

# GNOSTICISM AND EXISTENTIALISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IOAN PETRU CULIANU'S HERMENEUTICS

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**Abstract:** *Can we discuss a common conceptual ground between modern existentialism and early Gnosticism? And, reversing the terms of the statement, are we witnessing the continuity of an ancient existentialism through modern Gnosticism? What relationship-and clear differentiation—might exist between Heideggerian Da-sein and homo gnosticus? What could the phenomena of estrangement and unfamiliarity mean and how do they manifest in relation to transcendence as well as mundanity? Ioan Petru Culianu attempts to outline possible answers to these questions by hermeneutically engaging with the positions of renowned scholars such as Hans Jonas, H.-Ch. Puech, and Barbara Aland. Through such an approach, Culianu opens a wide range of problem-dilemmas, including the relationship between the Gnostic and transcendence, Gnosis and the hermeneutic circle between Gnosticism and existentialism, or the myths of the Gnostic savior. This text aims to highlight certain aspects of the extraordinary interpretive and scholarly effort offered by Ioan Petru Culianu, the great disciple of Mircea Eliade.*

**Keywords:** Gnosticism, Existentialism, Da-sein, Estrangement, Transcendence.

## **Introduction. *Da-sein* and *homo gnosticus*. Early gnostic existentialism.**

The Heideggerian inquiry into Being ultimately proves to be merely an ontological introduction to a question laden with far greater metaphysical and moral significance for the entirety of philosophical existentialism: the question of *Da-sein*, the human being thrown and projected into the midst of the world, temporally existing as a constant flight from the final inevitability of death. The individual, seemingly abandoned to the ephemeral, searching for destiny, and engaged in the pursuit of meaning and purpose—this *Da-sein* appears, conceptually, to be a thematic novelty, a subject neglected by traditional metaphysics. As *Heidegger* argued, centuries of philosophy seem to have confused the question of *Being* with the problems of *beings*, with the core of philosophical discourse centered on

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nature and its components, while Being and the human being were forgotten or postponed for decisive analytical consideration. Yet, Ioan Petru Culianu, following one of Heidegger's most brilliant disciples, Hans Jonas<sup>3</sup>, emphasizes that if we closely examine Western cultural evolution, we will notice a field of inquiry focused precisely on the status of the human as an *orphan of transcendence*, an entity projected into the openness of time under the sign of abandonment and forgetfulness - a unique being alienated from its transcendent origins or from Being itself, becoming a stranger in a world where it neither belongs nor finds fulfillment<sup>4</sup>. Culianu refers to the period of religious and philosophical *Gnosticism* as precisely this epoch when philosophical and mythological thought centered on understanding the human as a being alien to the world, subject to an estrangement not far removed from the ontic paradigm later attributed by Heidegger to his *Da-sein*. This perspective reinforces the similarities between Gnosticism and existentialism, as noted by Hans Jonas<sup>5</sup>.

What characteristics might define *homo gnosticus*, and first, what defines and distinguishes Gnosticism in the cultural and religious history of humanity? The term *Gnosticism* derives from the Greek word γνῶσις (*gnōsis*), meaning "knowledge." It refers to religious movements, mystical-philosophical schools, and currents that interwove diverse influences and nuances from a variety of religious beliefs and ethical doctrines. It seems that the influence of Judeo-Christianity and ancient Greek thought are the two decisive poles upon which Gnosticism was constructed. The creationist vision proposed by Gnosticism foregrounds an image of an imperfect, material world in which souls, of divine nature, are trapped and constantly yearn for liberation. This inferior world is the creation of a *Demiurge*, an imperfect deity, often identified as the God of Abraham and Moses. However, above this imperfect divinity exists, according to Gnostic teachings, a perfect, unknowable God, shrouded in an impenetrable

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<sup>3</sup> Eduard Iricinschi, „Ioan Petru Culianu și Ugo Bianchi: trickster-ul, ființa supremă și studiul dualismelor religioase”. In Ioan Petru Culianu - *Iter in silvis. Eseuri despre gnoză și alte studii*, Editura Polirom Iași, 2012, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2001, p. 320.

mystery for the uninitiated<sup>6</sup>. To reach this supreme, absolute divinity, humans must initiate themselves into *transcendent knowledge* and overcome the barriers imposed by the materiality of the inferior world. Thus, humanity is divided into *pneumatics* or spiritual beings—those who become enlightened and receive the vision of the Perfect Being—and *materialists*, those whose consciousness is "incarcerated" or "chained" by matter and temporal ephemerality. According to most Gnostics, great initiates, such as *Christ*, represent corporeal forms in which the energy of the Supreme Being manifests. Within this early vision, one can discern the foundational elements of *existentialism*, among which the most prominent are the idea that the human being is a stranger cast into an imperfect world created by an intelligence intent on making human life perpetually marked by absurdity and suffering, and the idea that the entirety of human existence is defined by an irreversible tendency toward death. Only a profound initiation into ultimate wisdom can save consciousness from falling into ontic and gnoseological oblivion.

### **The Phenomenality of Double Estrangement**

Viewed as a sect opposing the direction of official Christianity, which was increasingly taking shape in those distant centuries, Gnosticism was also perceived as being antagonistic to currents of *Greek thought*. In fact, as early as the 1st century AD, intense Gnostic activity was observed in certain areas of the Roman Empire, confirming that Gnosticism predated Christianity, acting as a significant competitor to Judaic and Hellenistic philosophical and religious traditions. With the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the expansion of Islam, Gnosticism, in its initial form, faded into obscurity, absorbed by the dominant spiritual frameworks that imposed their cultural-religious influence.

However, as Culianu notes, it survived through *underground* forms of expression, both within the Christian, Judaic, and Islamic spheres<sup>7</sup>. The rediscovery of Gnosticism in the late 19th and 20th centuries brought its ideas into various philosophical schools, esoteric and mystical currents, and

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<sup>6</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu; Mircea Eliade, *Dicționar al religiilor*, Humanitas, București, 1993, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Cult, magie, erezii. Articole din enciclopedia ale religiilor*, Polirom, Iași, 2003, p. 83.

even artistic visions and pursuits. Culianu, drawing on C.G. Jung<sup>8</sup>, attributes this resurgence to a re-emergence of a psychological state similar to the one that had facilitated the rise of Gnostic currents in late antiquity, which early Christianity fought against. Consequently, the sphere of existentialist thought, inaugurated as a philosophical direction in the 19th century by *Søren Kierkegaard* and elevated to a metaphysical peak by *Martin Heidegger* in the 20th century, absorbed Gnostic themes and perspectives. One key Gnostic idea embraced by existentialism is the notion that humans possess a destiny alien to the world—a fate incompatible with the mundane dimension. Thus, the human being is conceived as an existence characterized as *nicht Her-gehörige*—not belonging to the world, a stranger entirely foreign to it<sup>9</sup>. As Culianu interprets, following Jonas, the human being, as *one unaccustomed to the world*, must accept the destiny of this strange presence projected into mundanity, as seen through Heideggerian existentialism. However, over time, this estrangement may reverse: the one initially alien to the world and familiar with transcendence gradually becomes familiar with the world and estranged from their "former homeland," transcendence. Heidegger's *Da-sein*—or the human as spirit enclosed in corporeality, according to ancient Gnostic representations—adapts to the world, becoming part of it, forgetting transcendence and transforming into a stranger to their spiritual origins. Initially, as a stranger, the human feels lost and displaced in the world's foreignness, *unable to understand* its way of being. Later, they begin to "*understand*," as Jonas phrases it, and this understanding inaugurates adaptation, familiarity, and integration into the world's ontic structures. This is the moment when the human forgets their estrangement in the world and descends—or more precisely, degenerates—into the world's existential plane, becoming fully integrated within it.

At this point, they perceive as foreign any structure not of the world, rejecting their transcendent origin and reconsidering transcendence itself as an utterly foreign domain, one in which they no longer find themselves, nor wish to return. Estrangement from their true origin thus becomes a process situated at the opposite pole of their initial estrangement from the

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<sup>8</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Jocurile minții. Istoria ideilor, teoria culturii, epistemologie*, Polirom, Iași, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 38.

world. As Culianu emphasizes, there are, therefore, two types of estrangement and two forms of foreignness<sup>10</sup>. Initially, the human being is estranged from transcendence, having fallen from it into the world's foreignness, where they feel *out of place* (unheimlich). They wander in the world's alienness, in the ephemeral quotidian, until they grow accustomed to it, adapt, and forget or neglect their transcendent origin. This transcendent source becomes insignificant, deprived of value, and subsequently invested with false value—illusory importance—while the world and its immanent, temporal structures take precedence. For the fallen human, time becomes far more important than eternity, and materiality gains multiple meanings, while spirituality is dismissed as senseless. Thus, alienation from the world is followed by alienation from transcendence. Yet, this existential conversion—where the human becomes a familiar of the world and estranged from transcendence—fails to bring the expected outcome: ontic tranquility, peace, or the serenity of a fully balanced existence. On the contrary, it exacerbates and intensifies the convulsions of anxiety.

### **The Existential Unfulfillment of the Gnostic in the Midst of a Non-Transcendental World**

Thus, as Heidegger asserts, the human being projected into the world—or as Culianu interprets this Heideggerian concept, the person caught in the ontic *whirlwind*, *constantly diverted from authenticity*, *immersed in Da-* or the openness of the mundane<sup>11</sup>, *adapted* and accustomed to the spatio-temporal mundanity, alienated from transcendence—is gripped by the oppressive, traumatic experience of anxiety and the pressure of *Care*. Familiarity with the world and the abandonment of orientation toward one's transcendent origin do not bring what Culianu calls the "*Gnostic man*" the peace of conscience. On the contrary, following the moment of the pact with the world, there comes a revelatory encounter with its negativity and evil. The Gnostic consciousness feels unfulfilled in this world, which it momentarily believed to be its authentic home. *The dwelling* of Da-sein, as Heidegger recalls, is revealed not to be the spatio-temporal world in the sense of a sanctuary offering primordial shelter. The unease now experienced after the failed attempt to integrate and become familiar with

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<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>11</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Mircea Eliade*, Nemira, București, 1995, p. 127.

everyday mundanity is, in fact, the disquiet of a mistaken positioning—far from Being and close to mere beings. In this context, reference is made to the concepts of dwelling and habitation. The Gnostic man does not feel at home in the world, as if in his ontological homeland, as per Heidegger's formulations. The current dwelling offered by the world is narrow and obscure, an existential framework that he attempts to abandon but from which he struggles to detach himself<sup>12</sup>. Confronting the laws and axioms of his own captivity may be prolonged and difficult, as the Gnostic man contends with the connections and bonds already established between his consciousness and the ontological ground of the world, where he initially invested himself while becoming alienated from transcendence.

Viewed from a moral, not just an ontological perspective, this world reveals itself, as Janos describes, to be *a multiplication of systems of demonic force*—a world where evil dominates over good, the latter being eclipsed and forced to retreat, diminishing its spiritual influence and calling. In this sense, Culianu evokes a second author, the historian and hermeneut of religions *H.-Ch. Puech*, who considers that the central issue for the contemporary Gnostic man or Heideggerian *Da-sein* is, in fact, the problem of salvation and escape from the temporal sphere of the present world. The meaning and peace of complete shelter that the human consciousness dramatically and insistently seeks are not found in this world, nor in the dwelling provided by contemporary time. Rather, the proximity to Being, the essential existential, is entirely absent here. On the contrary, the Gnostic man finds only stagnation in a universe of the dynamics and intertwining of beings that have moved away from the primordial source of Being. This distance or estrangement from Being signifies for the Gnostic consciousness a double alienation from transcendence, compounded by exile in a world marked by ontic and gnoseological unfamiliarity. Thus, the Gnostic consciousness ardently desires salvation—its own salvation<sup>13</sup>, as Puech formulates it—liberation from captivity in time, which is alien to its structural essence and the primordial aim of its knowledge. The Gnostic consciousness is in constant search of both itself and a stable, enduring habitation—a shelter that will fulfill it. Yet, this superior state cannot be offered by the sphere of immanence and materiality. Man was projected

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<sup>12</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Henri-Charles Puech, *En quête de la Gnose*, Vol.1, Gallimard, Paris, 1978, p. 195.

into a universe alien to himself, so that *alienation* becomes the fundamental constant of any contact with this world. The Gnostic thus feels exiled and abandoned within it, enduring an *existential downfall* (geworfen-sein) from *the House of Life*, as articulated in Mandaean terminology. The pressure felt by the Gnostic is the result of the assault upon his consciousness by experiences symbolically expressed through the terminological triad: *sleep, forgetfulness, and intoxication*. It is, in fact, a state of profound disturbance in which the world's ignorance of transcendence attempts to assimilate the Gnostic's consciousness, seeking to render it ignorant as well.

### **The Theoretical and Practical Aspects in Gnosis: The Four Subdivisions of Gnostic Theory.**

The bipolarity evoked here is one of the most prevalent in the history of both Western and Eastern civilizations. Thus, Plato's ontology proposed a duality between the world of *Perfect Ideas* and the world of *imperfect copies*. Christianity continued and developed this distinction between the eternity of the *Kingdom of God* and the ephemeral spatio-temporal realm. Eastern spirituality, particularly *Hinduism* and *Buddhism*, emphasized the idea of liberation from *maya*, the illusion of this world, and the necessity of achieving a symbiosis between individual consciousness (Atman) and universal consciousness (Brahman), a union that constitutes *Nirvana*, the final step in the process of spiritual liberation for consciousness from the captivity of corporeality. Culianu, following Janos in his analysis, argues that the modern gnostic nonetheless manages to gather their consciousness from its dispersion across the multiple ontic and cognitive layers of the world, returning it to itself and thus hearing the call of transcendence<sup>14</sup>. However, for this rebirth to occur, one must assume a force capable of reviving the entire consciousness and lifting it beyond the alienation imposed by the world in relation to its transcendent origins. This energy, this resurjective force, is *gnosis*.

Gnosis cannot be defined as mere knowledge or the accumulation of information. Gnosis represents a path of light (fōs, tò tēs gnōseos fōs) in the sense of wisdom and lucidity, coupled with a sense of compassion.

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<sup>14</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 40.

Terminologically, the word *gnosis* can be seen as the opposite of *agnōsia*, which means ignorance, darkness, or blindness of the soul.<sup>15</sup>

It represents a much more complex and profound process in which the entire consciousness undergoes a transformation and spiritual leap, advancing not only in a gnoseological but also an ontological sense. We witness an act of initiation and enlightenment, an evolutionary transformation, an individual progress not only in knowledge but also in the capacity to perceive transcendence and reorient towards the fundamental reference represented by Being. Thus, as Culianu emphasizes, gnosis is a salvific form of knowledge that must be revealed, accepted, and fully assumed. Only from this level of total immersion in the gnostic experience can the process of spiritual rebirth and liberation from the estrangement and *unfamiliarity* of the world be achieved. Following the analysis conducted by Janos, Culianu points out that gnosis encompasses two major components: *theoretical* and *practical*. The theoretical sphere comprises four subdivisions: theological, cosmological, anthropological, and eschatological<sup>16</sup>. The theological dimension expresses a hidden history of the world in the sense of a meta-history, a development unfolding behind the scenes of profane events and occurrences. It concerns a history of the *Spirit* that profoundly determines and sustains the flow of human history, a transcendent genesis of the event of human appearance and universal manifestation in time. The theological aspect, in this context, refers to a metaphysical register situated beyond the evidences of temporality and spatiality within which human histories have unfolded. The cosmological dimension presents data regarding the cosmic structure as a sign of divine creative power. This subdivision of gnostic knowledge continues the theological one but on the scale of the entire Universe.

At this stage, the great truths addressed do not pertain solely to earthly history or the historical evolution of humanity but also to its connections with planetary and intergalactic movements, as well as the reflection of cosmic dynamics on earthly events. The idea evoked is, in fact, a recurring thesis that was offered to humanity as far back as the time of *Pythagoras*, who claimed that the universe is like a lyre in its perfect harmony, with

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<sup>15</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) și problemele platonismului în Renaștere*, Polirom, Iași, 2015, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 40.



individual and social human life depending on this perfect order. Gnostic anthropological knowledge involves meditation on the human paradigm, with all its extended correlations toward the past, the future yet to come, and, most importantly, the present. At this stage, concerns revolve around questions such as: What is the human being now, and what should it be? What are the resources of its creative energy, and how do they arise from the spiritual depths, always accessed in the distant past of humanity's relationship with the transcendent? *Eschatology* is inevitably present in the theoretical sphere of gnostic knowledge. A gnostic wisdom — understanding the hidden depths of individual and collective human destiny — cannot be constructed without referencing the final image, the tableau of the culmination of human existence. Eschatology concerns not only individual human personalities and consciousnesses but also humanity as a whole. It does not focus so much on the end of history as on the revelation that will transform this end into a new beginning. Contrary to initial expectations, this revelation does not solely revolve around judgment, punishment, or just compensation but also encompasses themes of *salvation* and redemption. In this context, damnation does not appear as an external action imposed upon a person at the end of their historical evolution but rather as a revelation of the state in which they will find themselves—or, more precisely, be caught—at the moment of the world's end. Gnostic eschatology, therefore, focuses on the final operationality of salvation, the *redemption* of each consciousness within that interval when time closes and enters the transcendent realm<sup>17</sup>. This redemption or level of salvation does not occur directly at that moment; rather, it is a characteristic of consciousness that develops during the unfolding of spiritual life over time and reveals itself in its final truth at that eschatological endpoint. It is no coincidence that the term "*Apocalypse*" originates from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning *revelation* or unveiling, and does not directly refer to *judgment* and damnation. In the gnostic sense, even more so, the emphasis regarding the concept of eschatological knowledge centers on the idea of final salvation, the redemption of consciousness, or its complete return to its original ground in the dimension of transcendence. Practically speaking, as Culianu also mentions, echoing certain aspects of Janos's analysis, the entire endeavor of gnostic knowledge is essentially a preparation for this

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

final moment—a detachment of human consciousness from immanence and the illusory familiarity with the profane world.

### **The dialectical reunification of Gnosticism and Existentialism within the hermeneutic circle**

The propaedeutics of gnostic-type knowledge are meant to perfect the spirit of the gnostic individual so that they may feel the necessity of returning to the transcendent homeland or to assume a sacramental return to the transcendent self through detachment from what Culianu calls *the entanglement of the psyche and body*<sup>18</sup>. Thus, we are witnessing the recommendation to adopt a constant exercise of detachment in relation to the world and a reorientation toward transcendence, a process that Janos calls *a practical realization of the estrangement from the world* (*praktisch vollzogene Entweltlichung*)<sup>19</sup>. What possible correlations and interconnections might exist between this gnostic metaphysical-theological vision and the premises of existentialism? Are there *gnostic roots* in existentialism, and can existential thinking be seen as having a gnostic conceptual basis, a foundation stemming from the realm of gnostic contemplation and experience? After extensive processes of terminological and interpretative distillation, developed over centuries of cultural evolution, it is possible that existentialism retains these gnostic foundations or, conversely, that gnosticism has survived, becoming a modern framework for expressing concerns and experiences initially embraced by ancient thinkers?<sup>20</sup> The answer provided by Hans Janos, both as a hermeneut and historian of religions and as a disciple of the existentialism developed by his illustrious master, Martin Heidegger, is a positive one. This affirmative answer is analyzed and reassessed based on references to both gnostic thinking and existential metaphysics by Ioan Petru Culianu. In this context, two conceptual dualisms emerge for observation: one between God and the world, and the other between man and the world. Thus, gnosticism will adopt and adapt, on the one hand, Plato's bipolar vision of two worlds—the world of *perfect Ideas* and the world of *imperfect copies*—this bipolarity symbolically expressed in the myth of the cave, reinterpreted by Culianu in connection with his analysis of Leonardo da Vinci's two

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<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>19</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*

paintings titled *The Virgin of the Rocks*<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, gnosticism will also embrace the Christian perspective of the distinction between eternal, absolute transcendence and the ephemeral dimension of the temporal, sustaining the dialectic between the divine presence and the temporal world's frameworks. Within this perspective, the world undergoes a process of estrangement from the Divinity, gradually distancing itself from its Creator and becoming alienated from Him, estranged from His grace and revelation. Likewise, the divine Creator distances Himself from the created world and humanity, in the sense of unfamiliarity, of not recognizing creation as a structure closely, morally, and value-wise attached to the imperatives and axiomatics established by the Creator at the foundation of the world. The outcome of this perspective is the thesis that man is positioned, projected, cast into an obscure dimension, into a cave of confused knowledge, in Plato's sense, and that his highest goal is to liberate himself toward transcendence through the process of *participating* in it or through the act of *assuming messianic salvation* based on the sacrifice of complete love. From the concept of estrangement of the Divinity from the world and the estrangement of the world from God, the idea of estrangement of man from his space-time world and of this type of universe in relation to human consciousness developed. Just as, in the early gnostic sense, Divinity is no longer found in the world, no longer meeting the reflection of its holiness in the immanent, and the decadent, desacralized world no longer recognizes itself as a product of divine force, so too, in existential thought, man feels a powerful rupture between himself and his own world. He feels foreign and unfulfilled within his urban time and space. But just as the estrangement between Divinity and man cannot remain at the stage of definitive separation, the abyss opened between man and his world does not remain frozen and permanent. On the contrary, for the early gnostic, man feels unfulfilled with his status of being abandoned in the middle of a desacralized world and seeks to recover the lost interval of connection with the Divinity, embarking on the great *Odyssey* of rediscovering the Creator who has withdrawn or "died" in the *Nietzschean* sense. For the modern gnostic or the existentialist, remaining at the stage of fragmentation in the relationship between oneself and the world is unacceptable. Although, initially, one may assume the status of a

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<sup>21</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Iocari serio. Știință și artă în gândirea Renașterii*, Polirom, Iași, 2002, pp. 162-164.

*familiarized individual with the world*, later, the feeling of unfulfillment, of a dispossessed self-identity in relation to the profane mundane world, overtakes one's consciousness. And one cannot remain in this state of uncertainty and rupture in the relationship with space-time. Starting from this state of existential unease, the modern gnostic accepts the mission of seeking the self and the peace of balance with the self and the forgotten Divinity, remembered in other forms than those dogmatically traditional.

Thus, the gnostic foundation of existentialism can prove to be a real aspect, both conceptually and in terms of philosophical experience, and the idea of understanding existentialism as a modern form of gnosticism seems plausible<sup>22</sup>. If we accept the idea that the entire existence can be conceived as a field of hermeneutical research, then the gnostic experience could be interpreted as an assumption of this research, a transition from the theoretical-conceptual plane to the practical one. In this way, existentialism would find a faithful expression in the gnostic experience, reflecting within its frameworks. At the same time, modern gnosticism could be understood as a reflective perimeter of existentialism. Here, the Heideggerian *hermeneutic circle* is revealed, within which both structures—the gnostic and the existentialist—are better understood by being correlated. Thus, gnosticism is better known in the existentialist perspective, and existentialism can be deepened in the light of gnosticism<sup>23</sup>. In essence, Janos argues that both existentialism and gnosticism are forms of *the way human being exists*. Their correlation involves, according to Culianu, who follows Janos, the introduction of the terms *myth* and *mysticism* into the discussion.

### **Gnostic mythologies and the new image of the gnostic as the savior of consciousness**

The myth, which reveals the special character of the sacred spatio-temporal<sup>24</sup>, could be thought of as an attempt to symbolically translate and objectify the personal experience of transcendence, while the mystical experience comes to return consciousness from the stage of this objectification and theorization to a more intense personal experience.

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<sup>22</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Studii românești II. Soarele și Luna. Otrăvurile admirației*, Polirom, Iași, 2009, p. 83.

Thus, from an initial gnostic experience, one transitions into existentialism, which conceptualizes, only to later return to a higher form of individual gnostic experience, one that becomes *mystical in nature*.

In this new dialectical circle, the relationship between man and the world, as well as that between Divinity and the world, undergoes not only a gnoseological deepening but also an ontic assumption, so that both gnosticism and existentialism find themselves in one another and mutually justify each other. By changing the analytical register, Ioan Petru Culianu questions how we can think of gnosticism outside of existentialist perspectives. This process can only be achieved by returning to the ancient gnostic texts and the typology of their spiritual life. From this new perspective, it is possible to observe that the ancient gnostic was not concerned with the phenomenon of the fall, of projection into the world as a break generating major soul traumas, nor was he primarily concerned with the act of alienation from transcendence. All of this evidence is perfectly real and justifies its presence but as *secondary experiences*. What dominated the gnostic's consciousness, according to other specialists besides Hans Janos, among whom Culianu evokes *Barbara Aland*, is the feeling of already being saved, of belonging to a community of *saviors of the world* who are already liberated, initiated, and open, at the level of consciousness, to the absolute of transcendence. Thus, according to this different exegetical opinion, the texts of the gnostics reveal, rather, the experience of the superiority of the spirit, of assuming a *messianic* mission, and belonging to a group of elect who are already assimilated into liberation through the initiatic knowledge of Divinity. In this new interpretation, the idea of rupture, of unfamiliarity with transcendence and then with the world, would matter very little to the gnostic. The unease of not finding a final spiritual refuge is replaced with the initiatic joy of already being situated in proximity to transcendence<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, *Homo gnosticus* would rather be, as Culianu draws the comparison, a Marxist of the Late Antiquity, but unlike the authentic ones, would not warn about social injustice but about the evil in the world, about the maleficence of the human being and the unhappiness of the human destiny<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

Paradoxically, in this context, the emphasis in the gnostic philosophical conception is not on the negativity of life but on its positivity, with good taking precedence, invested with the chances of final success. Thus, the gnostic conception would argue that, despite the overwhelming influence of evil in the world, salvation exists, there is the possibility of deliverance from it and the triumph of universal good. The gnostics are the initiates, those who know this exceptional mystery of the final victory for good, of eschatological reinsertion into the cosmic and infinite calm of transcendence. Such a vision is akin to the image of the *New Testament Apocalypse*, with the Christian vision of the supra-temporal finality of the world and of divine justice that imposes itself irreversibly at the end of the ages. The gnostic, according to this new interpretive perspective, is not only an initiate but also a forerunner, a visionary, and one close to the supreme truth, which has already saved him, delivered him from the illusion of the world, from the hypnotic Maya that the Orientals speak of, or from the Heideggerian status of simple Da-sein subjected to the temporality and historicity of beings who have forgotten Being. Therefore, it seems that the weight of the positive aspect of gnosticism is greater than that of the negative aspect<sup>27</sup>. The gnostic would not be a thinker of depression, of the unfortunate realization that evil imposes itself in the world and that the ephemeral has the final word in the scenario of human life.

The rupture between man and transcendence is acknowledged in this new version of gnosticism, but it is no longer given excessive importance; it can be easily overcome by assuming the role of the savior and initiate who is already bestowed and accepted into transcendence. Evil holds limited, transitional importance, while good seems infinite, being the primordial attribute of the relationship between transcendence and the presence of man in the world and beyond it.

Thus, as emphasized in I.P. Culianu's analysis, for the gnostic, *the joy of already being saved* surpasses the Platonic observation that man is in a cave in this world, in a cavern of ignorance and overwhelming suffering. However, the issue of doubt arises here regarding the full morality of such a gnostic direction. If the gnostic considers himself already saved and liberated from the danger of ephemerality, could he not fall into an ecstatic state of the orgiastic kind, similar to the *Dionysian* experiences of the Bacchanals? Would he not easily revert under the chains of matter and

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<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 47.

voluptuousness, with the mask of liberation hiding only a form of *libertinism* bordering on vice or sin in the Christian sense? Culianu will acknowledge, on one hand, the possibility that certain directions, schools, or subdivisions within ancient gnosticism may have adhered to practices that moderns could categorize as excessive or deviant behavior. However, even if those ritual forms were practiced, they could in no way be associated with an excessive, irrational joy of life or with Dionysian orgies. Rather, one could speak of practices of an *ecological* type, in modern terms, involving the adoption of a special relationship with nature, the human body, and celestial movements, such as the solar rotation or the phases of the moon. It is possible that some early testimonies about these practices were exaggerated by certain Christian orientations opposing gnostic conceptions, but Culianu asserts that we must understand that in a society striving for purity, unusual behaviors, which deviated from the chart and standard of common ethics, could have been labeled as licentious or *immoral*<sup>28</sup>. If they did exist, these were nothing more than manifestations of a gnostic libertinism devoted to the attempt of bringing man closer to the cosmos, as a stage in the overall effort of reintegration into transcendence, a transitional moment on the path to the full assumption of Creation and its supra-temporal imperatives.

In support of his opinion, Culianu brings into discussion the tradition of Coptic literature, as well as several apocryphal texts such as *the Gospel of Mary Magdalene* from the *Berolinensis gnosticus 8502 codex* or *the Apocryphon of John*. From these writings, one can derive an attitude that attempts to distance itself from the Judaic tradition primarily exposed in the Old Testament literature. Thus, for example, in the *Apocryphon of John*, the aspect of the woman's submission to the man is considered as an achievement of the *negative Demiurge*, meaning forces that are hostile to the natural evolution of the human being. It is worth noting, Culianu argues, that this concept of the evil Demiurge survived through the Christian centuries and we find it at the beginning of the 15th century among the Cathars of northern Italy<sup>29</sup>. Within the context of the aforementioned apocryphal writings, there is a contradiction between the gnostic vision and the patriarchal, *masculinist* perspective, as Culianu calls it, which is

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>29</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, Polirom, Iași, 2002, p. 25.

constantly present in the pages of the *Old Testament*<sup>30</sup>. In the same apocryphal writing, it is mentioned how a certain Pharisee, named Arimanius, suggests in a discussion with the apostle John that Christ had abandoned his disciples, deceiving them with his lofty yet false ideas. From this encounter, John is deeply troubled and discouraged, assuming an initial path of nihilism, but later adopting a path of inner search, knowledge, and self-discovery of transcendence. Eventually, withdrawn in the contemplative calm of the mountains, he receives a vision in which *a child of light* appears and asks him why he doubts. This is followed by a series of responses meant to dispel John's negative and resigned attitude. Thus, he receives from the Savior the revelation of the transcendent truth, which he will later share with the other apostles. Culianu emphasized the fact that from these symbolic-mythological apocryphal accounts, there is no image of a gnostic community dedicated to voluptuousness or bodily libertinism in the Dionysian sense. On the contrary, what is revealed is the portrait of the early gnostic who initially assumes the drama of distancing from transcendence, followed by the great initiatory search culminating in the acquisition of revelation and contact with transcendence. This spiritual journey ends, also in the gnostic style, with the initiation of other seekers of transcendence.<sup>31</sup>

### **The case of the gnostic Zostrianos. The final gnostic goal. Conclusion.**

An unusual case evoked by Culianu is represented by the text *The Apocalypse of Zostrianos*. This gnostic undertakes a major detachment from the world, an irreversible separation from profane existence. For him, the immanent is of *feminine* resonance, meaning it concentrates temptations of corporeality and levels of concern for existential security. Bodily desire, for him, equates to psychic chaos, to emotional instability that can only lead to spiritual involution. Rejecting everything that comes from this sphere of corporeality, Zostrianos believes that total withdrawal, alongside other initiates, is necessary. He speaks to them about *pleroma*, a term which for the gnostics means the fullness and all-creating grace of Divinity. However, there comes a moment when Zostrianos decides to separate from the sect he had become the leader of.

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<sup>30</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*.



The reason, mentioned by Culianu in his analytical description of the myth of Zostrianos, is the lack of intellectual themes among the members of the group. They believe that the entire focus of their activity should be and remain *ritualistic*. Inquiry, wonder, and the search for great answers are things to be rejected as obstacles in the path of experiencing ecstasy, which is supposed to open the way to transcendence. Certain themes, such as *the conception of the one who reveals himself*, could indicate a tendency towards a specific form of sexual ritualism infiltrated into the dynamics of religious acts, similar to Dionysian orgies. Adopting an individual, ascetic path of knowledge, Zostrianos attempts to address fundamental questions regarding the understanding of creation and the mobility of universal existence. Following the ideas of a so-called *Sethian* gnostic direction<sup>32</sup>, a doctrine later recorded in the texts known as *the Nag Hammadi Gospels*, which was mentioned by one of the early Christian theologians, Hippolytus of Rome, Zostrianos questions the foundations of existence and the fundamental motivation behind creation. Additionally, one pressing query for him concerns the mystery of the *creational division*, the great mystery of the eruption of ontological multiplicity from the *primordial unity*, and how it was possible that from the energy gathered in a single unit, the immeasurable plurality of the entire Universe erupted. In the cosmology and creation theory accepted by Zostrianos, from the primordial Unity, that One evoked by Plotinus as Monos, the Absolute, the Transcendent, the Unity that holds multiplicity<sup>33</sup>, emerge the eons of Existence, Form, and Beatitude. Culianu will repeat on other occasions the strong metaphysical connection between Plotinian conceptions and gnostic ones concerning theogony and cosmogony<sup>34</sup>. Thus, evoking the relationship between Existence and Form, as well as the Platonic relationship between Idea and imperfect copy, Zostrianos attempts to introduce the concept of *Beatitude*. This represents, in fact, the final goal of any personal existence, the end goal towards which every consciousness must strive. Beatitude represents the state of maximum proximity to transcendence, the experience of complete closeness to the divine Absolute, which opens the possibility of

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<sup>32</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Arborele Gnozei. Mitologia gnostică de la creștinismul timpuriu la nihilismul modern*, Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Călătorii în lumea de dincolo*, Nemira, București, 1994, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Iter in silvis. Vol. I: Eseuri despre gnoză și alte studii*, Polirom, Iași, 2012, p. 30.

assimilating consciousness into the grace of the Creator<sup>35</sup>. Despite this advanced knowledge, this superior gnosis, Culianu tells us while following the mythic-narrative thread, Zostrianos does not feel fulfilled in terms of knowledge; he does not experience that total gnosis he aspired to. He then makes the radical decision to renounce his followers and withdraw with the intention of committing suicide. But just before carrying out the suicidal act, the messengers of light from transcendence intervene and offer him the ultimate revelations of the supreme eons, of the absolute quaternity, and the Great Creator, *Authrounios*. He understands the structure and functionality of the pleroma and the entire Universe, receives *the cloud of gnosis*, and is encouraged to return to his followers and initiate them by giving them everything he received from these higher entities..<sup>36</sup>

What could be the meaning of this myth? Culianu notes that the central message of the story emphasizes the idea that neither *intellectualism* nor *ritualism* can alone open the doors to the mysteries sought by the endeavors of gnosis. Above these two approaches lies the necessity of personal evolution, self-discovery, and the revelation of the transcendental *Self* as part of divine transcendence. Only on the basis of this direct experience of individual consciousness can the intellectual or ritualistic approach be constructed. Thus, Culianu concludes, both paths—the intellectual path of the gnostic and the path of the one subject to ritual—cannot be authentic gnosés if they are not grounded in a personal experience of self-knowledge, of encountering the essence of one's own spirit, an essence of divine nature. Only after this radical discovery and interrelationship can the gnostic engage in intellectual acts of analysis or ritual endeavors aimed at experiencing closeness and integration with the transcendent Absolute. Therefore, only after the discovery and assumption of the inner spiritual strength, the gnostic will embrace the path of contemplative intellect or ecstatic ritual, understanding that, regardless of the chosen path, their final mission, the existential end of gnosis, is the ascension of the soul, as Janson, evoked by Culianu, mentioned.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, pp. 53-54.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Experiențe ale extazului: extaz, ascensiune și povestire vizionară din elenism până în Evul Mediu* (ed. a II-a), Polirom, Iași, 2004, p. 11.

According to Culianu, one cannot directly speak of an *existentialist root* being placed at the foundation of the two directions, but we can identify an existential foundation present in the attitude that must be active before choosing one of the two initiatory paths. This existential basis supports the great search and discovery of the transcendent self. Beyond the intellectualist position upheld by Janos or the ritual-affective one proposed by Barbara Aland, Culianu argues<sup>38</sup>, we must observe that what truly matters for the authentic gnostic is *the acquisition of gnosis*, the knowledge of Divinity, the foundational secrets of the world, and of the self—of the spiritual essence around which the entire complex of individual consciousness gravitates. Leaving aside even the existentialist vision of Heideggerian thought, and the modern theses of his phenomenological ontology, it can be said that, beyond any intellectualist or ritualistic approach from ancient times or adapted to modernity, the gnostic of all times seeks that type of direct connection, *face-to-face*, as Culianu calls it, with the gnosis that opens toward transcendence<sup>39</sup>. Of course, one can speak of a deep connection between existentialism and gnosticism, with one supporting the other in the process of advancing through the flow of history, just as one can affirm that intellectualist and ritualistic approaches can coexist together. However, what is far more important for the authentic gnostic of all times is the *personal, individual experience* with transcendence. In support of this idea, Ioan Petru Culianu quotes one of the most representative gnostic statements from *the Apocalypse of Zostrianos*:

*“You did not come here for suffering, but to escape from what binds you. Free yourselves, and what has bound you will be loosened. Save yourselves, so that gnosis may save you”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnosticism și gândire modernă: Hans Jonas*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

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