

# Widengren and Gnosticism

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## *Introduction*

“Gnosticism” was established as an important field of research in the History of Religions around the turn of the previous century. This happened largely due to the work of the so-called “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” which in its attempts to break free from the limiting perspectives of traditional Biblical exegesis, Church history and classical philology discovered “die Gnosis” as a wide area of investigation that allowed for the integration of evidence taken from many different religious contexts and inspired bold hypotheses about inter-religious contacts and influence. Scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein were particularly prominent figures in this line of research.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that when Geo Widengren made his contribution at the famous conference on the origins of Gnosticism in Messina in 1966,<sup>2</sup> it was precisely this tradition of scholarship he, as a self-conscious historian of religions, associated himself with and sought to defend. In particular, Widengren stood out at that conference as a strong supporter of Reitzenstein and his *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (1921), declaring his conviction that “the gnostic religion” can be traced back to Iranian sources. Widengren’s position met with limited approval at the time, and the subsequent history of scholarship has made it increasingly unfashionable. The Iranian hypothesis of Reitzenstein and Widengren is now widely regarded as a blind alley in the attempts to account for the strange historical phenomenon traditionally called “Gnosticism.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bousset, *Hauptprobleme*; Reitzenstein, *Erlösungsmysterium*.

<sup>2</sup> Widengren, “Origines.”

<sup>3</sup> The death blow to that hypothesis, at least in the view of the great majority of scholars in the field, was dealt by Colpe, *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Serious criticism of Reitzenstein’s constructions was also raised about the same time by Schenke, *Gott »Mensch«*, especially 20–33. Widengren wrote an extensive review of Colpe’s work in *OLZ* 58:11–12 (1963) 533–48, in which he mainly concentrated on its philological shortcomings and did not address the wider issues relating to the origins of “Gnosticism” in any significant fashion. In his 1966 paper, Widengren paid almost no attention to Colpe at all (“Origines,” 49). Widengren’s views (like those of Reitzenstein) were largely based on assumptions that are no longer generally held about the dates of certain sources that were regarded as essential by scholars in the 1920s and -30s: Mandaean texts were seen pre-Christian, Manichaean texts about the Primal Man

Notwithstanding this state of affairs, I think it may be a useful exercise to take a fresh look at Widengren's work in this field and see if something may still be learned from it – even, and perhaps not least, from the mistaken presuppositions on which it appears to have been based.

### *Phenomenology and History*

If we retrace Widengren's 1966 paper on the origins of Gnosticism back to his earlier work in this field, it may come as a surprise to discover that his initial approach to this topic was made in the context of comparative religion. To be precise, the topic first appeared as a chapter in his *Religionens värld* ("The world of religion"), a work that was first published in 1945 and presumably was based on the lectures he gave during the first years following his appointment to the chair of History of Religions at Uppsala in 1940. A second edition of this work came out in 1953, and a significantly expanded German version was published in 1969 under the title *Religionsphänomenologie*. A third, abridged, Swedish edition appeared in 1971. In this work, written as an introduction to the study of religion,<sup>4</sup> Gnosticism was accorded a separate chapter under the heading "Den gnostiska inställningen," in German "Die gnostische Einstellung." The chapter was later translated by Birger Pearson into English and appeared as a small monograph entitled *The Gnostic Attitude*.

The fact that Widengren's perception of Gnosticism was formed in the context of the phenomenology of religion (as he understood it) is important for assessing his contribution to this field. It is noteworthy that when Widengren was invited to give a lecture at the University of Bonn in 1952, entitled "Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis," he more or less repeated what he had already written about *gnosis* in his phenomenology. In other words, he discussed the historical problem of the origins of Gnosticism using the same text that presented "the gnostic attitude" as a category of comparative religion.

This confluence of historical and systematic methods puts severe obstacles in the way of a precise understanding of the nature of Widengren's work. A historical argument takes the form of a singular linear narrative, as plausibly reconstructed as can

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were thought to have re-used ancient Iranian materials, the account of the heavenly journey of the soul in *Hādōxt nask 2* was traced back to early Avestan sources, etc.)

<sup>4</sup> The first two Swedish editions carried the subtitle "Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter" ("Studies and surveys in the phenomenology of religion"). For reasons unknown to me, the subtitle was dropped in the third and final edition.

be done on the basis of the available historical evidence. A systematic argument, on the other hand, such as is aimed for in a comparative study, is a matter of ordering and classifying materials into general categories. This approach is, in principle, ahistorical: the general categories are attained by means of abstraction from the historical context of the various pieces of evidence, which serve essentially as *examples* of the general category. Diachronic arguments have no place here (or they belong to a secondary level of generalisation, in cases where comparable historical processes<sup>5</sup> can be demonstrated within the general categories, which are themselves not a matter of empirical history).

Historical reconstructions are bottom-up, starting from the evidence. Systematic studies are top-down, starting from the general categories, which are then elaborated through descriptions of their examples.

Widengren is certainly conscious of the difference in principle between systematic and historical approaches to the study of religion. To him they constitute two distinct branches of the discipline: “Die Religionsgeschichte gibt die historische Analyse, während die Religionsphänomenologie uns die systematische Synthese liefert.”<sup>6</sup> In practice, however, the boundaries are necessarily blurred, he goes on to say, because historical studies are necessary in order for us to be able to classify a phenomenon correctly, and the results obtained by means of the systematic and the historical working methods will frequently supplement each other.<sup>7</sup> These remarks regarding the interdependence of historical and systematic approaches – or empirical research and theoretical endeavours in general – are no doubt valid from an epistemological point of view. However, they do not invalidate the necessity of distinguishing between them as two different modes of demonstrative discourse. At this point, Widengren’s “phenomenological” presentation of his material is not without problems.<sup>8</sup> Let us look at what he actually does in his chapter on “Gnosticism.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am thinking of such processes as routinisation, institutionalisation, canonisation, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> “In der Theorie ist somit die Abgrenzung beider Wissenschaften voneinander völlig klar, in der Praxis jedoch müssen die Grenzen oft ziemlich fließend bleiben, und zwar deshalb, weil wir oft nicht imstande sind, ein Phänomen richtig zu klassifizieren, ohne gewisse historische Untersuchungen und Vergleiche anzustellen. Die Ergebnisse der systematischen und der historischen Arbeitsmethode müssen einander oft ergänzen” (ib.)

<sup>8</sup> Immediately after the passage quoted in the previous note, Widengren goes on to conclude: “Im folgenden wird der Leser daher auf verschiedene Beobachtungen und Hinweise stoßen, die gleichermaßen für die Religionsgeschichte wie für die Religionsphänomenologie gelten” (ib.).

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 17 in his *Religionsphänomenologie* and chapter 16 in the 1971 edition of *Religionens värld*.

### *Widengren's Construction of Gnosticism*

In his presentation of “the Gnostic attitude,” Widengren starts in Vedic India, with the *ātman* doctrine, according to which the individual *ātman* is identical to the all-encompassing great *ātman* of Brahman. This doctrine was then developed in a dualistic direction in the Upanishads, in which the multiple world of the senses came to be seen as an illusion, and the task of the individual human soul was understood to be the achievement of unity with Brahman through knowledge and a heavenly journey. According to Widengren, these ideas were further developed in Iranian religion, with the Great Spirit Vohu Manah playing the same role as Brahman in India. Furthermore, in Iran, Ahriman was introduced as an evil counterpart to the deity; the world was seen as a mixture of good and evil, and the idea of a Saviour becomes important. Widengren maintains that in the particular variety of Iranian religion called Zervanism, the Iranian dualism of good and evil was reinterpreted as a dualism of the soul and the material world. Against this background, the idea of the Saviour was developed further and came to include the motif that the Saviour himself needed salvation. This motif was connected with the idea that the Saviour, who is also the Primal Man, is a manifestation of the all-encompassing divine spirit, of which all the individual human spirits are parts, and in order to incorporate them all into himself and bring them back to where they came from and belong, he has to expose himself to the evil of the world in which humans are trapped. He is then first overcome by the powers of the world, but eventually defeats them and is redeemed.

In the course of this presentation, Widengren also surveys a common stock of frequently recurring motifs: the association of ignorance with sleep, the clothing which the soul assumes on its heavenly journey, the joining with one's heavenly twin, the provisions one takes on the journey, and the companions, as well as the idea of the repeated descent of the saviour figure.

It is very difficult to make sense of this argument from a methodological point of view. Presented as a chapter in a phenomenology of religion, it begins top-down with a general category: the Gnostic attitude. One may therefore expect the chapter to begin with a definition of this category and its relation to other general categories previously discussed. In fact, Widengren begins by relating his theme to pantheism, which was the theme of an earlier chapter. Gnostic dualism is seen as a particular transformation of pantheism in which the continuity between the deity and the world is simultaneously broken and maintained by the idea that the world is an illusion. This is undoubtedly a

theme that may be interestingly discussed from a comparative point of view across the history of religions. It appears in various modifications in Buddhism, in forms of Daoism, in Neoplatonism, in the mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabi and in other varieties of mysticism, eastern and western. In so-called Gnosticism the theme is found as well, though it appears in varying modulations across the different Gnostic mythological systems and groups. But Widengren does not seem to be interested in comparisons of the relationship between theology and cosmology on a cross-cultural and theoretical level. His idea of comparison involves suppositions about historical dependence, “influences,” “background.” This is, in other words, the diffusionist variety of the comparative method: things are similar because they share a common origin.<sup>10</sup> This perspective used to be popular in anthropology, folklore studies and historical linguistics, but is considered rather outdated now, after the various structuralist turns we have experienced since the 1950s.

The diffusionist method sits awkwardly between historical narrative and comparative category formation. As far as “the Gnostic attitude” is concerned, we are left in uncertainty whether it refers to a specific historical phenomenon that is the result of a singular process of development – from ancient India via Iran to Western Late Hellenism – or whether it is a type of religious attitude that can be exemplified generally across cultures in “the world of religion” (the title of Widengren’s book). The choice of the word “attitude” suggests the latter, referring to a mentality that can be realised in a diversity of historical contexts; yet the qualifier “Gnostic” on the contrary seems to point to something more historically specific.

As a hybrid form of thinking situated between the historical and the comparative, the diffusionist approach is top-down, but in a peculiar manner that begins with a specific set of historical materials, in this case located in ancient India. The Gnostic attitude is derived from this set of materials by means of a procedure that takes the double form of a logical deduction as well as a historical explanation. In consequence, a general concept of the Gnostic attitude is constructed, based on an Indo-Iranian macrocosmos-microcosmos model in which the individual soul is part of an all-encompassing deity, but has been lost in matter and a world that is evil; the soul must be redeemed by a Saviour figure conceived as a Primal Man, who incorporates all human beings and who

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<sup>10</sup> Widengren expresses a qualified approval of the diffusionist paradigm in *Religionens ursprung*, 68–69, while warning against excesses in its application. For a recent perspective on diffusionism as a way of doing comparative religion, see Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*, esp. 26, 67–68, who mentions Reitzenstein and Widengren as proponents of this approach (26).

himself needs to be redeemed. Thus, the general concept of the Gnostic attitude runs the risk of becoming a function of the model that is supposed to explain it, relying on a circular argument, instead of having been derived from the actual sources that can provide us with an understanding of the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism through an inductive, bottom-up investigation. Widengren does, indeed, refer to sources, with apparent attention to philological precision, but his use of sources is quite selective and essentially serves to confirm his pre-conceived construction of Gnosticism as a variety of Indo-Iranian religious speculation.

In fact, Widengren's favourite sources for Gnosticism are Manichaean texts, especially the Middle Iranian ones. In addition, he places great emphasis on the so-called *Song of the Pearl* from the *Acts of Thomas* and makes extensive use of Mandaean texts, all of which he considers to be essentially pre-Christian. He never engages seriously with the reports of the Christian heresiologists – Irenaeus and the others – who created the concept of *gnosis* as the name for a religious movement in the first place, whose reports are for the most part chronologically prior to Manichaeism, as well as probably to Mandaism as we know it,<sup>11</sup> and who never mention the *Song of the Pearl*. If we are to speak about *gnosis*, or “Gnosticism,” at all, this is clearly where one should start. Contemporary scholarship, however, has increasingly come to realise that those concepts form a heresiological construction that tends to become synonymous with “heresy” in general, and that by adopting those concepts as the basis for a general category, modern scholars risk making the same mistake as the heresiologists by lumping together a number of rather distinct historical phenomena and claiming that they are all the same sort of thing. Moreover, this generalisation has often been accompanied by an essentialising gesture: the assumption that all these phenomena belong together as manifestations of a single, shared essence.<sup>12</sup>

Today we know that what scholars used to call “gnosis” was based on a rather arbitrary combination of several ideas: the idea that the material world is bad and we need to be saved from it; the distinction between a supreme, good god and a not so good world creator; the idea of consubstantiality between the supreme god and an inner essence in the human; and the notion that redemption is attained by a special type of knowledge. Each of these ideas can be found across the history of religions without

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<sup>11</sup> For a succinct update on the current state of research regarding the origins of Mandaism and Mandaean literature, see Häberl, “Mandaism in Antiquity.”

<sup>12</sup> See, in particular, Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*; King, *What is Gnosticism*; Thomassen, “No Such Thing.”

necessarily being combined with any of the others and may form interesting points of departure for comparative studies of religious ideas. However, the combination of those ideas in certain religious contexts during the time of the Roman Empire is a historical contingency and does not add up to an essence which is greater than its constituent parts. “Gnosis” as such is therefore hardly a viable category in the comparative study of religions,<sup>13</sup> but may be used, with circumspection, to refer to specific historical phenomena in the later part of Antiquity.

I have now reached the end of the destructive part of my presentation, and I shall now switch into a more constructive mode.

#### *Alternative Perspectives on Widengren’s Model*

Some of the themes that Widengren highlights in his presentation of Gnosticism do, in fact, deserve closer attention than contemporary scholarship is usually prepared to admit. This is particularly true of such ideas as macrocosmos and microcosmos, Primal Man, and the Saved Saviour. These themes were part of the heritage from the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which Widengren adopted and developed, but they have largely lost favour in the more recent, post-Nag Hammadi studies in this field. This is undeserved, because these themes do in fact appear not only in Manichaeism, but also at the core of the source materials representing what the heresiologists referred to as the Gnostic heresy. Their presence there requires an explanation. Do they perhaps indicate that Widengren’s ideas are of some relevance after all?

Since we no longer may, or must, speak about Gnosticism in general, and also due to the limitations of this chapter, I shall here restrict myself to discussing two sets of evidence: Irenaeus’ testimony on what he explicitly names “the so-called Gnostic sect” (*haireisis*) in his *Against the Heresies* book I, chapters 29–30; and the systems of the Valentinians, who Irenaeus claims were directly inspired by this sect when they developed their “pretended *gnosis*,” against which Irenaeus primarily wrote his work. To these two sets of materials we may add the *Apocryphon of John*, which is directly dependent on the source used by Irenaeus in chapter 29 and uses much the same materials as his source in chapter 30.

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<sup>13</sup> How attempts to use “Gnosis,” “Gnosticism,” and “Gnostic” as general categories in the history of religions lead into a shoreless ocean of indeterminacy may be observed in such publications as Trompf et al., *The Gnostic World* (a book that nonetheless contains a number of good individual contributions and also is of value in so far as it documents the widespread use of those categories).

In Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30, we have a theogony in which the supreme deity is called the First Man. After him there is a Second Man, who is also called the Son of Man and who is the Thought of the First Man. Then comes the First Woman. Apparently, the generation of these beings takes place through an emanation of light, because we are told that the First Woman is unable to contain all the light that is streaming down upon her from the two male figures above. The part of the light she is able to retain produces Christ; the rest, however, spills over and becomes Sophia Prounikos.<sup>14</sup> She drops downwards and gives birth to the monstrous Yaldabaoth, who creates the world and seeks to become master over that portion of the divine light that has gone astray. We do not need to go into all the details of this system; the important point to be made here is that there is a First Man, a *Primus Homo*, at the beginning, and that a part of this Primordial Human Being is lost and needs to be retrieved.

In the *Apocryphon of John* there is also a First Human in the divine sphere. This is the figure of Barbelo, who is the Thought and image of the ultimate deity, the Invisible Spirit.<sup>15</sup> Barbelo receives the light of the Invisible Spirit and gives birth to Christ, like the First Woman in Irenaeus 1.30. In the *Apocryphon*, however, the figure of Sophia enters the story only at a much later stage. Several aeonic emanations and successive levels are interposed between Barbelo and the unhappy Sophia. Those levels can be seen, however, as replicas of the figure of the First Human: they include the level of Adam, the Perfect Human, and that of his son Seth. The author of this system was apparently concerned to widen the distance between the ultimate deity's manifestation as the First Human and the defect introduced by Sophia; however, the underlying concept is nevertheless still that of a primordial human figure emanating as light-substance from the deity, a part of which is subsequently lost and needs to be restored.<sup>16</sup>

The same pattern is found in the Valentinian systems. At the head of these systems, there is, basically, a transcendent Father who manifests himself in a Son, who then

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<sup>14</sup> The exact meaning of προυνικός is difficult to pin down. The word is basically a name for porters, i.e. servants who move things. Motility seems to be an important semantic component of the term, but the texts give us no clues as to what kind of motility may be intended. There is no foundation for the statement in Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v.: "name of aeon representing sexual knowledge."

<sup>15</sup> Nag Hammadi Codex III, 7:23–8:5, and parallel versions; cf. Waldstein and Wisse, *Apocryphon of John*, 34–35.

<sup>16</sup> The *Apocryphon of John* is no doubt the product of a complicated process of transmission. It constitutes a rewriting of the materials contained in the Gnostic treatise known to Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.29, which itself shows signs of previous redactional activity. I intend to discuss these issues in a different context.

enables the generation of a Pleroma of aeons. The *Tripartite Tractate* from Nag Hammadi explains that the Son is the Father's Thought, the mental activity by which the Father thinks himself (56–57). Moreover, "... he alone is truly the Father's first human being" (66:10–12). He is the manifest image of the hidden Father, and he stretches himself out in order to become many, giving birth to the Totality of aeons. Other Valentinian systems do not explicitly refer to the Son as the First Man. It is nevertheless clear that when the main Valentinian system reported by Irenaeus, for example, says that the spiritual seed was emitted after the image and the likeness of the Saviour's angels, that idea is presupposed.<sup>17</sup> For when the Pleroma sends out the Saviour and his angels to rescue Sophia, these constitute an outward representation of the Pleroma. Appearing to Sophia, the Saviour and his angels replicate the Son and the aeons, and in response to this vision, Sophia gives birth to the spiritual seed that will later be deposited in cosmic humans. Thus, the spiritual component in humans is an image of the angels, who are manifestations of the aeons, who are, in turn, individual representations of the Son spread out into multiplicity. In other words, the Son is a primordial macro-anthropos that forms the ultimate model of the spiritual human being. Correspondingly, redemption is conceived of as a unification of humans with their angelic models (referred to as "the bridal chamber"), and ultimately as integration into the Pleroma, which is co-extensive with the Son himself.

In this way, we see the outlines of a pattern that bears considerable structural resemblance to Widengren's model of an *Urmensch*-like deity who becomes fragmented and needs to be reassembled. Moreover, the idea of a Saved Saviour is also to be found in this material: certain Valentinian texts explain that the reason for the Saviour's baptism at the beginning of his mission was that he himself needed to be saved, having descended into the world of matter.<sup>18</sup> This idea is a logical implication of the model: the Saviour is a manifestation of the Primordial Human sent out to redeem the lost parts of himself.

But do we need Mahātman and Vohu Manah, Puruṣa and Gayōmart in order to find a historical explanation for this structural similarity? Should it not give us pause for thought that a connection with those Indian and Iranian ideas is not attested either by means of shared terminology or by other types of textual evidence? The Middle Iranian

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<sup>17</sup> "They teach that she gave birth to offspring after the image, a spiritual offspring that came into being after the likeness of the Saviour's attendants" (*Haer.* 1.4.5 end). The choice of words (εἰκόν, ὁμοίωσις) obviously alludes to Gen 1:26.

<sup>18</sup> Clem. Alex. *Exc.* 22:6–7; *Tripartite Tractate*, 124–25.

Manichaean texts provide evidence of this kind, of course, but that evidence is better seen as an instance of the familiar Manichaean habit of culturally translating its mythology into local idioms. (The same phenomenon appears in the Chinese Manichaean texts, translated in a Buddhist environment.)

Can we, on the other hand, imagine this structure as having originated independently of such Indo-Iranian parallels? The current scholarly trend is to search for Gnostic origins in Biblical exegesis, and, in fact, the intertextual references found in the Gnostic sources generally are to the Jewish scriptures: the human being as an image of God, the spirit upon the waters, the figure of Wisdom, Adam and Seth. (On the other hand, the origins of such names as Barbelo and Yaldabaoth remain enigmatic.) However, the structure into which these Biblical notions and names are incorporated seems not to have been derived from the Bible; the ideas of a Primordial Human as a corporate entity that mediates a consubstantial relationship between humanity and the divine, and of the fragmentation of this entity and its ultimate reassembly, are not easy to find in the Biblical texts. The impulses for such ideas must have come from somewhere else.

In the Greco-Roman world there seems to exist one mythological complex that displays the same type of structure. This is the so-called Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans, according to which humans, in their state of corporeal individuation, were born from the ashes of the Titans, who, after having devoured the child Dionysus, were struck by the thunderbolt of Zeus. As a result, humans are partly material and titanic, and partly immaterial and Dionysiac. As a consequence of their Dionysiac component, humans may overcome corporeal fragmentation and be assimilated into the unity of the reborn and reassembled Dionysus. At least later Neoplatonists seem to have interpreted the myth in this way.<sup>19</sup> In the present context, it is of interest to note that according to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or early 4<sup>th</sup> century Neoplatonist Alexander of Lycopolis, the Manichaeans referred to the myth of Dionysus, “as told in the mysteries,” in order to explain their own doctrine: the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans demonstrates how the divine *dynamis* is dispersed in matter.<sup>20</sup> In other words, they perceived a structural resemblance between Dionysus and the Primal Man of their own mythology.

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<sup>19</sup> The key text is Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.* 1.3; cf. 8.7. For a relatively recent discussion of this much-debated text and the myth it presents, see Graf and Johnston, *Ritual Texts*, 66–93 (by Johnston).

<sup>20</sup> ἐκ μὲν τῶν τελετῶν τὸν κατατεμνόμενον Διόνυσον τῷ λόγῳ ἐπιφημίζοντες ὑπὸ τῶν Τιτάνων, καθάπερ λέγουσιν αὐτοὶ τὴν θεῖαν δύναμιν μερίζεσθαι εἰς τὴν ὕλην· *Alex. Lyc. Man.* 5 (p. 8 Brinkmann). See the translation and commentary in Villey, *Alexandre*, 61–62, 190–91.

It may be added that this passage in Alexander of Lycopolis already indicates the influence of a Platonist interpretation of Dionysus as the world soul, whereby the dismemberment of the god is understood in the light of the division of the soul caused by its contact with corporeality, as described by Plato in the *Timaeus* (35a).<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Greek philosophical tradition as well offers ideas about the relationship between the universal soul and embodied individual souls that display the same general structure as the myths discussed above.

This topic deserves a more thorough treatment than is possible here, and I must content myself with throwing out some questions for discussion: if a commonality of structure such as this exists between a Greek myth (at least in its philosophical interpretation), and the “Gnostic” Manichaean one, how can it be explained? Should we assume that Iranian mythology during the Parthian period influenced the development of the myth of Dionysus – even if there is no historical evidence that makes that kind of influence transparent? Or should we rather postulate that the common structure is of such a general nature that it may have arisen independently in different cultural contexts? Or perhaps the structure represents a mode of thought that constitutes a common Indo-European intellectual heritage, which may reappear within this vast cultural area without necessarily having been caused by specific events of intercultural contact?

#### *Final Remarks on the Origins of the Gnostic Myth*

I leave the myth of Dionysus there, as a more or less loose end. In the final part of my contribution, I wish to offer some suggestions regarding the most likely scenario for the origins of the Gnostic (in the restricted sense mentioned above) and the Valentinian myths. In recent years, the strong presence of Biblical terms and themes in these myths has led many scholars to look for some kind of Jewish background for them. A fairly common narrative is that the myths were first created in some unidentified Jewish, or para-Jewish, circles, and were then later, and superficially, Christianised.<sup>22</sup> However, one should not take lightly the fact that the figure of Christ is an essential feature of these systems from their very beginning. In the systems of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29 and the

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<sup>21</sup> τῆς ... περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς. It is generally assumed that this interpretation is not attested before Proclus in the fifth century (Brisson, “Figure du Kronos”; Yates, “Titanic Origin”). I think that such texts as Clem. Alex. Exc. 36 and Tri. Trac. 94:23–95:16, 116:5–117:3 show that the Valentinians already applied this Platonic theme in their thinking about the descent of the Saviour as a composite being who exposed himself to corporeal divisibility.

<sup>22</sup> For a survey of the various suggestions along these lines, see Trompf, “Jewish Background.”

*Apocryphon of John*, for example, the process of divine manifestation starts with the generation of Barbelo, who then turns towards the Father, is illuminated by him, and gives birth to Christ, the anointed one.

The general pattern of the narrative told in these systems is that the unknowable and infinite deity begins to reveal himself by thinking himself in the form of a Primordial Human Being. The movement from divine indeterminability to determination furthermore also implies a spreading out from oneness to plurality. The logical and metaphysical problem involved in this ordinary act of divine manifestation is personified by Sophia, who, as a singular aeon, is unable to contain the infinity of the deity. This inability leads to a split, whereby plurality ends in division and fragmentation. Similarly, the system of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30 recounts, as mentioned above, that the First Female is unable to contain all the light that is streaming onto her from the First Man and his Son. Some of it spills over, becomes Sophia Pronikos, and is temporarily lost, while the rest is salvaged in the form of Christ. This notion of a split between Sophia and Christ in the process of emanation is also found in some Valentinian texts.<sup>23</sup> The interpretation of this theme I would offer is that the story of the passion of Sophia was originally closely associated with that of Christ, and that Christ's passion – his descent into the world of matter, his crucifixion, and his eventual separation from his body on the Cross – was interpreted as an image, and an inevitable consequence, of the initial process of divine self-manifestation, in which the ultimate deity himself “suffers” by extending himself into multiplicity.

This means that the first Gnostic systems originated in a philosophical interpretation of the passion of Christ, contrived in accordance with a proto-Neoplatonist model of divine extension, division, withdrawal and reunification. The systems were worked out in the form of treatises, showing little concern for the texts of the later New Testament; thus, they seem to represent an early form of Christ religion that took form before those texts acquired the canonical status that made them the defining sources of “Christianity”. It must have been devised by someone who was deeply affected by the death of Jesus Christ, but who was also familiar with contemporary philosophy and allegorical mythology, and who used this knowledge to make philosophical sense of the sufferings of the Saviour.

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<sup>23</sup> Clem. Alex. *Exc.* 23, 32–33; Iren. *Haer.* 1.11.1; *Val Exp.* 33:36–37; cf. *Tri. Trac.* 77:11–78:22.

The aim of the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” espoused by Geo Widengren, was above all to find extrabiblical, and especially “Oriental,” sources for ideas in the Bible and in early Christianity. “Gnosis” was one of the catchwords used in this endeavour. Gnosticism was conceived as a mighty pre-Christian, Oriental movement whose myth of the Redeemer decisively influenced early Christianity. It seems to me to have been the other way around. The Gnostic myth originated instead in the West (comparatively speaking), as an early, pre-canonical variety of Christ religion conceived in the idiom of contemporary Platonism; from there it eventually migrated eastwards and in the shape of Manichaeism assimilated into its Christ mythology structurally homologous themes found in Iranian mythology. In other words, “das iranische Erlösungsmysterium” originated in Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Christianity” is, strictly speaking, an anachronism here. We have to imagine a religion that presupposes Jesus of Nazareth as Christos and Saviour, but which is not defined by the New Testament canon.

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