

GNOSTICISM AS A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

The category of gnosticism is employed rather widely in today's theology as a kind of diagnostic tool for uncovering theological pathology. De Lubac notes gnostic traits running from Joachim of Fiore to our own times. Michael Novak claims to see the same in the utopianism of some forms of liberation theology. Karl Rahner accuses Von Balthasar's speculations on the Trinity of the same. And larger cultural criticism seems to parallel theology's use of this category: John Courtney Murray agreed with Eric Voegelin about the heavy strain of gnosis in modernity, while Hans Blumenberg challenged with a counterthesis. This paper will attempt to contribute toward the second order discussion of the issue, studying the appropriateness or not of gnosis as a category of theological diagnosis, which accompanies a theological therapeutics. Diagnosis and therapy (to use Voegelin's retrieval of Plato), or confession and salvation—these are the left and right hands of the theologian.

The study of ancient gnosticism is currently in a kind of creative fermentation, as scholars study the implications of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. There is much debate especially about gnosticism's origins and social carriers, with scholars inclining toward a Jewish apocalyptic matrix for the former. Interestingly, however, there seems to be little discussion of gnosticism's nature, its radically antic cosmic nature (and world alienation) still being accepted by scholars like Pelikan, Robinson, and Rudolph. This means that Hans Jonas' earlier characterization of the syndrome as one of intense alienation is still largely "in possession." There is some attempt to be more sympathetic to the gnostics (Pagels, Perkins, even Pelikan to some extent), but by and large Jonas' phenomenology of gnosis' nature still seems to hold.

Conflict heats up a bit more when one turns to the issue of a possible gnostic strain in modernity, or, more radically, toward a general characterization of modernity as basically gnostic. Theologians claim gnosis is present, at least as a strain, but offer little second order reflection on the matter. Voegelin's developing analyses probably offer the most sophisticated studies available. His final view was to propose that gnosis was a major strain infecting modernity (a technical term for transcendence-denying movements), accompanied by other dangerous strains. He suggested, in response to criticism, the distinction between phenotype (which admits of vast diversification through complex and changing symbolisms) and "core." The latter finally seems to be the inability to dwell in the humble space of the in-between mode of existence, the stretch between time and eternity, finitude and infinitude, knowing and mystery, etc. This inability becomes, for the gnostic, an active hostility toward reality, either in the form of an alleged reunion with the supramundane Deity beyond time (= ancient gnosis), or by means of

various strategies of drawing the transcendent into the immanent (= many forms of modern gnosis). This "psychodrama" is most controversial in the latter case, it seems. In any case, the gnostic has transcended faith through gnosis.

Blumenberg has argued, in response, that modernity is actually the overturning of gnosis, but by gnosis he seems to mean any belief in divine transcendence. And his view of modernity is rather secularistic too. Gnostic scholars PHEME PERKINS and Birger Pearson think that alleged modern forms of gnosis lack a sense of divine gratuity/transcendence, so crucial for the ancient forms. Yet, one wonders how much of a sense of divine gratuity one has when one thinks he or she dwells in a realm beyond faith. There is perhaps more of a modulation of divine gratuity among the ancient gnostics than we have so far noticed. At the same time, modern forms of gnosis may have a bit more transcendence (of a misplaced sort?) in them too. Voegelin liked to speak of the absoluteness of conviction, in the false deifying of one's alleged gnosis, in this regard. There seems, then, to be a fair dose of continuity between ancient and modern forms of gnosis. What needs exploring is that nature of the continuity within discontinuity of gnostic types that Voegelin emphasizes. He works with a less atomistic view of history than some other scholars seem to employ.

Ultimately the Voegelin thesis comes down to the plausibility or not of his somewhat rough notion of continuity of the gnostic core within the discontinuity of gnostic phenotypes. His classical language can seem a-historical and essentialistic, but actually he works with a very historically conscious notion of continuity. Gnosis is a possibility of human consciousness and action expressing itself in varying historical modulations. His opponents emphasize the discontinuity; Voegelin, the continuity as well. From a second order perspective, the discussion might be helped by intersecting with studies on the nature of development, which are also struggling with the complex ways in which continuity and discontinuity interpenetrate (here we might fruitfully think of the doctrinal development debates). This paper turns to Paul Ricoeur's notion of traditionality, as employed in his *Time and Narrative*, as a way of mediating the issue. It stands midway between radical historical contingency and simple essentialism. It is transhistorical, running through history in a cumulative rather than additive way. As such it allows for complex breaks, deviations, and metamorphoses, even deaths of certain styles. Building on Ricoeur, might we suggest that an alleged gnostic variant does not escape being an instantiation of the gnostic plot when it is characterized by an anti-cosmic animosity through some form of alleged gnosis? What Voegelin calls phenotype, Ricoeur names deviation and metamorphosis, and a cumulative rather than additive view of traditionality allows for rather subtle transformations. The mention of Ricoeur also calls to mind the literary media employed in traditionality. Perhaps a greater attention to gnostic genres (quasi-myth, quasi-rationality, amputated dialogue are possible examples studied here) might enable us to uncover even more fully the continuity between ancient and modern forms of gnosis.

In the end, a gnostic diagnostics might be said to be a functional equivalent to a hermeneutics of suspicion, a form of ideology critique which grows out of the Christian tradition and uses a non-gnostic openness to the Transcendent as its norm of discernment. It might fruitfully be compared with modern forms of such critique, and its ability to diagnose illusion and not simply error might be especially

studied. It seems rather self-critical, inasmuch as a condition of its use is the willingness to remain in the humble faith-space of the in-between where questions can be asked. It needs to be complemented by other forms of analysis: gnosis is rather an ultimate possibility of deformation only approximated by most. Surely there are other forms of deformation which are "on the way" toward the illusionary world of gnosis. Perhaps one of the special benefits of a Voegelin-style use of a gnostic diagnostics is its sensitivity to the subtle interplay between symptomatology and animating source, slighting neither, but emphasizing, with the great tradition, the final responsibility of the source.

One surely wants to avoid scapegoating. Like Pelikan and Perkins, we surely want to be sympathetic toward the gnostics, recognizing that they did indeed grapple with evil and suffering, and attempt to work through to some form of soteriology. They were, plausibly, good people, like us. But perhaps that is the great lesson. Good people can fall into illusion. The realization that such can happen keeps us a bit more aware and hopefully a bit more critical.

WILLIAM M. THOMPSON
Duquesne University