

The dream-like quality of gnostic myths continues to defy systematic intelligibility. In recent decades, systematic exigence has been raising questions and the answers these evoke are just as non-systematic as in previous centuries. This reviewer stands in awe at Couliano’s brilliant perceptions in his broad-based attempt to trace the history of gnostic myths from ancient to modern times, at least as these are registered in Western consciousness. Perhaps he hopes to discover a historical trajectory leading to modern nihilism that he discusses in his eleventh and last chapter.

In the process, he finds that in modern scholarship and hermeneutics, “the variations on the meaning of Gnosis itself are considerable” and decides (p. 256) not even to catalogue these variations. A methodical initial approach would be to limit the material to instances that manifest some “duality,” some affirmation of two opposed principles like good and evil, light and darkness, left and right, etc. Chapters 5 to 9 trace these manifestations in the myths attributed to Marcionism, Manichaeanism, Paulicianism, Bogomilism and Catharism.

If the duality here can be systematically extrapolated to modern nihilism, this may lead to an empirical verification that this dualistic system is probably operational in gnostic cognition. But what is this dualistic system?
Two examples appear in tabular form that graphically illustrates the author’s operational meaning of “dualistic.” The first one (on p. 15) tabulates the disjunctions between some pairs of opposed positions among christological schools of thought. The second one (on p. 182) compares some myths in terms of two opposed symbols (plus and minus) assessing some points of difference.

These tables also suggest what he means by systems being “fractal” (p. 7): each system “can be isolated as an ‘ideal object’ formed through binary switches” (p. 74, emphasis added. Binary switches are the “on/off” switches that constitute the main hardware components in computer programming.) This suggests that Couliano may be studying the possibility of a program for constructing a “tree” of computational operators whose operands may be found in historical data on gnostic myths: he is trying to construct a “tree of gnosis” of which one fruit may turn out to be modern nihilism.

If Landas readers are curious about Couliano’s interest in fractals, they will find answers in Peitgen’s and Richter’s book where they will see 88 beautiful pictures in full color, generated by computer graphics based on fractal systems. They will be astounded by designs of unpredictable artistry, resembling the interlacing lines on petals or the dream-like clouds of galaxies and planetary systems, unfolding in the repetitive operations of simple rules. These rules are as simple as the number “two,” whose two integer components interact with each other in dazzling variety. Strangely, this variety also includes peculiar interactions that become more and more chaotic.

Chaotic is the impression that this reviewer gets from Couliano’s chapter 11 on modern nihilism: it reveals the impossibility of clarifying the anticipated “mechanism” (p. xvi) mentioned in the Foreword. If this chaotic impossibility can be critically validated, it may confirm the heuristic utility of Couliano’s fractal method for analyzing gnostic myths and the consequences of their dualistic trait. Some dualistic interaction lead to order and beauty, and others to chaos. Thus there are two classes of interactions: if each class can be determined and identified, the identification can lead to an understanding of duality as a source both of good fruits and evil fruits.

Alternatively, Western duality, abstractly conceived, may itself be replaced by the Asian notion of advaita or “non-duality.” Is duality then to be replaced by unity? by trinity? by trinity-in-unity? These questions are recommended for further investigation in the context of Couliano’s fractal analogies.

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