

9. Couliano, Ioan P., *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (HarperSanFrancisco 1992)

This book flatly contradicts several other books in this list (see especially item # 14, by Dart) by claiming that fully articulated Gnosticism is only a Christian phenomenon, and that it got its start in the second century, with perhaps some proto-Gnosticism evident at about 70 A.D. This is a shortened version of what is on pages 50 and 51, but he makes no bones about certain scholars just plain being wrong when they claim there was a pre-Christian, fully developed, Gnosticism.

Couliano goes on and on about the German school that has been wrong for some time, and I sense he resents the popularization of their version of history which propagates it in the popular mind while scholarship now generally agrees with Couliano's version of Gnostic history and development. However that may be, I thought this on page 56 was worthy mulling over. The context is a discussion of studies suggesting that the roots of Gnosticism have been rather invariant, meaning that its dualism has always included a bad creator and a path of enlightenment out of this creation. Couliano is critical of this general approach since just how bad the creator is varies from his being totally evil to simply ignorant. But he agrees with the usefulness of two points as decisively dividing Gnostics from others:

As shown above, such attempts at defining Gnosticism as an invariant have not been entirely fruitless, since they have enabled us eventually to develop a simple system of oppositions that permits a rapid survey of differences between Judaism, Platonism, and Christianity on the one hand and Gnosticism on the other. Judaism, Platonism, and Christianity embody the

hidden assumptions of Hellenistic culture in so far as they subscribe to the principle of an intelligent and good cause that created the world and share the anthropic principle. Gnosticism, by contrast, is a phenomenon of counterculture in so far as it denies both the principle of ecosystemic intelligence and the anthropic principle.

If that is the key to deciding Gnostic or non-Gnostic, no wonder Daniélou defends Paul against Gnostic charges but allows accusations of Hellenizing to stand. At the same time it is Freke and Gandy who are completely wrong about Paul's Gnosticism. He may have borrowed their symbols, but he never for once called the creator evil or anything like it.

In the quote above Couliano defines the ecosystemic intelligence point, but not the anthropic principle. Both are defined in the Foreword on page xv:

. . . *ecosystemic intelligence*– that is, the degree to which the universe in which we live can be attributed to an intelligent and good cause.

. . . *anthropic principle*– that is, the affirmation of the commensurability and mutual link between human beings and the universe.

This last point was especially pleasing to me. Why? It gave me perverse pleasure to think that by Couliano's definition neither Bloom, who claims being a Gnostic, nor Freke and Gandy, who claim to be Gnostics, are actually Gnostics! All three see the universe as basically a good place and that humans are at home in the universe. Sorry Charlies, by this definition you are cast back into the sea, you don't qualify to be canned under the Gnostic label!

The bulk of Couliano's book is a scholarly study of the tenets of different bona-fide Gnostic traditions. It is a very finely

written and argued book. The part I found most interesting, however, is in the appendices on the variants of Catharism. I have written at some length on this topic elsewhere, but I was pleased to see that he validates a strong impression I had developed when reading background materials about the later version of Catharism with which I deal in my 2002 fairytale involving the Cathar Beatrice de Planisolles. I had the distinct impression I was dealing with a degraded, simplistic form of that faith when reading the sermons and doings of the last Cathars. Couliano is downright rude about it, but very correct, when he observes on page 233 that:

To judge Catharism in its entirety only by the crude fairy tales that already prefigure the sad time of the lapsed Perfect Guillame Bélibaste, last of his species but not best, would be like reconstructing the theology of Duns Scotus from the story of a Languedoc peasant summarizing the Sunday sermon of his curate. . . .

So, now I feel better about putting words into the mouth of one of my characters giving comfort to my heroine in my fairytale. That comfort was the sage advice not to worry about ones children having to go without the saving rites or ordinances of the Cathar faith after it was finally crushed. My character wisely says that earlier Cathars knew that God judged by the heart, and if circumstances prevented participation in a certain rite or ordinance, but the heart was right, the result would be the same. It is not the rites and ordinances that save, it is the character we build. In the last days of Catharism the leaders being led to their deaths by Courts of Love did not have this enlightened view and left their few remaining believers in considerable despair. They were strict literalists, the kind that Freke and Gandy decry in their books as always being post-Gnostic Christians. The original Christians were mystics and Gnostics, not literalists. The last Cathars were as bad as, if not worse than, their

persecutors when it came to literalistic fixations and interpretations. They had lost the Spirit that animated and enthused the charismatic Cathar leaders of the previous century, which made them irresistible.