbell of the University of California, Santa Barbara, associated H. P. Blavatsky and her spiritual tradition with Gnosticism in the following manner:

*The story of the Theosophical movement begins with a remarkable nineteenth century emigre, Madame Helena Blavatsky, and the buried religious tradition that she revived. "Theosophy", as she called it, was an ancient Western tradition, the Gnostic tradition, which went underground when Christianity triumphed.*¹

While this brief quotation, somewhat taken out of context, may seem to us as an oversimplification, it nevertheless indicates how normative academic authorities have regarded and still regard Theosophy as intimately related to Gnosticism.

For Theosophists it may be useful to consider that H. P. Blavatsky never represented her teachings as a unique revelation unrelated to



Blavatsky in the early 1870s

other, earlier traditions. Quite on the contrary, she humbly quoted Montaigne in the early part of her work, *The Secret Doctrine*, wherein the poet states that he has gathered a bouquet of flowers and only supplied the string to tie them. Among the flowers included in the theosophical bouquet, the Gnostic flower certainly occupied a prominent position, which was gratefully acknowledged by Blavatsky. Today, this particular flower is receiving a good deal of well deserved attention. A closer look at the Gnostic flower therefore may be in order for those who have been attracted to the bouquet.

WHAT ON EARTH ARE GNOSTICS?

At the halfway point of the twentieth century there occurred a discovery that is still transforming the understanding of many persons of religion in general and of the Christian tradition in particular. In December 1945 an Egyptian villager named Mohammed Ali was digging for fertilizer under a cliff near the small town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. While engaged in this work he struck something underground. A short time later he unearthed a sealed earthenware jar, six feet high. Inside this container were thirteen ancient codices, bound in tooled gazelle leather.

The collection contained an astonishing number of scriptures, including Gospels, as well as dialogues, conversations and visionary activities attributed to Jesus and His disciples. Some of these were recognized as copies of originals which dated back to times when Jesus had departed earth (For example, the *Gospel of Thomas* which was dated by Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University to c.a. 50 A.D. - some twenty years before any of the canonical

Gospels of the New Testament were written). Others were the *Gospel of Philip*, *The Secret Book of John*, *The Gospel of Truth*, *The Apocalypse of Paul* and quite a few more. The books were apparently a remnant of an ancient monastic library, which was purged of so called heretical literature at the order of heresy-hunting ecclesiastical authorities.

All of the writings found bear the hallmark of the school of thought, or 'heresy' if you please, that later ages came to refer as Gnosticism. Actually, contemporary research may even shy away from the term 'heresy' because it is now held by scholars that the early Christian movement contained enormously more diversity of viewpoint and practice than the Christian Church later acknowledged or even



Gnostic amulet depicting Abraxas

imagined. What today might be called 'orthodox Christians' and 'Gnostic Christians' lived and worshipped together often in the same communities for at least a century or longer after the departure of Jesus. The accusation of heresy was a belated and unjust one.

Based largely on these more recently discovered Gnostic writings, but taking into account some sources that were available at an earlier time we shall now attempt to present a brief summary of the world view of Gnosticism. This will be followed by an examination of the most prominent points of convergence between the ambience of the Gnostic tradition on the one hand and of the teachings of H. P. Blavatsky on the other. Finally, in the concluding remarks we shall suggest how both the theosophical and the ancient Gnostic tradition partake of a certain ultimate keynote of transcendently infused joy, which might qualify them for such descriptions as 'Joyful Gnosis' or 'Joyful Theosophy'.

Before we proceed to our summary of the Gnostic world view it might be useful for us to say a few words about the historical Gnostic phenomenon itself. In the first and second centuries of the Christian Era some persons and schools of thought came to be referred as 'Gnostic', because they emphasized the importance and salvific function of an interior, spiritual 'knowingness' which in Greek is called Gnosis. This knowledge is not of the intellect, or of matters dealing with the everyday world; rather Gnosis refers to knowledge of an interior, spiritual nature that by its very experience liberates the human of the existential condition of ignorance, limitation and suffering. Gnostic schools seem to have originated in Palestine and spread from there first to Hellenistic Egypt and then to many parts of the Roman Empire. During and after the third century Gnostic schools were suppressed and their successors carried on a tenuous existence more or less underground. In spite of this, the Gnostic movement never ceased to exist, but surfaced under various names in different historical periods throughout Europe and the Middle East.

THE GNOSTIC WORLD VIEW

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is the teaching based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. Although Gnosticism thus rests on personal religious experience, it is a mistake to assume all such experience results in Gnostic recognitions. It is nearer the truth to say that Gnosticism expresses a specific religious experience, an experience that does not lend itself to the language of theology or philosophy, but which is instead closely affinitized to, and expresses itself through, the medium of myth. Indeed, one finds that most Gnostic scriptures take the forms of myths. The term 'myth' should not here be taken to mean 'stories that are not true', but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy.

In the following summary, we will attempt to encapsulate in prose what the Gnostic myths express in their distinctively poetic and imaginative language.

THE COSMOS

All religious traditions acknowledge that the world is imperfect. Where they differ is in what they suggest might be done about it. Gnostics have their - perhaps quite startling - view of these matters: They hold that the world is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner.

Like Buddhism, Gnosticism begins with the fundamental recognition that earthly life is filled with suffering. In order to nourish themselves, all forms of life consume each other, thereby visiting pain, fear and death upon one another (even herbivorous animals live by destroying the life of plants). In addition, so-called natural catastrophes - earthquakes, floods, fires, drought, volcanic eruptions - bring further suffering and death in their wake. Human beings, with their complex physiology and psychology, are aware not only of these painful features of earthly existence, they also suffer from the frequent recognition that they are strangers living in a world that is flawed and absurd.



Gnostic Abraxas figure depicting
'the Redeemed Ruler'

Many religions advocate that humans are to be blamed for the imperfections of the world. Supporting this view, they interpret the Genesis myth as declaring the transgressions committed by the first

human pair brought about a 'fall' of creation resulting in the present corrupt state of the world. Gnostics respond that this interpretation of the myth is false. The blame for the world's failings lies not with humans, but with the creator. Since - especially in the monotheistic religions - the creator is God, this Gnostic position appears blasphemous, and is often viewed with dismay even by non-believers.

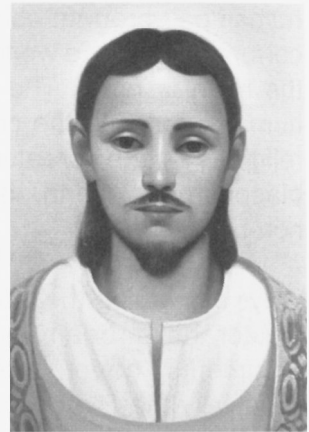
Ways of evading the recognition of the flawed creation and its flawed creator have been devised over and over, but none of these arguments have impressed Gnostics. The ancient Greeks, especially the Platonists, advised people to look to the harmony of the universe, so that by venerating its grandeur they might forget their immediate afflictions. But since this harmony still contains the cruel flaws, forlornness and alienation of existence, this advice is considered of little value to Gnostics. Nor is the Eastern idea of Karma regarded by the Gnostics as an adequate explanation of creation's imperfection and suffering. Karma at best can only explain how the chain of suffering and imperfection works. It does not inform us in the first place why such a sorrowful and malign system should exist.

Once the initial shock of the 'unusual' or 'blasphemous' nature of the Gnostic explanation for the suffering and imperfection of the world wears off, one may begin to recognize that it is in fact the most sensible of all explanations. To appreciate it fully, however, a familiarity with the Gnostic conception of the Godhead is required, both in its original essence as the True God and in its debased manifestation as the false or creator God.

DEITY

The Gnostic God concept is more subtle than that of most religions. In its way, it unites and reconciles the recognitions of Monotheism and Polytheism, as well as of Theism, Deism and Pantheism. In the Gnostic view, there is a true, ultimate and transcendent God, who is beyond all created universes and who never created anything in the

sense in which the word 'create' is ordinarily understood. While this True God did not fashion or create anything, He (or, It) 'emanated' or brought forth from within Himself the substance of all there is in all the worlds, visible and invisible. In a certain sense, it may therefore be true to say that all is God, for all consists of the substance of God. By the same token, it must also be recognized that many portions of the original divine essence have been projected so far from their source that they underwent unwholesome changes in the process. To worship the cosmos, or nature, or embodied creatures is thus tantamount to worshipping alienated and corrupt portions of the emanated divine essence.



Icon of the prophet Mani
painting by Jan Saether

The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully. The Fullness stands in contrast to our existential state, which in comparison may be called emptiness.



Amulet, possibly, depicting Sophia

One of the aeonial beings who bears the name Sophia ('Wisdom') is of great importance to the Gnostic world view. In the course of her journeyings, Sophia came to emanate from her own being a flawed consciousness, a being who became the creator of the material and psychic cosmos, all of which he created in the image of his own flaw. This being, unaware of his origins, imagined himself to be the ultimate and absolute God. Since he took the

already existing divine essence and fashioned it into various forms, he is also called the Demiurgos or 'half-maker'. There is an authentic half, a true deific component within creation, but it is not recognized by the half-maker and by his cosmic minions, the Archons or 'Rulers'.



Icon of the Holy Sophia. painting by John Goelz

THE HUMAN BEING

Human nature mirrors the duality found in the world: in part it was made by the false creator God and in part it consists of the light of the True God. Humankind contains a perishable physical and psychic component, as well as a spiritual component which is a fragment of the divine essence. This latter part is often symbolically referred to as the 'divine spark'. The recognition of this dual nature of the world and of the human being has earned the Gnostic tradition the epithet of 'dualist'.

Humans are generally ignorant of the divine spark resident within them. This ignorance is fostered in human nature by the influence of the false creator and his Archons, who together are intent upon keeping men and women ignorant of their true nature and destiny. Anything that causes us to remain attached to earthly things serves to keep us in enslavement to these lower cosmic rulers. Death releases the divine spark from its lowly prison, but if there has not been a substantial work of Gnosis undertaken by the soul prior to death, it becomes likely that the divine spark will be hurled back into, and then reembodied within, the pangs and slavery of the physical world.

Not all humans are spiritual (pneumatics) and thus ready for Gnosis and liberation. Some are earthbound and materialistic beings (hyletics), who recognize only the physical reality. Others live largely

in their psyche (psychics). Such people usually mistake the Demiurge for the True God and have little or no awareness of the spiritual world beyond matter and mind.

In the course of history, humans progress from materialistic sensate slavery, by way of ethical religiosity, to spiritual freedom and liberating Gnosis. As the scholar Gilles Quispel wrote: "The world-spirit in exile must go through the Inferno of matter and the Purgatory of morals to arrive at the spiritual Paradise." This kind of evolution of consciousness was envisioned by the Gnostics, long before the concept of evolution was known.

SALVATION

Evolutionary forces alone are insufficient, however, to bring about spiritual freedom. Humans are caught in a predicament consisting of physical existence combined with ignorance of their true origins, their essential nature and their ultimate destiny. To be liberated from this predicament, human beings require help, although they must also contribute their own efforts.

From earliest times Messengers of the Light have come forth from the True God in order to assist humans in their quest for Gnosis. Only a few of these salvific figures are mentioned in Gnostic scripture; some of the most important are Seth (the third Son of Adam), Jesus and the Prophet Mani. The majority of Gnostics always looked to Jesus as the principal saviour figure (the Soter).

Gnostics do not look to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather from the ignorance of which sin is a consequence. Ignorance



Monument of the Cathar martyrs
at Montségur, France

- whereby is meant ignorance of spiritual realities - is dispelled by Gnosis, and the decisive revelation of Gnosis is brought by the Messengers of Light, especially by Christ, the Logos of the True God. It is not by his suffering and death, but by his life of teaching and His establishing of mysteries that Christ has performed His work of salvation.

The Gnostic concept of salvation, like other Gnostic concepts, is a subtle one. On the one hand, Gnostic salvation may easily be mistaken for an un-mediated individual experience, a sort of spiritual 'do it yourself project'. Gnostics hold that the potential for Gnosis, and thus salvation is present in every man and woman, and that salvation is not vicarious but individual. At the same time, they also acknowledge that Gnosis and salvation can be, indeed must be, stimulated and facilitated in order to effectively rise in consciousness. This stimulation is supplied by Messengers of Light who, in addition to their teachings, establish salvific mysteries (sacraments) which can be administered by apostles of the Messengers and their successors.



Gate to Montségur Castle, France
last stronghold of Cathar Gnostics

One needs also to remember that Knowledge of our true nature - as well as other associated realizations - are withheld from us by our very condition of earthly existence. The True God of transcendence is unknown in this world, in fact He is often called the Unknown Father. It is thus obvious that revelation from on High is needed to bring about salvation. The indwelling spark must be awakened from its terrestrial slumber by the saving knowledge that comes 'from without.'

CONDUCT

If the words 'ethics' or 'morals' are taken to mean a system of rules, then Gnosticism is opposed to them both. Such systems usually originate with the Demiurge and are covertly designed to serve his purposes. If, on the other hand, morality is said to consist of an inner integrity arising from the illumination of the indwelling spark, then the Gnostic will embrace this spiritually informed existential ethic as ideal.

To the Gnostic, commandments and rules are not salvific; they are not substantially conducive to salvation. Rules of conduct may serve numerous ends, including the structuring of an ordered and peaceful society, and the maintenance of harmonious relations within social groups. Rules, however, are not relevant to salvation; that is brought about only by Gnosis. Morality therefore needs to be viewed primarily in temporal and secular terms; it is ever subject to changes and modifications in accordance with the spiritual development of the individual.

As noted in the discussion above, 'hyletic materialists' usually have little interest in morality, while 'psychic disciplinarians' often grant to it great importance. In contrast, 'Pneumatic spiritual' persons are more concerned with other, higher matters. Different historical periods also require variant attitudes regarding human conduct. Thus both the Manichaean and Cathar Gnostic movements, which functioned in times where purity of conduct was regarded as an issue of high import, responded in kind. The present period of Western culture perhaps resembles in more ways that of second and third century Alexandria. It seems therefore appropriate that Gnostics in our age adopt the attitudes of classical Alexandrian Gnosticism, wherein matters of conduct were largely left to the insight of the individual.

Gnosticism embraces numerous general attitudes toward life: It encourages non-attachment and nonconformity to the world, a 'Be in the world, but not of the world'; a lack of egotism; and a respect for the freedom and dignity of other beings. Nonetheless, it appertains

to the intuition and wisdom of every individual 'Gnostic' to distill from these principles individual guidelines for their personal application.

DESTINY

When Confucius was asked about death, he replied: "Why do you ask me about death when you do not know how to live?" This answer might easily have been given by a Gnostic. To a similar question posed in the *Gnostic Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus answered that human beings must come by Gnosis to know the ineffable, divine reality from which they have originated, and whither they will return. This transcendental knowledge must come to them while they are still embodied on earth.

Death does not automatically bring about liberation from bondage in the realms of the Demiurge. Those who have not attained to a liberating Gnosis while they were in embodiment may become trapped in earthly existence once more. It is quite likely that this might occur by way of the cycle of rebirths. Gnosticism does not emphasize the doctrine of reincarnation prominently, but it is implicitly understood in most Gnostic teachings that those who have not made effective contact with their transcendental origins while they were in embodiment would have to return into the sorrowful condition of earthly life.

In regard to salvation, or the fate of the spirit and soul after death, one needs to be aware that help is available. Valentinus, the greatest of Gnostic teachers, taught that Christ and Sophia await the spiritual man - the pneumatic Gnostic - at the entrance of the Pleroma, and help him to enter the bride-chamber of final reunion. Ptolemaeus, disciple of Valentinus, taught that even those not of pneumatic status, the psychics, could be redeemed and live in a heaven-world at the entrance of the Pleroma. In the fullness of time every spiritual being will receive Gnosis and will be united with its higher Self - the angelic Twin - thus becoming qualified to enter the Pleroma. None of this is possible, however, without earnest striving for Gnosis.

Inasmuch as it would not be feasible to present a comparative analysis of the Gnostic and the modern Theosophical traditions here, we shall have to be content with highlighting some of the most important similarities and differences of each.

According to the noted scholar Gilles Quispel, Gnosticism expresses a specific mystical or religious experience, which it generally turns into myth. Mainstream religions of the kind of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also partake of experiences of certain kinds of gnosis, but they almost inevitably turn them into belief and commandment. This is where the Gnostic with his mythic approach departs radically from his orthodox counterparts. Myth, when originating in mystical realization and expressed in fervent poetic imagery, leads to an amplification and assimilation of the original experience. Faith understood as belief, and ethical maxims expressed as commandments offer no such amplification of experience and allow for little assimilation of its import into the personality. The Gnostic's way of dealing with myth allowed him or her to once again approach the experience wherein the myth originated and enter the mystical experience again and again. Carried aloft on the zephyr winds of poetry and imagination, and aided by the winged thought of inspired myth, the soul of the Gnostic could be regenerated repeatedly by the experience of gnosis.

Turning to H.P. Blavatsky's teachings, we find that their fundamental postulates are virtually identical with those just mentioned in connection with Gnosticism. The pneuma of the Gnostics was no stranger to Blavatsky. Like the Gnostics before her, she endorsed the division of the psycho-physical organism of the human being into body, soul, and spirit, the last of which she regarded as the true source of all theosophia (wisdom of the gods). In her *Key to Theosophy* (pp. 90-92 of the 1889 edition) she refers explicitly to the spirit (pneuma) as a portion of the divine, the "immortal principle," the source of all "heavenly wisdom."

When it comes to her attitude toward myth, there can be little doubt that the author of *The Secret Doctrine* is a magnificent myth-maker and that all of her works possess a mythic power and impact

independent of and more valuable than their factual content. Prof. Robert Ellwood, a man of most eminent academic as well as theosophical insight has this to say:

"The Secret Doctrine is a book not easily forgotten, even by those who despise it or who, like many outside the theosophical orbit, find it almost impossible to read . . . To understand what it has to offer, one must learn how to read it. *The Secret Doctrine* is not a textbook, but is like an ocean with waves and currents and eddies and whirlpools and quiet caves. It calls for suspending one's normal mode of conceptual progress until one has discovered where the tides and techniques of this new medium will carry him. Water is, to man, a distorting element, and probably whatever he sees in it will not be seen as it really is. The ecstatic surges in his body as he rides the swells will not be forgotten after he has found his feet once again on the sand. Like riding the waves, or like listening to great music, this book wafts one to where he can perceive reality in new configurations that unite the subjective and the objective. It does not so much convey specific fact as arrange science, myth, philosophy, and poetic narrative in peculiar combinations which can generate remarkable experiences - or so it has been with Theosophists."

What may one call such an arrangement of various motifs 'in peculiar combinations which can generate remarkable experiences' but a myth as employed in the Gnostic manner? Certainly the writings of such Gnostic teachers as Valentinus or Basilides could be described in very similar words. The additional comments made by Ellwood merely reinforce this impression: "As one grows into the world of *The Secret Doctrine*, one understands more and more that it presents a psychological model of the cosmos. The more its vision is comprehended and interiorized, the more the reader shares the workings of universal consciousness. . . ." ³

Every occultist worth his or her salt is a romantic, be they aware of this or not. Whether they be called William Blake, Eliphas Levi, or Mme. Blavatsky, and before them Valentinus, Basilides, and Ammonius Saccus, all such persons were primarily concerned not with passing on factual information but with engendering that

majestic sense of wonder that one glimpses to a minor degree in sunsets, grand landscapes, fairy tales, and hoary legends, and to a major degree in great art and in the experience of the 'wholly other' in ecstasies of the spirit.

Mystics and Gnostics speak the language of myth, not of cold logic or scientific fact. Yet it must be remembered that some such persons have the misfortune to live in an age that has an inadequate appreciation of myth. The author of *The Secret Doctrine* belonged in this category. There was no word in the dictionary of nineteenth century intellectuals for 'psychological model of the cosmos'; C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and their fellows had not come upon the scene yet to rehabilitate myth and symbol. What was H.P. Blavatsky to do?

According to all available evidence, she did the best she could. In her work *Isis Unveiled* she wrote:

Myth was the favourite and universal method of teaching in archaic times. ⁴

Fairy tales do not exclusively belong to nurseries; all mankind - except those few who in all ages have comprehended their hidden meaning, and tried to open the eyes of the superstitious - have listened to such tales in one shape or other, and after transforming them into sacred symbols, called the product Religion. ⁵

There are few myths in any religious system but have an historical as well as a scientific foundation. Myths . . . are now found to be fables just in proportion as we misunderstand them; truths, in proportion as they were once understood. ⁶

It is in words such as these that Blavatsky tried to point to the transformative value of myth. In *The Secret Doctrine* she went farther, and came close to asserting that the mythic and symbolic (which in the terminology of her day she calls "allegorical") element plays a crucial role in all esoteric material:

*To some extent, it is admitted that even the Esoteric Teaching is allegorical. To make the latter comprehensible to the average intelligence, the use of symbols cast in an intelligible form is needed. Hence the allegorical and semi-mythical narratives in the Esoteric, and the only semi-metaphysical and objective representations in the exoteric Teachings. For the purely transcendently spiritual conceptions are adapted only to the perceptions of those who "see without eyes, hear without ears and sense without organs."*⁷

There is very little doubt then that the enunciator of the modern Theosophical mythic system was an expert myth-maker herself, who in spite of the unsympathetic intellectual climate of her day recognized the Gnostic function and value of myth, and who gently introduced her readers and followers to the controversial concept of the possible mythic and symbolic character of her teachings.

Let us now look at some other features of Gnosticism in the light of their relationship to various teachings in *The Secret Doctrine*, *Isis Unveiled*, and other works of Blavatsky. The world view of the Gnostics declares that the rigid monotheism of mainstream Judeo-Christian-Islamic orthodoxy amounts to a gross oversimplification. The personal, well-nigh anthropomorphic God, envisioned as the creator, lawgiver, and judge of his universe is not the only and true God.

H. P. Blavatsky went to infinite pains to state over and over again that the true Godhead is not the personal god of the Bible, but rather an Infinite Reality that exists beyond the out-flowings of manifestation. She gathered numerous cognate terms from various traditions to apply to this Infinite Reality; from Hinduism she adopted *Parabrahman*, from Buddhism *Adhi-Budha*, and from the Kabbalah *Ain-Sof-Aur*. All of these, as she well knew and stated, are cognate terms for the Gnostic pleroma, or transcendental Fullness of Being. The dislike she appears to have felt for the personal God of the Bible was probably only equalled by the more uncompromising of gnostics in the early centuries of the Christian era. In *The Secret Doctrine* she not only calls Jehovah the bad names the Gnostics were wont to

apply to him, but in a fashion reminiscent of Cathar teachings she equates Jehovah with Satan. Here is but a small example of her lore concerning Jehovah-Satan. He is, she writes “a proud, ambitious, and impure Spirit who has abused his power by usurping the place of the Highest God, though he was no better, and in some respects far worse than his brother Elohim; the latter representing the all-embracing, manifest Deity.”⁸

At another place in the same work she declares boldly: “The appellation Sa'tan, in Hebrew Satan . . . belongs by right to the first and cruelest 'Adversary' of all the other Gods - Jehovah.”⁹

Very much like the Gnostics, H. P. Blavatsky gives little credence to the orthodox version of the temptation myth in Genesis, and regards the serpent as a spirit of wisdom, dispensing sage and liberating advice.

The Sophia myth, so dear to many Gnostics, also finds endorsement on the part of our author, especially in *Isis Unveiled*. The wise daughter of the Fullness, who is called Sophia (wisdom), is in reality the mother of the blind and rebellious Jehovah-Satan, called here *Ialda-Baoth*, who in defiance of his mother has bungled the job of creation and merely fashioned a flawed world in the image of his own flaws. Humans, however, unlike the monstrous abortions whereby Jehovah peopled the earth, have within them the spark of the divine light, which allows them to communicate with Sophia and through her with the Infinite Light. This continuous seeking of human souls for their true source enrages Jehovah and impels him to attempt to destroy humanity in great disasters of cosmic proportions. All of this is recounted in complete agreement by Blavatsky.¹⁰

Arising from these considerations we find another perhaps even weightier consideration. Many theosophists have opted for a certain kind of Neo-Platonic optimism which delights in a beautiful world, filled with evolving life and governed by laws of perfect justice and harmony. Some literature written for popular consumption by writers following in the footsteps of Blavatsky may be cited in support of such a rosy world-view. But the author of *The Secret Doctrine* seems

to have adhered to a much darker view, quite similar in fact to that held by the Gnostics. Far from being a good world created by a good God (even if he be renamed Solar Logos), this world is a dark place - weird, flawed, even monstrous at times. Fashioned and managed by flawed beings who are themselves radically alienated from the supreme source. Here is a relevant passage from *The Secret Doctrine*:

The One is infinite and unconditioned. It cannot create, for It can have no relation to the finite and conditioned. If everything we see, from the glorious suns and planets down to the blades of grass and specks of dust, had been created by the Absolute perfection and were the direct work of even the First Energy that proceeds from It, then every such thing would have been perfect, and unconditioned, like its author. The millions upon millions of imperfect works found in Nature testify loudly that they are the products of finite, conditioned beings - though the latter were and are Dhyan Chohans, Archangels, or whatever else they may be named. In short, these imperfect works are the unfinished production of evolution, under the guidance of imperfect Gods. ¹¹

The implications of such passages (for this is not the only one) are significant. Not only do they make mincemeat of the cheap sentimentality and heedless cheerfulness that is rampant in most 'New Age' circles and is not absent from theosophical groups. More importantly, such passages give one pause when reflecting over the rampant evil present in the world and in human history at any given time.

The frequent and at times all-too glib approach to such evil declares that it is all connected with laws that rule the world, among which karma is most prominent, all of which are in the nature of perfect justice, and therefore essentially good. The time may at last have come when, following the lead of Blavatsky the Gnostic, we may begin to look beyond such facile attempts to evade the existential darkness and flawed character of the world and earthly life. An excellent step was in fact taken in this direction by the above-quoted Robert Ellwood, who in his excellent basic work on Theosophy dared

to ask and answer these fundamental questions on the basis of these very teachings of Blavatsky:

Whether one thinks of such propositions as literal or only allegorically true, they can meet an 'existential' need dealing with evil which goes beyond just attributing it to various 'laws.' Such explanations do not entirely satisfy the rage and despair the world's sufferings evoke . . . One answer is that the God of this world is, at best imperfect, and, at worst, a vindictive incompetent blunderer into whose world we, whose true home is in halls of light far and above his sway, are entrapped until by following the slow path of evolution and initiation, we free ourselves from his grasp. ¹²

Another important teaching we must concern ourselves with is the one concerning salvation or more properly named, liberation. We noted earlier that Gnostic teaching affirms the crucial role in this regard of salvific figures, at times known as messengers of light, among whom a special role appertains to the Founder of the Christian religion.

Blavatsky's position regarding salvation and particularly concerning the Christian saviour is far from clear. At times she seemed inclined toward the position of *docetism*, a minority Gnostic position which denied the physical incarnation of Jesus altogether. (She most clearly expressed this view in her long essay, *The Esoteric Character of the Gospels*.) At other times, she reverently referred to Jesus as an initiate of signal purity and holiness, which is hard to reconcile with his presumed total lack of physicality at any time. Most importantly, perhaps, she presented a highly concentrated but brilliant reconciliation of these and other positions when discussing the meaning of such terms as Chrétos, Chrétés, and Christos in her *Theosophical Glossary*. While greatly emphasizing the concept of an indwelling or mystic Christ, which is a universal principle rather than a person, (she states "Every good individual . . . may find Christ in his 'Inner Man' as Paul expresses it [*Eph. 3:16,17*], whether he be Jew, Mussulman, Hindu or Christian" ¹³ she also acknowledges the

great spiritual and indeed cosmic role of the saviour figure as represented in Gnosticism.

Among the most learned and insightful statements ever to come forth from Blavatsky's pen in relation to Gnosticism are her voluminous commentaries on the scripture *Pistis Sophia* published in 1890-91 in *Lucifer*. These appeared in conjunction with the very first English translation of this noted Gnostic work by her pupil, G. R. S. Mead. In addition to their great erudition these commentaries show several significant aspects of her views of matters Gnostic.

First, her aforementioned understanding and approval of the Gnostic approach to the mystery of Christ is quite evident. Second, she anticipates the subsequent discoveries in regard to Mary Magdalen, whom she calls "the most intuitive (pneumatic), and the most prominent interlocutor of all the disciples." Third, she comments most approvingly on the now completely restored passage from the *Gospel According to Thomas* (Logion 22) wherein the union of the opposites and the androgyny of human nature are held up by Jesus as the desirable qualities accompanying the "entry into the kingdom." This latter passage is interpreted by Blavatsky as (1) pertaining to the union of the opposites within the individual human being, as a sign of pneumatic gnosis, and (2) as the cosmic androgyny which according to her is to prevail in the distant history of the human race, when the separation of the sexes as known to us today shall have ceased. ¹⁴

Let us briefly summarize now our findings outlined above:

1. The frequently reiterated opinion of academics, concerning the intimate connection of Blavatsky and the Gnostics may be considered valid. H. P. B. indeed qualifies as a modern Gnostic, not only because of her personal intuitive knowledge, or gnosis, but also on account of her intimate acquaintance with and profound sympathy for the Gnostic tradition.

2. In regard to the normative Gnostic method of employing myth rather than dogma and commandment to express gnosis, she occupies a position much closer to that of the Gnostics than one might suspect. Were she alive today, it is highly likely that she would enthusiastically join such pioneers as Jung, Eliade, and Joseph Campbell in endorsing myth as the way par excellence to esoteric truth.

3. Blavatsky endorsed the Gnostic concept of deity as the totally transcendent Fullness, to which she juxtaposed the equally Gnostic concept of limited intermediary beings, sometimes called *демиургои* and *archontes*, and at times represented as lacking in both wisdom and goodness.

4. Like the Gnostics before her, the great enunciator of Theosophy held that the manifest cosmos is flawed, and the creation of flawed and unregenerate cosmic beings, and she appears to have held this view as a metaphysical certainty rather than as an allegory.

5. As to Gnostic soteriology (teaching of salvation), she held to a universal concept of messianic impulse, but recognized the complex and mysterious image of Jesus Christ as presented by the Gnostics as of truthful and salvific relevance.

6. With the Gnostic Jesus whose utterance to this effect is recorded in *The Gospel According to Thomas*, H. P. B. recognized the need for the reconciliation of opposites in human nature as a hallmark of spiritual liberation along Gnostic lines. This paves the way to recognitions which might lead one into the symbolism of Alchemy, and into the experiential field of spiritual initiation, as exemplified by the two supreme Gnostic Sacraments, the Redemption and the Bride-Chamber.

Such are some of the signal convergences which set H. P. Blavatsky apart not only as the great torchbearer of Theosophy, but also as a true modern Gnostic, who restated and confirmed the wisdom of the knowers of old - those whose contribution, like the stone rejected by

the builders, still awaits its reincorporation into the fabric of Western spirituality and culture.

We would be greatly remiss if in this context we would not give honorable and prominent mention to a very fine work, *H. P. Blavatsky On The Gnostics*, edited by Henk J. Spierenburg and published in 1994 by Point Loma Publications in San Diego, California, U. S. A. In this volume the editor compiled the overwhelming majority of H. P. B.'s statements concerning Gnosticism. The result is most impressive indeed. Not only do we find a large number of well-informed and utterly sympathetic pronouncements about the Gnostics and their teachings, but we also find that H. P. B. was far more interested in the Hermeticists and the Essenes. Out of the 300 pages of this book only 50 pages concern these two other movements, all the rest being devoted to the Gnostics!

At the near-conclusion of this lecture we may wish to ask one portentous question: Whence does the great similarity of Gnosticism and modern Theosophy derive? The frequently voiced notion that there exists a historical link between the two is not entirely convincing. It is no doubt true that H. P. B. postulated the existence of a 'Secret Doctrine' or even 'Secret Tradition' originating in very ancient times and descending through the ages. If we accept this proposition then we might affirm that the two schools of thought are part of the same primordial and perennial transmission and that this accounts for their similarity.

Another possibility is that the similarities are rooted not primarily in a clearly defined historical connection but rather in a commonality of psycho-spiritual experience. Gnosticism and modern Theosophy may thus be related not because they are linked progressively through history, but because they are linked inherently as the result of the interior realizations and extraordinary states of consciousness experienced by their founders and prophetic leaders. Of the two I am inclined to favor the latter possibility.

These considerations bring us to the issue of joy, as noted in the title of this lecture, reflecting the theme of the Summer School meeting

where it was delivered. Are Theosophy and/or Gnosticism truly in the nature of Joyful forms of Wisdom? No doubt there are many kinds of joy in human experience, and they are related to a large number of causes. Among the many varieties of joy and happiness that one may experience there is one particularly worth considering and striving for. I refer to the joy bestowed by freedom or even the promise of freedom. Theosophy and Gnosticism both acknowledge that without spiritual enlightenment or Gnosis, humans are not free. Without a certain liberating consciousness we are slaves of a world wherein unconsciousness, greed, hatred and all manner of wrong-headedness rule. The world views of both Theosophy and Gnosticism declare that humans have within themselves certain powerful resources that may enable them to attain to such liberating Gnosis. The two traditions also assure us that we have not been left forsaken in our present inadequate existential condition: Messengers of Light, Seers and Sages, Masters of Wisdom are present and ready to assist us and lead us to the greater light and life and freedom of the Spirit. Gnostic and Theosophist both have the assurance of their tradition that they are capable of a direct and liberating encounter with a higher level of being. Can there be a greater joy than this?

And certainly one of the finest teachers who brought us such joyous wisdom was none other than our very own Gnostic lady, H. P. B.

As one whose religious commitment in this life has joined to the Gnostic tradition, the present writer takes great pleasure in saluting Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. May her noble soul journey gloriously in the aeons of light, and may her fiery spirit be united with the Fullness of the Great Flame from whence it once came into this darkened sphere, to bring gnosis to the light-sparks in the sea of forgetfulness!

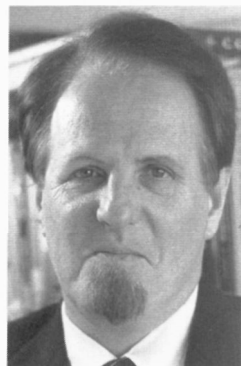
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