Symbolic Loss, Memory, and Modernization in the Reception of Gnosticism

Matthew J. Dillon

Rice University

mjdillon@rice.edu

Abstract

Social scientist of religion Peter Homans has demonstrated that symbolic loss, cultural memory, and modernization are tightly intertwined. As a consequence of modernization, Western culture has lost a shared relationship to the symbols of its Christian past, leading to religious mourning. This article demonstrates that the category gnosticism opened up an imaginative possibility for individuals to reinterpret the cultural memory of the Christian past and achieve rapprochement with the tradition. The argument proceeds through case studies of psychologist Carl Jung, visionary artist Laurence Caruana, and public speaker Jonathan Talat Phillips. Each case exhibits how symbolic loss of the Christian tradition throws the individual into a period of inner turmoil. When each of them read ancient gnostic texts, they do so to reinterpret the symbols of Christianity, specifically Christ, in ways that respond to forces of modernization. The article concludes that popular and religious interpretations of the ancient gnostics should be recognized as attempts by those who lost Christianity in the West to re-envision its cultural memory and reimagine Christianity in the present.

Keywords

Gnosticism – Nag Hammadi Library – Cultural Memory – Psychoanalysis – Modernization – Jesus

As Karen King has demonstrated, the category “gnosticism” was discursively constructed in a way that helped establish the borders of normative Christianity in the twentieth century.¹ Forms of ancient Christianity outside what became

¹ King 2001, 2003, and 2005.

“orthodoxy” were classified as “gnostic.” As a number of ancient Christian texts were discovered, translated, or published for the larger reading public (e.g., Bruce, Askew, Nag Hammadi, and Tchachos codices), initial popular reception inevitably characterized the texts as gnostic. Gnosticism thus became at once Christian and non-Christian, outside but of the tradition.

This article demonstrates that the category of gnosticism offered a counter-memory of the Christian past used by individuals to respond to what Peter Homans identified as “symbolic loss.”² Homans’s socio-psychological theory of symbolic loss argues that the processes of modernization (i.e., disenchantment, rationalization, and pluralization) destroyed the self-evident nature of the Christian symbolic order in the West.³ Western culture lacks a meaningful and publically shared relationship to the Christian past.⁴ Certain individuals experience this transition from participation in the Christian symbolic order to de-idealization in a single lifetime, leading to symbolic loss.⁵ This article argues that individuals experiencing symbolic loss of Christianity use the counter-memory opened by gnosticism to achieve rapprochement with the Christian tradition and re-idealize its past. The process in which individuals experiencing symbolic loss reinterpret and achieve rapprochement with the tradition is referred to as religious “mourning.” Significantly, such individuals often misread the ancient gnostic texts themselves, but do so in ways that respond directly to the conditions of modernization that had destroyed the self-evident nature of the Christian symbolic order.

After an explanation of Homans’s theory of symbolic loss and the process of mourning, this article demonstrates its argument through case studies of three individuals: Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961), Canadian-Austrian visionary artist Laurence Caruana (1962–), and American public speaker Jonathan Talat Phillips (1975–). As we shall see, each individual experiences a process of mourning for the Christian tradition and utilizes the gnostic texts to offer creative reinterpretations of these symbols and achieve rapprochement with the tradition.

2 On symbolic loss, see Homans 2000a, 2000b and 2008. In earlier writings, Homans used the term mourning to refer to the loss of a tradition or ideal as well as the process by which one overcomes symbolic loss through reinterpretation and rapprochement with it. See: Homans 1984 and 1989. Later theorists use the term mourning to encapsulate both the loss and the process. See Parsons 2008a, 2008b, and 2013; Carlin 2014. In this article, I used the term symbolic loss to refer explicitly to the loss of a religious tradition due to the effects of modernization. I use “mourning” to encapsulate the *process* in which individuals respond to symbolic loss with reinterpretation and achieve rapprochement.

3 Homans 1989, 26–27; Homans 2008, 16–20 & 40–41.

4 Homans 1989, 297–312.

5 Homans 1989, 115–120, 145–150; Homans 2000a, 22–40; Homans 2008, 20–42.

Symbolic Loss and the Process of Mourning

Peter Homans's theory of symbolic loss elucidates the psychological impact of modernization. On his reading, before the advent of modernity, Western culture shared a "sacred canopy" of symbolic meanings: a symbolic order.⁶ Religious meanings and interpretations of the world were publically shared and accepted. Psychoanalytically speaking, religion here marks a set of idealizations of shared symbols and values (e.g. Jesus, the Catholic Church, the Bible) that speak to the narcissistic sector of the personality.⁷ Participating in a world of shared symbolic meanings—what Talcott Parsons refers to as the "common culture"—ensured individuals' unconscious needs for idealization, identity, and attachment would be satisfied.⁸ This common culture was oriented towards a particular cultural memory of the Christian past.⁹

With the advent of scientific explanations of the external world, pluralization, and rationalization, the self-evident nature of these publically shared meanings was lost.¹⁰ Traditional meanings of religious symbols became unstable and Christianity had to compete with alternative interpretations of the world. The religious past could no longer be used as an unquestioned source of orientation. For some, the impact of these consequences of modernity is acutely felt. Raised with a sense that the Christian symbolic order is completely real, individuals experience these processes in a single lifetime, leading to de-idealization and symbolic loss.¹¹

In psychoanalytic terms, symbolic loss is the sudden deprivation of a symbol—a person or place, but also a cultural symbol, ideal, or value—that had been attached to and reinforces the structure of a person's identity.¹² A sense of anxiety, instability, and identity-confusion arises from symbolic loss.¹³ The unconscious needs met through idealizations and identifications

6 Berger 1967.

7 Homans 1989, 19; Parsons 2008a, 63–64.

8 Homans 1989, 119 & 126; Parsons 1964, 21.

9 Homans 1989, 4–5 and 297–312; Homans 2008, 16–18. I use cultural memory in the sense designated by Jan and Aleida Assmann in a number of works. See J. Assmann 1997, 2011; J. Assmann and Livingstone 2006; A. Assmann 2011.

10 Homans 1989, 26; Homans 2000, 231–233; Homans 2008, 18–20.

11 Homans 2008, 13–41.

12 Homans 2008, 18–20. See also Homans 2000a, 20: "symbolic loss refers to the loss of an attachment to a political ideology or religious creed . . . and to the inner work of coming to terms with this kind of loss. In this sense it resembles mourning. However, in the case of symbolic loss the object that is lost is, ordinarily, sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective."

13 Homans 1989, 126. Identity-confusion refers to a state in which the ego becomes incapable of synthesizing self-understanding with the variety of roles played in the social

with the common culture in an experience-distant manner are left unmet.¹⁴ Divorced from the common culture, individuals may experience a drastic psychological regression.¹⁵ In this phase, what Homans calls “analytic access,” or the capacity to introspect oneself *outside* the common culture, becomes pivotal.¹⁶ Introspection of anomic activity such as dreams is commonplace, and it is not uncommon for the loosed unconscious contents to erupt into hallucinations, visions, or “unchurched” mystical experiences.¹⁷ Crucially, the symbolic loss of a religion may be compensated for by another, smaller sub-culture, such as a professional association.¹⁸ When no such compensation arises an individual may feel alienated and withdraw from the culture to focus on their inner world.¹⁹

The mourning process encapsulates early attachment, de-idealization, symbolic loss, and the outcome of symbolic loss.²⁰ Mourning may lead only to resignation and moving on from the tradition.²¹ However, in a successful mourning process, the individual achieves a new sense of self that heals trauma from personal history in addition to rapprochement with the religion.²² Rapprochement is accomplished through the “re-creation of meaning.”²³ In the recreation of meaning, individuals produce reinterpretations of the “lost” symbol that are meaningful to their new self-understanding achieved with analytic access. The individual is then able to re-idealize and re-attach to the symbols of religion and its past *without* accepting the commonplace meanings of them.²⁴ Significantly, the reinterpretations adapt Christian symbols to the forces of modernization—pluralization, rationalization, and

environment. Reciprocity between self-identity and social identity/identities is lost. See Erikson 1968, 211–221.

14 Parsons 2008b, 102; Parsons 2013, 143–146.

15 Parsons 2013, 143; Homans 1989, 122–128.

16 Homans 1989, 5, 126–127.

17 Parsons 2008b, 102.

18 Homans 1989, 115–128, 139–142, and 336–338.

19 Homans 1989, 112, 126, and 150; Parsons 2013, 142–146.

20 Homans 1989, 306–307; Homans 2008, 18.

21 Homans 2000a, 20; Homans 2008, 18.

22 The literature on the link between childhood relationships to parents and ones’ concept of and capacity to relate to God is extensive. See especially: Freud 1964; Kakar 1978 and 1991; Obeyesekere 1981; Kripal 1995; Parsons 2013, 102–132. A useful overview can be found in Merkur 2014, 81–114. On how introspective activity can heal early relational trauma and the impact this has on personal concepts of God, see Erikson 1962; Rizzuto 1979; Obeyesekere 1990, 1–28; Jones 1991, 68–110; Merkur 2014, 155–179.

23 Homans 2008, 14–20.

24 Homans 1984, 142–154; Homans 1989, 150–152, 326–343; Homans 2000b; Homans 2008.

disenchantment—that led to symbolic loss of the Christian tradition in the West.²⁵ In sum:

The Process of Mourning: Attachment → De-idealization → Symbolic Loss and Analytic Access → Reinterpretation → Recreation of Meaning and Rapprochement.

Jung, Caruana, and Phillips offer “extreme cases” of this phenomenon.²⁶ Each of them experience the full process of mourning for the Christian tradition, and in doing so, they show the role gnosticism plays in responding to a symbolic loss of the Christian tradition in the West. In the case studies below, the process of mourning will be divided into three stages: (1) early attachment and subsequent de-idealization; (2) symbolic loss and reinterpretations of Jesus; and (3) the recreation of meaning that responds to the forces of modernization.

Carl Jung

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung is the paradigmatic case of religious mourning. Homans and William Parsons have each analyzed his life and thought in terms of mourning for the religious past.²⁷ In light of the newly published *The Red Book* these analyses can be extended.²⁸ Specifically, Jung’s mourning for the Christian tradition is essential to understanding *The Red Book*, and his reinterpretations of Christ during what he called his “confrontation with the unconscious” are through gnostic texts. Jung’s later theoretical writings recreate meaning by showing how a gnostic approach to Christ can revivify the symbol for modernity.

Early Attachment and De-idealization

As the son of a village parson, Jung was raised amidst theological conversations and formal Christianity.²⁹ The symbols of God and Jesus play a central role in his inner world as a child and adolescent. Jung was obsessed with the theology of God, the Trinity, and grace from a precocious age. The emotional

25 Homans 1989, 326–343; Homans 2008, 38–41; Parsons 2013, 143–146.

26 James 2002, 26.

27 Homans 1979; Homans 1989, 141–152; Parsons 2008b, 105–107.

28 Jung 2009.

29 Jung 1989; There are an enormous number of biographies on Jung. The best include: Shamdasani 2005, Wehr 1987, and Bair 2003.

dimension of this attachment is apparent in experiences such as his feeling comforted by his nightly prayer to Jesus and his sense of enchantment in the presence of a Cathedral.³⁰

By the time he was a teenager he began to de-idealize the tradition due to a series of dreams, fantasies, readings of Nietzsche, and his father's own vagueness in religious matters. Paradigmatic here are the "cathedral fantasy" and his experience of confirmation. In the cathedral fantasy, after Jung experienced an emotional buildup of internal pressure, God himself suddenly defecated on the cathedral of Jung's inner vision.³¹ Jung interpreted this as a signal that God could be approached outside of the vessel of the church. Similarly, during Jung's confirmation his father confessed that he did not understand the Trinity. When he took his first communion, Jung was astonished to feel absolutely nothing—much less an experience of participation with the divine.³² Without a connection to the Christian symbolic order, his narcissistic needs for idealization, identity, and attachment were met first through his work as a medical student and psychologist, then later as Freud's appointed heir in the psychoanalytic association.³³

Jung's narcissistic idealization and merger with Freud was lost, however, after publication of his *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*.³⁴ In this book, Jung gave the first major psychoanalytic interpretation of religion, concluding that all religious myths (including especially Jesus's death and resurrection) were at their core symbolic representations of a psychoanalytic process. Specifically, he concluded all religions and myths at their base represent when an individual regresses through introversion into a pre-oedipal phase in order to release libido cathected in the early mother-son relationship.³⁵ Jung refers to this as the "hero's journey."³⁶ Symbolically, this is the hero's descent into the underworld, defeat of the dragon, and return to the social world for moral action. Freud was dismayed at Jung's distortion of his own libido theory

30 Jung 1989, 10 and 36.

31 Jung 1989, 39.

32 Homans 1979, 148–151; Parsons 2008b, 105–107; Jung 1989, 52–55.

33 Jung 1989, 146–169; Wehr 1987, 96–160.

34 Homans 1979, 29–56 and 111–114.

35 Jung and Hinkle 1916.

36 Jung and Hinkle 1916. Note that although Joseph Campbell would later utilize Jung to construct his own theory of the "hero's journey" monomyth, he and Jung depart on a number of points. Most notably, Campbell's approach only tangentially touched on issues of unconscious mentation, symbolization, and psychodynamic healing, which for Jung are paramount. Campbell does attempt to read a mythic dimension into the development of self, but this is not psychoanalytic in any technical sense. See Campbell 1972.

and desire to turn psychoanalysis into a religion.³⁷ It is essential to note that the central symbols under analysis in *Wandlungen* were Mithras and Christ. Jung's desire to revivify the symbol of Christ through psychology shows he had begun to seek rapprochement with the religion.

Symbolic Loss and Reinterpretations of Christ

When Jung's relationship to Freud ended, his needs for idealization, attachment, and identification went unmet. He greatly reduced the number of patients he saw, resigned from the psychoanalytic association, stepped down as editor of the *Jahrbuch*, and abandoned his post as *Privatdozent* at the University of Zurich.³⁸ Unconscious contents erupted. Jung was plagued with anxiety and beset with rage. He experienced disturbing symbolic dreams (such as the "sarcophagi" dream) and recurring visions (the countryside coated in blood).³⁹ In terms of this article, these anomic activities—dreams, visions, and uncontrollable emotions—are precisely what would be expected as a consequence of symbolic loss.⁴⁰ These anomic activities inspire a period of intense analytic access. Jung himself makes this clear by calling the 1912–1916 period of his life a "confrontation with the unconscious."⁴¹

In order to understand these eruptions of unconscious content, Jung developed a technique he called "active imagination."⁴² He would sit in a chair, eyes closed, and let his mind produce fantasies without interference. His experiments and dreams were recorded in narrative form in *The Black Books* and later transferred in handsome calligraphy and paintings into *The Red Book*. Each dream or vision is first presented in bare narrative form and followed by Jung's own interpretation of its meaning. *The Red Book* is divided into three sections: *Liber Primus*, *Liber Secundus*, and *Scrutinies*. At the beginning of these experiments Jung began to question his relationship to Christianity.⁴³ "In what myth does man live nowadays? In the Christian myth, the answer

37 Freud and Jung 1974, 293–296; Jung 1916.

38 See: Jung 1989, 167–168 and 193; Jung 2009, 333; Freud and Jung 1974, 550 and 551. On analytic access leading to a general withdrawal from the common culture to focus on introspection, see: Homans 1989, 112, 126, 150; Parsons 2013, 142–146.

39 Jung and McGuire 1989, 172–173, 175–176.

40 Homans 1989, 24; Parson 2008b, 102.

41 Jung 1963, 174, "Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Unbewußten." It should be noted Homans's own theorizing about mourning and individuation found first expression in his celebrated book on Jung. See Homans 1979, 115–132.

42 Jung 1997.

43 Jung 1989, 171.

might be, “Do you live in it?” I asked myself. To be honest, the answer was no.”⁴⁴ Jesus would become the primary figure of *The Red Book*.⁴⁵

In *Liber Primus*, Jung symbolically experiences the dying-rising myth of the hero he outlined in *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*. Jung descends into the underworld, murders the false hero, conquers the snake, and becomes deified. It is here Jung is transformed into the Mithraic Chronos and identified as “Christ” by Salome.⁴⁶ Immediately Jung sees Elijah transformed in light, an apparent reference to the transfiguration.⁴⁷ Jung has clearly begun to identify with Christ.

Liber Secundus and *Scrutinies* are where Jung’s new psychological theory of individuation, his reinterpretation of Christ, and his readings of gnostic texts first appear.⁴⁸ All three points are related. In book two, Jung encounters his “Devil,” pines for and finally reconnects with his “soul” or “Eros,” is taught by Philemon, and experiences the birth of his new god-image, Helios.⁴⁹ These images would translate directly into his psychological typology of the Shadow, Anima, Wise Old Man and the Self archetypes.⁵⁰ For instance, Jung’s “Devil” persuades him that evil and the desire for joy are a fundamental part of the human psyche that cannot be repressed without imbalance.⁵¹ His “Devil” informs him appetites and instincts have to be integrated into the personality so that they do not overpower the ego.⁵² Similarly, Jung wants Philemon to teach him “magic.” Philemon chides him that magic cannot be learned—only rational, discursive, logical formulations can be passed on. Magic is an opening to the irrational.⁵³ These ideas would be theorized in Jung’s doctrine of individuation as integration of inferior functions.⁵⁴

44 Jung 1989, 171.

45 Sonu Shamdasani, “Jung After the Red Book.” Symposium given at The Jung Center, Houston, TX, April 20–21, 2011.

46 Jung 2009, 251–252. This imagination was not published in Jung 1989. It was published in Jung and McGuire 1989, 94–97.

47 Matthew 17:1–13.

48 Jung began researches into gnostic texts in 1914 with Dieterich 1891 and the writings of G.R.S. Mead (Mead 1896; Mead 1900; Mead 1987), with whom he started a correspondence that would last until Mead’s death in 1933. See Jung 2009, 264 n. 29.

49 For the “Devil”: Jung 2009, 259–261, 277–279, and 317–320; For “Eros”: 298–299, 323–328; For Philemon: 327–331, 333–359; For Helios and the Self: 327–330.

50 Jung 1956, 182–254; Jung 1978, 1–35.

51 Jung 2009, 259–261.

52 Jung 2009, 322–323. Jung would theorize this idea in Jung 1957 and 1978.

53 Jung 2009, 314.

54 Jung and McGuire, 1989, 67–91.

As Jung developed his theory of individuation he began a radical reinterpretation of Christ. In one imagination he stumbles upon a library to read *The Imitation of Christ*. The librarian chides him for his superstitions. Jung responds: "You know that I value science extraordinarily highly. But there are actually moments in life where science also leaves us empty and sick... We haven't come to an end with Christianity by simply putting it aside. It seems to me that there's more to it than we see."⁵⁵ In this quote, Jung expresses symbolic loss wrought by rationalization. Science leaves one "empty and sick," void the objects that had previously given values and meaning.

Theodicy presented a stumbling block towards reinterpreting the symbol of Christ. Christ denied the animal nature Jung met in his Devil. At this point, Jung has a fantasy:

I saw the black serpent, as it wound itself upward around the wood of the cross. It crept into the body of the crucified and emerged again transformed from his mouth. It had become white. It wound itself around the head of the dead one like a diadem, and a light gleamed above his head, and the sun rose shining in the east.⁵⁶

This imagination expresses symbolic loss and reinterpretation. Jesus, dead on the cross, is literally a lifeless god. He is entered through the mouth by the black snake. The snake symbolizes evil and rebirth throughout *The Red Book*.⁵⁷ Theophagy itself is a recurring theme as well, a means of sacrificing a god and ingesting its power.⁵⁸ Christ's ingestion of the snake is thus the incorporation of evil and the unconscious that leads to renewal. This is the first depiction of the integration of evil and darkness into the symbol of Christ in Jung's writings.

Jung began to read accounts of the gnostics in late 1914, first through Albrecht Dieterich's study of *Abraxas*, and soon thereafter through the writings of G.R.S. Mead, with whom Jung developed a correspondence that would

⁵⁵ Jung 2009, 292.

⁵⁶ Jung 2009, 309–310.

⁵⁷ "The Devil is the sum of the darkness of human nature. He who lives in the light strives toward being the image of God; he who lives in the dark strives toward the image of the Devil. Because I wanted to live in the light, the sun went out for me when I touched the depths. It was dark and serpentlike. I united myself with it and did not overpower it... If I had not become like the serpent, the Devil, the quintessence of everything serpentlike, would have held this bit of power over me." Jung 2009, 322.

⁵⁸ Jung 2009, 290–1 and 342.

last until Mead's death in 1933.⁵⁹ Jung creatively interpreted the writings of the ancient gnostics to produce a new conception of Christ that fit Jung's own developing psychology of individuation. He portrays this through what he calls "the dead." The dead personify two things in *The Red Book*: (1) aspects of the unconscious that were incapable of being integrated into the personality due to the Christian emphasis on light, and (2) the literal dead of the past whose belief in orthodox Christianity had left them in limbo. These dead are represented as ghosts wandering the afterlife seeking knowledge that will provide their salvation.⁶⁰

In "Seven Sermons to the Dead," found in the *Scrutinies*, Jung presents a gnostic doctrine of God.⁶¹ Delivered by Philemon and written under the pseudonym Basilides, the sermon preaches a new God: Abraxas.⁶² For Jung, Abraxas is the personification of the Pleroma. He is the generator of Helios and Satan, the Summum Bonum and Infinium Malum, or the principles of light and darkness.⁶³ All that is light he compensates with darkness, and all that is darkness he injects with light. The Pleroma itself more closely resembles an idea from Hippolytus's version of Basilides, particularly the "non-existent, many formed, all empowering seed of the world."⁶⁴ It is the "Ground" as a dialectical monism: simultaneously fullness and emptiness, everything and nothingness, motion and stillness, life and death.⁶⁵ God-as-Pleroma here is reinterpreted as the matrix of all psychological potentials in dynamic balance. The Self is the personification of the Pleroma that integrates light and dark, good and evil into its horizon of consciousness. At the conclusion of the sermon, the dead recognize they have heard knowledge granting salvation. They then "ascended like smoke."⁶⁶

Jung attributes the first recognition that Christ had to be counterbalanced and integrated with the Devil to the gnostics. In the final passage of *The Red*

59 Jung's researches into gnostic texts began with Dieterich 1891 and writings of Mead, with whom he started a correspondence that would last until Mead's death in 1933. In *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* Jung cites teachings of Hermes from Corp. herm. 4, but no references to Christian gnostics can be found. See Jung 2009, 264 n. 29. On Mead and Jung, see Goodrick-Clarke 2005, 27–31.

60 The dead are a common theme. See Jung 2009, 342.

61 Jung 2009, 346–356. Previously in Jung and Segal 1992, 182–193; Hoeller 1982, 44–59.

62 Jung's encounter with Abraxas was through Dieterich 1891. See Jung 2009, 264 n. 29.

63 Jung 2009, 350.

64 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.22.16 Appears in Greek in Jung 1978, 66: "οὐκ ὄν σπέρμα τοῦ κόσμου πολύμορφον ὁμοῦ καὶ πολυούσιον." Translation mine.

65 Jung 2009, 347.

66 Jung 2009, 347.

Book Christ enters the garden of Simon Magus and Helen. Simon tells Christ that “Men have changed. They are no longer the slaves and no longer the swindlers of the Gods and no longer mourn in your name.”⁶⁷ That is to say, the individualism and humanism brought by modernity challenged traditional modes of relating to Christ. In order to become an object for them once again, Jesus must recognize his oneness with the Devil. “[Satan] came before you, whom you recognize as your brother . . . recognize, Oh master and beloved, that your nature is also of the serpent. Were you not raised on the tree like the serpent?”⁶⁸ Have you laid aside your body, like the serpent its skin? . . . [D]id you not go to Hell before your ascent? And did you not see your brother there, who was shut away in the abyss?”⁶⁹ In other words, Simon convinces Christ that he needs the Devil/Antichrist in order to function as a symbol of wholeness for the men of this age. In Jung’s interpretation, the gnostic Christ becomes meaningful for modernity as a paradigm of the process of descent into suffering, the incorporation of evil, and ultimate apotheosis as a symbol of the Self.

Recreation of Meaning and Rapprochement with Christianity

The Red Book was not published until 2009. As such, these fresh interpretations of Christ and God were initially consolidated into Jung’s *Collected Works*.⁷⁰ As noted above, the interpretations of the Devil, Salome/Eros, and Philemon would be rationalized in his psychological theory of the archetypes.⁷¹ The figure of Christ and Jung’s theory that psychological wholeness was achieved through integration of the unconscious would be theorized directly in the archetype of the Self and his theory of individuation. He detailed his practice of achieving individuation through fantasy and art in “The Transcendent Function,” the first writing he produced after his confrontation with the unconscious.⁷²

Late in his life, however, he published two essays—“Christ as a Symbol of the Self” and “Gnostic Symbols of the Self”—that reproduced interpretations of Christ and his relationship to the psyche in *The Red Book* for the culture at

67 Jung 2009, 359.

68 An apparent reference to John 3:14.

69 Jung 2009, 359.

70 Homans 1979, 161–192.

71 See especially: Jung 1978, 1–35; Jung 1956, 70–99 and 182–253; and Jung 1957. Several scholars have analyzed how the “confrontation of the unconscious” became theorized in Jung’s psychology. See Homans 1979; Hannah 1991; Shamdasani 2009; Hillman and Shamdasani 2013.

72 Jung and McGuire 1991, 67–91.

large. He avers that Western culture has to reconnect to the symbol of Christ: “[Christ] is still the living myth of our culture . . . He is in us and we in him.”⁷³ Yet individuals have lost the capacity to be transformed by the symbol. Jung argues that this inability is due to orthodox Christian theology having denied existence to evil with the doctrine of *privatio boni*. Jung thus makes a *historical* argument to support his *psychological* theory.

Jung thought the ancient gnostic writings, including the by then discovered Nag Hammadi Library, exhibit how the symbol of Christ is experienced by the unconscious as a drive towards individuation. After reading *The Jung Codex* in 1955, Jung became enamored with the Gospel of Truth.⁷⁴ For Jung, the Gospel of Truth shows Christ descends as a revealer to awaken the unconscious individual from their stupor as a symbol of the Self.⁷⁵ This spontaneous experience of this symbol of the Self reorients the psyche teleologically towards achievement of psychic wholeness, as depicted in imagery of magnetic attraction in the Naasenes and Peratae.⁷⁶ The gnostic Christ already contained both poles: light and dark, good and evil.⁷⁷ Moreover, once confronted by a symbol of the Self in Christ, the unconscious naturally assimilates comparable symbols within the culture, just as in the Naasene sermon (e.g., Attis, Adonis, Osiris, Adam, Korybas) or today in symbols like *Atman* or the *tao*.⁷⁸ Like Basilides's Christ, the Self arising into consciousness would differentiate the previously unconscious contents in order to integrate them into awareness.⁷⁹ Finally, as in the Naasene sermon, after Christ awakens the inner, spiritual man, he opens the door through which that man is transformed into their own integrated Self: the Anthropos.⁸⁰

73 Jung 1978, 36.

74 See Jung and Segal 1992, 97–100. A multi-lingual translation of the Gospel of Truth, then entitled *Evangelium Veritatis*, was produced by Jung's dear friend Gilles Quispel, as well as H.C. Peuch and Michael Malinine. It is this edition Jung was familiar with. See Mainline, Puech, Quispel 1956.

75 Jung and Segal 1992, 98–99. Jung was presented with a translation of the Jung Codex in advance of the commemoration held for him in 1956.

76 Jung 1979, 185–186, quoting Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.9 and 5.17 Jung refers to *Haer.* by its alternate title, *Elenchus*.

77 Jung 1959, 64–66. See Hippolytus *Haer.* 7.20–27.

78 Jung 1959, 199.

79 Jung 1978, 64; Hippolytus *Haer.* 7.27.

80 Jung 1978, 212; Hippolytus *Haer.* 5.8.

Laurence Caruana

Visionary artist and author Laurence Caruana is one of the most productive contemporary gnostics. He has written extensively on the Nag Hammadi Codices, producing two major works: *Enter through the Image*, a philosophical study of ancient epistemology as he sees it; and *The Hidden Passion: A Novel of the Gnostic Christ Based on the Nag Hammadi Texts*.⁸¹ He founded and runs the Vienna Academy of Visionary Art.⁸² Recently, he has begun work on a series of paintings that depict paradigmatic scenes from gnostic mythologoumena (e.g. the Anointing of the Christos, the Five Seals, and the Bridal Chamber) planned for a gnostic chapel in the southwest of France. Like Jung, his interest in gnostic texts is prompted by the de-idealization and symbolic loss of the Christianity of his upbringing. His encounter with ancient gnostic texts allowed him to reinterpret the Christian symbolic by embracing pluralism, sacralizing the psyche, re-enchanting the cosmos, and incorporating the divine feminine.

Early Attachment and De-idealization

Born in Toronto, Caruana was raised by Catholic parents who had immigrated from Malta.⁸³ As he describes it, the symbolic universe of Catholicism—Jesus's bodily dying and rising, the Trinity, Heaven and Hell—was self-evidently true to him. The Bible recounted sacred history, and the statues and rituals of the mass had genuine power. Even as he took a degree in Philosophy at the University of Toronto, he never brought his faith under critical analysis.

Unfortunately, both in his published materials and in interview, Caruana is silent about what precisely caused his de-idealization and loss of attachment.⁸⁴ It is inarguable, however, that this occurred. After graduating from college what he calls a "dark period" set in. As he remembers it, "beginning in my mid-twenties, I entered a period of instability on all levels: financially, professionally, and in personal relationships. *My former worldview collapsed and I basically became an atheist*. This dark period last for about seven years, with each new conflict plunging me deeper into the world of dreams, memories,

81 Caruana 2007 and 2009.

82 <http://academyofvisionaryart.com/>.

83 Unless otherwise indicated, all details on Caruana's biography are from Caruana, e-mail message to author, Sept. 14, 2015 and skype interview, Oct. 1, 2015.

84 Interviews include: Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015, and skype interview with author, Oct. 1, 2015. Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio Shows "What Would the Ministry of a Gnostic Jesus Look Like?" and "Secret Rituals in Gnostic Myths"; and Mental Contagion Interview 2002.

and the unconscious (emphasis mine).⁸⁵ In my interviews with him, Caruana expressed that during this period “the Catholic framework of faith which I’d inherited through my upbringing had been abandoned, and I was rationally an atheist.”⁸⁶ Even today, self-identifying as a gnostic-Christian, he tries to avoid use of the name Jesus, which in his estimation has become “disgusting” due to the terrible associations it has gained as part of “traditional religion.”⁸⁷ In such quotes, Caruana describes the shift from idealization to de-idealization and symbolic loss: a sense of alienation from the common culture (professional, personal, and religious), a loss of identity and psychological stability, the incapacity to idealize religious symbols, and the advent of “analytic access” with his interest in dreams and released unconscious contents.⁸⁸

Symbolic Loss and Reinterpretations of Christ

During his “dark period,” Caruana lived a peripatetic life in Vienna (1989–1990), Malta (1992–1994), and Munich (1994–1997), before settling in Paris. Given that Caruana is unfamiliar with Homans’s theory of mourning, it is remarkable how the “dark period” he describes conforms to a period of symbolic loss and analytic access. The seven-year period plunged Caruana deeper and “deeper into the world of dreams, memories, and the unconscious.” While in Malta, Caruana notes he “experienced a complete breakdown which allowed me to finally remember buried childhood memories and heal them.”⁸⁹ In terms of symbolic loss, the location of this breakthrough is important. Malta is his ancestral homeland. Living and working in Malta, he experienced a reconnection with his cultural roots and was daily confronted by its Catholic imagery.

Early on in his “dark period,” Caruana began to dream of Christ. In his words:

In my dreams, the figure of Christ re-emerged, but significantly different from the one acquired through my Catholic upbringing. This was the symbol, archetype or eternal image of Christ, which had no physical or bodily existence. Through my reading, I interpreted this image of Christ as a mythic figure, the Christian version of the “ever-dying and rising savior.”⁹⁰

85 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

86 Caruana, e-mail interview with author Sept. 18, 2015.

87 Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio Show, “What Would a Ministry of the Gnostic Jesus Look Like?”

88 See note 19.

89 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

90 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

Soon thereafter, reading Kazantzaki's *The Last Temptation of Christ* inspired Caruana to consider Jesus as a man struggling with the appetites and fears of the flesh in order to recognize divinity within.⁹¹ It was then, wrestling with the nature of Christ, that Caruana encountered gnostic texts. He read the first edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion*, Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*, and Hippolytus's *Refutatio* in 1989.⁹² Caruana was drawn to the gnostics as Christian heretics whose belief and practice responded to a lack in Catholicism: visionary gnosis, the creation of new gospels in light of gnosis, the sacred feminine, and rites and sacraments that produced genuine transformation. "All in all, the Gnostic texts revitalized my interest in Christianity and blew a breath of fresh air into my spiritual outlook."⁹³ For example, Caruana found a parallel for the two states of Christ he had found in dreams and literature needing to be reconciled in the pre-existent image of the anointed and earthly Jesus in texts such as the Tripartite Tractate.⁹⁴ In theoretical terms, the combination of dreams, literature, and the Nag Hammadi codices provided a means for Caruana to begin to re-idealize the symbol of Jesus again.

During his period of intense symbolic loss, Caruana had a series of mystical experiences.⁹⁵ One of these in particular he identifies as *gnosis*. One afternoon, after having smoked hashish and sitting in his painting studio, he suddenly felt as though

For the first time, I felt a genuine religious or mystical awakening with profound and life-altering consequences. I had a direct experience of Divinity beyond any categories or points of reference given to me in my life thus far. It came as a revelation, of the sudden remembrance of who I was, where I came from, and where I would return after death. I experienced the Divine Presence as a unity, as the unified and ever-present source of all things, and I too was now a knowing particle of that Oneness,

91 Kazantzakis 1960.

92 Robinson 1981, Jonas 1963. In our interview, Caruana states he made copies of Irenaeus and Hippolytus at the local library, though it is unclear what edition he consulted.

93 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

94 Tri. Trac. NHC I,5 86.23–87.17 and 114.32–115.30.

95 On mystical experiences as not uncommon in periods of analytic access, see Parsons 2008b, 102; Parsons 2013, 143. Significantly, but as would be expected after completing the process of mourning, Caruana notes that these experiences essentially stopped at the end of his "dark period." Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

though that knowledge and experience had remained unknown and inaccessible to me for most of my life.⁹⁶

After this experience, the *Nag Hammadi Library* became the centerpiece of Caruana's religious quest: "It was [after this experience] that many texts from the Nag Hammadi Library acquired a new level of meaning, a whole new series of resonances with known and lived experience."⁹⁷ The consolidation of these reinterpretations in a new system of meanings is found in his *The Hidden Passion*.

Recreation of Meaning and Rapprochement with Christianity

Immediately after the above-quoted experience, Caruana began work on *Enter through the Image*, titled after a passage in The Gospel of Philip.⁹⁸ Essentially, Caruana's new epistemology is as follows: the divine source, "the One," emanates itself first in archetypes (such as the Self archetype), then cultural symbols (such as Jesus), and last in human minds and lives.⁹⁹ Humans can come to reconnect with the divine source of all through forms of symbolic thinking, such as meditating on a cultural symbol, reflecting on one's life as an expression of mythic prototypes, and through interpretation of dreams. This language of images Caruana dubs "iconologic." By understanding iconologic, individuals can "enter through the image" to realize identity with the One.¹⁰⁰ Crucially, these symbols can be borrowed, displaced, or combined from different cultures to achieve *gnosis* since all of them are ultimately expressions of the One. In Caruana's view, this ancient image language was lost when modernity became excessively logocentric.

In his novel *The Hidden Passion* Caruana creates a new vision of Jesus that would simultaneously allow him to *identify* with a gnostic Christ while also *idealizing* him as a superior being. This novel features what Caruana felt Catholicism lacked: gnosis, transformative rites and sacraments, and a goddess. Moreover, his Jesus functions as a mythic paradigm for each individual's own process of reconciling the two dimensions of humanity, the body and the divine.

Before composing the novel, Caruana began what he calls the "Gnostic Q" project. This morphological project identified themes and symbols common

96 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

97 Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Sept. 18, 2015.

98 Gos. Phil. NHC II,3 67.17.

99 Caruana 2009. See especially 1–40.

100 Caruana 2009, 36, 291–293.

in gnostic texts, such as baptism, revealer, and light, and collected them into an index.¹⁰¹ The novel enacts Caruana's iconologic by arranging these symbols along the mythic path of Jesus's "hero's journey" that the individual reader can identify with.¹⁰² Furthermore, Caruana collected all theological statements from revealer figures in gnostic texts, including Zostrianos, Allogenes, and Seth and places them in the mouth of Jesus in the novel.

Beginning with Jesus's "separation" from his mother Mary by edict of Joseph, the novel follows Jesus in his "call" when the monastery he is being trained in identifies him as Messiah, followed by his "dark night of the soul" as he fails to incite a political rebellion on Yaltabaoth's orders. With a broken arm and in despair verging on madness, he describes feeling the 360 demons moving his body and sees the archons controlling all of time and space.¹⁰³ With his best friend Judas and his love interest Mary Magdalene, Jesus encounters John the Baptist at the river Jordan. John baptizes him three times. In the first, Jesus is healed and the demons are dispelled from his body. In the second, he is rendered luminous. In the third, he is granted his secret name, "Yesseus Mazareus Yessedekus."¹⁰⁴

Caruana's depictions of the baptisms operate on two levels. The baptisms are an enactment in time of the initial moments of the Barbelo theogony, where the Son is born from the Father and Barbelo, light is poured upon him, and he turns towards the father as his image in the watery light.¹⁰⁵ Jesus here is a paradigm of the realization of the divine image within. On the second level, Jesus is a unique object for idealization. To wit, at the third baptism the "Jordan, his beloved river, began to flow backwards."¹⁰⁶ Everyone present was momentarily blinded by the release of light. John designates Jesus "the Messiah of the Five Seals!"¹⁰⁷

101 <http://www.gnosticq.com/>.

102 Caruana follows Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey and not Jung's version above. See Campbell 1972. Campbell was obviously influenced by Jung in his approach to symbol, myth, and the hero's journey. However, their theories of the "hero's journey" are quite different. Cf. note 36 above. Caruana utilizes many of the mythemes of Campbell's monomyth to structure the account of Jesus, for example "the call to adventure," "refusal of the call," "tests, allies, and enemies," "the ordeal," "the reward," and "the return with the elixir."

103 Caruana 2007, 120–121. The reference is to Ap. John NHC II,1 15.1–19.3.

104 Caruana 2007, 140–44, 170–171.

105 Ap. John NHC II,1 6.15–31.

106 Caruana 2007, 143. Source text Testim. Truth NHC XI, 3 30.20.

107 Caruana 2007, 143.

The remainder of the novel depicts Jesus leading his disciples through spiritual transformation in the rite of the Five Seals. The Five Seals is a ceremony mentioned only in the Three Forms of First Thought, Gospel of the Egyptians, and long recensions of Apocryphon of John.¹⁰⁸ These references are sufficiently vague as to have led to diverse reconstructions from respected scholars.¹⁰⁹ John Turner has posited that the Five Seals is a visionary form of baptism, an interpretation that Caruana follows.¹¹⁰

Utilizing iconologic, Caruana maps these five seals onto the sacraments mentioned in the Valentinian text, the Gospel of Philip: “The lord did everything in a mystery: a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber.”¹¹¹ In order to maintain the hero’s journey narrative, Caruana moves the eucharist to the fourth “seal” and replaces it with the resurrection. Two of these “seals” in particular—the resurrection and the bridal chamber—are necessary to understanding Caruana’s recreation of meaning in Jesus.

Resurrection (ἀνάστασις), the third seal, consists of Jesus and his cousin Arsinoe leading the twelve disciples on a visionary pathworking through the cosmos of the Apocryphon of John: the five sub-lunar realms to discard the body and the seven planetary spheres to discard the passions of the soul. After ascending into the ogdoad, Arsinoe shrieks Yaltabaoth’s name and he explodes. The disciples ascend into the Ennead and are gifted with visions of the Monad as “a foundation of clear, glowing light” and “a mosaic comprised of flawless crystals and glittering gems.”¹¹² Each of the disciples enters into eternity, becoming an aeon in the mind of God.¹¹³ In knowing their own divine Self and entering through the image, each disciple becomes part of the self-consciousness of God. In *Enter through the Image*, Caruana reads the theogony of the Apocryphon of John as parallel to a mental event in which the consciousness of God (embodied in the aeons) is occluded by the passions of the

108 See Three Forms NHC XIII,1 50.9–15; Ap. John NHC II,1 30.11–33; Gos. Eg. NHC III,2 62.24–63.4.

109 For Five Seals as visionary baptism see Turner 1994, 137–149; Layton 1995, 18–19; Burns 2014, 134. For Five Seals as related to chrismation and sealing of the five senses see Logan 1997, 190; Brakke 2010, 73–75. For Five Seals as water baptism, see Sevrin 1986, 37–38.

110 Turner 1994, 137–149. Caruana is aware of and has read Turner’s essay “Ritual in Gnosticism.” Caruana, Skype interview with author, Oct. 1, 2015.

111 ἀπλχοεῖς ῥῶδβ νιμ εἰννογμγστηριον οὐβα[π]τισμα μῆ οὐχρισμα μῆνογχεχαρ[ιστ] ια μῆνογσῶτε μῆνογνγμφωμ, Gos. Phil. NHC II,3 67.27–30. Translation by Isenberg 1989, 177, with slight modification.

112 Caruana 2009, 283–4.

113 Caruana 2009, 284.

soul and the appetites of the body.¹¹⁴ Gnosis is the transcendence of these passions and appetites to recognize the consciousness of God within the self. As such, this is the fictional depiction of Caruana's experience of *gnosis*.

Significantly, Christ remains set apart. In their moment of gnosis the disciples see: "the blinding face of God, whose countenance bore the lineaments of the Son. The smile on the Savior's face was full of compassion; his eyes were closed in half-contemplative bliss. But the Son, they now recognized, bore their own features. They stared at themselves while staring, inexplicably, into the face of God."¹¹⁵ Jesus is therefore the paradigm who each disciples sees themselves in (identification), but as the image of the full countenance of God each disciple is an aeon in *his* mind (idealization).

The bridal chamber, the fifth seal, occurs after the crucifixion. It is the "Hidden Passion" of the title. For Caruana the crucifixion remains central to Christian belief. The Nazarene, "through love and sacrifice... found the path to a higher state of existence, a timeless state 'at one' with the Divine, which transcends our physical and temporal existence."¹¹⁶ Physical and temporal existence is symbolically overcome in the crucifixion. However, neither embodiment nor sexuality is evil for Caruana. This is represented by Jesus's relationship to Mary Magdalene. Mary's journey mirrors Jesus's in the novel. A childhood friend of Jesus, Mary is cast out by her mother. She loses her virginity in Babylon performing the *hieros gamos* rite between Astante and Baal.¹¹⁷ Within the sex-rite she feels "ecstatic"—is set loose from her body—only to "fall" back into herself. When it is over, she is labeled a "whore." She is plagued by visions where she identifies as Helen or Sophia. She is the Christian Goddess.

The reconciliation of the Goddess and the Christ is accomplished in the bridal chamber. After Jesus's crucifixion, Mary is distraught. Then, in a vision, she experiences the resurrected Christ. They kiss, and as they do they ascend through the archonic spheres, light swallows up the abyss, the disciples ascend to marry their holy angel consorts, and the Pleroma is made whole again.¹¹⁸ Caruana depicts here the "restoration" (*ἀποκατάτασις*), a doctrine found in certain Valentinian texts where the fallen aspect of Sophia, Sophia-Achamoth, returns to the Pleroma and thereby ends the need for a separate material

¹¹⁴ Caruana 2009, 95–109.

¹¹⁵ Caruana 2007, 285.

¹¹⁶ Caruana, e-mail interview with author, Oct. 1, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Caruana 2007, 105.

¹¹⁸ Caruana 2007, 408–409.

world.¹¹⁹ In some texts, Sophia can only return by receiving her consort Jesus.¹²⁰ In terms of Caruana's own reinterpretation of Christianity, the syzygy with Mary/Sophia-Achamoth is the unification of the flesh with the spirit or primordial image of the Christ. The seeming end of the evil, hylic world is psychologically the end of the distracting, demonic, tempting aspects of embodiment. The body and spirit are each transformed and reconciled in one another as the image of eternity.

Jonathan Talat Phillips

Jonathan Talat Phillips is a major figure in "consciousness culture," a counter-culture associated with Burning Man and concerned with integrating eco-consciousness, sustainability, technology, and spirituality. Along with author Daniel Pinchbeck, he launched the website Reality Sandwich.¹²¹ He has written and spoken about his return to Christianity through a sequence of religious experiences and readings of the Nag Hammadi codices. In his memoir *The Electric Jesus: The Healing Journey of a Contemporary Gnostic*, Phillips recounts his youth in a Methodist church, his suffering from depression in his teens and twenties, and his healing through an encounter with psychedelics and "the Electric Jesus." Phillips's autobiography as narrated precisely fits the process of mourning.

Early Attachment and De-idealization

Raised Methodist in a small mining town in Colorado, Phillips recalls "hating" church as a child. Nevertheless, Phillips was evidently attached to Christian symbolism and interpreted the world through it.¹²² After watching a violent depiction of the Rapture in film at ten years old, for example, Phillips was plagued with nightmares of Jesus standing "on a mountain of broken, tortured bodies, victoriously holding a sword above his head while surveying the bombed gray landscape around him. Every morning I feared the coming slaughter of the Tribulation."¹²³ His attachment to Christianity was inflected by parental dynamics.¹²⁴ Phillips could not idealize his father and was

119 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.7.

120 Val. Exp. NHC XI, 2 2.39.28–39.

121 <http://realitiesandwich.com/u/talat-jonathan-phillips/>.

122 Phillips 2011, 53.

123 Phillips 2011, 55.

124 See note 24.

therefore prone to grandiosity. Though his mother would fan Phillips's narcissistic grandiosity by praising his accomplishments to neighbors—school president, valedictorian, prom king—she rarely displayed affection at home. Instead, she was prone to fits of anger, openly wishing Phillips and his siblings “had never been born.”¹²⁵ It is no surprise he would suffer depression through much of his life. Phillips describes his depression symbolically as the “black bowling ball” in his stomach.¹²⁶ The interrelationship between narcissistic injury from his mother and attachment to Christianity is central to the healing journey of Phillips's memoir.

In his college years and twenties Phillips became utterly disillusioned with Christianity, becoming a self-described “cynical secular materialist.”¹²⁷ The break from the common culture was attenuated by a sense of belonging to subcultures that provided venues for idealizations, narcissistic mirroring and attachment.¹²⁸ He became enthralled by Beat Generation, frequenting the same bars as Kerouac and Neal Cassady, writing until dawn, and indulging in alcohol and sex as much as his literary heroes.¹²⁹ He spent a few years as an expat author in Prague but returned to the United States after 9/11 and became an anti-war demonstrator. Nicknaming himself “General Johnny America” and wearing a George Washington overcoat, sky blue pants and vest, and silver stars from his ankles to his shoulders, Phillips was the leader of the street-media team “Green Dragon.” But when George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 Phillips's hopes for a revolution were crushed. In theoretical terms, his attempts to connect to American symbols of the common culture were thwarted, leading to a period of intense depression.¹³⁰

Symbolic Loss and Reinterpretations of Christ

It was during this period, divorced from any common culture and in the midst of a depression, that Phillips discovered the Nag Hammadi codices and began to reinterpret the symbols of Christianity through them. His interpretations attempt to make sense of a sequence of psychedelic experiences while also connecting the Christian symbolic order to Eastern religious traditions, an

¹²⁵ Phillips 2011, 53–61.

¹²⁶ Phillips 2011, 12.

¹²⁷ Phillips 2011, 1.

¹²⁸ See note 20.

¹²⁹ Phillips 2011, 61.

¹³⁰ Phillips 2011, 1–11, 61–71.

“enlightenment of the body,” and a re-enchantment of the world that adapt the symbol of Jesus to a modernized world.¹³¹

Phillips interprets his own journey towards healing under the paradigm of mythicist Christianity as presented by Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy. In a trio of popular histories, Freke and Gandy used the Nag Hammadi codices to argue that the historical Jesus of Nazareth never existed.¹³² He was an invention of a small group of Jewish mystics who wanted to adapt the dying-and-rising god-man archetype of the mystery religions to a Jewish context. On their interpretation, Jesus is a symbol of the psychological death of the ego-self and mystical awakening to a deeper sense of identity with an impersonal divine consciousness, known as “the Christ within.”¹³³ The “Literalists” of the Catholic Church misinterpreted this myth as a series of historical events, while the gnostics continued to accept the allegorical reading.¹³⁴

Phillips is influenced by these ideas in three ways.¹³⁵ First, he structures his memoir to fit the dying-rising godman myth, identifying with the symbol of Christ as a paradigm of self-transformation. Second, the ample parallels Freke and Gandy cite between Jesus and figures like Osiris draws the Christian symbolic order into a universal frame of reference that legitimizes Phillips's own connections between the gnostics and Tantra. Third, for Freke and Gandy canonical and noncanonical gospels are gnostic in the sense of being allegories that encode the mystery religion of Christianity.¹³⁶ Phillips in turn reads the New Testament with the same eyes as the Nag Hammadi codices.¹³⁷

Phillips's reinterpretation of Jesus presumes that a doctrine of an underlying metaphysical body is found cross-culturally. With what Jeff Kripal calls an “enlightenment of the body,” such metaphysical body doctrines (usually Tantric) undergird embodied practices that catalyze and cultivate altered

131 On re-enchantment as a response to disenchantment and modernization, see Partridge 2004.

132 Freke and Gandy 1999, 2001, and 2006. Mythicism in its hard form (i.e., Jesus is not a historical personage) is typically traced to Bruno Bauer, 1850. Arthur Drews 1909 is the first to blend this notion of Mythicism with invention by a mystically oriented group of Jewish persons. Freke and Gandy go further in utilizing the Nag Hammadi codices to portray the original form of Christianity as a gnostic mystery religion.

133 Freke and Gandy 2001, 88.

134 Freke and Gandy 1999, 191–250; Freke and Gandy 2001, 7–38.

135 For Phillips's adoption of these ideas, see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-talat-phillips/gnosis-mystical-history-of-jesus_b_199493.html.

136 Freke and Gandy 1999, 89–132.

137 Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

states of consciousness and energy.¹³⁸ For Phillips, the alternative memory opened up by the gnostics and their texts allows him to reinterpret Christianity in terms of a Tantric enlightenment of the body. He reads Logion 106 of the Gospel of Thomas, “When you make the two one, you will become children of Adam, and when you say ‘Mountain, move away from here!’ it will move” as a recognition of the Tantric concept of the *ida* and *pingala* channels which rise up from the lowest chakra, encircling one another through the remaining seven until rising up and through the crown chakra at the top of the skull.¹³⁹ Significantly, in his rendering of this passage Phillips substitutes “children of Adam” for “sons of man” (ΝΩΗΡΕ ΜΠΡΩΜΕ) in an effort to read this state of non-duality as a return to Eden, for him as much an ecological ideal of conservation, tribalism, and sustainability as a spiritual state.¹⁴⁰ Realization of non-duality is accomplished by release of the kundalini energy that shoots up the *sushumna*, a central channel through the chakras that evaporates the polarity of the *ida* and *pingala* in its tremendous rush of force.¹⁴¹ For Phillips, the gnostic Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden symbolizes the Tantric “enlightened body.” In the ecstasy of rising kundalini, “spiritual adepts pass through the veil of ego death and find themselves in communion with the “ineffable,” “eternal,” and “immeasurable light”” surrounding the Invisible Spirit in the Apocryphon of John.¹⁴²

Phillips further interprets gnostics and the Jesus of history as “healers” who recognized this underlying spiritual energy base to the body. Informed by Freke and Gandy, Phillips believes *soter* (σωτήρ) did not initially mean “Savior,” but was a means to signify the healing miracles of mythic godmen such as Asclepius.¹⁴³ Jesus’s healing miracles were energetic acts that shifted the auras of the ill back into alignment.¹⁴⁴ Gnostics (“pneumatics”) encode energetic healing in their language of *pneuma*, a Greek synonym for *ruah*, *qi*, *prana*, and *mana*.¹⁴⁵ Baptism is a matter of transmitting this spiritual energy from master

138 For Kripal’s “enlightenment of the body,” see Kripal 2007, 22. This Tantric notion is dependent upon both the body and consciousness being understood as expressions of divine energy that can be awakened, harnessed, and channeled.

139 Phillips 2011, 104. See Gos. Thom. NHC II,2 50.18–22.

140 Phillips 2011, 21.

141 Phillips 2011, 105.

142 Phillips 2011, 105. See Ap. John NHC II,1 6.11–12.

143 Phillips 2011, 78. Freke and Gandy 1999, 37–42.

144 Phillips 2011, 116.

145 Phillips 2011, 116. Phillips apparently accepts the equation between the Paul’s language of *pneumatikos* (1 Cor 15), Valentinian *pneumatikoi* and the more general category of Gnostic made between Freke and Gandy throughout their work. See Freke and Gandy 1999,

to disciple, as when the living Jesus intoxicates a disciple with “the bubbling spring that [he] has tended.”¹⁴⁶ Baptism in “rushing water” is meant to convey this underlying energetic conception.¹⁴⁷ Jesus and the gnostics are therefore practitioners of energy healing that secularized medicine has not caught up to. The underlying conception of the (metaphysical) body brings Christianity into a cross-cultural frame of reference.

In both content and interpretation, Phillips’s psychedelic experiences utilize gnostic-Christian symbolism to show his reattachment to the tradition through psychological healing. During an Ayahuasca ceremony Phillips finds himself visited by his spirit guides. He suddenly feels “a blinding light open[ed] up above me, descending into my crown chakra, filling my entire body with energy. *It was what I had imagined early Christian baptisms to be like . . .* white energy gushed through my meridians, pumping pleasant sensations through my body. I was charged to the point of being overwhelmed.”¹⁴⁸ His guides inform him he had become like Christ, Buddha, or Krishna, an enlightened being returned to the Edenic state.¹⁴⁹ Although Phillips does not draw attention to this, his own visionary experience recapitulates his own interpretations of the anointing of the Son with the Light of the Father to become Christ in the Apocryphon of John.¹⁵⁰ Phillips’s religious vision is encoded and interpreted in manner that reconnects him to the Christian symbolic order.

The psychological healing Phillips sought is also accomplished through re-attachment to the Christian symbolic order. Phillips became a public speaker after Reality Sandwich went live. In one of these talks, he spontaneously began speaking about the role of Christ and the gnostics in his healing journey. Later that evening, Phillips’s guides informed him they had a message from Jesus. As Phillips tells it, a “sermon” came down as a holographic image the size of a volleyball that downloaded into his heart chakra. The guides informed him that the message encoded “healing vectors” that he could transmit when talking about Jesus. The hologram descended down his chakras until:

168–170 and 2001, 68–78. *Ruah* is Hebrew for “spirit.” *Qi* is Mandarin for “air, breath” and is most commonly associated in an American context with the practice of Tai Chi. *Prana* is Sanskrit for “breath” and is associated with practices in *prana yoga*. *Mana* is Maori for “pervasive supernatural power.” Phillips equates all of these as spirit power that can be used for healing and to cultivate altered states of consciousness and energy.

146 Gos. Thom. NHC II,2 35.4–8.

147 Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

148 Phillips 2011, 124–125; emphasis mine.

149 Phillips 2011, 125.

150 Phillips 2011, 80; Ap. John NHC II,1 6.15–31. See parallels in Ap. John NHC III,1 9.2–11 and BG8502,2 30.2–11.

the black bowling ball in my stomach lurched upward. It rotated clockwise and then pulsated rapidly, until a pool of dark energies broke through my pelvis and rushed down my legs and out the soles of my feet... I felt purified. Thank you Jesus, I found myself saying.¹⁵¹

In that moment two things happened that completed Phillip's process of mourning. First, the healing of the bowling ball of depression can be understood as his own symbolism of narcissistic injury. When downloading the sermon he sees an image of his mother and realizes that her abuse was necessary for him to transmute his own ills into love and compassion for all, including her.¹⁵² In essence, overcoming his depression and reconciling with his mother are representative of the new, integrated, healthy sense of self Phillips achieved with introspection during the process of mourning.¹⁵³ A second meaning is found in a new Christology. He concluded from this experience that Jesus was not merely a mythic prototype, but "a vast and complex cosmic plane, an overarching energy structure that stretched across realms of the divine pleroma."¹⁵⁴ In other words, Jesus is both a symbol of the healer (identification) *and* a conscious field of energy (idealization) that operates as an agent of healing.

Recreation of Meaning and Rapprochement with Christianity

Unlike Jung and Caruana, Phillips's recreation of meaning is not in theoretical products, but in his memoir. His narrative follows Freke and Gandy's depiction of Jesus as the dying and rising God, from Phillips's captivation by the world of appetites, to disillusionment, through the process of ego-death and healing into identification with the "Christ consciousness" within. His own autobiography is presented as a prototype of the recreation of meaning and potential for rapprochement with Christianity.

In many public talks since, Phillips has found that his yearning to reconnect with Christian symbols is hardly unique. Many attendees of his talks thank him for allowing them to feel like a Christian again.¹⁵⁵ As part of his "recreation of meaning," Phillips hopes to revivify Christian practice from within the churches themselves. In his estimation the orthodox churches are "imitation churches" that have become the "dry canals" spoken of in the Revelation of

¹⁵¹ Phillips 2011, 184.

¹⁵² Phillips 2011, 184.

¹⁵³ See note 22.

¹⁵⁴ Phillips 2011, 184.

¹⁵⁵ Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

Peter.¹⁵⁶ Phillips sees, however, that a new religion is beside the point insofar as it fails to integrate the Christian tradition that undergirds Western culture. What is needed is for the established churches to enhance “their services with meditation, prayer, breath work, energy healing, body movement, possibly even late-night dancing, and among the more radicalized, the dispensing of psychoactive sacraments.”¹⁵⁷

In theoretical terms, Phillips vision after his process of mourning is to revivify the Christian symbolic for others in America. With experiential technologies that overcome disenchantment, the integration of non-Western practices that encompass pluralism, and a new historical vision of Jesus, Phillips believes the Christian symbolic can once again be a resource for idealization, attachment, and meaning in America.

Conclusion

As Homans made clear, symbolic loss, cultural memory, and modernization are tightly intertwined. In his words:

It is mourning that puts loss and history together. Mourning is a part of both loss and memory. In fact, loss, mourning, and memory are inseparable from each other . . . this continuity makes it possible to explore the dark side of modernization: its failure to recognize that a dimension of loss—at times personal, at other times collective and historical—always accompanies progress.¹⁵⁸

The “dark side” of the progress of modernization is symbolic loss, specifically the loss of the self-evident facticity of the Christian symbolic order and a culturally shared relationship to the past. In order to complete the process of mourning, individuals need to revise the cultural memory of their tradition to reinterpret it for a modernized age. Gnosticism as a category opened a new interpretive possibility in early Christian memory that individuals use for revision of and rapprochement with the tradition. Gnosticism, then, fits hand-in-glove with the revision of memory necessary for individuals to resolve religious mourning.

156 Apoc. Pet. NHC VII,3 30.1.

157 Phillips 2011, 82.

158 Homans 2008, 16.

Clearly, Western individuals *en masse* are not experiencing symbolic loss and the process of mourning with the intensity of these “extreme cases.”¹⁵⁹ But the cases of Jung, Caruana, and Phillips show in high relief the ways in which modernization, symbolic loss, and gnosticism are closely related. Each writer experienced symbolic loss in a single lifetime. In midlife, this loss manifested itself as a compelling need to introspect their unconscious contents and reinterpret Christ. The lack of attachment to and idealization of the Christian tradition set loose unconscious contents. Unchurched mystical experiences erupted.

In the midst of this symbolic loss, each of these authors became obsessed with the Christian gnostics. Crucially, all turn to the gnostics in order to reinterpret Christian symbols, such as Jesus, not simply to understand the gnostics themselves. In fact, in the cases of Jung and Phillips their interpretations, though creative, are historically quite wrong. Caruana is more interested in fidelity to historical scholarship, but even he admits to taking license when he places all statements from revealer figures into the Nazarene's mouth.

The disconnect between the historical gnostics and contemporary religious interpretation necessitates analysis of what these interpretations have in common. This article has shown the new interpretations of Jesus are acute responses to modernization. Jung reframed Jesus as a psychological symbol of the Self that individuals may use as a paradigm to guide their own awakening to psychological wholeness. In so doing, he makes Jesus a universal symbol, located in the brain, that befits a rationalized and pluralized West. Caruana creatively reinterprets Jesus as a perennial manifestation of the dying and rising God, consort of the divine feminine, and a paradigm for life as a journey into gnosis. This *gnosis* re-enchants his world while commenting on the logocentrism wrought by secularization. Phillips's reinterpretations of Jesus made of him a healer and Tantric guru pointing to the hidden metaphysics of embodiment that attempts to embrace America's unprecedented pluralism. His Jesus even speaks in favor of a prelapsarian, neotribal share economy, and in so doing offers a critique of the excesses of capitalism and industrialization.

In closing, if one accepts the principle that individual case studies are representative of sociological dynamics, then this article suggests an as yet unacknowledged factor in the reception and construction of gnosticism in

159 William James famously asserted the methodology of the “extreme case” in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. See James 2002, 48.

the West.¹⁶⁰ The unprecedented mainstream popularity of the gnostics and their texts in the last century—evident in everything from best-selling novels such as *The Da Vinci Code* and National Geographic's documentary *The Gospel of Judas* to the popularity of Elaine Pagels's scholarship—may be a response to the symbolic loss of the Christian tradition in the West.¹⁶¹ This approach makes sense of characteristics that popular works on the gnostics highlight, to wit: proto-feminism, psychological and individual approaches to the divine, openness to sexuality as a spiritual technology, and resonances with non-Christian (Kabalistic, Buddhist, Yogic) religions.¹⁶² These characteristics key the gnostics into the modernized West at the turn of the 21st century. The relationship between mourning, memory, and modernization that Homans illuminated suggests that the popular reception and construction of gnosticism is more than a category for what Christianity is not. It has become an imaginative space through which individuals in the West reimagine what Christianity can be by re-envisioning its origins.

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- 160 The relationship between the individual and collective processes is fundamental to Homans's contextual approach. See Homans 1979, 14–22 and 155–158. Parsons explores this relationship in the development of unchurched, psychological mysticism in Parsons 2008b, 101–116 and Parsons 2013, 142–155.
- 161 Barret et al., "The Gospel of Judas," 2006. Pagels' *Beyond Belief* achieved New York Times best-seller status in 2003. See "New York Times—Best-Seller List for June 22, 2003." Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* spent over two years on the New York Times best-seller list, over one year of those at number 1. See "New York Times—Best-Seller List for April 23, 2006."
- 162 The literature on each of these characteristics is extensive. For proto-feminism see especially: Pagels 1979a, 66–69; 1979b; 2011, 86–89; Houston 2006. For psychological and individualistic approaches to the divine, see especially: Hoeller 1982, 1989, and 2002; Quispel 1995; Caruana 2009; Singer 1990. For sexuality as a spiritual technology, see: Osho 1984, 191–193; Brown 2003; Churton 2015. On the Kabbalistic Jesus, see Keizer 2009. On Buddhism and Jesus, see Borg and Reigert 1997. On Hinduism and Jesus, see Newman 2011.

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