

The Care of the Self and Gnostic Initiation

Patrick McNamara defines religion as a form of therapy that promises to heal the “divided self” through ritual (McNamara 2009, 26). The centralization of the self into a “new executive form of the Self” has cultural benefits, he says, including enhanced autonomy, attentional control, and cooperativeness. It also makes possible a dissociative process that allows individuals to gain access to “unusual abilities of healing and aggression” (McNamara 2009, 166). While McNamara’s understanding of religion may reflect many contemporary forms of religion, ancient religions in the Mediterranean largely were not focused on therapy or the construction of the self. Their focus was on overcoming the natural propensity of chaos, and then the maintenance of social order through the strong external control of the moral self by the laws of kings and priests. The person was considered a servant or slave of the god whose purpose was to labor on behalf of the god who desired leisure and gifts. This understanding of the human is drawn from the everyday experience of lives of people ruled by terrifying kings and capricious oligarchies in slaveholding societies. The daily experiences of forced labor, oppressive governments, patriarchal families, and the avaricious wealthy was their reality, and this extended to their conceptualization of the sacred and the transcendent. Once these patterns of subservience toward the sacred were embedded within the myths, symbols and rituals of the ancient religions, the religions became powerful instruments that maintained society’s patterns of dominance and servitude. Religions, then, became powerful advertisements of the human’s place in the world and society as obedient and humble slaves to entities superior to them, whether they were the gods or the men who represented them. So where does McNamara’s understanding of religion as therapy of the self originate? Is it a completely modern concept? I do not think so. At the beginning of the first millennium a new form of spirituality arose and began to interrogate the status quo. Gnostic spirituality provided an alternative model of reality, one in which the human is not a servant to the gods, but is liberated from them. The first Gnostics flipped the old forms of spirituality upside down as they became aware of another reality altogether, and began to initiate people into this. This form of spirituality understood the real self to be divine. This divine self existed within the human as a seed that needed to mature. The movements associated with Gnostic spirituality created elaborate rituals in order to mature and then integrate the real self with a transcendent god who was ineffable. The main purpose of these ancient Gnostic rites was self-therapy, the construction of a powerful divine self through ritual that could overcome the cosmic gods (and their men), bring healing to broken bodies, and foster autonomy to brave an unsympathetic chaotic world.