



The True Gnostic – Clement, Athenian philosopher of Alexandria
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By the first and second centuries A.D., the culture and philosophy of Athens moved across the Aegean to Alexandria, with its libraries, its university and famous Christian Catechetical School, where in about 180 A.D., Clement the Athenian philosopher came. He was one of the most learned and well-read scholars of the day, who had travelled from academic centre to academic centre seeking for truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. At Alexandria, it seems, he met Pantaenus, whom he describes as the 'Sicilian bee full of honey', that time head of the Catechetical School. He joined the School and before long succeeded him as its head.

By that time the 'golden age of the Antonines' was over. Marcus Aurelius the philosopher emperor of Rome died in 180 A.D. and was succeeded by his son Commodus, a degenerate son of the most attractive of all the Roman emperors. A Spate of extravagances and cruelties for thirteen years debased the fair name had inherited from his father. Culture and scholarship meant nothing to him. It may well have been Clement's disillusionment and disgust at this reaction from the decent Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius which drove Clement into Christianity, the only society which satisfied both his intellectual and his moral values.

By 190 A.D. Clement had succeeded Pantaenus, and in 193 A.D. the death of Commodus the accession of Septimius Severus offered a period of distinguished peace, in which Clement carried on a long remembered term as head of this learned School. Though converted as a Christian, he was far too well balanced to cast aside the values and virtues which he had found in all the sciences, the lessons he had learnt from the philosophers and poets and dramatists of his native Athens. He used his scholarship and encyclopaedic knowledge to restore a sane and balanced intellectual platform for the Christian faith. Cultured thinkers of the middle and upper classes were the people he aimed at. They had tended to get left out of the efforts of Christian teachers and missionaries, who, with an oversimplified gospel, showed a marked suspicion of the Christian and semi-Christian intellectuals. Many of these had taken up faith with a set of mystical devotees of a kind which we might label theosophists or Spiritualists. The best of these were the Hermetists, a meditational group who claimed spiritual guidance from the Egyptian Thoth, or his Greek counterpart, Hermes. The general term for describing the whole movement of thought is Gnosticism, which included those who wished to accept Christian truth, but see it expressed in more cultured thought-forms than those of the simple-minded teachers of the day.

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These same cultured people were no doubt, like Clement, disgusted at the decline of thought and manners of that age. There is much excuse for their resort to hidden mysteries and esoteric practices. None the less these theological adventures frightened the simple folk. The higher thinkers became tabu. Clement saw the danger of this. Christianity was becoming a second class religion unable to meet the intellectual sneers of its opponents. No, the Gnostics had something to teach us, and' we something to teach them about Gnosis, but the true Gnosis. Gnosis is a word which has been slanted by misuse. To call a thinker a Gnostic is at once to suggest shades of the 'occult' and unsupported fantasy: it has become a term of contempt and contempt is generally a defensive mechanism and is used in default of reasoned counter-argument. Clement willingly accepted the label with the proviso that gnosis is of two kinds, one true and the other false, one founded on research and scholarship – the other speculative and founded on insecure tradition, one the outcome of gaining disciplined thought – the other 'such stuff as dreams are made on'. As we already seen in Clement's day the fear of Gnosticism arose from the contacts between Gnostic thinkers and pagan systems. It was the fear of contamination well supported by the experience of the Israelites in the Old Testament scriptures. It was also partly a social reaction of simple folk against what we would now call 'middle class' culture. Today it is the rejection of the metaphysical and idealistic categories which has driven many otherwise fine scholars into the loss of a complete dimension. Supernaturalism is out of fashion, while (curiously) the physicist is moving further and further away from an objective dependence on phenomena. The term 'a physical explanation' has come to include so many indeterminacies that we have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that it is enough to know how things work and not bother ourselves about what they are. We have concentrated on two only of Aristotle's four causes' – the formal and the efficient – and have shrugged our shoulders at the material and the final (what things are and what they are for). In fact the modern is afraid of the unpredictable, the freedom of the spirit, the personal element in the universe. The Gnostic, on the other hand, pictured the whole of Creation in personal terms. He did not talk of blind forces of nature or patterns formed by lifeless atoms, like Democritus and Lucretius, but of great personal beings; of a God who worked through agents in the heavenly places, free agents had used their freedom wrongly and caused confusion in the ordered pattern of God's purpose; of other redeeming agents seeking to restore the pattern under the will of a God who saved by creation and not by destruction, by addition and not by subtraction.

This was the form of Gnosticism in which Clement saw much good, and he set himself to fill up what even the best of the Gnostics had left out: that was the authentic figure of a Christ who actually lived in the flesh, who had acted in history, who embodied in his teaching and life all that the best of the pagan religions had been looking for and the best of the Greek philosophers had aimed at. This was the real figure in whom all the archetypes found their balance and so were redeemed.

What were these archetypes which needed redemption? We shall have more to say about them later. It is enough to say that they were the great principles behind creation, each exercising its own particular function in nature, good when in balance with its fellows but dangerous in isolation. To the cultured world of Clement they were seen as great 'daemons', linking an imperfect world with a perfect God.

Clement himself seems to see a certain validity in the belief in heavenly beings linking all who were not Christian with God. This was a ministry of angels under Christ the 'Arche' to whom Christian believers committed themselves by faith as the 'Theios Logos' our Saviour, in desiring that the Gnostic should be perfect as the father in heaven, that is as himself- our Saviour says "Come ye children and I will teach you the fear of the Lord" – desires the Gnostic should no longer need the help given through the angels, but being made worthy should receive it from himself and have his protection from himself by means of his obedience. None the less it is clear that only the perfected Gnostic can safely dispense with angelic help. For most it is an ascent of the soul of Christ, reminding us of the many paths which must lead to the main thoroughfare' and to the gate. But here he sees an ascent through a series of planes, well able to be compared with the aeonian steps of Valentinus and the more acceptable Gnostics.

Clement continues:

'One original principle, which works in accordance with the Father's will depend the first and second and third gradations: and then at the extreme end of the visible world there is the blessed ordinance of angels; and so even down to ourselves, ranks below ranks are appointed, all saving and being saved by initiation and through the instrumentality of One. As then the remotest particle of iron is drawn by the influence of the magnet extending through a series of iron rings, so also through the attraction of the Holy Spirit the virtuous are adapted to the highest mansions and the others in their order even to the last mansion.'

So much then for the true Gnostic for whom the saving logos is the necessary presupposition of his relationship with his creator. So God's transcendence is safe from contamination with a fallen world, or even with a world which could fall. But how, for pagans, to establish a link with God? There must be, Clement would agree, such a link, or how could it have happened that Greek philosophers and pagan religions showed gleams of truth? Clement was much influenced by the Middle Platonists, who had adapted the current mythology to their purposes, and introduced a hierarchy of 'daemons', ranging from celestial, exotic and weightless beings in the high heavens to the lower level of attendant spirits in contact with humankind. As Apuleius said:

'No god is mixed up in human affairs. This the particular mark of their transcendence, that they are not defiled by any contact with us.....'

The gods of Plato:

'Separated far from the touch of humanity are revered by most folks though not properly; feared by all though ignorantly, while some few blasphemously profess disbelief....need I give an account of their progenitor, who is the ruler creator of the universe, free from all shackles of suffering and action, and tied by none of the laws of form and change?'

But by means of this daemonic ladder, man's prayers and offerings could be carried up to the empyrean, where the formless and passionless God could receive them.

Though God is not mixed up with human affairs, this is not to deny intervention through the daemons (regarded by the masses as gods).

Apuleius says again:

‘You tell me that no god intervenes in human affairs? To whom shall I take any prayers? To whom shall I dedicate my vows? To whom shall I make sacrifice?’

Plutarch appeals to the ‘ancient theologians’ who take the gods of the nations such as Typhon and Osiris and Isis to be ‘great daemons’, as Pluto, Pythagoras, Xenocrates and Chrysippus maintained, ‘more vigorous than men, and in power surpassing our condition, but not purely divine nor uncontaminated, but possessing a share of psychic nature and bodily sensations, experiencing pain pleasure and all the feelings that disturb us’ (Plutarch on Isis and Osiris, 360 D,E).

The Hermetists materialised these concepts into the series of planetary hemispheres inverted over the world, each marked by its planetary master and therefore seven in number. Through these man’s thoughts, prayers and meditations could carry him to God, so long as he possessed the right magical passwords. Finally the soul of the true disciple would ascend after death through the seven hemispheres of the planets, pronouncing the ‘open sesames’ at each of the gates. The Gnostics adopted patterns on the same principle but more elaborate, and built round them a symbolic and philosophic mythology. Their genealogies of masculine and feminine qualities, personified and in pairs leading up to God, are best seen in the system of Valentinus, who with Basilides is the most cultivated type of Gnostic. For Basilides especially, Clement showed his considerable respect: Basilides was on the right lines in his symbolism. His animal archetypes have been used by more than one writer of our own time, notably by Charles Williams, who might have claimed some support from Professor W. H. Thorpe. Thorpe speaks of inherited behaviour patterns, ‘species-characteristic’, which sound remarkably like archetypes from a collective unconscious which goes far back into the early stages of evolution. The intuitions of a Basilides are all too easily misunderstood by disciples always ready to turn metaphysical and mythological concepts of their master into stone by literalising them.

Clement himself is ready enough to use symbolic figures to represent these archetypes, but it is characteristic of him that he chooses to avoid the semi-philosophical terms of Gnosticism when possible. We find in his teaching no aeons or emanations; but he speaks often of angels in their various categories, celestial and apostate. For him the dispensation of grace through angels the normal channel: ‘to nations and cities have been assigned the regiments of angels; and perhaps even some of them of one type may have been set aside individuals’. ‘Thus therefore divine aid penetrates into man’s spheres and stands clearly to be seen, through the encouraging fellowship of angels. For it is through the angels that the divine power dispenses benefits whether as visible agents or not. Such also was the manner of the Lord’s appearing,’ i.e. proclaimed by angels. Angels are guardians children and simple folk, while in the same passage he speaks of them as fiery agents of punishment.

So Clement was willing to acknowledge the need of an angelic hierarchy to link the world to God. This was the ladder of the archetypal qualities, which had become confused through the perversion of some of them and the isolation of others. There is

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no doubt that he saw these as angelic and personal. This Confusion he taught, was resolved by the act of God in sending to earth the embodiment of the primal archetype in his own image, who would restore the balance of the angelic order. For the Logos is God's own mind in action, and is the personal creative force containing in himself the design on which creation was based, in all its variety.

Only for the 'true gnostic' was there no more need of the link of the angelic hierarchy; for the Logos himself embodied in Jesus Christ, was the direct link. In him all the archetypes converged. The Logos is compared to the centre of a circle in which the individual archetypes are the radii:

'All the forces of the Spirit achieve their purpose collectively, each performing one particular function for the central authority, which is the Son; but the individual function and purpose of each power cannot be defined. Indeed, the Son is not absolutely an undivided unity, nor is he many things, one in the sense of everything. From him indeed are all things; for the being is the circle of all the forces drawn together and united into one. That is why the Logos is called alpha and omega, of whom alone the end is the beginning and again ends in the original beginning, with no break at any point.'

For that reason also to believe in him and through him is to become a very part of him in an undivided unity; while to disbelieve is to lose touch and withdraw and become out of all control.'

S.R.C. Lilla refers to this passage on p.206 of his *Clement of Alexandria* and compares it with Plotinus, *Enneads* ii,2,1; *Pluto*, *Timaeus* 34A and *Laws* x,898A; and *Philo*, *de Gigan*.8).

The Logos at the centre contains all the yet undivided potentialities. He calls Logos the 'Monas' from which the 'cosmos noetos' (knowable universe) springs, and from which all living beings and created things take shape:

'The Son has been called by the name of God since he works according to his vision of the Father's goodness as God and Saviour. He is the source of the created universe, fashioned in the image of the invisible God, first before the ages, and the type-image of all that was created after him'.

He is 'typos' as well as 'arche'. But Logos is also seen as divine wisdom, for he is no less than the first created being and the agent of creation, under God.

Such, as Christ before Christ, as the divine person speaking to the ancients through the prophets of the Old Testament and to the best of the thinkers and philosophers of Greece and Egypt and the Middle East, the Logos opened the door to men like Clement to see truth – and God's truth – wherever Spirit found a sincere heart to receive and a mouth to speak God's creative word. That vivid untranslatable phrase which opens the letter to the Hebrews well expresses the central concept of Clement himself. I can do no more than just transliterate. Teilhard de Chardin has re-popularised first word in his philosophic process: he sees the evolution of ideas following same course as the evolution of the physical universe, moving from polymerisation to convergence, from variety back to unity. Men have called him too a Gnostic in the heretical sense, as they called Clement one, and as they call any

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Christian who has the courage to step beyond the conventional and pragmatic limits of speculation.

This concept sets us free to explore the workings of the Divine Spirit in the fragmented intuitions of the Ancient West; India, China and Japan; in the uneven but unquestionable inspiration of the Koran. We shall not deny its appearing in some of the utterances of Asiatic and American Indian shamans, or myths of tribal Africa with their wealth of proverbial wisdom. In this we follow a Clement who denied nothing that was positive and creative in the Philosophy of Greece or in the pre-Hellenic mysteries, though he criticised their limitations and their extravagances, and deplored the stupid literalism with which some of his contemporaries treated their mythology.

Clement gives a significant attention to the thinking of Valentinus and Basilides: this not because they were more wrong than others of the Gnostics but because they were often so nearly right. The dangerous heretic is not the man who is wildly astray from truth, but the man who is nearly right. The particular fault that he found in Valentinus and Basilides was their rigid view of mankind, divided into absolute castes religiously.

While he himself taught that the ideal gnosis, which consisted in the full appreciation of the vision of God by the spiritual man (pneumaticos), his whole system was a lead up to this ideal state through faith (pristis) and by means of strict training. The Valentinian myth had told of a higher race of men, born into a world of inferior mortals whom they were called to guide to such knowledge of God as they were able to attain: but it they alone, the 'pneumaticoi' (or spiritual men), who could climb the ladder of 'aeons' separating man from God. The 'psychicoi' (or soul men) could reach a sort of limbo, an inferior paradise in which they would be happy in their lesser way. Basilides seems to have been more definite even than Valentinus that the 'elect' – i.e. the pneumaticoi – are supra-mundane beings by nature; and he quotes the words of Abraham, 'I am a stranger and a passing guest among you' as an archetypal foreshadowing of the elect's position here.

Sin to Basilides is always repaid by suffering. Indeed, he feels so certain of this that to see a man suffering is sufficient reason for Basilides to feel sure that he must be a sinner; for like Job's friends, Basilides said, 'I will say anything rather than call providence evil'. But, to the Christian, suffering is redemptive and God is good.

These men were constructive thinkers who had tried to give Christianity just that intellectual framework which they felt it needed. Their ideas appealed to a great many of the cultured and better-to-do, more particularly to those who thought they liked a little philosophy 'without tears'; who appreciated the symmetry of Valentinus' elaborate pseudo-Pythagoreanism, and were convinced by Basilides' mysticism and obvious sincerity.

Clement argued with them, but he argued with respect. He was sure that all subjects were safe to be discussed, so long as they were subject to checking by yardstick of Jesus Christ. Not a Jesus semi-divine even physically, as Valentinus held, so pure that even his food was transmuted so that he needed no evacuation of waste material; though curiously Valentinus freely acknowledged suffering on the Cross. For Clement Jesus is fully human, 'arche' and mysterium', source and type-image – but how to use him as guide remained for Clement to explain. It is something like this.

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Jesus will be our guide if we 'know' him. Such knowledge is not the mere following out his life as literally recorded in the scriptures. There is, Clement knew, an inner meaning in all his actions. We are not to be mere imitators. How indeed could we be in a different environment, a Western kind of culture, a different set of people. We are to look beneath the literal story, and beyond the obvious meaning, to find the kind of Spirit by which he was being guided. Sometimes surprisingly ordinary, sometimes quite eccentric, sometimes shocking, this man whom nobody knows gives us no ordinary ethical pattern of behaviour. Why does he sometimes seem strangely brusque and even rude to such gentle people such as his mother, the Syrian lady from over the border who begged him to heal her daughter, the 'king's officer' who called him to heal his son? Why does he go out of his way to fraternise with doubtful characters? Before we quote Jesus as a guide to morals, there are questions to be answered, and problems to be solved. We are to look for a second meaning in the scriptures about him.

But even that is not enough. There is moral guidance in all the parables and 'works of power', and we do well to recognise that it is not so easy to find as at first we thought. But there is more to it than that. Clement tells us that John wrote a 'spiritual gospel'. By this he meant that John looked for more than guidance on how to live our lives, and found it in Jesus' teaching to the inner circle of his followers who knew enough to know there was an inner meaning there which carries his followers beyond a bare morality to a truth which could not be told in words.

Clement was probably a Stoic before he became a Christian. As a Stoic he would know the meaning of that inner harmony which suddenly convinces that 'all shall be well'. This he had achieved through 'gnosis' of Christ, that full relationship with the one being in whom, he was convinced, all the archetypes were summed up, all great qualities combined, and all things held in perfect balance.

