ÉTUDE

A DYNAMIC TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF 'POST-GNOSTIC' GNOSTICISM.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The field of religious studies has always been troubled by the fact that certain key terms appear to be as impossible to define as they are impossible to avoid. 'Gnosticism' is a particularly notorious example of such a term. Some decades ago, H.J.Schoeps complained that 'most authors work... with such unclear concepts, that their polemics become sham-fights, because everybody appears to mean something else by gnostis' (1). It can hardly be said that this situation has since changed for the better. The vagueness and ambiguity of the term 'gnosticism', already problematic in dealing with the relatively
limited period of late antiquity, is downright disastrous when the term is applied to more recent esoteric movements, including contemporary currents in the sphere of the New Age movement (2), or even to modern culture as a whole (3). This is a problem that cannot be solved pragmatically, by using the term 'gnosticism' as a mere container concept for a certain historical group of movements, as this still leaves the question unanswered what exactly justifies treating those movements as similar in the first place. We can only answer the question by making such a similarity explicit, and in order to do this we need to define what we mean when we call something 'gnostic'.

In this article I intend to address this problem of 'gnosticism', especially in view of its relevance for the study of what I propose to call 'post-gnostic' movements (i.e., movements that emerged after the late antique period). This will lead to a proposal, offered in the spirit of experiment, for a possible solution.

1.1. The problem

Addressing the problem of 'post-gnostic gnosticism' is not an exercise of merely philosophical interest. Its relevance becomes clear as soon as we realize how the term 'gnosticism' can in fact be used in order to make far-reaching claims about religious and cultural history. As my point of departure I will take one strong example of such an application. In 1988, the well known gnostic specialist G. Quispel edited a Dutch symposium titled *Gnosis - The Third Component of the European Cultural Tradition* (4). This title contains the basic claims of the book in a nutshell. These claims can be analyzed as follows: 1. Attention is asked for a great number of 'western esoteric' religious, spiritual and philosophical movements, the importance of which in western cultural history tends to be underestimated. 2. It is claimed that these movements etc. should be regarded as a more or less coherent whole. 3. This tradition or component is called 'gnosis'. 4. It is claimed that this 'gnosis' should be regarded as nothing less than one of the three basic components to which the dynamics of western culture can essentially be reduced, the two others being 'reason' and 'faith' (i.e. philosophical rationalism/science and institutionalized Christianity).

The first element does not really need justification. The study of western esotericism still remains a relatively neglected area of research in religious studies, and Quispel is right in emphasizing the need of more serious scholarly attention for this subject. However, can we (passing on to the second element) speak of 'esotericism' as a coherent whole? Here the crucial question is what exactly Quispel has in mind when he speaks of gnosis as a 'com-
ponent'. Is he referring to a tradition based on historical succession, or to a structural similarity along phenomenological lines, or to a shared affinity or mentality? Here some theoretical foundation is clearly indispensable. As regards the third element: we already stated that the exact meaning of the terms 'gnosis' and 'gnosticism' has always been, and still is, a matter of much debate. The apparent difficulties of finding a tenable definition have in practice given rise to a proliferation of applications, which have almost robbed the word of any clear sense at all. As long as this is the case, any thesis about a 'gnostical tradition' is clearly left suspended in mid-air. The fourth element, finally, is clearly the most ambitious one. Can general distinctions like these have any exact meaning at all, apart from purely intuitive and impressionist, and correspondingly imprecise ones? How does a typological abstraction like this deal with the differentiation and variety found in historical reality? Briefly: what do Quispel cum suis mean exactly by 'reason', 'faith' and 'gnosis'?

These are the kinds of questions that have to be addressed in order to make any theory about a 'gnostic tradition' fit for scholarly ends. Quispel's symposium was mentioned only as one example among many, of such a theory. Here, we have taken it as a starting-point, but we will not be concerned with elucidating, criticizing or defending Quispel's thesis specifically. Our object is to find out whether, and if so, in which way, these kinds of claims about gnosticism in general can be rationally defended.

2. A DYNAMIC TYPOLOGY OF GNOSIS

An analysis of the ways in which gnosis or gnosticism is in fact defined (explicitly), or used (implicitly), in the relevant secondary literature leads to the conclusion that two basic positions can be discerned in the scholarly approach to gnosis or gnosticism (5).

The first position, of which Hans Jonas is a typical example, regards gnosis as a movement which is primarily characterized by a certain speculative world view (expressed in mythology and metaphysical speculation), in which dualism plays a decisive part. In principle, it is possible to uphold such a world view without any appeal to gnosis in its literal sense of revelational 'knowledge' (the best example is Marcionism). Gnosis is therefore basically regarded as a contingent element within gnosticism. Important, and indeed essential though the gnostics themselves may have found it, it is deemed superfluous for the scholarly definition of gnosticism. Indeed the representatives of this first position tend to pay relatively little attention to the nature of the gnostic 'knowledge', and one even suspects that scholars like Jonas personally feel a bit embarrassed by its elusive character.
The second position, of which Quispel is a good example, emphasizes gnos-
sis as a constitutive, and therefore essential, characteristic of what is to be
called 'gnostic'. According to this view the gnostic speculative world view(s)
should be interpreted against the background of its legitimation by this
'knowledge', and of the epistemology which is implied in it. It is considered
impossible fully to understand gnostic thought without taking account of the
basic 'knowledge' from which it proceeds. A corollary of this approach is
that dualism is no longer logically essential for gnosticism: people can very
well appeal to gnosia without drawing dualistic conclusions. Hermeticism, of
course, is a case in point.

So, although these two approaches start with what may seem to be a mere
difference in emphasis in interpreting the gnostic material, they end up with
strongly different circumscriptions of what constitutes their subject matter.
Contrasted to each other this way, the second position looks stronger, but
also more difficult. Clearly, it is more complete. It does not fundamentally
contest the relative right of the first approach, but it emphasizes an extra
element which was obviously of central importance to the gnostics themsel-
ves, and which seems to be neglected by many modern scholars for no better
reason than that they are puzzled by it. Therefore, if it can be made clear
exactly in which way(s) the gnostic 'knowledge' relates to gnostic specula-
tion, dualistic or otherwise, nothing will be lost, but much will be gained. It
is this second approach that usually lies at the basis of constructs of 'post-
gnostic' gnosticism.

I will now proceed to give the outlines of a 'dynamic typology' of gnosti-
cism, based on this second approach. In attempting to clarify the central
issues which make gnosticism such a confusing and elusive phenomenon, I
will rely to some extent on the tools of philosophical conceptual analysis (6).
The typology that will result from these analyses consists of two distinct
parts: first, it will be claimed that a general typological distinction can indeed
be made between reason, faith and gnosia (although this approach may be
rather different from what Quispel had in mind), and second, a more detailed
typology will be developed for the inner dynamic of gnosia. It is essential to
emphasize beforehand that the distinctions which constitute both parts of
this typology should consistently be taken as ideal types, i.e. they do not
coincide with historical movements, but are meant to serve as a heuristic tool
in order to discern certain structures in a historical reality that defies neat
compartmentalization. Equally important, the typology is 'dynamic' in cha-
acter. This idea of a 'dynamic typology' derives from Paul Tillich, but was
not further elaborated by him. In Tillich's words

'types are not necessarily static; there are tensions in every type which
drive it beyond itself. Dialectical thought has discovered this and has shown
the immense fertility of the dialectical description of tensions in seemingly
static structures. The kind of dialectics which, I believe, is most adequate to typological enquiries is the description of contrasting poles within one structure. A polar relation is a relation of interdependent elements, each of which is necessary for the other one and for the whole, although it is in tension with the opposite element.’ (7)

I believe that in this way a reductionist approach, which would fail to do justice to the complexity of reality, can be avoided.

The typology will not primarily refer to the level of the 'history of ideas', but to the level of individual or collective religious experience which successively gives rise to those ideas. We start from the position that religious ideas can only be adequately understood against the background of religious experience; the typology will therefore have to demonstrate how certain kinds of experience give rise to particular ideological structures (8). This means that a rigid conceptual analysis of ideas will have to be combined with an attitude of Verstehen, in an attempt to arrive at an understanding of the experiential meaning of these ideas for those who express them.

2.1. Reason – Faith – Gnosis

We start with some general observations about the nature of 'views of life' in general.

To the extent that everybody, in order to be able to lead a normal life, is bound implicitly or explicitly to consider certain things as true and others as untrue, everybody can be said to have a 'view of life', at least in a rudimentary sense. The truth-claims which are implicit in such a view of life however do not have meaning 'in themselves'; meaning depends on some particular 'language game' which provides a context in which statements can be made and interpreted. In every language game there are certain questions which can meaningfully be asked, while others are meaningless (for instance: the question 'Is Jesus Christ the son of God?' can only be meaningfully asked within a language game which presupposes the existence of God). As regards the truth (in contrast to the meaning) of statements we should distinguish between internal and external questions. Internal questions are asked and answered within the limits of a particular language game; external questions bear on the truth or untruth of a language game as such, and of the kind of reality to which it relates. However, to answer such an external question, one would of necessity need some sort of 'meta'-language game, equally acceptable for all language games that have to be discussed in its context. Such a 'real reality language', which would provide a universally acceptable platform for deciding on the truth or untruth of any view of life, cannot exist (9). In relation to views of life, this means that there is no way to externally answer the question of their truth or falsity. Such questions can only be
answered internally, i.e. within the framework of some particular view of life with its attendant language game. Any view of life thus necessarily includes some basic axiomatic truth(s), the credibility of which cannot be the subject of discussion within the same language game (for instance: one cannot question the existence of God within a language game which presupposes God's existence).

Now, because every view of life necessarily claims that some things are true and others are not, we can, as a matter of principle, always ask the question what these basic, axiomatic truth-claims are founded on. The answers may of course be extremely divergent (for instance some particular holy scripture, tradition, human reason, the evidence of the senses, some authority figure or guru, etc.). However, when we ask what kind of truth is involved in these 'sources of knowledge', we find that we can reduce the possibilities to no more than three. I propose to call these 'reason', 'faith' and 'gnosis'. These terms are meant in a purely technical sense as indicating ideal types. Associations with common meanings of the terms (such as 'faith' = 'Christian faith'), natural though they may be, are not intended here. For our present purposes the three can be logically distinguished as follows:

**Reason.** According to this, truth - if attainable at all - can only be discovered by making use of the human rational faculties, whether or not in combination with the evidence of the senses. In principle, knowledge based on reason is accessible to all human beings, and its findings can be expressed in discursive language, which makes mutual communication, and therefore discussion possible.

**Faith.** According to this, human reason does not in itself have the power to discover the basic truths about existence. The ultimate truth must be revealed to man from some transcendental sphere. This revelation can be found in traditional stories, dogmas or creeds, the pronouncements of authoritative figures, holy scriptures, etc. The common characteristic is that one has to believe (or 'have faith') in the authority of these as means of revelation.

**Gnosis.** According to this, truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or 'enlightenment'. Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of reason or faith, it is in principle not generally accessible. This 'inner knowing' cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of faith (in the above sense) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience.

It should be noted that, in accordance with the preceding discussion, no claim is involved either here or in what follows about the credibility of any of these three kinds of 'knowledge'. It is only stated that people can refer to such kinds of knowledge in legitimating their view of life; whether they are right to do so or not cannot be answered objectively (i.e., externally), but
only from the premises of some other kind of accepted knowledge, the credibility of which can equally well be questioned (i.e., internally).

In the rest of the article we will be concerned with the third kind of knowledge, i.e. *gnosis*.

### 2.2. The latent gnostic disposition

Although we have thus defined *gnosis* as a view of life founded on the appeal to some sort of 'inner knowledge', it is not yet clear what it is that may induce certain people to give priority to this kind of knowledge rather than to 'reason' or 'faith'. This brings us to what we might call the mental 'structure of preference' or 'disposition' of the gnostic. What we have in mind is what A.E. Lovejoy, in his classic *The Great Chain of Being* (10), refers to as 'implicit or incompletely explicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation', and which should be regarded as of fundamental significance for the study of the history of ideas.

'It is the beliefs which are so much a matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, the ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness, that often are most decisive of the character of a philosopher's doctrine, and still oftener of the dominant intellectual tendencies of an age. These implicit factors may be of various sorts. One sort is a disposition to think in terms of certain categories or of particular types of imagery.'

The same goes for the individual person. It is possible to discern a certain personal mental 'structure of preferences' or disposition, of the kind referred to by Lovejoy, which makes certain people feel attracted intuitively to certain ideas, while others are repulsive or simply unappealing to them. Thus it is possible, at least to some extent, to describe the particular mental disposition which makes people receptive to a gnostic view of life. It is essential to stress that this disposition *by itself* should be regarded as only *latently* or implicitly gnostic. It does not in itself make someone into a gnostic, although it greatly increases the chance that he will become one.

I propose the following four elements as constitutive for the 'gnostic disposition':

1. The very general existential feeling (or: awareness, intuition, even conviction) that there is 'more' to existence than meets the eye. The alternative view that normal, finite, empirical existence is all there is to reality is not experienced as self-evident, but as unnatural. Note that this feeling precedes
any concrete theorizing, metaphysical or otherwise, and is therefore not fundamentally affected by any falsification of such theories. Its intensity can range from extremely ecstatic experiences to a unemphatic 'basic trust' in existence.

This 'natural religious' feeling can take two alternative forms (which, in the context of a dynamic typology should be regarded as dialectical polar opposites). a. The 'more' real dimension - briefly: the 'more' - may be experienced as being already present here and now. b. It may be experienced as something yet to be achieved.

2. A more or less strongly developed fascination with the depths of the human mind, which is experienced as a numinous mystery.

3. A feeling that the ultimate purpose of human existence must lie in some kind of 'self-realization'. One experiences oneself as an 'unfinished animal' whose final goal must consist in 'becoming what you are'.

4. A fundamentally holistic basic feeling, which in some way or another is directed at 'restoration of (lost) wholeness'. Here as in the three preceding elements, no explicit theorizing is involved about the exact nature of 'wholeness': there is just a basic feeling that one should strive towards 'wholeness'. Questions like 'what kind of wholeness, and why' are secondary to the awareness itself. Parallel to the first element, the feeling may take two forms which are in dialectical opposition: a. 'Wholeness' is what really exists; fragmentation is therefore fundamentally a delusion of the mind. b. Some original state of wholeness has been broken, and should be restored again.

The four elements are evidently interconnected in many ways: for instance 'self-realization' [3] can be considered to consist in developing one's inner potential [2], which finally leads to a complete awareness of absolute reality [1], or to the disappearance of fragmentation and attainment of the wholeness which had been lost [4]. The fourth element in particular seems more or less to synthesize the three others. Later we will find that this striving for 'restoration of lost wholeness' may be regarded as the characteristic of gnosticism par excellence.

An analysis of the relationship between these four elements and our ideal types of reason, faith and gnosis respectively would show that while this 'latent gnostic disposition' is indeed naturally connected to gnosis, it is far more difficult to reconcile it with the dynamics of either reason or faith (11).

The question now arises: exactly how should the relation between a latent/implicit gnostic disposition, and an explicit gnostic view of life be understood? If, as we stated earlier, everybody necessarily has a view of life, is it still possible to make a distinction between implicit and explicit strands in it?

In order to answer this important point, let us take a look at a fragment of
literature with evident gnostic overtones. The Dutch poet Adriaan Roland Holst once wrote a piece of prose (De Afspraak) which has been quoted by Quispel as a contemporary parallel to Mani's account of his meeting with his 'other self' (12). I propose to take a further look at the fragment, in order to illustrate how people may express 'latent gnostic' thoughts and sentiments without necessarily being gnostics in the full sense of the word.

Roland Holst relates how, as a child, he had met a mysterious stranger, who had entered his room at night. Many years later, while sitting on the beach in the evening, he is overwhelmed by emotions at the sudden realization that this stranger had been his own 'other self', his spiritual twin soul, from whom he has been separated but with whom he will one day be reunited in an other reality.

'O, my greater, stronger image on the other side of light and wind, prematurely my equal, from that glimmering coast, to which the indomitable ones have taken refuge singing, when the dejected ones came here, you, who, even here, waiting until I will be able to go back again, can live the life that I can only dream, can live it, you, who do not want to leave me to the unwinged ones, how near to me had you drawn there, that evening. Then it was no longer just your face; where I sat huddled and sobbing, you stood behind me, and on my quivering back you lay your strong hand. How could you stand my remaining here? Was it not the edge of the world there, and what would time have been on that edge against a moment of your will? For you know that I can do nothing here but keep going the murmuring of homesickness; what then did induce you to let go of me and leave me again? (...) There are strange, quiet places here in the dunes, which it seems you have only just left, when I arrive there. It is as though you are still walking around somewhere near. Then I stand, quiet and thoughtful, where nearby above me cloud and edge of dune are as they were before the world was, and I feel how one day homesickness and desire will turn out always to have been the same. Then, somewhere inside my eyes, the long-desired will have left the world, of itself and for good, for wasn’t it the world, and the world only, that kept them apart and unfulfilled. And won’t that be the restoration of that clearer state of living, where we are one another again, like before I was born here; re-united, beyond the rustling secrets of fire and water again, with the indomitable ones in the deep glittering of an aftermath, almost eternal?' (13)

On closer scrutiny, the desire for 'restoration of lost wholeness' [4] turns out to provide the basic structure without which the text would fall apart. 'Unity' is thought of as a reunion with the 'other self' in another, 'clearer state of living' [1]. This restoration is not described in eschatological terms, but as somehow happening internally, 'somewhere inside my eyes'. The dis-
tinction between dream and 'real life' seems to be rather unimportant for Roland Holst (14). The restoration happens in an otherworldly reality; the poet can only dream this reality, but his other self lives in this 'dream'. Apparently Roland Holst is speaking about the 'world of the spirit', which seems to be in a sense more 'real', and in any case more important to him than the normal world of everyday life. This is evidently a variation on the 'depths of the human mind'-element [2]. Although the element of self-realization [3], finally, may not seem to be conspicuous in the fragment, it is there nevertheless. Roland Holst feels he belongs among the 'indomitable ones', and not among the 'unwinged ones' among whom he lives. This means that something deep inside him evidently longs to return to its origin. Roland Holst already is the one he will eventually become. Only he does not seem to think there is need for a process of gradual 'development' in order to 'return'; 'one moment of your will' would suffice.

Although the four elements thus turn out to be essential to Roland Holst's fragment, they are so unemphatically present that it is almost certain that they were not consciously incorporated. Roland Holst seems to have used them quite spontaneously, without any purpose (or indeed without being conscious) of expressing anything 'gnostic' (15).

Nevertheless, one might conclude that Roland Holst has a gnostic view of life. I would suggest, rather, that his work is a typical example of an only latent (or implicit) gnosticism. In order to distinguish between latent and actual gnosticism, the fundamental question is: what kind of reality (what ontological status) is accorded to 'gnostic' imagery by the person who uses it?

In the case of Roland Holst, the author seems not at all interested in the question of the 'reality' (subjective or objective) of his images. He just gives voice to the longings of his soul. In doing this he more or less spontaneously uses a kind of imagery which on closer scrutiny appears to reveal a 'gnostic' physiognomy, but he evidently does not mean to express any considered opinion, let alone a doctrine, on the nature of the world, of man or of God. Although his experiences as described in the text may be very important to him, he is not interested in any systematic questions about the wider implications his imagery might have. He describes images, not ideas. This makes him a latent (implicit) gnostic.

However, as soon as he would start to ask himself systematic questions about the implications his imagery has for the nature of the world in which he lives, and for his own place in it, he would move in the direction of explicit gnosticism, i.e. of a gnostic view of life. Both a 'latent' and an actual gnostic are expressing some kind of basic personal experience, the character of which can be approximately circumscribed by the four elements of the 'latent gnostic disposition'. The fundamental difference between the two is, that the latter accords to this experience the status of knowledge, while the former does
not feel the need to do so. Now, when the basic experience is indeed regarded as 'knowledge', two possibilities arise, which should be seen as fundamental polar opposites in our dynamic typology. I will call them artistic and occultistic gnosis.

- The artistic gnostic consistently bases himself on gnosis, which is an essentially non-rational experience. By according to this experience the status of 'knowledge', he tries to make it the foundation of an intellectually satisfying, internally coherent view of life. It is this specific combination of visionary intuition and a systematic intellect, which I suggest should be regarded as the mark of the typical artistic gnostic. Fascinating and of absolutely crucial importance for the understanding of gnosticism is that the rationality of this artistic gnostical speculation is inversely proportional to its intellectual consistency (16). The gnostic can only be intellectually consistent by fully acknowledging the non-rational character of his basic 'knowledge', and indeed of the complete metaphysical speculation which proceeds from it. As soon as he allows rational knowledge to play a fundamental part in his view of life, its intellectual credibility collapses. This means that the imagery he uses should not be interpreted rationally as describing some reality existing in space and time, but metaphorically as referring to some less tangible 'truth' about existence.

- Occultistic gnosis must be contrasted to this artistic gnosis, as fundamentally arising from the failure to recognize the intellectual necessity of choosing between 'reason' and 'gnosis'. The occultistic gnostic longs for something 'higher' than normal rationality and believes to have found this in personal experience, but in developing a view of life from this he unwittingly rationalizes the contents of that experience. While for the typical artistic gnostic a concept like, for instance, the 'pleroma' (and indeed any concept) is ultimately only a symbol or metaphor for a spiritual reality which defies rational description, the occultistic gnostic turns it into a sphere of light and bliss which somehow exists in reality and to which he longs to return from the world of matter.

Anticipating my further discussion, I would propose that 'artistic' gnosis be regarded as the central gnostic phenomenon. In relation to it, 'latent gnosis' must be considered 'not yet' gnostic, while 'occultistic' gnosis is 'not anymore' fully gnostic because it is already on its way to rationality. Occultistic gnosis is fundamentally the attempt to build a halfway-house between gnosis and reason.

Again, we should not forget that we are dealing with ideal types. In historical reality we find all kinds of transitional forms between the two theoretical extremes, as well as between gnosis, reason and faith. We could represent the situation by considering the image of a triangle formed by three magnets, representing gnosis, faith and reason. Amidst the magnets small pieces of
metal are situated, which represent separate persons having a view of life. Each piece is a compound of three different metals which correspond to the three magnets, and are attracted by them. In this situation the position of each piece (i.e., the answer to the question how this view of life should be classified) will be defined by the ratio of its three metals. The more one metal dominates, the more the compound will be drawn to the corresponding magnet; however, it will never reach the magnet, due to the opposite pull of the two other metals. In this image, the 'gnostic magnet' appears to be represented by the ideal type of 'artistic' gnosis. The concrete 'gnostic' views of life extend away from this magnet, i.e., in the direction of relatively 'occultistic' variants. This is necessary because of the fact that some minimum of rationalization is necessary for views of life of this nature, in order to survive as a collective property. According to the forms which rationalization takes, and the cultural situation in which it occurs, the resulting view of life may easily turn into some sort of doctrine, in the truth of which one has to 'believe' (17). To the extent that this is the case, the corresponding compound would approach the 'faith' magnet.

Gnosis is thus defined as an 'area' or 'field' of views of life, the inner dynamics of which rest on the polar tension between 'intuitive' personal experience on the one hand and rationality on the other, on the general foundation of a mental substratum which we called 'latent gnosis'.

2.3. The dynamics of gnostis

Within the area thus defined as gnostis, three basic elements can be discerned. The situation may be visualized as follows:
The three elements experience, imagination and transformation are necessarily part of any gnostic view of life; they can be analytically distinguished, but not separated, because (as will be demonstrated) they presuppose each other.

The dialectical polar opposites, which will be the center of attention in our dynamic typological approach, are those lying on a horizontal line: mysticism vs. gnosis within experience, and holistic vs. dualistic within imagination, while transformation has no polarity of its own but is immediately influenced by those of the two other elements. We thus get four possible ideal-typical combinations: experience of the mystical type which can be elaborated either holistically or dualistically, or experience of the gnostic type which also can be elaborated in those two directions. Finally, all these elaborations can be understood either 'artistically' or 'occultistically'. Though the resulting picture is rather complicated, this is nevertheless the only way to do justice to the complexities of our subject, and to the variety of its historical phenomena.

2.3.1. Experience

That gnosis in its original meaning of 'knowledge' indicates a religious experience seems to be incontestable (18). As soon as we, on the basis of the descriptions given by gnostics, try to define this kind of experience more
precisely, we find that it is extremely difficult to make a sharp distinction with mystical experience. Therefore if we wish to develop a clear concept of 'gnosis', we will have to include mystical experience in our discussion. Because far more has been written about the nature of mystical experience than about the nature of gnosis, we will start with the former.

In anything we say about mystical experience, we are dependant on second-hand information, i.e. on the descriptions given by the mystics themselves. In those descriptions one of the most central and constant elements is the emphasis on the fundamental *ineffability* of the experience. If we take this seriously - and I think we have to (19) - we have no option but to accept our inability to say anything definite about the ultimate nature and content of mystical experience. We will have to restrict ourselves to general boundary characteristics, which can do no more than delimit those experiences we choose to call mystical from other experiences. To me, William James's approach to this task still seems to be valid, although I propose some modifications to his conclusion. In *The varieties of religious experience* James gives four characteristics: *Ineffability, Noetic quality, Transiency and Passivity*, calling the last two 'less sharply marked' (20). Indeed I would argue that *Transiency* is not really indispensable for the definition of mystical experience, and can be omitted for reasons of conceptual economy. James's term *passivity* appears to be slightly misleading in relation to how he actually describes it (21); I would suggest that this characteristic could more profitably be regarded as only one aspect of *unconditional inner authority*, which I propose as an alternative (the mystical experience typically carries an unconditional inner authority for the one experiencing it). The list of characteristics thus runs: *Ineffability, Noetic quality, Unconditional inner authority*. Taken together, these three characteristics seem to be sufficient to define the field of what is usually understood by 'mystical experience'.

If this definition of what can be regarded as 'mystical' is accepted, we have no choice but to conclude that *gnosis* is a mystical experience. However, we cannot leave it at that. When we compare the ways in which 'typical' mystics and gnostics describe their basic experience, we cannot help but feel that we are dealing with completely different mentalities, which make the 'worlds' of mysticism and gnosis - in spite of all their resemblances - fundamentally different in atmosphere. The problem of the exact relationship between mysticism and gnosis, which tends to be ignored or evaded in most of the literature about gnosticism, thus appears to be of essential importance for our inquiry.

As a possible solution to the problem, it will be suggested further on that both mysticism and gnosis could be regarded as dialectical polar opposites within one larger class of phenomena, which in itself cannot be reduced to
either of them but is constituted by the tension which results from their opposition within a common structure. This larger 'class of phenomena' can obviously not be called after one of its poles, so we will simply refer to it as experience (cf. the diagram).

Because we only have second-hand access to their experience, we cannot say anything definite about what it is that the gnostics or mystics 'know'. We are under no obligation to accept their own interpretations, for instance that it is 'God' they know. We only know that 'something' happens to them which they cannot describe in words, but which they experience as a 'knowledge' or 'insight' with great, sometimes overwhelming importance for their lives.

However, the experience seems to be of a nature such as to make the possibilities for interpretation fairly restricted (22); the object of experience is invariably claimed to be either 'God', or 'the Self', or both together as a unity (23).

2.3.1.1. "Knowledge of God"

The claim to 'know God' by personal experience is problematical from a philosophical point of view. Everything the mystic/gnostic can know about God before his experience is necessarily mediated by language. So, what does he really do, when after his experience he claims to have encountered God? When the experience is really ineffable, no previous language-mediated information about God can possibly be relevant to it, so we cannot say the mystic/gnostic identifies the experienced reality as God on the basis of preceding information. We have no other option but to conclude, alternatively, that 'God' is only a name which he gives to the experienced reality: he has experienced a reality which is so impressive that he has no choice but to call it 'God'. In this case there is no reason to assume that this reality has anything to do with whatever is traditionally meant by the word 'God', either in his own or in any other tradition. This paradox is connected with the well-known theological/philosophical problem of how to assert God's transcendence without at the same time making any relation between God and the world and/or man impossible. The mystical/gnostic experience seems to imply the view that God is not radically transcendent, because in that case any experience 'of God' would be impossible. But though God does not transcend the world or man, he apparently does transcend language. However, the ontologically satisfying picture which thus results has a price: God's relation to established religion now becomes a problem, at least insofar as religions claim to say something about God, i.e. to know something about him which can be mediated by language. This is one of the reasons why mystic and gnostic modes of religion have always tended to become heretical in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.
Now, one first difference between the typical gnostic and the typical mystic lies in the way they react to this philosophical and theological problematique inherent in their experiences. The typical gnostic is an intellectual and a radical: as an intellectual he is apt to recognize the problematic character of his experience, and as a radical he does not shrink from the logical consequence of rejecting the traditional views of God wherever they conflict with his own experience. The typical mystic on the other hand is a (wo)man of feeling, reacting to the experience that is conferred upon him (her) with gratitude rather than with critical questions. He does not feel the intellectual need to draw his own consequences, but is content to let his traditional view of life be enlightened and enriched by his experience.

2.3.1.2. "Knowledge of the Self"

Quispel has once stated very sharply that the gnostics were in fact not at all interested in God, but only in the 'Self' (24). Although this view deserves serious consideration, it should be relieved of its inherent ambiguities. In arguing that the interest of the gnostics is directed to the Self, and therefore not to God, Quispel shows a theological approach with a Judaeo-Christian bias, according to which it is regarded as self-evident beforehand that the personal self of humans cannot be divine. In other words, Quispel takes the word 'God' as an identification (of YHWH) rather than as a name. From a metaphysically neutral point of view this cannot be accepted. When the gnostic experiences a 'numinous' inner reality which he feels should rightly be called 'divine', he thereby only defines what he means by 'God'; he does not claim that this 'God' has anything to do with what is meant by the word in traditional Jewish or Christian thought. Therefore we have no right to infer that the gnostic really encounters 'only himself' but not God, i.e. that he worships a purely psychological category. What in fact strikes us is the numinous, divine character that the gnostics accord to the 'Self', and which makes them speak about 'knowledge of the Self and of God' as one and the same thing. This means that our initial threefold distinction of 'knowledge of God', of 'the Self', and of both cannot be upheld. 'Knowledge of the Self' in gnostic usage always means knowledge of the Self as divine. So, since 'knowledge of the Self' without any religious dimension is of course irrelevant to our inquiry, we end up with two alternatives only: 'Knowledge of God' and 'Knowledge of the Self (as knowledge of God)'. As we will see, this second option still requires separate discussion.
2.3.1.3. "Knowledge of the Self and of God": the gnostic paradox

What does the well-known formula 'knowledge of the Self as knowledge of God' really mean? Should we just understand it in a reductionist sense, as an attempt (conscious or not) to inflate the merely human to godlike proportions or, alternatively, to reduce the divine to the merely human? I would argue that this interpretation holds true only for the shallower, 'occultistic' kinds of gnosticism (whether of not these form the quantitative majority). With the alternative interpretation that we will set forth we may have reached the heart of gnostic spirituality. This central element is however particularly hard to grasp, and its evasiveness may be the main reason for the many perplexities which have arisen in relation to gnosis, both among the enemies of gnosticism and among scholars of the subject, and even among the gnostics themselves.

Gnosticism shows a remarkable penchant for consciously making use of paradoxes. Carl A.Keller has emphasized this as one of the most basic and constant motifs which strike the reader of the Nag Hammadi Library. In that context he makes an immediate connection between the use of paradox and the gnostic 'knowledge'. About this paradoxality he says 'A more brutal and striking definition of the new form of knowledge, of the consciousness changed by this knowledge, of the existence, changed by the changed consciousness, of the one who knows, can hardly be imagined. The form of existence of the steadfast - the elements of the Pleroma - can simply not be compared with the things of the provisional world at all' (25). In other words, the emphasis on paradox is the radical consequence of the opposition between the higher 'world' to which gnosis gives access, and the normal 'material' world in relation to which 'merely' normal, rational thought is valid. 'Higher knowledge' implies a 'higher logic' which is the exact opposite of normal logic, just as the pleroma is the exact opposite of the material world.

Now, this paradox is also present in the formula 'knowledge of the self as knowledge of God'. Gnostical literature is full of statements like these: 'You shall be like God, when you have realized that you have come from God, and you will see that God is in you, and God will live in your aeon' (26) (man 'comes from God', but God is at the same time something in man); 'The spirit (= the spiritual man according to Quispel) which has come to itself has returned to its origin' (27) (here, man appears to be his own origin); 'Whoever knows himself, knows the All' (28) (man's inner reality is apparently somehow synonymous to 'the All' in which he is). A Manichaean psalm says that the Spirit of Truth has '...brought us a mirror, we looked, we saw the Universe in it' (29). Although many such statements could be explained in a conventional way, there can be little doubt that, at least in the mind of the more subtle gnostic
thinkers, statements like these were meant to convey a 'theology of paradox': man is in God (or: the All) which he is himself; briefly: man is in himself. Man comes from God and God comes from man; when one asks for the relation between God and man, the result is an infinite circular regression. The well-known 'Ouroboros' has been mentioned as an image of this (30). The abiding power of this symbol no doubt lies - at least partly - in its paradoxical implication: 'logically' the snake will in due course reach the point where he has his own head in his mouth. This dazzling idea makes the Ouroboros into a perfect metaphor for an epistemological position, according to which only a 'logic of paradox' can do justice to the relation of God and man, both of whom are felt to be both creator and creation of the other. This idea could evolve naturally from the initial notion of 'knowledge of God': because only the like can be supposed to know the like, it could be argued that man, if he should be able to 'know God', must be assumed to be godlike, but on the other hand if man and God were completely identical no wish could possibly arise to know 'the other'. So, the paradoxical situation of identity and non-identity can be taken as a logical condition for the possibility of gnosia.

With all this we have clearly moved into the context of what I proposed to call 'artistic gnosia' (31). The core of 'artistic gnosia' can thus be described as the awareness that the relation between God and man is a mystery which cannot be rationally understood, combined with the attempt to give radical expression to this conviction by purposely describing this relation in paradoxical terms. In our 'provisional' world the answer to the basic question is permanently suspended, not because we do not know the answer, but rather because we are not able to formulate the question itself. The question can only be asked and answered in the context of a radically other dimension of being, in which our narrow rational categories are left behind and a 'logic of paradox' rules.

Obviously, if the formula 'Knowledge of the Self as knowledge of God' is understood in this way, we cannot speak of a reduction of the divine to the human or of 'self-deification'. Such an interpretation, which is typical for the 'occultistic' antipole of artistic gnosia, would mean that the paradox is resolved and the mystery rationalized. Historically, however, all kinds of variations have occurred between these two polar extremes; gnosticism as a whole can be described in terms of the tension between those poles, and if we want to understand the full range of gnostical thinking we will have to take both of them under serious consideration.

If we return now to our distinction between 'Knowledge of God' and 'Knowledge of the Self and of God', the difference initially seems to lie in the
fact that the former supposes a relational scheme and the latter does not. In 'Knowledge of God', it is supposed that God is out 'there' while man is 'here'. In the mystical experience the distance is bridged and the human merges into God. God is and remains the logical sovereign subject and man the essentially passive object. However, we already saw that this engenders intellectual problems; 'Knowledge of God' as a really separate (i.e., radically transcendent) reality does not seem to be intellectually possible. Some element of 'knowledge of the Self' must be contained in 'knowledge of God', and indeed this is exactly what we find in the lives of the mystics. Here, even when the 'object' of experience is unambiguously described as 'God', the experience inevitably includes a confrontation of the mystic with his own inner 'Self'. Often we find that the essential distinction between creator and creature comes to lie under heavy strain, even if the theological context is such as to forbid the blurring of that distinction. We can therefore risk the inference that the unambiguous concentration of many mystics on 'God' is primarily the result of the theological requirements of the religious context in which they live (and maybe of their personal character as well, moulded as it is by that context), rather than being typical of their 'experience' itself, in which the two poles 'self' and 'God' are always both present.

It thus seems that not only our initial distinction between three, but even our later one between two kinds of 'experience' needs to be modified. All 'experience' can to some extent be described as 'Knowledge of the Self and of God', which means that there is always some ambiguity and paradox as regards its final source. We are left with a relative emphasis on one of the poles 'Self' and 'God' within a wider context which is constituted by the simultaneous presence of both. Thus, in trying to distinguish gnosis and mysticism, we should not try to look for clearcut differences in the descriptions of the experience itself. Rather, the question is how different people manage to deal with the ambiguity of their experience, and eventually with the paradox it contains. From this perspective we can make the following distinctions:

1. In (ideal-)typical 'artistic gnosis' the paradoxicality of 'experience' is fully and consciously explored and exploited. The reason for this is the characteristic penchant for systematical intellectual reflection on an non-rational foundation which we recognized as typical for 'artistic' gnosis. This combination of intellect and non-rational experience naturally leads to the recognition of the 'gnostic paradox' as an intellectual necessity. The artistic gnostic does not resolve the paradox, but uses it as the foundation for a view of life which is based on infinite circular regression. Therefore he cannot express himself in unchanging doctrines: every 'definite' statement is misleading, unless it be complemented by its opposite. This makes 'artistic gnosis' into a
view of life based on systematical doubt about any final proposition about reality. However, this 'nihilistic' relativism or scepticism about 'worldly truth' is asserted in the name of a 'higher truth'. The insight into this 'higher truth' forces the artistic gnostic to the conclusion that human existence is paradoxical. Every religious statement that claims to be unambiguously true simplifies reality, and so reveals its untruth. All 'normal' knowledge is only true in relation to the merely phenomenal world; in relation to the world of absolute truth however it is untrue. Briefly: the world is untrue. This systematic bracketing of all 'unambiguous' knowledge is the only certainty the artistic gnostic possesses. This is the price he pays for his basic awareness that divine reality is an absolute mystery which transcends all human categories.

2. The typical mystic emphasizes the pole of 'God' in his experience, and as a man of feeling he simply ignores the intellectual problem this involves. He does not possess the kind of temperament needed for the intellectual somersaults of the artistic gnostic. Although at times he may realize the paradox contained in his conviction that he is experiencing 'God', his creator - who must be regarded as 'wholly other' according to normative theology -, this does not bother him in the end. He is neither a philosopher nor an artist by nature, but a man of faith who simply trusts that in the end God will no doubt have an answer to what seems to be puzzling or paradoxical. At bottom, this means that the typical mystic ultimately leaves it to God to resolve the paradox of the latter's own existence! Properly understood, this implies a 'leap of faith' which reveals that the typical mystic is in fact a borderline case of the category of 'experience'. Here 'gnosis' appears almost imperceptibly to pass into 'faith'. Although the mystic may well understand the considerations of the artistic gnostic, to him they are just not important enough to shed doubt on his 'naive' faith. This does not mean that he is superficial. A very eloquent example of this may be found in Dostoyevski's novel 'The brothers Karamazow'. Ivan shows the characteristics of the artistic gnostic type of personality (which does not necessarily imply he is a gnostic!), while Alyosha is a typical example of the mystical type. Although Iwan is probably his superior intellectually, it is the saintly Aljosja who leaves the deeper impression on the reader.

3. Finally, while the artistic gnostic chooses for 'knowledge of the Self and of God' in its full paradoxicality, and while the mystic concentrates on the pole of 'God' without letting himself be bothered too much by the paradox, there is also the type which chooses for the 'Self', but does not want, or is not able, to pay the price of having to live with the paradox. Here we are again confronted by 'occultistic gnosis', which is characterized by the reductionist
approach to 'experience'. The occultistic gnostic denies the paradox (although he may pay lip-service to it) and is usually completely unaware of its existence. He has no difficulty equating 'Self' and 'God': for him, inner 'self'-experience is simply experience of God. We are justified to speak here of a fundamental lack of sensitivity for the dimension of the numinous. In its extreme forms, this religiosity consists of a rationalized gnosticism in which 'God' is cut to measure, so to speak, in order to be made available for daily use.

2.3.1.4. Mysticism and Gnosis

Against this background we can now further elucidate the difference between mystic and gnostic experience. Both are based on an experience which can be described as 'knowledge of the Self and of God', but in this formula the mystic emphasizes God while the gnostic emphasizes the divine Self (whether or not in a reductionist sense). Starting from this opposition we can extend it into two series of catchwords which are characteristic of the ideal types of mysticism and gnosis respectively. I make the following proposal, without claiming completeness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MYSTICISM</th>
<th>GNOSIS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>Man/Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devotion/Surrender</td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Magic (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
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The typical mystic feels overwhelmed by the presence of God. He naturally responds to this with an attitude of emotional surrender and devotion to a reality which infinitely transcends his own finite being. From such an attitude, the mystic will not easily be inclined to the intellectual and self-conscious undertaking of questioning the authority of his religious tradition. Rather, he will privately interpret traditional opinions in the light of his own personal experience. As we already noted, this is the point where our general category of 'gnosis' almost imperceptibly passes into 'faith'. In specific instances it may be very difficult (although not necessarily impossible) to decide whether the ultimate 'source of knowledge' is 'faith' or 'gnosis'.

The typical gnostic on the other hand starts from man, and from his own personal experience. He is inclined to interpret his experience as being based on his own divine nature and origin, which he feels is his birthright rather than a gift of grace. This *pneuma* (to use the late antique expression) which he
discovers in himself can easily be interpreted as a source of power for reaching the divine. 'Pneumatic' man feels he has supernatural power over the lower powers of this world. Starting from this interpretation it is easy to see why gnosis has often been susceptible to assimilating magical practice: both the gnostic and the magus claim to have 'knowledge' of the nature of reality and of the ways the 'lower powers' can be manipulated; the gnostic has power over the archonts, the magus commands demons. Because the gnostic feels he is in touch with 'higher reality' he can trust his own judgment, and is liable to rebel against established 'worldly' religious authority wherever the latter conflicts with his own gnosis. Finally, he will make use of the power of his intellect to expose the weaknesses he discerns in those time-honoured world views.

In this way it is possible to describe 'mysticism' and 'gnosis' as two clearly distinguished ideal-typical poles within the general category of 'experience'. The 'mystic' pole borders immediately on faith and can easily blend with it, while only its opposite pole is fully typical for the general 'view of life' which we call gnosis. This is why the term 'gnosis' can be used in the restricted sense of a pole within 'experience' (sensu stricto), as well as for the whole view of life which is theoretically based on it (sensu lato).

I summarize briefly. Mysticism and gnosis are two polar extremes in one general class of 'experience', the contents of which cannot be described in discursive language, but which evidently involves some kind of 'altered state' in which a deeper insight in reality is felt to be attained. As regards its final source, this experience has a paradoxal character, in so far as it seems that 'the knower' is to some extent necessarily felt to be identical with 'the known'. This 'gnostic paradox' can be programmatically expressed in the formula 'Knowledge of the Self as knowledge of God'. In this formulation, however, the mystic emphasizes God, and the gnostic the Self. Apart from this polarity within 'experience', there is another, independent polarity which is characteristic for the 'gnostic' view of life as a whole, i.e. 'artistic' vs. 'occultistic' gnosis. Artistic gnosis accepts the paradox and uses it as the foundation for a view of life (which may be intellectually satisfying as long as it is consistent in its rejection of rationality). The occultistic gnostic refers to the same foundation as the artistic gnostic, but wittingly or unwittingly reduces Self to God or God to Self, and thus resolves the paradox. This results in a quasi-rational philosophy.

2.3.2. Imagination

No view of life can be said to exist unless somehow expression is given to it. But how can one express an ineffable experience? The tension between the
ineffable and the attempt nevertheless to communicate its content to others is characteristic for all expressions of a 'gnostic' view of life.

We may make a general distinction between metaphorical and discursive language as vehicles for communication. Although discursive language does occur in gnosis, especially near the 'mystical' pole of experience where 'faith' tends to play a relatively large part, there is little doubt that it is metaphorical language which seems pre-eminently fit for gnostic expression. It should be clear by now that a gnostic preference for metaphorical language is what could be expected on theoretical grounds, and this expectation is confirmed by historical reality.

For reasons which will be further elucidated I will in this context use the term 'imagination' for the attempt of gnostics to express their basic experience: the gnostic uses images to communicate. The typical example is, of course, the gnostic myth.

Before going into the different kinds of gnostic mythology itself, we should first make clear how the connection of experience with imagination can be explained.

The gnostic/mystic undergoes an experience which grants him 'insight' into a dimension of reality, the existence of which had so far remained hidden from him. It is natural to use light-metaphors for this: he 'has seen the light', he 'sees the world in another light', he undergoes an experience of 'enlightenment'. Because the experience is of an inner nature, one easily comes to speak of an 'inner light' or a 'spark', of which it is again natural to assume that it must have a source: an original 'light' or 'fire', or simply God who lights the light in the soul. In all these cases some kind of 'dualism' occurs as a matter of course: the world as it was known before the 'experience' cannot but strike one as having been 'dark' in comparison with the newly experienced 'light'. Whether or not the person involved had already felt some kind of deficiency in his daily life before, the 'experience' cannot but mean something like a parting of light and darkness. Now, it is essential to distinguish between two forms in which this 'parting of light and darkness' may occur.

1. The experience can be one of a 'light that shines in the darkness'. Imagine someone who has always lived in twilight, and who has become so used to it that he does not experience the twilight as a lack of light, but as a natural state of affairs. Now, when all of a sudden a light appears, the surrounding world will become darker by comparison, and the person will realize that he has always lived in 'darkness', without being aware of it. The appearance of the light introduces a new standard into his life, and everything which does not come up to this standard darkens accordingly. This is
The experience which gives rise to a typical gnostic dualism. Inside the gnostic a light has begun to shine, which he from now on carries with him through the relative darkness of the world. However, this light remains restricted to the gnostic's consciousness, and is not able to illuminate the rest of the world. It is only a spark and no more than that, but its mere existence serves as a warrant for the existence 'somewhere else' of an original light from which it originates and to which it must eventually return. In this way the experience naturally leads to the vision of 'two worlds': the realm of darkness and the realm of light, the world of daily experience and the divine pleroma. The 'ineffable' experience of a light shining in the darkness implies salvation by knowledge: it reveals that an 'other' reality must exist, it unMASKS the present reality as 'darkness', and it assures the gnostic that in his inner being he is already connected to the 'world of light' so that in due course he cannot fail to fully regain it.

2. But 'experience' does not necessarily lead to dualistic conclusions. This can be illustrated by the alternative example of someone who has always lived in night, and to whom the light of the stars is the only light there is. When finally the sun comes up, the stars fade and the whole world looks transfigured. Here too, the person involved 'sees the light', but this light now enlightens the whole world, and makes him see his world 'in another light'. This experience is fundamentally 'holistic' rather than dualistic, but still we can speak of a 'parting of light and darkness' even here, so that 'dualism' is not completely absent. However, for this person the 'dark world' only exists in retrospective. Just like in the first case, the appearance of the light makes him realize that he has formerly lived in darkness, but the difference is that the light has driven away the darkness altogether. It has become a thing of the past.

In fact this second kind of 'enlightenment' stands in opposition to the first one. In the eyes of the second kind of 'gnostic', the first kind has only partly seen the truth. The latter wrongly projects dualism into the outside world, but in reality dualism exists only in the mind. It is not the world that was dark, but it was the gnostic himself who was blind for the existence of the light. Therefore there are not two worlds, one of light and one of darkness, but only two states of mind, one of blindness or sleep, and one of being awake and seeing.

These two kinds of experience (or possibly: of interpreting the same experience) each have a tendency (but not more than a tendency: we are not dealing with causal mechanisms here) to develop into markedly different directions, especially as regards ethics. Because the dualist has yet to attain final salvation for himself he tends to be more self-centered, and because only those who, like him, have the 'spark' can hope to reach the light, he
tends to think of himself as a member of a spiritual elite. The 'holist' on the other hand has already attained 'insight' and does not need to strive for an 'other' world; because for him 'dualism' exists mainly between those who are 'awake' and those who are still asleep, he will naturally try to wake up his fellow-men, i.e. to try and make them share his insight, rather than dissociate himself from them.

Finally, it should be noted that there is an immediate connection between these two types of experience, and the first and fourth 'psychological conditions' which were described earlier: here too we distinguished between the 'more real dimension' and the 'restoration of lost wholeness' as either something yet to be achieved, or as something which is already there, but not generally recognized.

2.3.2.1. Gnostic mythology: holism and dualism

While the characteristic structure of gnostic mythology will be dealt with in the chapter on 'transformation', here the problem of dualism vs. holism will be further investigated. Although dualism is popularly believed to be typical for gnosticism, this is fundamentally one-sided even if one leaves hermeticism out of the picture. The term dualism as such has hardly any meaning at all; some reflection reveals that it can be used in very different contexts to denote very different contents. Therefore it is necessary always to elucidate exactly what is meant by it in a given instance. When this is not done, all kinds of extremely divergent currents and ideas that have very little in common can be classified as 'gnostic', simply because they are in some sense dualistic (33). That this has happened over and over again is one of the main reasons for the vagueness of the term 'gnosticism', which provided the starting-point of the present study.

We already called the wish for 'restoration of lost wholeness' a central, maybe the central motif for gnostic strivings. All gnostics agree that man and/or world are in an unsatisfactory state of disruption, fragmentation, alienation, and that the great goal of life is to restore some desirable state of wholeness. However, this fundamental tenet can be taken both in a relatively moderate and in a radical way. As examples of these two possibilities we propose to compare Manichaean and Valentinian mythology.

The Manichaean myth starts with an original state of duality, in which the realm of light and the realm of darkness are radically separate. The myth describes how this ideal situation is disturbed when the elements of the two realms get mixed, and how the separation will ultimately be restored. Things will be well when the two realms leave each other in peace again, each one to live its life according to its own nature (34). It is clear that in this myth the emphasis is on dualism rather than on holism, and that the goal is 'restora-
tion of the lost separateness' rather than of the 'lost wholeness'. However, although this is certainly true with regard to the whole of reality, it is not so from the point of view of the Manichaean elect himself. There can be little doubt that his personal desire was to return to the 'wholeness' of unbroken existence in the realm of light. Although the final state is ultimately dualistic, existence within the borders of the realm of light means living in an unbroken whole, and the fact that 'somewhere' far away darkness keeps living its own life will then hardly be of any practical importance. The distinction between this 'conditional' holism and 'absolute' holism, which is of a theoretical and philosophical nature, may thus be of relatively little importance for the mental state of the Manichaean and his quest for salvation. The Manichaean strives for 'restoration of the lost wholeness' by separation from anything threatening that wholeness. So we can speak of a 'quest for wholeness' supported by a dualistic metaphysical system.

In contrast, Valentinianism is an example of a consistently holistic type of gnosticism. For the Valentinians it is unacceptable that the principle of evil should have an independent ontological status on a par with the principle of good. Evil must be an aberration. 'Restoration of the lost wholeness' cannot be taken to mean just separation of good and evil, light and darkness. Wholeness is simply not complete when somewhere evil still remains, being different from it. This means that philosophically the Valentinians are faced with a much heavier task than the Manichaeans: they must explain how dualism could arise from wholeness, how evil could be born from good. The Valentinians tried to accomplish this feat, not completely successfully, by postulating an enormous number of emanations between the 'source' and the phenomenal world, in an attempt to make the 'aberration' look as small and insignificant as possible. In any case, they tried to take 'Wholeness' in the most radical sense possible. Manifestation starts from absolute wholeness (although already a female and male pole can be discerned), and will eventually return to it. Ultimately all dualism will disappear, and no evil will be left anywhere in the universe. Here we are clearly dealing with a radically holistic vision, in which the dualism of our present world is considered only a passing thing.

In the preceding chapter we concluded that 'knowledge of the Self and of God' should be taken as denoting one fundamental class of experience in which gnosis and mysticism act as dialectical poles which presuppose one another. Now, a similar situation appears to exist in relation to holism and dualism. In itself, the two terms can not be taken to denote two different, mutually exclusive world views; rather what we have is one world view (or class of world views) which presupposes both holism and dualism as dialectical polar opposites. Gnostics never accept the one while rejecting the other, but they are always relatively emphasizing one or the other. When gnostics
talk about dualism, they only do so in the context of the desire for wholeness (whether personal or cosmic); when they talk about wholeness, they only do so in the context of the painful reality of duality.

So far the problem of dualism in gnostic mythology. However, the element of 'imagination', which is the subject of this chapter, is also strongly influenced by the general dialectics of artistic and occultistic gnosis. To make this clear we must ask ourselves in which ways gnostic mythology could have been meant to be interpreted by the gnostics.

2.3.2.2. Interpretation: description or metaphor?

Gnostic mythology can be interpreted in different ways. First, the narratives can be taken as just a product of subjective fantasy which should not be taken too seriously. This is the view of the sceptical outsider who is at a loss to understand why the gnostic accords any religious importance to such manifestly absurd stories. Second, myth can be taken quite literally as a description of facts; this is the view of the more extreme wing of 'occultistic gnosis'. Third, myth can be taken metaphorically, in which case we are moving again into the opposite direction, of 'artistic gnosis'.

In the case of some mythological systems, for instance the Valentinian (in contrast to the Manichaean), it is almost impossible to imagine that it was ever taken factually. But when we assume that it was meant in a metaphorical sense, what does this imply for the nature of the religion it represents?

In order to elucidate this important point, I want to call attention to a study by the theologian Sallie McFague. Although her Metaphorical Theology - Models of God in Religious Language (35) does not mention gnosis, the views it sets forth are very helpful in dealing with our present subject. One key passage should be explicitly cited here:

'the language the model gives us (i.e. metaphorical language. W.J.H.)(...) is not just any language, but one that lights up our experience in the world in profound ways. It provides something similar to the "shock of recognition" we get from reading a fine poem or seeing a good play: "Yes" we say, "life is like that" -not life as conventionally lived or usually understood, but at its deepest level, or as it could be, ought to be, might have been. The basic structure of experience is illuminated and we feel the transformation that is the secret of the linkage between discovery and creation at the heart of great poetry and at the heart of great religious traditions' (36).

This implies that religious metaphors are not about factual life, but about the meaning of the life of the one they address. They are not about the outer world, but are meant to speak to the inner world of the reader. More exactly, they appeal to the fundamental 'latent gnostic disposition' elucidated earlier
(which, incidentally, explains why some people can be immediately grasped by their impact, while others remain immune to them). For people of the 'latent gnostic' type, the language of mythology (but also, for that matter, of parable, fairy-tales, certain kinds of romantic poetry, science fiction and fantasy) is experienced as symbolical for a 'greater life' ('as it could be, ought to be, might have been') of which one partakes by the imagination (37). While some people relegate the products of the imagination to the status of subjective fantasies, implying that taking them seriously means trying to escape from the real world, for others it is exactly the imagination and its products which reveal a deeper dimension of the world in which we all live (38). For the latter, imagination is the key to reality. In fact, it might be that this was really what at least some gnostics meant by the pneuma. If pneuma is the necessary condition for gnosis, and if the faculty of creative imagination is the necessary condition for an adequate understanding of gnostic mythology, 'pneuma' might well be translated, at least in part of the cases, as 'imagination'.

But how is it that myth, if taken metaphorically, can serve as an ideal vehicle for an 'artistic' gnostic view of life? By now, it will hardly come as a surprise that here again paradoxicality plays a key-role. As Sallie McFague puts it, it is typical for metaphors, and for that matter, for myths, that they 'always contain the whisper, "it is and it is not"'. Now, this can be understood at least in three ways (39).

1. It can be taken in a reduced sense. About the events described in the myth one can say 'it never happened, but remains eternally true' (40). This means that the myth is 'true' in one sense, and not true in another. In this case no real paradox is implied.

2. A second possible interpretation goes deeper. A metaphor indicates something, not by naming it, but by naming something else. The real meaning is suppressed, and something else is named instead. Why? Here two distinct possibilities can be mentioned, which however may both be present in one and the same metaphor.

   a. The real meaning is not named because it is ineffable. By naming something else, it is hoped that the ineffable meaning is nevertheless communicated. Of course this is highly paradoxical: one tries to say something by not saying it. How can the speaker possibly hope to be understood? There seems to be only one answer: he must assume, or at least hope, that the one addressed will have the capacity to execute a discontinuous leap from what is said to what is really meant, from what is there in the utterance, and what is absent in it. When this capacity for 'jumping to conclusions' is not presupposed, the use of metaphors to indicate the ineffable has no sense at all. Now, this capacity can suitably be described as the faculty for creative imagination. The metaphor is chosen and presented in such a way as to guarantee as
much as possible that it will activate the power of imagination of the one addressed, so that it will search in the right direction (in gnostic terminology: only the one with a *pneuma* will be able to understand the myth and to attain gnosis). Ultimately, however, the interpretation must be left to the latter: there is no absolute warrant that the metaphor will not be misunderstood. This inevitable inexactness of metaphors can be seen as negative, but it need not be. In the latter case we are dealing with the second reason for using them.

b. In the last resort, the metaphor can only be interpreted by each person individually, and this interpretation can, logically, only be fully valid for that person himself. This makes metaphorical language pre-eminently suitable for a view of life which assumes that truth cannot be expressed in discursive language accessible to everyone regardless of his 'inner development', but that it can only be discovered individually in an inner process of 'awakening'. From this perspective, a metaphor can only be a pointer indicating a certain direction. At most it can (here I use a metaphor myself) show the one addressed the way to a window, but only he himself can decide whether or not he will go that way, and only he himself can look through the window. The metaphor does not say anything about what is to be seen through the window, because that vision can only be the individual vision of the person himself who looks through it. In other words, the metaphor does not say anything at all; it only does something for those who know how to make creative use of it.

So, the lack of total reliability of metaphors might be seen as a benefit, rather than as a drawback, by a view of life according to which the way to truth can only be an individual one. This view indeed lies at the bottom of that gnostic individualism which believes, as we saw, that the ultimate 'source of knowledge' is a personal and ineffable experience of 'insight'.

3. Finally there is a third level in which metaphor can play a role in gnostic mythology, and here the 'gnostic paradox' is fully central. To make this clear I call attention to the rather mysterious last sentence in the quotation from McFague, where she speaks about *'the transformation that is the secret of the linkage between discovery and creation at the heart of great poetry and at the heart of great religious traditions'* (41). In relation to this she elsewhere quotes Paul Ricoeur: *'It would seem that the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that it 'invents' in both senses of the word: what it creates, it discovers; what it finds, it invents.'* (42)

Here we are again confronted by the paradox of the Ouroboros, and here we find also the ultimate reason why I have chosen to describe the first two elements of gnosis as 'experience' and 'imagination'. The term 'experience' denotes a basically passive attitude to 'something else': divine reality, which exists independently from man, and so can be 'experienced' by him. In contrast, the term 'imagination' denotes an active, creative act; here the di-
vines is created by the human imagination. Now, I would suggest that in certain kinds of artistic gnosis both statements are meant to be true. 'God' is a 'human all too human' invention, but in this product of his own mind man discovers the source from which his own existence has proceeded. In a really dazzling paradox, the product of the human mind also appears to be its ultimate source. Thus, McFague's words may be paraphrased to apply to gnosticism: 'the secret of the linkage between experience and imagination at the heart of gnosticism' and the same is possible with Ricoeur's words: 'the enigma of (artistic) gnostic discourse is that it 'invents' in both senses of the word: the God it creates, it discovers, and the God it finds, it invents.'

We may well consider this either absurd, crazy and blasphemical, or thought-provoking and inspiring. More important than whether we personally like or dislike this radical brand of gnosticism, is the question how the recognition of its possible existence affects current views of the gnostic phenomenon. I have the impression that some scholars of the subject simply cannot believe that the gnostics would have been so unashamedly non-rational. This may lead to a view of gnosis which takes the sting out of it, in order to conform it to accepted standards of domesticated, 'decent religious behaviour' which some of the gnostics just may not have cared about at all.

2.3.3. Transformation

With the two preceding elements 'Experience' and 'Imagination' the main outlines of the gnostic religious sphere could be said to be completely given. The third element, which we have called 'transformation', is in fact nothing more than a logical consequence of their inner dynamics, and can only be understood in relation to the latter. Nevertheless it should be regarded as an independent and indispensable element. However, especially because 'transformation' has no inner polarity which needs to be analysed, it is fairly easy to describe, and we can therefore be relatively brief about it.

The gnostic 'experience' leads to an expression of it by the metaphorical discourse of gnostic mythology, in other words, by the products of 'imagination'. But which goal does all this serve? The answer can be found in the characteristics of the 'latent gnostic' psychological disposition. This was characterized by the desire for a 'more' real dimension and for a state of wholeness, which should be attainable by an inner process of 'becoming who you are', or 'self-realization'. The first appearance of 'experience' can be seen as the beginning of this process, which eventually will lead to the attainment of the final goal. In this context we can use Ernst Bloch's term Vor-Schein, defined as 'temporary appearance of a hidden content which contains the promise of a final appearance in the future'. It seems to the gnostic/mystic that a door has been opened and closed again. Because he has looked
through the door he knows that an other 'higher' reality is behind it, and from now on his mind is set on attaining this ideal. The ideal can be described in many different ways ('God', 'the All', 'the world-soul', 'the higher Self' etc.) and can give rise to very divergent metaphysical assumptions. However, the basic experience of a promised 'wholeness' precedes those secondary descriptions.

Very significantly, the ultimate reality to which the experience refers is often described as 'home'. Although the experience as such is new in the life of the one involved, it is also felt to be somehow intimately familiar. It is recognized as something from which one has sadly become separated, so that one has even forgotten its existence, but which one now with a sigh of relief has found again. Gnostic literature contains many examples of gnosis as 'remembrance', as waking from the sleep of forgetfulness to the reality of one's origin. So, 'wholeness' seems not only to be experienced as the future goal of one's existence, but also as its origin. One's present existence has proceeded from 'wholeness', and will finally return to it.

In this way we come to the two basic characteristics of 'transformation': the notion of a 'way' of spiritual transformation, and the background of this in a cyclical world view.

The cyclical world view is clearly expressed in the gnostic myths, especially those of a more 'holistic' kind. Here a kind of double process of transformation is described. First, there is a process of emanation as an ultimately negative (43) 'way down' which results from ignorance and in the course of which wholeness is disrupted. Second, there is a complementary positive 'way up' (or 'back') as a result of gnosis, which will ultimately result in the restoration of wholeness. This second movement I call 'transformation' (the first one might conveniently be called 'formation'). This cyclical vision is hardly an arbitrary invention; rather, it is a logical result of the specific character of 'experience', which, as we have seen, is typically felt as a 'recollection' of something which had been forgotten, rather than as the discovery of something radically new. If attaining the ideal is felt as 'coming back home', a 'leaving home' must logically have preceded it. So, the theory of emanation, and the myth which describes it, functions as a metaphysical legitimation for the endeavour of 'inner spiritual transformation' of man and world, which was initiated by the first appearance of 'experience'.

The process of transformation can be thought to take place both on a personal and on a cosmic level. It is often assumed that both hold true: the personal way of transformation is only a reflection of a universal process. However, here two distinct possibilities arise: a universalist and an exclusivist one.

1. According to a 'universalist' view the process of transformation can
only be completed when all human beings have returned to wholeness. The emphasis lies on the alienation of man from himself and from God, which is the origin of dualism. This emphasis on man can lead to a relatively Christian ethic, and can even be combined with a certain explanation of the Christian 'original sin': man has brought about the disruption of the original ideal existence, and in man the disruption will have to be repaired. The typical mystic will often tend to this view.

2. The process of 'transformation' can however also be seen as metaphysical rather than ethical in character. In this case the emergence of dualism is regarded as a cosmic phenomenon, rather than a specifically human one (although man can well be assumed to have played an important role in it). Dualism has occurred on the level of 'being', before man existed, and so man cannot be held responsible for it. According to this view 'restoration of the lost wholeness' is not a process of inner spiritual 'perfection' of man, but consists in the parting of Light and Darkness or the restoration of the integrity of the pleroma. In this case it need not be of crucial importance that all men are 'saved' by being reunited with the Light: the all-important thing is that the Light itself must be restored in its original purity. Starting from this premise gnostics may well assume that it is only the business of a spiritual 'elite' to accomplish the great work. Only those who already, by nature, take part in the 'light', i.e. 'pneumatic' men, can play a part in it. The rest of humanity will ultimately perish together with the rest of matter.

Because theories about salvation like these presuppose that they are somehow talking about facts rather than giving metaphorical expression to truths that transcend facts, it is generally 'gnosis' in a more restricted sense, and especially its more 'occultistic' representatives that come into this 'exclusivist' category.

'Artistic' gnosis is different from both universalism and exclusivism in the above sense, in that it does not project the personal process of transformation onto a cosmic screen. The process remains of an inner, personal nature and cannot lead to an 'opinion' about salvation. For the typical 'artistic' gnostic the need to express such an opinion only betrays weakness of conviction.

The idea of 'transformation' can be expressed in a variety of ways. Some obvious examples would be the ascension of the soul in late antique gnosticism, the mystical way in Christian mysticism, transmutation in spiritual alchemy, reincarnation in modern theosophy and individuation in Jungian psychotherapy.
3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We can briefly summarize our dynamic typology by enumerating the distinctions, most of them of a polar-dialectical and ideal-typical nature, which are deemed indispensable for covering the complete field of gnostic/mystic views of life. In relation to this, the schematic figure of gnosis given above must be referred to again.

- A distinction was made between three possible kinds of 'knowledge', to which people can appeal for the foundation of their view of life: reason, faith, gnosis.
- A distinction was made between latent gnosis as a particular, characteristic mental disposition, and gnosis as a view of life. The latter is characterized by the 'combination of a visionary intuition with a systematizing intellect', or its shallower forms.
- This last distinction was further elaborated by a distinction within gnosis as a view of life (sensu lato), between two ideal-typical poles: artistic gnosis and occultistic gnosis. The first one recognizes the non-rational character of gnosis and elaborates a view of life on the basis of this recognition, which is in principle an intellectually satisfying procedure; the second tries to rationalize the non-rational, which leads to an intellectually unsatisfying pseudorationality.

- Within gnosis as a view of life three constitutive elements were distinguished (which are distinct from the general polarity artistic-occultistic): experience [1], imagination [2], transformation [3].
  1. 'Experience' was defined as characterized by ineffability, noetic quality and unconditional inner authority.
  - Starting from the formula 'Knowledge of the Self and of God', 'experience' was described as being constituted by the tension between mysticism and gnosis (sensu stricto) as ideal-typical poles. Strong emphasis was laid on the gnostic paradox which is inherent in experience, and which is explicitly exploited by artistic gnosis.
  2. The element of 'imagination' concerns the ways of giving expression to 'experience'. Starting from gnostic light-symbolism, a distinction was made between two kinds of dualism, which can arise from an experience of 'enlightenment': an external dualism in the world, or an internal dualism in the mind. After this the polar dialectics between holism and dualism in gnostic mythology were discussed.
  - Discursive and metaphorical ways of interpreting gnostic mythology were discussed, and connected with the general polarity of artistic vs. occultistic gnosis.
Artistic interpretation was further enlarged upon, especially in relation to the paradoxal epistemology which is implied in the use of metaphors, and to the way artistic gnosis exploits this.

3. 'Transformation' appeared to be relatively easy to grasp. In so far as the idea of transformation is understood as describing both an inner and a cosmic process, a distinction was made between a relatively 'mystical' universalism and a more 'occultistic gnostic' exclusivism. Artistic gnosis appeared to imply the rejection of a cosmic interpretation of transformation.

The inquiry started from the question of the meaning of 'gnosis', especially in relation to the question whether it is possible to speak of a 'gnostic component' in European culture. In order to be able to cover the complete field of gnosticism - including its 'post-gnostic' developments -, and to account for its relation to mysticism, faith and rationality, a complex multi-dimensional structure appeared necessary. It is of crucial importance to realize that the three fundamental polarities of the basic diagram represent three different and mutually independent levels from which one can approach the same phenomenon:

- artistic .................. occultistic
- mysticism .................. gnosis
- holism .................. dualism

In a specific view of life, any particular point on one line can be connected with any point on the two others: there is no causal relation between the levels.

This multi-dimensional, structural and 'dynamic' ideal-typological approach clearly has both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage would be that it enables us fairly accurately to chart any view of life which meets the general conditions, and to make clear how, and according to which laws of attraction and repulsion one view of life can almost imperceptibly move into an other one. It could be considered a disadvantage that the model does no longer permit us to speak unambiguously about 'gnosis' or 'mysticism' as such, but forces us to regard each historical phenomenon as a temporary and fleeting synthesis which is a result of a delicate balance of conflicting tendencies rather than of the presence of definite characteristics, and which in the course of time may be subject to changes which make it gradually move into something else. There just might be a parallel here with sub-molecular physics. Just as in physics it has turned out to be necessary to replace the clear and rigid model of 'ultimate building blocks' by the more exact but far less tangible abstraction of fleeting effects of chance which can only be described statistically, so in religious studies we may have to sacrifice the concept of empirical religious 'blocks' for the more exact but less tangible categories of tensions between theoretical extremes.
When Hegel was confronted with the criticism that his philosophy did not accord with reality, he is reported to have answered 'so much the worse for reality'. In trying to define a terminological system which is relevant for phenomena as elusive as those we call 'gnostic', we may have to find a middle ground somewhere between theoretical abstraction and historical concreteness. Our concepts do not mirror reality, and neither does reality conform to our concepts; so much should have become clear from our use of ideal types. There is no such thing as 'gnosis' until we start talking about it, and even after we have started talking about it the gnostics still only exist in our minds, if indeed they exist anywhere at all. We cannot expect people to suddenly start behaving as though they cared about our efforts at systematizing. To this we must resign ourselves. Indeed, reality may be indescribable after all, if not ineffable. But even so, in order to talk about reality at all we still need conceptual tools, and if we want those tools to serve any clear communicative function at all, we had better make them as sharp as possible.

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NOTES


(3) Here I refer to the work of philosophers like Eric Voegelin or Hans Blumenberg. A comparison of their work presents us with a model par excellence of the problem addressed here: according to Voegelin modernity as a whole is gnostic, while for Blumenberg the reverse is true: modernity represents 'the second victory over gnosticism' (Eric Voegelin, Science, Politics and Gnosticism - Two Essays. Chicago, 1968; Hans Blumenberg, Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung. Frankfurt a.M., 1985).

(4) G. Quispel (ed.), Gnosis - de derde component van de Europese cultuurtraditie (Utrecht, 1988)
(5) In the restricted space of this article it is not possible to present this analysis. It included the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur, Hans Jonas, Kurt Rudolph, Wolfgang Schulte and Gilles Quispel for late antique gnosticism; J. Lindeboom, Baur, Eugen Heinrich Schmitt, Karl R. J. Frick and Quispel as examples of authors who describe a ‘gnostic tradition’ extending beyond the late antique period; and Hans Jonas, Eric Voegelin and Hans Blumenberg as examples of philosophers of culture who have accorded central importance to ‘gnosis’ in their analyses of the nature of modernity. This survey included a critical discussion of the way in which some of these authors used the terms gnosis or gnosticism. Voegelin’s use of the term ‘gnosticism’ was found to be extremely misleading, while Blumenberg’s discussion turned out to be about Marcionism rather than gnosticism proper. For details I must refer to the original Dutch version of this study, _Gnosis - Een dynamische typologie_ (Unpublished doctoral thesis. Utrecht University: faculty of letters, 1990).

(6) I am especially indebted, for the general approach taken, to the work of Vincent Brimmer, in particular his _Theology and philosophical Inquiry - An Introduction_ (London & Basingstoke, 1981).


(8) This is not to deny the complex interaction that exists between religious experience and ideological structures. Exposure to certain ideas may engender corresponding experiences, which in turn serve to confirm the ideas, thus leading to a kind of feedback circle. Here, on the other hand, I refer not to this interaction process, but only to a logical hierarchy: a person may conceivably have certain experiences (for instance, the experience of sinfulness) without a corresponding ideological belief structure, but it is difficult to conceive of someone consciously adhering to a belief structure which has no connection to his own experience. In such a case, his own ideas would simply not make sense to him.

(9) I am aware that some philosophers would not agree to this. I believe that the idea of such an ‘Archimedean point’ for metaphysical epistemology is bound to remain a dream, but I will not enter into this philosophical discussion here.


(11) For this discussion I must again refer to the original version of the present article. It is pertinent at this point to remind the reader once more of the ideal-typical nature of our distinction between _reason, faith_ and _gnosis_. Concrete believers adhering to a view of life which we would class - ideal-typically, i.e., relatively spoken - as _reason_ or _faith_ may very well manage to combine the one with the other.


(13) A. Roland Holst, _De Afspraak_ (The Appointment) (Weesp, repr. 1984)

(14) This is confirmed by the text as a whole. Note for instance the opening sentences.

(15) In addition, several more concrete images and ideas appear which are strongly reminiscent of gnostic mythology. First, the concept of an ‘other, greater Self’. Second, a distinction which the author makes between the ‘unwinged ones’ among whom the author is forced to live, and the ‘indomitable ones’ who live ‘at the other side of light and wind’ and to whom he longs to return (cf. the concept of the gnostic ‘stranger’, the distinction between ‘hylic’ and ‘pneumatic’ man etc.). Finally, it is ‘the world’ that is said to separate the lost source of being and the future restoration” ‘...for wasn’t it the world, and the world only that kept them apart and unfulfilled?’

(16) The popular supposition that rationality and intellect are more or less synonymous, must be considered untenable. To realize this one need only to consider the example of musical composition, which is very demanding intellectually, but has nothing to do with rationality in any normal sense of the word.
(17) Before gnosis can become a doctrine which should be taken on authority, it has to be rationalized first, at least to some extent. So, although in our general typology three 'polar' opposites occur, within the narrower confines of 'gnostic' views of life the number can thus be reduced to two.

(18) The term 'religious experience' tends to be used as inaccurately as the term gnosis itself. In an unpublished paper (Het ongekende weten, 1989) I have suggested that the term 'religious experience' can be used to denote three different kinds of experience. 1. 'Paranormal' perceptions (unusual subjective experiences of a sensual nature and capable of being described in terms of sense perceptions); 2. What I call 'faith-experiences' (objective things or occurrences as well as normal subjective experiences (esp. dreams) which are subjectively interpreted by the person concerned as charged with a 'deeper' meaning and significance. Take for instance Augustin's conversion experience at hearing a child say 'tolle et lege', opening the bible, and interpreting the text as a message from God); 3. What is usually called 'mystical' experience. The first two can be reduced to reason and faith; in the present study we will only be concerned with the third type.

(19) Against Frits Staal, Exploring Mysticism (Penguin, 1975). Staal believes that we can explore mysticism scientifically by having mystical experiences ourselves. He forgets two things. 1. If the researcher succeeds in having a mystical experience (for instance by meditational practice), he will be in no better position than any traditional mystic in trying to communicate the ineffable: he will meet the same barrier of language which has traditionally frustrated attempts to find out the nature of mysticism. Staal seems to presuppose implicitly that the talk of mystics about 'ineffability' is only due to obscurantism or irrationalism and an unscientific attitude. This means, however, that he ignores a priori (i.e. without any empirical base, but obviously on the foundation of his own philosophical ideology) one of the key characteristics which make his subject matter circumscribable in the first place. 2. Staal ignores the probably unsurmountable problem of how to verify that the experience of a researcher, induced for scientific reasons, is the same as the experience of the mystic, which is sought for spiritual or religious reasons.


(21) '...the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.' (James, op. cit., p. 368). This seems to point to an experience of being confronted with an overpowering kind of reality, rather than to an attitude of passivity on the part of the mystic. Cf. the criticism of James's characteristics in Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism - A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York/Scarborough, 1974) p. 81.

(22) It could be argued that it is not the nature of the experience itself which limits the possibilities of interpretation, but rather the limitedness of religious world views which are available as an interpretative context. In the end this argument may turn out to be tautological, but whatever the answer will be, it does not fundamentally affect the ensuing discussion.

(23) On this level of the discussion it is not necessary to distinguish between different meanings of the word 'God'. What we are fundamentally concerned with is to distinguish the experience of something or someone 'out there' as contrasted to something 'in here'. On this premise it is irrelevant whether the reality 'out there' is, for instance the personal YHWH of Jewish religion, or the divinized cosmos as a whole as contrasted to the experiencing subject who is in this cosmos.


(28) Hermetic definitions 9,4; The Book of Thomas the Contender, Nag Hammadi codex II, 138: 16-18.

(29) Manichaean Psalm 223, in C.R.C.Allberry (ed.), A Manichaean Psalm-book Part II (Stuttgart, 1938), p. 9. 'the Universe' may also be read as 'the All'.

(30) Piet Meeuse, De slang die in zijn staart bijt - Essays (Amsterdam, 1987)

(31) My claim that the core of gnosticism is 'artistic gnosis' does not by any means imply that we could also turn the argument around, and conclude that 'art is gnostic'. However, neither should we be surprised to find similar ideas among some artists, especially those of an intellectual/speculative type. In order to prove that the idea of a 'paradoxical logic' like the one described is to some extent a natural one, examples could be given from the work of romantic and post-romantic poets and novelists, for instance Novalis, Paul Valéry and Gombrowicz (Meeuse, op. cit.). Valéry, who was fascinated by the Uroboros symbol, is an extreme example of the kind of thinking referred to here (Cahiers part I. Edited by Judith Robinson. Paris, 1973. See especially pp. 225, 735 and 756-757).

(32) I am aware of the controversy in religious studies over the 'Frazerian' distinction between magic and religion. I do not mean to make any dogmatic statement about this debate, but I think that the distinction, regardless of its problematic character if used in order to make all-encompassing claims about the field of religious (sic) phenomena as such, the distinction can still be used on a pragmatic level (Cf. H.S.Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic - Religion' In: Numen vol. 38: 2)

(33) Examples abound in popular and less popular literature. Cf., as just one example, the historian William M.Johnston in his book The Austrian Mind - An Intellectual and Social History 1848-1938 (Berkeley, 1972). Although this book won the Austrian history award, the chapters 'Marcionists at Prague' and 'The forgotten versatility of Christian von Ehrenfels' are based on completely misguided ideas about both gnosticism and marcionism.

(34) This, at least, is the most common version. Manichaeism also knows speculations which point into a more 'holistic' direction, such as the idea that the realms of darkness will be confined in a kind of grave, closed by a stone, or be reduced to a small bundle or 'bolos'.


(37) Some brilliant observations relevant to this point can be found in the chapter about C.S.Lewis in R.J.Reilly, Romantic Religion - A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien (Athens, 1971).

(38) As for the criticism of 'escapism', see the defence of J.R.R.Tolkien - undoubtedly one of the major mythographers of our century -, as presented by R.J.Reilly (op. cit., p. 207): '...Tolkien will not admit that Escape is a bad thing. The word, he thinks, has fallen into disrepute because its users too often confuse "the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter". Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.' (...) Fairy stories, like other kinds of literature and like many other things as well, can provide a kind of solace in a world of "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death". And this kind of solace or respite is necessary; it is not refusal to face reality, it is a time needed to regroup one's forces for the next day's battle.' I leave it to the reader to think out the implications of Tolkien's prison-metaphor if compared with gnostic ideas about the world.

(39) The following line of reasoning is not the one of McFague. I only make use of her concept of metaphor, but the conclusions I draw in relation to gnosis are entirely my own responsibility.

(40) 'Das geschah nie, ist aber ewig wahr': Julian the Apostate as quoted by Quispel, Gnosis als Weltreligion, p. 67.

(41) McFague, op. cit., p. 142.

(42) McFague, op. cit., p. 137.
(43) Of course in the Valentinian myth, which here serves as a model, the original emanation which results in the 'pleroma' is not negative: things only start to go wrong after the error of Sophia. However, the pleroma itself can hardly be seen as a disruption of wholeness; it is rather the triumphant unfolding of it. Therefore the cyclical movement which is here discussed starts from the wholeness of the pleroma.