

Essay

On Atheist Spirituality Part VI: Immanensity, Ocean of Feeling, Mystical Experience and Gnosticism

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Abstract

In this series of essays, I explore and discuss spiritualization of materialistic atheism in support of Andre Comte-Sponville. These essays are further dedicated to Marie-Louise Nykamp. This essay contains: Immanensity ? Lost on an ... Ocean of Feeling ... ? Oh again a Mystical Experience ... Gnosticism, a Rather Irresistible and Better Human Temptation ...; and A Finger ...

Immanensity ?

C-S recalls that the poet Jules Laforgue coined the term “immanensity”, in order to bring together the concepts of immanent and immense, as related to Creation.

And C-S gets quite lost in being overcome by the silent immensity and immanence one can experience by looking at the stars during a night, say, somewhere in the countryside ...

Well, it seems that the ancient fundamental statements “As above, so below” and “One can find the whole world in a grain of sand” have been all but forgotten ...

Indeed, spirituality, mysticism, and anything of the kind is not about having some more unusual experience which may cause you to feel as if lost, by being overwhelmed ...

After all, there are so many other ways to be overwhelmed to the extent of being lost to one’s usual ways of awareness ...

And as is well known, so many fall for that confusion, and end up believing to have genuine spiritual, mystical, and so on, experiences simply by taking certain drugs, or using some strange methods for merely ... altering ... their awareness ...

By the way, would you ever like to eat some altered food ?

And is it not that the concept of “altered” is merely a negation ?

And a rather vaguely inept, or if you prefer, an ineptly vague negation, one which ends up without being able to provide any kind of specific affirmation ?

Thus, either you like it or not, it opens the gates to absolutely everything, except the one thing which it happens to negate ?

After all, it is an elementary fact of Logic that one cannot give a definition merely by a negation, since it does not specify anything from among the infinity of alternatives left open, except the unique thing which happens to be negated ...

But never mind, immanence plus immensity, that is, immanensity, can certainly give one an ... altered ... state of consciousness ...

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And by all means, try and have a good rest after it, so that you may recover from being so lost in being so overwhelmed ...

Yes, there are ways out of that poor dichotomy of either being lost in one or another, shall we say, un-saintly, un-enlightened, un-righteous immature chattering of no matter how elite a class, or enjoying for a short while some experience of altered state of overwhelmed consciousness ...

And how to find such a way out ?

Well, the Hindus, Jews, Buddhists or Moslems may have some advantage in this regard over, say, the Catholics. Indeed, the latter simply can never ever have the chance to talk to a saint, a genuine and living saint, instead of some allegedly all knowing and all understanding psychologist or psychiatrist ...

So much for prostrating oneself to immanensity, instead ...

Lost on an ... Ocean of Feeling ... ?

Yes, there seems to be no end to the view according to which spirituality is just about the same with spiritual experiences which, on their turn, are just about getting lost into feelings of being overwhelmed in certain ... altered ...ways, of course ...

Tantric, and other ancient and similar ageless methods, are quite direct about being overwhelmed in altered ways : they say it upfront, and then, on top of it, they use one of the most, if not by far the most, powerful and tempting ways available to animals and humans, namely sex. As for the effectiveness of it all, well, the long existing record can, of course, speak for itself ...

But let us go back to that oceanic feeling which, clearly, is not anywhere near to Tantra ...

So then, here we go, and C-S tells us how Freud borrowed the term from the French novelist Romain Rolland ...

And that it is all but about the ... dissolving of the ego ...

Well now, the poor ego ...

Did it again do some pranks ?

And so nasty ones that, simply, it should be dissolved ?

And if yes, then for how long it should be attempted to be kept in such an awful state ?

After all, no one seems to have been able to keep it dissolved for any longer period of time ...

Well, we humans are quite good to manipulate with the logical operations of “and” and “or”, but contrary to what we believe, we are quite poor at doing so with the logical operation of “no”, that is, with negation ...

And needless to say, the reason is that in the latter operation far more emotions get usually involved, than in the former ones ...

And of course, emotions, operating under emotions, under stronger emotions, can - and do so often - make us prone to errors ...

And with dissolving the ego we are back to one such emotionally charged negation where we cannot avoid trying to overdo, quite thoroughly overdo in fact, a good thing ...
Fortunately, one's ego is well known not to be such a pushover, and simply, it cannot be gotten rid of so

easily ...

So that, all we may eventually manage is to dip sometime our ... spiritual toe ... into that oceanic feeling ... and do so for a while ...

The rest, well, we may leave it to personages in novels or books of the kind written by a Romain Roland, Michel Hulin, Marius Favre, Richard Jefferis, Margaret Montague, Albert Camus, and so on, and so on ...

Oh again ... a Mystical Experience ...

The author of C-S starts the section “A Mystical Experience” in chapter three, with the recollection of an occasion in his younger adult years when, somewhere in the middle of nature, he was overcome by a feeling of peace, simplicity, serenity, delight ...
And then comments that the latter two words may sound incompatible ...

Somewhat later, C-S states that “This is what Spinoza meant by eternity ...”

Sweet talking is, indeed, a charming human ability ...
And it may be quite irreplaceable in a romantic situation ...
However, sweet talking oneself into some state is quite another issue ...

C-S then continues in its third chapter with quite a number of sections, with the titles “Is It Possible to Speak About Silence?”, “Mystery and Self-evidence”, “Plenitude”, “Simplicity”, “Unity”, “Silence”, “Eternity”, “Serenity”, “Acceptance”, “Independence”, “Death and Eternity”, “Mysticism and Atheism”, “The Absolute and the Relative”, “A Spirituality for Everyday Life”, and ends with a section on “Interiority and Transcendence, Immanence and Openness” ...

All of them a sweet talk, with lots of citations from older or newer celebrities ...

It is as if C-S tries to come up with as much additional persuasion as possible, in order to be able to hope that the ever lingering doubts may be put somehow to rest ...

And as a kind of last chapter, C-S offers a Conclusion entitled Love and Truth, with lots of further sweet talk ...

And it ends with :

“Here is where all our different themes converge without conflating.

Fidelity to truth : rationalism - the rejection of sophism.

Fidelity to love : humanism - the rejection of nihilism.

Fidelity to a separation between the two : atheism.

Truth is not love, if truth loved itself, it would be God.

Rather, love can be true, and it is absolute only in so far as we love truly. Such is the atheists’ Pentecost, or the true spirit of atheism : not the Spirit which descends but the spirit that can open us up to the world, to other people, to ever-present eternity - and rejoice. The absolute is not love, rather, love can open us up to the absolute.

Thus, ethics can lead to but not replace spirituality, just as spirituality can lead to but not replace ethics. Here, perhaps - at their culmination - is where the wise and the saintly agree :

Love, not hope, is what helps us live. Truth, not faith, is what sets us free.

We are already in the kingdom. Eternity is now.”

Well, as much as about the whole book, and as well, many books with similar aims, C-S as a whole, and its above closing lines, are presenting , suggesting, or even stating certain relationships between a number of important concepts, or more precisely, between aspects of life, creation, being, and so on, we may find important, and then try to capture them by concepts ...

Among such concepts are, of course, fidelity, truth, rationalism, love, humanism, absolute, spirit, spiritualism, eternity, ethics, hope, faith, kingdom, and so on, just to mention some of those in the above citation ...

And then, what is the problem ?

How come that most one can achieve seems to be sweet talking ?

Well, one problem is that the very, shall we say, bricks which one uses, that is, the concepts, are already failing us dramatically ...

And it is not only that the respective aspects which we conceptualize are rather hard to press into the inevitable constraints of any concept. But also, the semantics which we shall associate with such concepts, once we somehow managed the respective conceptualizations, are not only not well defined. No, in fact, they inevitably end up like the concept of beauty which, as the saying goes, is in the eye of the beholder ...

And then, the bricks which we use in building edifices like C-S, become, when read, just about anything the eyes of the semantic beholder makes them look ...

Well, and once past the bricks, what about the edifice ?

Simple indeed : even if the semantics would be fixed and universally shared, the initial difficulty in conceptualization may make any relationships between those bricks multiply problematic, since none of those bricks happen to embody the real meaning of what they are supposed to represent ...

And then, thank God, we can still achieve something often quite useful, even if only for a while, namely, a sweet talk ...

Gnosticism, a Rather Irresistible and Better Human Temptation ...

When using above the term elite chattering class, one may perhaps found it to a certain extent derogatory ...

That was, however, most definitely not the intention ...

And to try to explain, and hopefully, also excuse its use in the case of such a possible perception, let us make an appeal to the way Hassidic Judaism, for instance, may help in clarifying the issue.

Well, according to their teachings, Creation has as its four lowest levels the mineral realms, the vegetal realms, the animal realms, and the realm of the “medaber” ...

And who are constituting that fourth realm of “medaber” ?

Simple, it is us humans, the whole of humanity. Indeed, the word “medaber” has - and can have - only

one clear meaning in Hebrew, namely “the speaking creature”, or rather, “the one who keeps speaking”
...

And the remarkable fact in speaking, at least as the Hassidic tradition sees it, is that it is a more subtle and sophisticated form of action than all the other ones available to the denizens of lower realms ...

Yes, in other words, when taken in it best possible meaning, the fourth realm in Creation is that of the elite chattering class ...

Quite amusing, indeed ...

Above that level, needless to say, are supposed to come the various realms of the righteous men, of angels, and so on, and so on ...

Well of course, there is also another possible interpretation, one that sees the elite chattering class and the Gnostics as being in certain connection, in a certain relationship ...

We can try to elaborate somewhat more in this respect, and do so as a further commentary on C-S ...

By the way, let us mention again that all the above lines, as well as the following ones, are indeed meant as a support for the intended aim of the author of C-S, no matter how these section may seem at first sight to less attentive readers ...

And such a support is the same for, and is equally deserved by, any better Gnostic text ...

Traditionally, Gnosticism is associated with religion, and even reduced to being merely another form of religion. However, this is a similarly superficial, thus erroneous, view as is the reduction of mysticism, or in general, spirituality to religion.

In fact, Gnosticism can accommodate secular tendencies, which may in fact include atheists or agnostics as well. Harold Bloom, of Yale University, a remarkably prolific and most distinguished writer and literary critic, considers himself to be a Gnostic. And if one reads his books related to religion, one may easily see that he would rather belong to the category of, shall we say, secular Gnostics, than to that of the religious ones ...

But then, C-S is also a secular book, and to a good extent, a Gnostic one as well ...

Here, therefore, is where the issue of Gnosticism may arise in these lines, and as a kind of conclusion to our comments on C-S, we present a few related comments ...

Well, for a start, the issue of defining what is, and what is not Gnosticism has for long proved to be less than facile. And quite likely, as with other important concepts related to human life, like for instance happiness, such a difficulty may in fact be quite unavoidable. At the same time, when dealing with such deep concepts, it is often not so important to start up front with a definition. After all, we all know about the saying : “I can’t tell you what a good wine is, but certainly I recognize it when I drink one ...”

An important feature of Gnosticism is the sharp and relentless hostility which various organized religions have always manifested against it, since they simply cannot but consider it a most dangerous form of heresy. Such a view has been maintained, for instance, by the Christian religion, ever since the earliest times, nearly two millennia ago.

Of course, as always with such matters, the situation may be considerably more involved and complex
...

Let us just recall the case of Valentinius (c.100 - c.160 AD), one of the most remarkable Gnostics during the last two millennia, and who nearly became Pope.

The Church, throughout the times, had indeed a tough fight to avoid Gnosticism to take over. And the Gnostics could hardly be accused in public with any other credible capital sin, except for being heretics. Not to mention that such an accusation could too easily hold, since Gnosticism is an extraordinarily prolific and protean approach which keeps endlessly producing new and new visions ranging from Apocalyptic Hells to Most Glorious High Heavens ...

And then, so many see all of that as being an ever renewing theology ...

On the other hand, any Church that wishes to become established, expand and survive can, obviously, take only so much renewal at a time ...

Protestantism came up with having as one of the fundamental principles "Semper Reformanda", that is, Perpetual Reformation ...

And as seen in the perspective of nearly five centuries by now, they themselves had to slow it down considerably ...

The early church fathers had also another major concern with Gnosticism, namely, it required persons who were not only quite educated, especially given the situation of the general population at the time, but in addition had a spirit which was more attracted by the ever ongoing exploration of the spiritual depths of being, than merely settling down for ever more into some given and rigidly held doctrine ...

And needless to say, there had been preciously few such persons at the time, or for that matter, at any time, much fewer than any church would need for massive expansion and consolidation ...

However, a most important concern of the early church fathers could have been the following one. The Gnostic approach to spirituality is based, as its name tells it, on one's cognitive being which is supposed to fulfil, to keep happy, one's affective one ...

And as it happens, that approach can, indeed, bring about miracles in this regard ...

The problem - and a fundamental one at that - is that one's affective being, although can be fulfilled and even overwhelmed, it does not remain in that state for long ...

And like one's stomach, it starts asking for new and new such fulfilment ...

But then, the really great Gnostics, Valentinius among them, can put up with all that, and bring forth new and new visions which may again and again amaze one's affective being ...

Well, every better church father could not help realizing that such an approach would quite likely degenerate and end up being more of a show, than substance ...

In the New Testament, in John 4:13-14, Jesus Christ tells a Samaritan woman who draws water from some well : "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again . But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

And this is indeed the main problem with Gnosticism : it can give one plenty water of the kind the Samaritan woman could herself draw for the well, but it can hardly ever give anybody of the other kind of water, of the "living water" ...

And so it comes to pass, that the Gnostic visions, be they secular or religious, keep ever multiplying ...

Theology is so often but, shall we say, a religious version of Gnosticism, and a rather pale one at that ... What the modern elite chattering class is doing is, on the other hand, a secular version of theology, and so often, not much more bright or fascinating ...

Saint Thomas Aquinas, before dying, seems to had a revelation about all that, about how much what he had earlier written was not "living water" but merely chaff and straw ...

And here, therefore, we are lead back to the Zen-Buddhist saying about the finger pointing to the Moon ...

Yes indeed, so many of us, probably nearly all of us, may need some such finger at a certain stage in our life ...

And the more such fingers may indeed point to the Moon, quite likely the better ...

But then, so clearly, the issue is not in more and more such pointing fingers, but in making that leap, in making that incredible flight from fingers, any number of fingers, to the Moon ...

Let us now go back for a moment to the history of Gnosticism ...

In view of long ongoing accusations of heresy, the perception can often emerge that there is indeed such a thing like "Gnostic Religion" ...

In this regard, however, an essential aspect of Gnosticism - and one which indeed seriously threatens usual organized religions - is that, most definitely, Gnosticism is not merely another religion.

Gnosticism, instead, and as briefly mentioned in the sequel, is a typical development of the Eras of Myth, eras that followed the earlier Eras of Magic of many millennia ago. The immense novelty of the Eras of Myth is that now, we humans, would start bringing into religion our minds as well, and do so on a scale and depth that would, among others, lead to such massive and comprehensive texts relating to human affairs like the Vedas, the Bible, the Greek Mythology, or the Koran, among other ones ...

That passing into the Eras of Myth, however, proved to present a major and imminent danger to any attempt for setting up organized religions. Indeed, those who at that stage, or for that matter, ever after, took up the Gnostic ways were those whose mind was quite prolific at coming up with a potentially unlimited variety of new and new religious visions. And needless to say, such a protean production of visions could not be accommodated in any way whatsoever by an organized religion. Certainly, any organization, including in religion, is essentially in need of some stable, well defined basic setup. This is why in usual organized religion such a setup is its respective foundational dogma, and it indeed becomes a dogma, since it is not supposed to be changed anytime soon, if ever. Consequently, any variation on such a foundational dogma, let alone of the prolific and ever ongoing Gnostic variants, can only be seen as a most dangerous heresy.

It follows that the Gnostic ways - and it is essential to understand that there is not only one, but on the contrary, an ever ongoing flood of them - were in fact the ones which took a fuller advantage of the opening brought with the Eras of Myth. Indeed, organized religions were each only able to take one step into that new era, and then, immediately after, nailed themselves down to their respective positions given by their specific dogmas. And they did so since, among others, they were terribly afraid that no organization could be kept up in any other way.

The Gnostic ways, on the other hand, were ready, willing, and above all, able to take any number of steps ahead within the Eras of Myth ...

As for the basic limitations of the Gnostic ways, it is important to realize that the Eras of Myth as such are but one stage in the human venture towards the Divine. And the Gnostics themselves may fundamentally have to go beyond their own ways, even if from the start they have proved to be so much better pioneers, than the pursuers of organized religions.

There is, of course, also the issue of the individual who may come up with a vision outside of organized religions, or simply, may follow someone else with such a vision.

The deeper such a vision may be felt, the more likely the individual would hold to it for longer. In this way, such a vision may in fact become a kind of dogma, and as such, constitute yet another organized religion, even if all of that on a very small scale of one single individual, or of a few followers.

Needless to say, Gnosticism at its best is not about such a venture. No, at its best, a Gnostic is the one who is making full use of the dynamic ability of human mind to produce visions. And when it comes to approaching Divinity, such a venture is of course not supposed to be within the ability of human mind to be brought to its full completion, be it by one single, or by any number of visions. Here is precisely one of the basic limitations of the Gnostic ways.

And yet, as Sartre noted “To be religious means to have a good imagination” ...

Let us now consider several relevant details.

From the start, we can note that, rather inevitably in human affairs, there may be a variety of Gnostic ways, each considered valid by their respective pursuers, yet not all of them of the same authenticity, genuineness, depth, consequence or value. In this regard, with the passing of time, various lists of criteria, conditions or specific features have been drawn up, each attempting to give a means by which one may sort out the alleged, or hoped to be right, or proper Gnostic ways. Along such attempts, in more recent times, the Gnostic ways have in some manner or other been connected, among others, to what is nowadays called “depth psychology”.

Also, and quite naturally, even within one given specific Gnostic way various individuals may find themselves at different stages. And such individuals may possibly experience oscillations regarding their respective stages, with the setbacks often eliciting on their part a variety of strong negative reactions.

Regardless of all that, there may hopefully be a far simpler and clearer approach to the issue of bringing us nearer to a definition of Gnosticism, one which is more direct and straightforward. Here we shall present such an attempt, and do so in two stages. We shall start by trying to single out what may actually go on with a Gnostic person. Then, we shall consider the issue within its larger historic, and in fact, anthropological framework.

Gnosis, or knowledge, be it of any kind in us humans, is but one aspect of the functioning of our awareness. Consequently, let us rather try to deal with awareness as such, which is the very matrix of gnosis.

Here however, we should note three facts.

First, much of our awareness springs in us from deeper realms, realms of which we are often not quite fully aware.

Second, we have to consider the often strongly interacting affective and cognitive processes in our awareness. And in this regard, knowing and knowledge, and in fact, the very knower in us, is supposed to be more about the cognitive, than the affective, even if our processes of cognition may have important affective implications, as well as two way interactions with our affective processes. Consequently, here, related to Gnosticism, when we are concerned about our awareness, we mainly mean the human ability of having conscious knowledge, that is, both of knowing and being conscious about it, an ability which can function in us even in the absence of an immediate or ongoing more significant

emotional or affective process.

Third, we can further note that our normal, usual, everyday human awareness can function on several levels of increasing or deeper subtlety.

One of the least subtle levels of awareness, for instance, is that activated by some direct physical sensation, provided by one or more of our usual five senses.

A more subtle level is that of an awareness not provided by any such direct physical sensation. For instance, for more than a century by now, we are aware of the existence of electro-magnetic waves, and in particular, radio and TV, and lately, mobile phone waves. Those among us who are trained in Physics, can of course have access to a whole range of scientific arguments, supported by a variety of most clear and convincing experiments, which make us aware of the existence of electro-magnetic waves, and do so in a large number of ways, be they theoretical or empirical. And many such experiments can give us direct physical sensations, even if not of the electro-magnetic waves proper, but of some of their physical effects which can act directly upon our usual senses. The rest of us can have it even simpler : we just switch on our radios, TV-s or mobile phones and, similarly, have the direct physical sensation of some of the effects of electro-magnetic waves, even if not of the very electro-magnetic waves themselves.

A yet more subtle level of awareness is clearly involved when studying, let alone researching and bringing forth, various ideas and results in modern abstract Mathematics, or theoretical Physics, for instance.

And if we want to go beyond the realms of modern scientific precision or rigour, with its hard and objective ways of validation, then much of Philosophy or Metaphysics, or for that matter, Theology or Gnosticism itself can give us further realms where our awareness may function on subtle levels.

When it comes to our awareness relating to the Divine, we may, needless to say, need yet more subtle ways of its functioning.

Certainly, when looked at more carefully from this point of view, it turns out to be a rather trivial contradiction in terms to say that one has - or for that matter, can have - a “religious experience”. Indeed, by definition, the Divine is - and must by necessity be - far beyond the direct grasp of any of our usual senses or awareness. After all, even mere electro-magnetic waves are so ...

Also, the Divine cannot as such be within the realms of many of our more subtle or deeper levels of awareness. In this regard it may be useful to recall that even much of modern Mathematics or theoretical Physics, for instance, happens to be completely outside of the awareness of so many of us humans ...

Yet, in certain more subtle ways, we can nevertheless become aware of the Divine. And this is where the Gnostic opening may happen ...

By the way, C-S also writes often about opening up, and does so specially in its ending lines cited above ...

As mentioned, and seen below, Clement of Alexandria was also talking, even if in other less direct terms, about the same ability of our awareness, ability mediated by gnosis ... However, the elite chattering class, as much as the Gnostics, have shown two critically important shortcomings :

- They never come anywhere near to the solidity in credibility which modern hard science offers when bring up all those new relevant realms and presenting them to our awareness.
- They miss noting the above unprecedented fact, and even more, miss taking advantage of it.

And it is, indeed, not just about any kind of awareness which may open us to the Divine. And quite likely, it is rather about more subtle levels of our awareness, levels at which the interaction with our affective ways is less relevant.

Perhaps we can try to use the term “abstract” to indicate the kind of subtle and pure awareness which may bring us towards, and above all, beyond any kind of Gnostic opening. Certainly, the term “abstract”

suggests setting aside many features which, with their endless specific varieties, usually populate our less subtle levels of awareness. It may also suggest a setting aside of many of our more usual emotional processes.

In modern philosophical literature we may find a certain analogy for such a concept of “abstract” in the term “bracketing” which is fundamental in the Phenomenology of Husserl. However “bracketing”, even if it aims to discard a lot of the customary contents of our awareness, and as such it is indeed a process of abstraction, it is nevertheless still supposed to stop at what are hopefully the remaining deeper “intentional” structures of our own awareness, thus it is not exactly meant to open us up to the Divine, but rather to aspects of Creation only ...

Certainly, the concept of “abstract” is to a certain extent self-referential, that is, it is quite “abstract” in itself. This makes it highly nontrivial, since it is much unlike many of our usual concepts. For instance, the concept of “blue” is definitely not “blue”, thus it is not self-referential. And as is well known in Logic, self-referentiality can easily lead to paradoxes ...

Consequently, much of the difficulty in defining Gnosticism comes from the less than usual kind of awareness which can open us up to the Divine, a kind of awareness for which the term “abstract” may be suggested.

And in order to try to diminish the possibility for misunderstandings, one can list a number of states of awareness which need not be included among those called “abstract” in the above sense.

For instance, traditionally, it has been observed that being in a group which at a given moment in time aims to reach an opening to the Divine, can have a facilitating effect on the participating individual. Also, the performance in such a group of certain rituals, ceremonies, sacraments, and so on, can have an enhancing effect.

When alone, the individual may also initiate a number of specific procedures in an attempt to open up to the Divine. And such an opening up may in fact happen occasionally, as if in an accidental manner, and as if all by itself, or rather, as an act of what may usually go by the name of Divine grace ...

Here however, one should be particularly careful to distinguish between two fundamentally different phenomena.

The various procedures, practiced in a group or individually, can at most “switch off” the individual from the levels of awareness which occupy our everyday lives. And so often, the experience of such a “switching off” may pass as a “religious experience”. This, as mentioned however, is simply a contradiction in terms. And the fact that such a “switching off” may appear to us as being so extraordinary, so immensely valuable and desirable, has much more to do with its relatively elevated or subtle position when compared to our everyday awareness, than to its nearness to the kind of “abstract” awareness which may lead us to a Gnostic opening, or even beyond ...

Certainly, if we stop with such a “switching off”, with such a so called “religious experience”, and consider it as the “non plus ultra” in Gnostic, or for that matter, any kind of opening, then we simply fail to realize that it was merely one of the possible preludes to an eventual “switching on” towards an “abstract” awareness which would hopefully be the one to take us further along the road to an opening up to the Divine ...

And needless to say, one may eventually simply leave aside such “switching off” procedures or stages, as being unnecessary. After all, as we can see, they are in themselves not sufficient for a Gnostic or any other more genuine opening ...

William James, in his 1902 classic book “Varieties of Religious Experience”, mentions four characteristics marking and setting aside such experiences, namely, that they are :

- ineffable, thus defying expression in language,
- noetic, by their revelation of most relevant knowledge related to existence as such,
- transient in their rather ephemeral duration, and
- passive in the sense that they appear as simply happening to us, while we are completely taken up by the respective event as mere witnesses.

Clearly, the above qualities are more about a “switching off” from our usual awareness under the effect of what appears to us as a most relevant event, than they may - all alone in themselves - represent a more lasting “switching on” towards the Divine ...

And to further point to the misunderstandings surrounding such issues, we can recall the various long persistent views and practices which, with the use of all sorts of drugs, claim, hope and try to help the individual to reach a “switch off” or a “religious experience”, and do so based on the ill-conceived view of having thus attained actually nothing short of an opening up to the Divine ...

The fact is, of course, that our usual ways of awareness are not particularly conducive to a Gnostic opening. And then, an ignorant and careless use of negation in Logic makes so many believe that the whole issue, and in fact, the only issue, is to reach “alternative” or “altered” forms of awareness ...

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it is a rather elementary fact of Logic that one cannot give a definition by a mere negation. After all, by negating something, one does not do anything more than to open the door to absolutely all the other possibilities. And this is certainly not a meaningful, let alone, operative definition.

And in the case of a human brain which has billions upon billions of highly interconnected and interacting neurons we can, of course, bring it into an unimaginable number of “altered” or “alternative” states, corresponding to a similarly unfathomable variety of forms of awareness. And then, how can we imagine, let alone know for sure that just about any of such “altered” or “alternative” states of awareness, any which we may happen to elicit, are but perfect for a Gnostic or any other kind of more genuine opening ?

Merely playing rather arbitrarily with the immense variety of possible ”altered” or ”alternative” states of awareness can only show the rather hopelessly superficial and misdirected approach of those who believe in pursuing it ...

Does not the above recall the ridiculous situation of a compulsive liar who believes that, by simply telling just about whatever lie, that would rather automatically benefit him or her ?

Quite likely, on our way to a Gnostic opening we should at least at the beginning “switch off” our more usual ways of awareness. But then, the main issue still remains, namely, how to “switch on”, and above all, what to “switch on” to ?

And to the extent that here we may simply and inevitably reach the realms of the ineffable does in no way mean that we have also reached the rather murky realms of whatever some arbitrary “altered” or “alternative” states of awareness may ever happen to mean ...

No wonder that Timothy Leary, so much prone to strange ways, formulated his “gospel” to enlightenment in the simple formula “tune in, turn on, and drop out” ...
And needless to say, quite a few ... dropped out ...

Out, and far far away from any kind of enlightenment ...

To “switch off” is like becoming “free from”. And as mentioned earlier, it is well known that by merely being “free from”, one is not automatically qualified for being “free for” as well ...

And to “switch on” is, of course, rather like being “free for” ... Not to mention that, when it comes to approaching Divinity, it is about ineffable realms ...

The difficulty of the situation we face here, however, is not reduced alone to the ineffability we encounter. No, here we may come face to face with what, after all, and so seldom realized, may in fact be by far the greatest and most unfortunate poverty ever oppressing mankind :

- Namely, the poverty in the variety of our known and practiced forms of religions. The poverty that we do not have at least over six billion, or more, of religions. The poverty that not each and every human being - who happens to have his or her uniqueness expressed even on the level of mere fingerprints - can, and does have, his or her own religion. And why not, several such individual religions over one's life time of development and enlightenment ...

In short, one simply cannot know God. In particular, one simply cannot experience God, no matter what one's so called “religious experience” may happen to be ...

On the other hand, our more “abstract” types of awareness can help us know not only about electromagnetic waves, and know about them for certain, even if at the moment we do not experience them in any direct or indirect way. Yes, our more “abstract” types of awareness can help us in knowing that God exists.

To know God we cannot.

But to know that God exists we certainly can ...

And this second type of knowing - which is open to us - is the Gnostic opening at its best ...

And now, a few historical, or rather, anthropological remarks.

Several millennia ago, we humans went through what anthropologists call the Axial Age, when most of the present day major religions originated. One way to see that period is as a transition from the earlier Eras of Magic to the Eras of Myth, to which we still mostly happen to belong. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers appears to have originated the terms Axial Age, and first dealt with the issue in depth.

The Eras of Magic kept us in the merry-go-round of “doing-feeling”. Some such archaic stages in human development can still be witnessed with a few less developed tribes living outside of civilization, or for that matter, with the practices of certain rather backward groups in the New Age movement.

The Eras of Myth came later, following the Axial Age, when the cognitive abilities of many enough of us humans reached certain higher levels. At that stage, we entered a new merry-go-round, namely, that of “knowing-feeling”, with the “knowing” component being supplied by our various myths. Of course, a strong element of the earlier “doing-feeling” merry-go-round has remained as an important component. However, what post-modernism, for instance, likes to call with a clear disdain as “mega-narratives”, namely, the newly emerged myths following the Axial Age, they were to be ever after the essential component. And they proved to provide a long lasting centralizing and unifying power within their respective human realms of influence.

Indeed, it was not easy just for everybody to come up with a myth large and sophisticated enough in order to be able to claim to explain all the more important issues in human life, let alone in the universe. Also, in order to become relevant, and let alone, operative, such a myth had to be accepted by

many enough of the humans. And following that, it also had to be guarded from the myriad of possible “heretical” alterations, not to mention, simple forgetting or disregard.

What would, however, work in the favour of such myths was the powers of authority, tradition and majority, as well as the fact that the alternative of refusing the given myth, and thus suddenly having no myth at all, often seemed a bleak one which would among others leave the individual with a diminished social relevance, let alone, individual guidance. Here, by the way, we can again note the fact that one cannot obtain a definition by a mere negation. And by negating a given myth, one simply risks instantly losing any deeper definition of one’s identity and social position ...

Just as the Eras of Myth make use of the earlier “doing-feeling” elements, so does Gnosticism makes essential use of “knowing-feeling”, even if by doing so it may often lead no further than a mere “switching off” of one’s more usual levels of awareness.

Where Gnosticism goes beyond the usual ways of the Eras of Myth is in its distinctive and manifest protean ways of producing ever new myths. In particular, it does not see itself as being bound by any given specific myth raised to a form of established and most jealously guarded dogma. This, as mentioned, may, after all, be one of the main reasons why Christian Gnosticism, for instance, was treated with so much hostility ever since the early days of the Church.

The typical and essentially protean ways of Gnosticism in ever coming up with new myths is a clear, even if possibly less than conscious attempt not to stop at the stage of “switching off” our usual levels of awareness, and instead, to prod us towards those more “abstract” levels of awareness which may eventually lead us to an opening towards the Divine ...

Zen Buddhism, which is only about a millennium old, is the other better known attempt to go beyond our Eras of Myth. And in certain ways it is yet more radical in doing so than the various Gnostic approaches. Indeed, by its sustained practice of meditation and koans it clearly aims to help one move towards more “abstract” forms of awareness.

In the early part of the 20th century, Ernest Holmes, with his Science of Mind, made another attempt to go beyond our Eras of Myth. The way his attempt ended up with the various churches of Religious Science can be seen as a testimony to the difficulty of such an attempt even in our modern times, and in particular, of the difficulty in clarifying enough what a more “abstract” level of awareness may, after all, mean ...

With the emergence of modern science during the last few centuries, and even more so during the last half a century, we may have yet another opportunity in understanding the nature of our more “abstract” levels of awareness. Indeed, modern science has made it abundantly clear that realms in Creation which earlier were totally outside of human awareness can usefully be brought into its direct or indirect grasp. And the story of the electro-magnetic waves is but one of the many many such instances.

And then, one may be led to the following rather inevitable four earlier questions :

1. Do you believe that whatever in Creation which may be relevant to your life is already accessible to your awareness ?
2. And if not - which is most likely the case - then do you believe that it may become accessible during the rest of your life ?
3. And if not - which again is most likely the case - then do you believe that you should nevertheless try some kind of two way interactions with all that which may never ever become accessible to your

awareness, yet may nevertheless be relevant to your life ?

4. And if yes - which most likely is the minimally wise approach - then how do you intend to get into a two way interaction with all those realms about which your only awareness can be that they shall never ever be within your awareness, no matter how long you may live ?

Well, one way to see our more “abstract” levels of awareness may perhaps be given by a proper consideration of the last question above ...

So much for trying to reach in our awareness towards the Divine ...

Of course, the above four questions try an approach from the point of view of the divide “to be aware of - not to be aware of”.

And as any approach based on one or another point of view, has its own limitations ...

What is important, however, is the suggestion of approaching these questions with a more and more “abstract” level of awareness ...

And this in particular means, with less and less involvement of our affective being ...

Including less and less affectivity, that is, emotions, about having or not having emotions ...

After all, just like our bodies, our emotions are an inseparable part of us. And just as it is not necessary to dispose of our bodies completely when trying to open up our awareness to the Divine, so it is not necessary to get rid of all our emotions ...

But then again, when trying to open up to the divine, the results are in no way proportional to the extent and intensity of involvement of our bodies ...

And similarly those results are not with the involvement of our emotions ...

Amusingly, desiring to open up to the Divine is seldom, if at all, a desire of our bodies ...

On the other hand, it can often be a desire of our emotions ...

Yet that does in no way mean that it is, therefore, our emotions which have to be massively involved in the process of reaching such an opening up ...

Even more amusingly, however, the above distinctions are seldom clear enough to many enough among us humans ...

The view of human consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon emerging from the functioning of certain more complex physical or biological system, in particular, the billions of neurons in our brains, has been with us ever since the dawn of modern science about three centuries ago. Needless to say, in earlier times, no one among the more learned and wise was so foolish to fall for such a simplistic and simplifying reductionist view. Instead, it had for ages been assumed that human consciousness, soul or spirit, are entities which do not belong to the palpable realms of physics, chemistry or biology.

More recently, a certain awareness in this regard has started to re-emerge connected with the issue whether “mind” and “brain” are the same, or rather, they are different. And here the issue is not merely whether “mind” is simply the functioning of “brain”, that is, an epiphenomenon of “brain” ...

Clearly, whatever may be beyond the palpable realms of Physics, Chemistry or Biology, it may require more “abstract” ways of thinking and awareness. At least as abstract as the world of ideas of Plato, so vividly described in his parable of the Cave.

And human consciousness or awareness may after all belong to such realms ...

A Finger ...

As an attempt to illustrate that concept of “abstract”, let us consider the following simple, yet rather subtle exercise :

One sits down comfortably, relaxes, and comes to a state of sufficient inner rest and peace. And then, for no special purpose at all, one simply decides to move one's, say, right index finger ...

And lo and behold, the finger moves !

But now one can ask : who or what did really move the finger ?
Who or what in him or her did decide and then move the finger ?

Most certainly, it was not only the respective muscles involved in the movement ...

Of course, so often, one immediately jumps and says : "I decided and moved my finger."
And with that, the issue is simply set aside ...
If ever was considered even for a brief moment ...

It is, indeed, taken so much and so naturally for granted that we do know the obvious and perfect answer to it, that no one ever bothers about it, at least not as long as one can move one's fingers ...

It reminds one of the fact that we see through our eyes, yet we do not see our eyes through which we see ...

And thank God that we do not see our own eyes in the process of seeing ...
At least not, as long as our eyes are healthy enough ...

But can we leave the above issue with the finger in the same way ? And leave so for evermore ?

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