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LAWRENCE OSBORN

The Light that is Darkness

Gnostic Themes in the Theology of Martin Israel

Martin Israel is a prolific spiritual writer of our times, who has wrestled with important themes, notably suffering. In this article Lawrence Osborn puts his theology under the spotlight, and finds, despite Israel's status as a well-known author, that it has echoes of age-old gnostic themes. Even in their modern transpositions in Israel's thought they are, he maintains, disturbingly heterodox.

Gnosticism as an ideal type

GNOSTICISM figures prominently in the early history of Christianity and the development of Christian theology. A confusing range of interrelated groups and religious perspectives together constituted one of the most influential religious systems of the early Christian era at least from the perspective of the early Christian Fathers. The relationship between early Christian theology and gnostic ideas is marked by tension and conflict culminating in the anathematising of formal gnostic systems. Tillich's view of the struggle is representative:

the Christian Church in one of its most vital struggles, overcame, in the name of the Old Testament, the temptation to become a group of timeless individuals bound not to a physical or psychological space, but to the spiritual timeless space of mysticism.¹

However such a conclusion is both premature and misleading. It misleads in that it fails to recognise the tremendous importance of early Christian dialogue with gnosticism for the subsequent development of Christian theology. The traditional formula *haereses oportet esse* ('it is necessary that there be heresies') is a reminder that much of the most creative theological thinking has been done in confrontation with distortions that threaten the integrity of the Christian gospel. The very attractiveness of gnostic views to early Christians presented a serious challenge to Christianity – a challenge that was met by such theologians as Irenaeus.

Tillich's conclusion is also premature in the sense that, while the Church managed to outlaw adherence to formal gnostic systems, it had much less success in overcoming gnosticism's attractiveness for the spiritually-minded believer. Far from being vanquished by the truth, isolated gnostic themes survived and are

1 P. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, OUP, New York, p 36.

discernible in subsequent Christian theology. At times, these isolated themes have come together again in self-sustaining constellations of thought and practice amounting to gnostic alternatives to orthodox Christianity couched in Christian terminology.

In an important study of contemporary American Protestantism (both liberal and evangelical) Philip Lee has documented the post-Enlightenment re-emergence of gnostic forms of Christianity.² Although he does not develop the connection with gnosticism, Rubem Alves's earlier study of conservative Evangelicalism in the Brazilian Reformed Church reveals the appearance of the same distinctive gnostic features.³ The purpose of the present paper is to explore the presence of these gnostic features in contemporary Anglicanism with special reference to the writings of an influential Anglican retreat leader and writer on spirituality, the Revd Dr Martin Israel.

It would, of course, be futile to attempt to trace any historical continuity between contemporary gnostic trends and the formal gnostic systems of the early Christian era. Quite apart from attracting charges of indulging in the genetic fallacy, such an exercise would be dubious since gnosticism is an individual vision rather than an historical faith. However, as Lee points out (following Weber and Troeltsch) one can identify characteristic features which together make up a gnostic type of religious vision.⁴ Typically, a gnostic outlook is characterised by the conjunction of the following beliefs and practices: matter-spirit dualism; salvation as escape from/transcendence of the material order by means of saving knowledge; a focus on the knowing self rather than the believing community; spiritual elitism; and a syncretism designed to subvert the historical particularity of Christianity.

The gnostic vision of reality

Relative dualism

In sharp contrast to orthodox Christianity's insistence on the goodness of creation, gnosticism explains the imperfections in our present existence in terms of a flawed creation. This, in turn, is explained as the handiwork of a finite and imperfect demiurge rather than the ultimate God. However, because the demiurge shares in the being of the ultimate God, creation is not completely evil. Rather it contains elements of the divine, sparks of deity or spirit that have become entrapped in matter. Human nature mirrors this duality: in part it was made by the demiurge 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'.

Such explicit dualism and denial of the goodness of matter is not usually found within Christian traditions because of its condemnation by early Church Councils. However, a similar tendency may be discerned in efforts to stress the spiritual at the expense of the material.

2 P. J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Oxford UP, New York 1987.

3 R. Alves, *Protestantism and Repression: A Brazilian case study*, SCM, London 1985.

4 Lee, *Protestant Gnostics*, p 6.

In Martin Israel's writings this dualistic and spiritualising tendency is betrayed by his view of the material creation as a temporary expedient: a propaedeutic device intended to teach finite spirits certain spiritual truths. Thus, he can say, 'our life on earth is a school of spiritual training based on obedience to the Spirit of God within us, and a movement of the chastened soul beyond the world of punishment and reward to an experience of eternity in the present moment.'⁵ Lest it be thought that this only applies to human spirits and there might remain a place for the material non-human creation, Martin Israel makes it clear that the end (*telos*) of creation as a whole is spiritual rather than material:

...the emergent creation of the universe that will find its summation when everything is lifted up to its creator, resurrected from the thralldom of matter to the liberty of pure spirit, as the body of Christ changed from the inertia of dead matter to the vibrancy of transformed spirit.⁶

From time to time in his discussions of matter and spirit, Israel is unable to avoid the characteristic gnostic distaste of matter. As the above quotations suggest, matter is dead; it is the cause of our slavery. Elsewhere he slips into describing it as 'stinking and corrupt'.⁷

His overall vision of the world bears a striking resemblance to the world pictures of platonizing gnosticism. There is a classical *egressus-regressus* pattern to his cosmology. In the beginning there was a fall from unconscious and undifferentiated identity with the Godhead into conscious separateness. As a result of this fall, the human spirit is now 'imprisoned' in a finite creation. Space and time are seen as the prison bars rather than the essential form of God's good creation.⁸

Finite material creation is a place of suffering and purgation. Existence in this prison prepares the soul for an ultimate return to spiritual unity with the divine. This is not the real world but a fleeting shadow:

the world of separation, of multiplicity, of perpetual change, is not the final world. Beyond it, yet supporting it, is the realm of ultimate reality whose nature is divine, whose Name is unspoken but which is identified with the Godhead. Its experience is nirvanic; its end is the deification of all things, their assumption into God.⁹

At times our present state of existence as separate individuals is presented as illusory.¹⁰ As suggested above, matter is finally transcended in a spiritual communion with God.¹¹ This end is, in a sense, a return to the beginning since he views the psychic aspect of creation as an eternal emanation from God:

The soul substance of creation, eternally begotten of the Spirit of God, is universally differentiated into those portions of consciousness that we call human beings – and doubtless other equally sentient beings elsewhere in the universe, including the indeterminate psychic realms.¹²

5 M. Israel, *Gethsemane: The Transfiguring Love*, Fount, London 1987, p 48.

6 M. Israel, *Creation: The Consummation of the World*, Fount, London 1989, p 83.

7 M. Israel, *Smouldering Fire: The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Hodders, London 1978, p 27.

8 Israel, *Smouldering Fire*, p 11.

9 M. Israel, *The Pain That Heals: The Place of Suffering in the Growth of the Person*, Hodders, London 1981, p 51.

10 Israel, *Transfiguring Love*, p 30.

11 Israel, *Creation*, p 139.

12 Israel, *Pain*, p 40.

His emphasis on unity at the expense of diversity extends to the Godhead itself. Not content with an orthodox trinitarian understanding of God, he reinterprets the doctrine of the Trinity in modalistic terms as little more than a visual aid for the one God beyond God:

the God of rational theology... shows Himself to man as person to person, whose divine essences are known to Christians as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Godhead the Holy Trinity finds its eternal generation, and 'at the last day' even the Son will be made subordinate to God who made all things subject to Him, and thus God will be all in all... The Trinity itself will be subsumed in the unity of the Godhead, and the creation story will have ended in the deification (the raising to the divine nature) of all things.¹³

Saving knowledge

Gnostics do not look to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather from the ignorance of which sin is a consequence. At the heart of our slavery to matter is ignorance of our true condition and of the underlying spiritual realities. This is dispelled only 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 coming of this saving knowledge should not be understood in a coldly rationalistic way. It is not merely the impartation of some interesting information but a moment of enlightenment, the eruption into consciousness of a spiritual vision of the cosmos.

Similarly for Israel, it is knowledge rather than any act of God that is central to salvation. And, like the gnostics before him, Israel understands this saving knowledge not merely as a body of doctrine accessible to the intellect but as a spiritual insight transcending both reason and intuition:

the person attaining sanctity has to dispense even with his intuitive knowledge as part of his journey to the ultimate light, a light that is more like darkness to most of us. But, in fact, it is the darkness that one experiences when one gazes directly into a source of intense illumination.¹⁴

Israel's preferred metaphors for this saving knowledge are connected with vision and light. This is in keeping with gnostic traditions. It is also characteristic of the modern world with its philosophical birth in the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) of the eighteenth century. However, as Jacques Ellul has pointed out, this emphasis on vision and insight contrasts sharply with an important Judaeo-Christian emphasis instead on hearing and obedience.¹⁵

The emphasis on the salvific import of spiritual insight inevitably affects Israel's understanding of the work of Christ. His suffering (primarily at Gethsemane rather than on the cross) is seen as a demonstration of divine love rather than an act that effects victory over sin and death. Thus Israel portrays Christ as 'the perpetual

13 Israel, *Pain*, p 73f.

14 Israel, *Gethsemane*, p 46f.

15 J. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1985.

victim of the world's neglect and cruelty'.¹⁶ His continuing suffering is an ever present witness to the unconditional love of God. Christ's suffering does not so much overcome sin as illuminate its darkness. Thanks to the cross we can now see sin in a new light – 'It is transfigured into something of the nature of eternal service.'¹⁷ It follows that the spiritual birth of Christ in the soul – the transformative illumination that allows the soul to become spirit – is more important than the incarnation.¹⁸

A related theme is Israel's Pelagianism. Again, like the classical gnostics, Israel insists that the individual soul has a substantial role to play in its own salvation. Gnosis must be appropriated. The individual must work to loosen the ties that bind the soul to matter. Thus Israel stresses the incompleteness of Christ's work. For example,

we... have been acquainted with the supreme advent and the work of redemption He achieved by the power of love. But Jesus did not complete the healing work; indeed he is with us in travail until we, and also the whole created universe, partake fully of the divine nature in which we were created. This participation in divinity can never be applied from above; it has to be sought diligently from the heart of creation, whose spokesman in our world is the human conscience working in close communion with God.¹⁹

Israel insists that we have a crucial place in bringing Christ's work to fulfilment. More generally he takes a synergistic view of the relationship between God and humanity, suggesting that

God waits patiently for the creature to fulfil its own destiny of perfection, and he will never fail to respond with help once this is requested. As we have already noted, divine assistance strengthens the faculties of the mind, so that we, in cooperation with the Creator, can solve our personal problems and serve the whole creation in selfless devotion.²⁰

Israel's emphasis on the human role in redemption leads him to suggest that our own suffering may be redemptive. Of course, it must be interpreted in the same subjective way as he interprets the redemptive nature of Christ's suffering. This allows him to rationalise the massacre of the Holy Innocents – their innocent suffering sheds light on the darkness of the world in much the same way as Christ's own suffering.²¹

In several places Israel represents the process of salvation in terms of our access to the Spirit of God. This is immanent in creation, infusing all creation as a kind of *élan vital* and potentially accessible to all of us:

it would seem that, in the natural man, the Holy Spirit infuses the personality as an unrecognised host, and that the power of life he bestows is dulled and distorted by the adverse current of psychic elements in that personality. Thus the life that the Spirit bestows is crippled, wasted, and made awry by the destructive forces of the psyche. Its power is used selfishly, and its effect is

16 Israel, *Gethsemane*, p 97.

17 Israel, *Gethsemane*, p 91.

18 Israel, *Creation*, p 123.

19 Israel, *Pain*, p 38.

20 Israel, *Creation*, p 80.

21 Israel, *Gethsemane*, p 39.

impure and adverse. Yet without the power of God man would not be able to act even perversely. It is good to realise that all action, no matter how destructive it may appear, is ultimately under the creative Word of God and subject to his control.²²

He/it (Israel is ambiguous about the personhood of the Spirit) is awoken by our response to the illumination described above. This gives us access to the power of the Spirit to the extent of possible misuse: 'the inspiration of the Holy Spirit does not, in itself, guarantee that His power will be used profitably by the person on whom the Spirit descends. It can as easily be used unwisely and selfishly.'²³

Focus on self

A corollary of the gnostic's suspicion of the world is a neglect of the communal dimension of spirituality. Gnosis must be appropriated individually. The gnostic way is a solitary path to unity with the divine. Furthermore, since our most immediate contact with the divine is through the divine spark within, the gnostic way encourages an emigration inwards – a detachment from the world and the entanglement of relationships and a corresponding emphasis on inwardness.

This aspect of gnostic thought has become a major feature of contemporary culture. While the individualism of our culture may have arisen independently of the gnostic elements within western philosophical traditions, the same cannot be said of emphasis on self-fulfilment found in contemporary psychoanalysis. Carl Jung's indebtedness to medieval gnostic writers and the *völkisch* solar mysticism of German Romanticism is well-documented²⁴ and, through his mediation, gnostic themes have become a commonplace of our culture's burgeoning therapy industry.

Again this is reflected in Israel's work. He is typical of a large cross-section of contemporary spiritual writers who see in Jung and his followers a way of making traditional forms of spirituality relevant to contemporary men and women.

One striking way in which this emphasis on the self appears in Israel's work is the importance he places upon private revelations. As I noted above, the gnostic way involves the personal appropriation of spiritual insights. A good example in Israel is the basis for his belief in reincarnation. In his own words,

I have little doubt that many souls do reincarnate, not as a punishment but as an opportunity for growth and service. I was 'told' once by a source of infinite intelligence that there are things we can do here that are not nearly so easily performed elsewhere. This revelation came after a period of rapt prayer.²⁵

Later in the same article he urges the reader to use his or her own discernment regarding such statements. The point is that the ultimate arbiter of spiritual truths is personal discernment illuminated by private gnosis. This may work at an individual level but is problematic if we try to maintain that spirituality has a necessary communal and social dimension.

22 Israel, *Smouldering Fire*, p 17.

23 Israel, *Smouldering Fire*, p 38.

24 see e.g. R. Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Fontana, London 1996.

25 M. Israel, 'Faith, Reason and the First Last Thing', review of *A Necessary End: Attitudes to Death* edited by Julia Neuberger and John White, *The Tablet*, 29 Feb. 1992, p 281.

Spiritual elitism

Gnosticism is unashamedly elitist. The illuminating power of gnosis is not for everyone. The conventional gnostic wisdom is that only a small elite group of human beings is spiritual (pneumatic) and thus ready for the liberating effect of gnosis. Most humans are earthbound and materialistic (hylic), recognizing only the physical reality. Others live largely in their psyche (psychics). The latter group usually confuse the Demiurge for the true God and have little or no awareness of the spiritual world beyond matter and mind. Not surprisingly, gnostics would put most Jews and Christians in the psychic category.

It is possible to discern a very similar spiritual hierarchy in Martin Israel's writings. He consistently addresses his remarks to the spiritually discerning. Indeed one wonders whether his popularity as a retreat director is not in part due to this ability to create a sense that one is part of an inner circle. Dismissive remarks scattered throughout his works reinforce this sense that we, the readers, are part of a spiritually discerning elite by creating a body of people who do not qualify. Israel's 'others' include puritans, charismatics (especially those who engage in a different style of healing ministry from his own), theosophists and other esotericists (whom he perceives as trapped at a psychic level of operations). To complete the parallel with gnostic elitism, Israel too has a third category – those whom he castigates as 'of poor spiritual stature', men and women who are entirely dominated by matter and emotion.

Israel's hierarchical view of humanity appears most explicitly in a remarkable digression in a review article published in *The Tablet* in 1992. Having dealt with the book under review in the first third of his article, he devotes the rest to his own speculations on death. We are assured that materialistic men and women will, once deprived of their bodies, create their own hell – a result of the collective terror resulting from their loss of a physical locus for self-identification. Those who are more spiritually advanced find themselves in a state akin to purgatory. In this intermediate state, exposure to radiant love gradually burns away the rags of egoism until they are ready to join the most advanced as servants of God.

An interesting feature of Israel's view which mitigates this elitism to some extent is his spiritualisation of the virtue of *noblesse oblige*. Unlike some of the more extreme early Christian gnostics (who saw no hope of salvation for the *hyloi*), Israel understands his spiritual elite to have a duty towards those less advanced than themselves. Indeed he asserts that members of this elite may be reborn on this or other planets precisely to aid the spiritual evolution of those less advanced than themselves.

Syncretism

A final feature widely associated with gnostic systems of thought is syncretism: their capacity to appropriate ideas, concepts and practices from surrounding cultures and religions for their own purposes. There is, of course, a sense in which Christianity itself is the ultimate syncretistic faith. One of the great strengths of Christianity as a missionary faith is precisely its capacity to translate its central

message into local languages and cultural forms. Thus, in addressing this feature, one must focus not on the mere fact of syncretistic borrowing but on its purpose.

In the case of Christian mission, the purpose of such borrowing is clear: it serves to clarify and commend the good news of Jesus Christ. Its function is to reinforce a historically particular message. However, as Lee points out,

Gnostic syncretism, on the other hand, believes everything in general for the purpose of avoiding a belief in something in particular. In the case of Christian gnosticism, what is being avoided is the particularity of the Gospel, that which is a 'stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.'²⁶

Like Christian syncretism, gnostic syncretism is purposeful. However, its purpose is to break free from the shackles of matter, energy, space and time by a deliberate weakening of our dependence upon particularities. The cross of orthodox Christianity is scandalous precisely because it is particular. A precondition for the coexistence of gnosticism and Christianity is a weakening of the historical basis of the Christian faith. Again, as Lee points out,

Gnostic faith can exist within Christianity, indeed can thrive within Christianity, so long as the Incarnation is accepted as only one image among many. Through purposeful syncretism the one image becomes diffused, a mere element in the gnostic mix. In this sense, gnostic syncretism involves not only an acceptance of many beliefs and practices, but a denial of the particular belief and the particular practice that make Christianity, Christianity. Many ideas, all lacking in subordination, aid and abet the gnostic cause; particularity, a single focus, represents a threat to the gnostic thought pattern.²⁷

Just such a tendency is clearly visible in Israel's writings. As I have already pointed out, his emphasis on our appropriation of saving knowledge draws attention away from the atoning work of Christ and even from the incarnation itself. This loss of focus is compounded by his revision of Christian cosmology in the light of neoplatonic, kabbalistic and hermetic concepts and myths. The outcome is a vision of cosmic spiritual evolution more akin to those of contemporary esoteric spiritualities than that of orthodox Christianity.

The challenge of gnosticism

The identification of gnosticism within contemporary Christianity is not merely an interesting academic exercise. Many theologians have pointed out that there is an intimate relationship between theology and practice. Admittedly the relationship is by no means straightforward. It would be extremely naive to assume that adherence to orthodox Christian theology guaranteed the practice of a community (its worship, ecclesiastical structures and ethical stance) to be satisfactory. On the other hand, there are numerous examples of departures from orthodox Christian theology leading to dramatic changes in practice. Similarly there are many examples of churches changing their theological stance in order to legitimate

26 Lee, *Protestant Gnostics*, p 80.

27 Lee, *Protestant Gnostics*, p 177.

certain practices. Perhaps the most striking example from the twentieth century is the German Christian accommodation to Nazi ideology. A more recent example might be the adoption of creation spirituality by the Nine O'Clock Service in Sheffield. With the benefit of hindsight, the rapid transition from a broadly evangelical theology to what is essentially a neopagan fertility theology dressed up in Christian terminology may be interpreted as the search for a spirituality capable of justifying the sexual experimentation that was taking place.²⁸ Since it represents a similarly radical departure from orthodox Christianity, we may expect Christian gnosticism to be associated with corresponding changes in Christian practice.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion of the gnostic world view that a Christian gnosticism poses a serious challenge to Christian faith and practice at a number of points. The goodness of creation is called into question with spirit being emphasised at the expense of matter. Instead of relying upon God's grace, the Christian gnostic practices a religion of self-help, seeking saving knowledge that is as likely to come through some private revelation as from Scripture and tradition. Above all, it reinforces the individualism that has been all too common in Christian churches since the Enlightenment.

Gnostic individualism provides a spiritual legitimation for cultural individualism. By contrast, orthodox Christianity is a communal faith. There is no salvation outside the church – there is no salvation apart from the network of personal relationships without which one cannot be said to be fully human. Israel's individualism simply ignores this essential communal dimension and the credence he gives to private revelations undermines the role of Scripture and tradition in shaping our communal spirituality.

Gnostic individualism also has implications for Christian social concern. A recurring suspicion among critics of gnostic spirituality is that its emphasis on detachment from this world must inevitably undermine social concern. For example, in his study of contemporary gnosticism, Carl Raschke suggests that 'when the search [for eternity] becomes an obsession, when it centres on the eternity of escape, then it begins to gnaw at the corporate bonds and institutions of human society. In the endeavour to stop time, man runs the risk of undercutting his relations with others; indeed, he threatens to stab to death his very humanity'.²⁹

Israel clearly does not want to go down this road – as witness his views on the function of reincarnation. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a spiritualising of social concern in his writings. Thus, he regards relief work and concern for the material welfare of other human beings as rather superficial:

28 L. H. Osborn, 'A Fox Hunter's Guide to Creation Spirituality' in *Different Gospels: Christian Orthodoxy and Modern Theologies*, Andrew Walker, ed., SPCK, London 1993, pp 155-72.

29 C. Raschke, *The Interruption of Eternity: Modern Gnosticism and the Origins of the New Religious Consciousness*, Nelson-Hall, Chicago 1980, p 21f.

Many agencies that work to overcome the suffering of the world look to outer sources of relief, such as economic assistance or health projects. Necessary as these are, they merely scratch the surface of the problem. The cause lies deep in the soul of humanity; the outer discord is merely a symptom of a deep inner disease process, the failure to face reality and the tendency to worship idols.³⁰

This is not just about one unorthodox Anglican retreat director. I have concentrated upon Martin Israel because the major gnostic themes are particularly clear in his writings. However, similar themes may be identified in a wide range of contemporary Christian and non-Christian spiritualities. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, Christian theology finds itself facing a challenge remarkably similar to the religious and spiritual challenge of the second century.

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30 Israel, *Pain*, p 20.