

# Gnosticism and Contemporary Soteriology: Some Reflections

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The abundant variations of Gnosticism in the second and third centuries A.D. testify both to its popularity and to the threat that it posed to the early Christian church. This threat is all the more evident in that some forms of Gnosticism were espoused by men, for example Valentinus and Basilides, who considered themselves faithful Christians. Yet, as is well known, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and other Church Fathers believed that Gnosticism was radically inimical to the authentic Christian gospel as professed by "the Great Church". I wish to argue here that many contemporary theologians, who equally profess to be Christians, have proposed soteriological theories which are at their heart Gnostic, and constitute an equally grave threat to the integrity of the gospel today.

Before examining instances of what I consider contemporary variants of Gnostic soteriology, I will briefly state what I believe to be at the heart of the ancient Gnostic systems. I am not so much interested in the particular details of the various Gnostic Schools, but rather I want to highlight what exactly it is that gnosis consisted of for the Gnostics. What is it that the *Pneumatikoi* knew which brought them salvation?<sup>11</sup>

The various Gnostic Schools taught elaborate cosmological systems or schemes. These were normally composed of the utterly transcendent and, often, unknowable good God, followed by the assorted lesser aeons of spirits (such as, *Sige, Ennoia, Nous, Logos, Zoe, Pneuma, Sophia*, angels, etc., depending on the Gnostic school). These made up the *Pleroma* and filled the infinite void between the transcendent God and the world of matter. The evil demiurge, often seen as the God of the Old Testament, was responsible for the creation of the material world and thus for the evil within it. Through a mixture of mythology and philosophy Gnosticism offered a total cosmological view of reality and what reality was all about. The intention of all this was to properly locate human beings within this

total cosmological order and to offer, at least to the elect, a way out of the evil world of matter so as to obtain knowledge of God and thus salvation. Within this cosmological scheme is found the relevance of "the Gnostic Redeemer". This redeemer, however he was portrayed, revealed saving knowledge/*gnosis*. Within Christian Gnosticism Jesus, "inhabited" by Christ, fulfilled this task.

Now the central question for this study is: What does the Gnostic Redeemer/Jesus reveal? What is the saving *gnosis* that is imparted? What does the Pneumatic come to know? The answer is that the Gnostic Redeemer reveals how the cosmological system works. The Gnostic Redeemer does not change the cosmic blueprint, rather he makes known what has always been the case. The Pneumatic, in receiving this *gnosis*, is enlightened and thus empowered by this esoteric knowledge to attain union with God and the divine Pleroma. Through Gnostic mythology and philosophy, the enlightened, being "in the know", can confidently participate in the cosmological enterprise.

In light of this brief description of classic Gnostic thought, I will now examine some contemporary soteriological theories so as to illustrate their Gnostic tendencies. The theologians I will examine will be a representative sampling of what, I believe, is common among many other contemporary theologians and their soteriological theories.

John Macquarrie in his book *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*<sup>2</sup> contends that since the Enlightenment the traditional Christian view of God supernaturally acting within the world is no longer theologically or philosophically defensible. Thus Jesus can not be seen as the eternal pre-existent divine person of the Son now existing as man, but rather "to call him the God-man . . . is to claim that in him human transcendence has reached that point at which the human life has become so closely united with the divine life that, in the traditional language, it has been 'deified'" (p. 370). Unlike the rest of humankind, Jesus is the human being in whom the divine image is not defaced but manifested in its fullness, and thus he is "God's existence" in so far as "the divine can become manifest on the finite level" (p. 371; see also pp. 372-3). Thus, for Macquarrie, Jesus differs from us only in degree and not in kind in that he manifests to a greater degree than we the ever present God in our midst (see pp. 346, 358, 361, 377, 392, 415).

How then does Jesus save us? "Jesus is the representative human being" (p. 373). For Macquarrie there is an archetype, an ideal, or a lure which draws us to God which "we see fulfilled in a signal way in

Jesus Christ . . . We recognize him as the representative human being, the Word made flesh." Jesus enfleshed the love of God and so a "new humanity was formed" (p. 374). Jesus represents, makes known, and reveals the decisive clue to what God has always been up to in the world (see p. 379). Jesus "sums up and makes clear a presence (of God) that is obscurely communicated throughout the cosmos" (p. 381). Salvation consists, for Macquarrie, in the coming to know what has always been the case: God is ever present in the world and we, like Jesus, are called to respond and incarnate this self-sacrificing love as he did.

Jesus, then, is not for Macquarrie unique among the founders of world religions. Like Jesus, all "saviour figures were mediators of grace. We have seen what this means in the case of Jesus Christ, yet these others too were emissaries of holy Being. They too had given themselves up to the service of a divine reality, who might work in them and through them for the lifting up of all creatures upon earth" (p. 420). The founders of all religions are all saviours because like Jesus they manifest or reveal, in their various and distinctive ways, the one truth of what God is doing generically and constantly in the world and so what our response should be.<sup>3</sup>

John Hick, though in much more sweeping and conspicuous manner, offers a similar view of salvation to that of Macquarrie. In his book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*,<sup>4</sup> Hick places Jesus squarely within the context of world religions and contends that Christianity offers the exact same sort of salvation as that of any other world religion.

Like Macquarrie, Hick finds the traditional view of the Incarnation completely unacceptable to our scientific and enlightened age and so views Jesus as possessing an "immensely powerful God-consciousness". He is "so transparently open to the divine presence that his life and teaching have a universal significance which can still help to guide our lives today" (p. 26).<sup>5</sup> Because of this, Jesus manifests what God is always up to in the world. The idea of the Incarnation is "a metaphorical statement of the significance of a life through which God was acting on earth" (p. 106).

For Hick other religious traditions have similar metaphorical formulae and thus they are ultimately expressing the same view of salvation as that of Christianity. "I suggest that these different conceptions of salvation are specifications of what, in a generic formula, is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered on the divine Reality" (p. 135). Put more philosophically, Hick states that "our human religious

experience, variously shaped as it is by our sets of religious concepts and practices, is a cognitive response to the universal presence of the ultimate divine reality that, in itself, exceeds human conceptuality" (p. 146). The ultimate referent then of all religious mythology is "the Transcendent, the eternally Real, experienced in different ways within the different religious traditions" (p. 161).

In Hick we see, more clearly than in Macquarrie, that religious mythology, whether Christian, Jewish, or Hindu, is but a metaphorical way of expressing a deeper, "hidden", philosophical truth. Salvation consists in perceiving and living the philosophical truth hidden within the religious metaphor and myth. For Hick, this truth is that divine Reality or the Transcendent is always acting toward us in love and that we manifest this generic and continual presence in our own selfless love. The role of Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, or Buddha is all of one piece. Through their teaching they reveal and in their lives they manifest, at least metaphorically, this common gnosis of what the Transcendent and the world are all about.

This same kind of soteriology is found in some expressions of "Spirit Christology". One of its most recent exponents, following G.W.H. Lampe, is Roger Haight. In an article "The Case for Spirit Christology", Haight proposes that the best way of conceiving of God and his work in the world is through the metaphor "God as Spirit".<sup>6</sup> "God as Spirit is God present and at work outside of God's self" (p. 267). Thus Jesus is an "embodiment of God as Spirit" to an exceptional degree (p. 276). "The symbol of the Spirit more forthrightly makes the claim that God, God's very self, acted in and through this Jesus" (p. 272). Haight proposes then "a revelational and exemplary theory of salvation" in that Jesus is "the revealer of God and God's salvation which God as Spirit has effected from the beginning, the revelation of what human life should be, and the empowering example of life for disciples" (p. 278). Jesus is "a normative manifestation of what God is like and the pattern of what human existence should be" (p. 278-9). Jesus brings us salvation by being a metaphor of God's generic action in the world, and by our coming to know this we are able to respond to it more easily and readily. Because Jesus for Haight, as for Macquarrie and Hick, only differs in degree from us and not in kind, we too possess God as Spirit and so can live as he has manifested to us. Moreover, again as for Macquarrie and Hick, just as God as Spirit acted in Jesus, so too has he acted in other "salvation bringers" (see pp. 280-2).<sup>7</sup>

This same pattern can be found, in a more metaphysical manner,

within Process Christology. For Process theologians, God is part of the total and unbroken cosmic process where he provides from within his primordial or abstract pole the goods and values that are to be actualized (prehended) within the world, especially by human beings, and so assumed (prehended) into God's concrete pole, that is, God as he actually is. Placing their Christology and soteriology within the general framework of Process Theology, Process theologians see Jesus as incarnating (prehending) God's lure or potential to the highest degree and so concretizing it and making it real. God does not act in a different kind of way in Jesus, but rather in Jesus we find manifested the way God is always acting. Thus for Norman Pittenger Jesus "is the classic instance of the Divine Activity in manhood".<sup>9</sup> The Incarnation is not an intrusion of God by some supernatural act, but "Jesus Christ is seen as the focal self-expression of God the Word in human terms." In the man Jesus, then, "the Word who is present and active in the lives of men in their historical situation, is actualized or 'en-manned' in such a decisive and distinctive fashion that we are enabled to say here, as nowhere else, we are in the presence of the Word 'made flesh'."<sup>9</sup>

For Process theologians, Jesus does not establish an entirely new relationship between God and man, but makes it possible for the God/man relation which always was to become more fully actualized. It becomes more fully actualized because Jesus, at least symbolically through his life and teaching, makes it known. David Griffin writes: "The only change in the God-man relation is man's attitude. Through revelation he comes to know things about God that were already true, and this knowledge affects the subjective form of his experience."<sup>10</sup> Jesus saves us by being the mythical or metaphorical expression of what Process theologians *know* to be literally the case through Process Philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

Having briefly examined a representative sampling of contemporary theories of salvation, I will now attempt to demonstrate how they are essentially Gnostic in character, something that may already be evident. While the above cases are not exact replicas of classic Gnosticism (for example, they do not see matter as evil), salvation, within these soteriologies, similarly consists in coming to know the "eternally" established and unchanging (and unchangeable) cosmological order. Soteriology is reduced to and identified with cosmology.

Because this cosmological order is total, self-contained and closed, Jesus changes the God/man relation not by establishing an entirely new and different kind of relation, but by making the "old"

relation (the only one there is) more workable. Reality (the complete cosmic order) is not ontologically changed or made different by the salvation Jesus brings, but only gnoseologically. One is not saved by faith but by knowledge — esoteric and philosophical in nature. Thus, as in classic Gnosticism, Jesus is a mythical or metaphorical Gnostic redeemer and Christianity is Gnosticism — the coming to know the cosmological system.

Jesus as a person, therefore, loses much of his existential and contemporary importance. Having fulfilled his task of imparting the “secret” or “clue” of reality in a metaphorical or mythical manner, he is relegated to being the mere historical revelatory exemplar of a philosophical/religious sect. Like Mohammed, Buddha, or any good moral philosopher or holy person, his sole task is to put humankind “in the know” so that it might obtain, through this knowledge, salvation. Having done this his contemporary relevance vanishes. What is important is purely the *gnosis*.

Moreover, what is ultimately critical within all of these various expressions of contemporary soteriology is not Jesus, or, for that matter Buddha, Mohammed, or Moses, for they all trade in myth and metaphor, but rather the philosophy contained in and behind their mythical and metaphorical “revelation”. Actually one could live a “saved” life without belonging to any religion, and one might actually be better off for having abandoned the myth and metaphor contained within them, as long as one knows philosophically the cosmological system and lives in accordance with it. Within these contemporary soteriologies it is the traditional believers (whether they be Jews, Christians, or Hindus) who are now — at best — the *Psuchikoi*, and the people who actually *know* the true philosophical cosmology are the new *Pneumatikoi*.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of how one judges the truth and validity of these contemporary forms of Christian Gnosticism, one thing is certain, they are not authentic expressions of the traditional Christian Gospel and the faith of “the Great Church”. The Christian gospel and tradition asserts that the person of Jesus himself is central to salvation and not a message (*gnosis*) apart from him. He himself is the message. To *know* Jesus through faith is to find salvation. Unlike, for example, Buddha who imparts a salvific message (what one must do) that is distinct from himself, Jesus himself is the gospel of salvation.

The reason for the centrality of Jesus is that God, through him, has radically changed and altered in kind and not in degree man’s relationship to himself, and this new kind of relationship is secured not through some *gnosis* which he imparts, but by being united to his

very person in faith through the Holy Spirit. Jesus, as the eternal Son of God existing in time and history as man, has through his death and resurrection put in place a whole new salvific order or program that differs in kind from what existed hitherto. Through *faith* in him as the living risen Lord, one receives the Holy Spirit and through this reception one's relationship with God changes in kind and not in degree. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, one is transformed from being a sinner and an enemy of God into being a righteous son or daughter able now to call God "Father". Moreover, as implied in the above, the believer is changed not in degree but in kind. The believer is a radically new creation in Christ. Equally, believers possess a relationship with other believers, as members of the Body of Christ, that differs in kind from the type of relation they have with those outside of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

By reducing the Christian gospel to the mythical or metaphorical expression of an unalterable philosophical cosmology, contemporary soteriology has deprived and robbed the Christian gospel of its fundamental integrity and distinctive character. The reason for this, and this is the heart of the problem, is that God, within these contemporary soteriological views, does not exist ontologically distinct from all else that is, in such a way as to be free to interact with all else that is in ways he freely chooses, but rather he himself is a prisoner to a cosmological order that is self-contained and closed. Because it is impossible for God to interact with humankind in different kinds of ways (traditionally called "supernatural") contemporary soteriology is forced, by philosophical necessity, to view salvation in a merely Gnostic manner — only as the coming to know of what has always been.

However, it is precisely here that the Bible loudly protests. It demands to be taken on its own terms and not reinterpreted within a philosophical hermeneutic that is foreign to it, a philosophy which, if true, would require the biblical proclamation to be false. The Bible refuses to be merely or solely mythical and metaphorical. The heart of biblical revelation, with its own inherent philosophical principles, is precisely that God ontologically does differ in kind from all else that is and that he, nonetheless, has acted in time and history in distinctive and various ways, and ultimately and lastly has acted through his Son. These actions were performed precisely to form relations with humankind that differ not in degree but in kind.

In conclusion I want to comment on the inter-religious concerns of the above theologians. All the above propose that, by making Christianity comparable to other religions, specifically by making

Jesus just one among many “salvation bringers”, they have rightfully denied Christianity its mistaken “elitism”, and in so doing they offer an equitable solution as to the inherent unity of all religions. Ecumenically this appears very appealing. However, by denying Christianity its specific integrity, they have equally denied the specific integrity of all other religions. Now all religions have become mere mythical and metaphorical expressions of a philosophical “truth” that those “in the know” truly discern. The ardent and committed Jew, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist are all equally deluded. They do not *know* that they all *really* profess one and the same “faith”.

This is especially important with regard to the relationship of Christians to the Jews. Hick, for example, virulently castigates Christians for their anti-Semitism and finds its origin in the elitist claim that Jesus is God incarnate.<sup>14</sup> Christians do believe that Jesus brought the fullness of salvation. However, Hick (and all the above), by making Judaism but another mythical and metaphorical expression of a religious philosophy, have denied Jews their chosen status. If Hick is correct, all the Jews who died for their faith died in vain. They did not *know* that Christianity, or for that matter Hinduism, is really the same as their own faith. If they had only *known*, they need not have died.

Christians have persecuted the Jews. However, today most Christian theologians and church leaders recognize, unlike many in the past who held that they ceased to be God’s chosen people following their denial of Christ, that the Jews still remain God’s chosen people, and they are so precisely because he established a relationship with them that differed in kind from his relationship with all other peoples. Hick, and all the above, by proposing that the Jews are no different from anyone else, are in the end unwittingly espousing a position that is inherently more anti-semitic than anything held in the past. By reducing Judaism to just another mythical and metaphorical expression of a generic philosophical gnosis, they may have performed “the most unkindest cut of all”.

- 1 For recent studies of Gnosticism, see S. Petrement, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); and K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1984). For brief accounts of Gnosticism, see “Gnosticism,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. E. Ferguson (London: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 371-6; and “Gnosis,” *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. A. Di Berardino (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1992), Vol. 1, pp. 352-4.
- 2 London: SCM, 1990.
- 3 For a critique of Macquarrie, see Charles C. Hefling, Jr., “Reviving Adamic Adoptionism: The Example of John Macquarrie,” *Theological Studies* 52 (1991)



- 4 London: SCM, 1993. Hick also proposes similar arguments in his other works. See *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973); *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989); "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" and "The Logic of God Incarnate" in *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993).  
Hick notes that his book finds its historical impetus and forbear in the publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate* of which he was the editor (London: SCM, 1977). He believes many younger theologians today hold similar views to his own. He includes such people as A. Race, P.W. Newman, J. Bowden, P. Fredricksen, K. Ward, L. Houlden (see p. 3). Other recent writers representing this tendency include: D. Cupitt, G. Kaufman, J. Knox, H. Küng, C.M. LaCugna, J.A.T. Robinson, and M. Wiles.
- 5 Hick acknowledges that his proposal falls within the liberal tradition of F. Schleiermacher (see p. 18).
- 6 *Theological Studies*, 53 (1992) 257-286. For similar examples of this type of Spirit Christology, see G.W.H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) and P.W. Newman, *A Spirit Christology* p. 1975 University Press of America, 1987).
- 7 For a critique of Haight's Spirit Christology, see John Wright, S.J., "Roger Haight's Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 729-735, and T. Weinandy "The Case For Spirit Christology: Some Reflections," *The Thomist* 52 (1995) 173-188.
- 8 *God In Process* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 29. Other significant works by Pittenger are: *The Word Incarnate* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1959); and *Christology Reconsidered* (London: SCM, 1970). For other examples of Process Christology and soteriology see, David Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), and Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (London: SCM, 1967), and *The Point of Christology* (London: SCM, 1982).
- 9 Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, p. 180.
- 10 *A Process Christology*, 236.
- 11 For a critique of the whole of Process Christology see T. Weinandy, *Does God Change?: The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Press, 1985), pp. 124-53.
- 12 It is interesting to note how often, in his *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Hick contrasts the "unlearned circles" (p. 28), those "unacquainted with the modern study of the bible" (p. 29), and most of all "the fundamentalists" (pp. 87, 115, 121, 126, 147, 154, 160) with "educated Westerners" (p. 8), "highly regarded Christian theologians" (p. 11), "the scholarly community" (p. 33), "the New Testament scholar" (pp. 34, 42), the "majority of contemporary theologians" (p. 34), "modern New Testament scholarship" (p. 91), "thoughtful Christians" (pp. 113, 159), "educated Christians" (p. 116), and "responsible scholarship" (p. 151). The former not only includes those who believe God created the world in, literally, seven days, but also those who believe in anything "supernatural". The latter, obviously, are the new elite, the *Pneumatikoi*.
- 13 For a fuller account of the biblical notion that Jesus brings about changes in kind rather than in degree, see T. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1993).
- 14 See *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, pp. 80-3.