



## Research Article

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# The Corrupted “Wheel of Life”: An Essay on Ouroboroses

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is a symbolic image often found in world mythology – a giant snake or a dragon biting its own tail. This image is usually denoted by the Greek word “ouroboros” (οὐροβόρος), which means literally “eating its own tail.” This essay is devoted to an interpretation of this symbol, which the author sees as leading to the much broader topic of human unfreedom and the forms that this unfreedom takes. The first section deals with the unique features of Gnosticism which have made it appealing in extremely varied times and situations. Gnosticism will be the basis for my considerations about ouroboros. The author’s reflections start from understanding the Gnostic worldview as an expression of apprehensiveness about the radical otherworldliness of the human spirit and its alienation from the universe. The second section deals with the symbolism of the ouroboros and its place in Gnostic conceptual schemes as a reference to the closed cycle of nature that enslaves the human spirit. The third section attempts to decipher layer by layer the Gnostic conceptions associated with the ouroboros. Various levels of interpretation are identified: literal, mythological–magical, psychological-ascetic, and sociopolitical. In the fourth section, the author connects Gnostic ideas with Christianity by interpreting St. Paul’s Epistles, particularly his ideas concerning rulers and authorities. The place occupied by the ouroboros in the Christian universe is analyzed. The last section relies on the ideas of René Girard, Jacques Lacan, and Alain Badiou to illustrate the manifestations of the ouroboros in different dimensions of human existence, both individual and collective, with special emphasis on human desire and its futile circlings.

**Keywords:** Gnosticism, Christianity, ouroboros, religious symbolism, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis, Carl Gustav Jung, Saint Paul, René Girard, Christus Victor

*Nature revolves, but man advances; both  
Eternal, that a circle, this a line.*

Edward Young<sup>1</sup>

In the world mythology there is a frequently occurring symbolic image – a giant serpent or dragon biting its own tail. This image is usually denoted by the Ancient Greek word “ouroboros” (οὐροβόρος), which literally means “eating [its own] tail.” This essay will focus on interpreting this ancient and very special symbol, which is nevertheless quite well known. I want to animate this symbol, to show how ouroboros and the controversy surrounding it reflect the problems of human freedom and unfreedom, of suffering and searching for liberation from this suffering, of finding and not finding one’s place in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Young, *The Complaint, Or Night-thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality*, 139.

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My study is based on the one hand, on the texts of primary sources, and on the other hand, on the tradition of studying ouroboros in various disciplines – from history and theology to psychoanalysis and religious studies.<sup>2</sup> This essay is the first attempt to propose a systematic understanding of the ouroboros, which would encompass a variety of dimensions, from theological to psychological–existential and social, and which would be based on a broad interdisciplinary approach. In this sense, I would like to synthesize the different existing ways of interpreting ouroboros into a single comprehensive picture.

I would also like to show that the history of religion and the sometimes quite esoteric constructions are directly related to our lived experience. That is, this is not an abstract discussion of some abstract problems, but a direct appeal to immediate human realities. Raymund Schwager rightly pointed out that over-specialization makes the study of religion – as well as other social sciences and humanities – incomprehensible to a general audience that does not understand how to relate it to the problems it faces in its direct experience.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is those works that allow this connection to be seen that are of value. This attitude determines the logic of my analysis.

I will begin my reflections with Gnosticism, which will be the basis for my considerations about ouroboros. First of all, it will be necessary to find out what is so special about Gnosticism that makes me pay attention to this particular group of religious teachings (Section 1). Then I will examine the symbolism of the ouroboros and the place it occupies in Gnostic constructions (Section 2). Next, I will try to understand how this symbolism can be deciphered and to what realities the ouroboros and related entities refer us (Section 3). I will then turn to a consideration of the ouroboros in Christianity and, above all, in the Epistles of St. Paul, who is a key figure for me in terms of translating the ouroboros into a language understandable to contemporary human beings (Section 4). Finally, in Section 5, I will examine specific ouroboroses through the example of human desire.

## 1 What is Unique about Gnosticism?

Since the 1966 Congress in Messina, Italy, “Gnosticism” has come to be understood as a group of religious teachings that emerged within the semantic universe of Christianity in the first few centuries of its existence.<sup>4</sup> Although the presence of unity in Gnostic teachings is often disputed,<sup>5</sup> in my text I will still stick to the standard set of ideas as the core of Gnostic tradition: radical dualism of God and the world – the “unknown God” is absolutely transcendent and has nothing to do with the existing material-psyche<sup>6</sup> universe; acosmism – the universe is the result of manipulations of lower forces (the pseudo-god Demiurge and his servants–archons), which themselves arose as a result of the tragic falling away of a part of God from himself; spirit as a hostage of the carnal element – human by his bodily-psyche nature is a creation of lower forces, but there are also sparks of divine light, spiritual particles of God in her; doom (*εἰμαρμένη*) and the complex structure of “rulers and authorities” controlling everything – particles of light are captivated by the universe, controlled by a very intricate hierarchy of archons and entities subordinate to them, keeping a watchful eye that the spirit does not awaken and defy these cosmic “rulers and authorities”; “gnosis” (*γνώσις*) – salvation comes through “knowledge,” a message from the higher

<sup>2</sup> For example, Stricker, *De grote zeeslang*; Ritner, “A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection,” 209–21; Kákosy, “Uroboros,” 886–93; Preisendanz, “Aus der Geschichte des Uroboros,” 194–209; Preisendanz, “Ein altes Ewigkeitssymbol als Signet und Druckermarkte,” 143–9; Deonna, “La descendance du Saturne à l’ouroboros de Martianus Capella,” 170–189; Deonna, “Ouroboros,” 163–70; Preaux, “Saturne à l’ouroboros,” 394–410; Scholer, “Le serpent qui se mord la queue,” 143–99; Reichenberger, “Das Schlangensymbol als Sinnbild von Zeit und Ewigkeit,” 346–51.

<sup>3</sup> Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, x–xii.

<sup>4</sup> Bianchi, *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo/The Origins of Gnosticism*, xxff.

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have challenged the very validity of the term, as it encompasses too contradictory a corpus of ideas. In particular, Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of “psyche” refers to the second component of human’s nature in Gnosticism of the three: spirit, psyche, and body. The first refers to the higher order, the other two to the lower order.

world that gives the human subject an understanding of who he is and how she should act to break free from this prison of the material-psychic cosmos.<sup>7</sup>

Starting to study Gnosticism, one is immediately confronted with an interesting paradox: we are talking about a religious tradition that was ruthlessly destroyed fifteen hundred years ago – people were killed, and books with “wrong” ideas were mostly banned and destroyed (at least as early as the fourth century, according to the Festal letter of Athanasius the Great). Moreover, this tradition, filled with strange and utterly fantastic constructions, seemed to make no sense at all from the point of view of common sense, let alone modern secular science. Yet Gnostic ideas and motifs have been haunting humanity like a ghost for the past several thousand years. “The Gnostics have taken over the whole world” – this is how the famous Romanian historian of religion Ioan Culianu somewhat exaltedly summarized the influence of Gnosticism on the contemporary world in 1984.<sup>8</sup> This apparent vitality of Gnosticism does not give rest to a whole galaxy of new inquisitors of the twentieth–twenty-first centuries, starting with Eric Voegelin<sup>9</sup> and further,<sup>10</sup> who think of themselves as almost new Irenaeus of Lyons, called to fight against the never-disappearing Gnostic heresy.<sup>11</sup>

From this paradox, it becomes obvious that there was something universal, something appealing to everyone in Gnosticism that made and still makes Gnostic motives reproduce themselves despite the best efforts of persecutors. So, what is it?

Gnosticism in the most acute form in the spiritual history of humankind expressed the experience of radical “not-of-this-worldness” of the human spirit, its alienation from the universe. It most radically identified the problem of human unfreedom and, accordingly, the ways of its liberation. Moreover, the question of unfreedom was not posed psychologically or, for example, socio-politically, but was raised to a much higher level – we are talking about the metaphysical enslavement of the human spirit, where bodily, psychological, socio-political, and other aspects are only partial aspects of this much more general state of unfreedom.

And these are not some secondary, ex post facto elements of the Gnostic worldview. These are the very foundations of Gnosticism. Hans Jonas called the “immanent experience of a disunion of *man* and world” the existential “first principle” of Gnosticism.<sup>12</sup> The universe is not a big sweet home for human, but a giant monster, within which the human soul is lost, wandering through the dark labyrinths of the gloomy bowels of this monster. As a line from one of Naassene’s hymns says: “And now She reaches the point where hemmed in by evil, She knows no way out. Misled, She has entered a labyrinth” (Hippolytus, Refutation, Book V, ch. 5). The created world turns out to be “a power system directed at the enslavement of... transmundane self: everything from the grand cosmic design down to man’s psychophysical constitution serves this fearful purpose.”<sup>13</sup> In the words of Leo Strauss, Gnosticism may well be considered the most radical revolt in Western history against the Greek concept of φύσις (nature).<sup>14</sup>

It is this radical acosmism that makes Gnosticism so important for interpreting the ouroboros and, more broadly, questions of human unfreedom. This religious tradition occupies a unique place as a mediator, a transitional phenomenon between the blessed Cosmos of the ancient world and the resacralization of this Cosmos in the gradually becoming dominant Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Gnosticism spotted and in the most radical form raised the problem of universal evil, which was highlighted by it in all its comprehensiveness and multi-dimensionality. This was achieved because Gnosticism preserved in all details and nuances the pagan concept

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to Gnosticism, see Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism”*; Rudolph, *Gnosis*; Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*. For Gnostic primary sources, see especially Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

<sup>8</sup> Culianu, “The Gnostic Revenge,” 290–1; see also: Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*.

<sup>9</sup> Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism.”

<sup>10</sup> On the tradition of the New Inquisitors, see Versluis, *The New Inquisitions*, 69ff.

<sup>11</sup> A particularly striking example of this approach: O’Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity*.

<sup>12</sup> Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon – Typological and Historical,” 94.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Lazier, “Overcoming Gnosticism,” 632.

<sup>15</sup> The separation of Gnosticism from Christianity is purely tentative – I consider Gnosticism to be a part of the universe of early Christianity that was removed from it as Christian orthodoxy took shape. The more than obvious intersections between Gnosticism and Christianity in the light of the subjects I am considering will be analyzed in the section on Paul the Apostle.

of the Cosmos with all its complex tiered hierarchy of gods and entities, with all-powerful “fate” (*εἰμαρμένη*) and planetary influences (“astral fatalism”). The only thing that changed was the evaluation of this Cosmos, and what seemed to be “an absolute body, beautiful and divine,”<sup>16</sup> “emerged as terror, from which the only way out was a flight into transcendence and the final destruction of the ‘cellula creatoris’ (‘cell of the creator’: Marcion).”<sup>17</sup> The cosmos has “changed its prescriptive evaluation,”<sup>18</sup> without losing an iota of its descriptive complexity. What was a detailing of the universe became a detailing of the universal evil that dominates human.<sup>19</sup> Such a turn was a real scandal for the ancient world – as reflected, in particular, in the indignation of Plotinus in the *Enneads* (II.9): he could in no way understand, much less accept, this contempt for the Cosmos.

Thus, the constant return of Gnosticism is not the result of some mystical forces or the conspiratorial efforts of Gnostic cults that have gone into the shadows and operated in secret. Behind Gnosticism is the eternal problem that has troubled humans and humankind throughout the ages – the problem of evil and, consequently, the search for salvation from this evil.<sup>20</sup>

Hans Blumenberg is quite right when he writes that Gnosticism is only a reaction to the fundamental question about the nature of evil in the universe. It is not Gnosticism that is eternal, but that to which it is a response. It is a “continuity of problems rather than of solutions, of questions rather than of answers.”<sup>21</sup> However, Blumenberg is mistaken in assuming as if the Modern Age, together with Francis Bacon and the new scientific worldview, successfully overcame Gnosticism on the second attempt (the first Christian attempt to overcome Gnosticism, epitomized by St. Augustine, was, according to Blumenberg, unsuccessful) and consequently removes these fundamental questions. Together with Hans Jonas, we can speak of a third return of Gnosticism and attempts to overcome it already in the twentieth century (and perhaps even a fourth in the twenty-first century). The sense of “alienation,” this existential origin of Gnosticism, never went anywhere.<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Ouroboros and Its Place in Gnostic Constructions

A serpent eating its own tail is an ancient image that has its roots in the civilizations of the Ancient Near East.<sup>23</sup> According to the standard interpretation, which can be found in dictionaries of religious symbols, “ouroboros” symbolizes cosmic dynamism, the cycle of the universe, the unstoppable “wheel of life.”<sup>24</sup> It is synonymous with the Cosmos itself, the Universe itself, to the extent that they are equated to the rotations of this Wheel.

<sup>16</sup> Losev, “Dvenadcat’ tezisov ob antichoj kul’ture.”

<sup>17</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> I am willing to agree with Nicola D. Lewis, who suggests that the pessimism of Gnosticism has been overexaggerated by scholars – beginning with Hans Jonas himself – who have projected onto these religious teachings the pessimism that was characteristic of their time (see Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 13ff). The Gnostics themselves were quite cheerful – they described all their misfortunes in detail only to realize even more joyfully their own freedom from this evil, granted to them by the saving “gnosis.” However, Lewis’s “new paradigm” does not abolish neither Gnostic acosmism nor a heightened experience of world evil, even if this evil concerns only those who do not possess the innermost knowledge. I focus on the negative side not because I consider the Gnostics to be extreme pessimists, but because they constructed an extremely gloomy image of the universe, which makes it possible to highlight in the most vivid form what this essay is devoted to (“ouroboros” and human’s spiritual unfreedom).

<sup>20</sup> See also, Styfhals, “The Eternal Return of Gnosticism? Secularization and the Problem of Evil,” 17–31; Styfhals, “Evil in History,” 191–213; Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World*; Styfhals, “Modernity as Theodicy,” 113–31; Solovev, “Diskussii o modernom gnosticizme v poslevoennoj Germanii i performativnyj aspekt koncepcii ‘gnosticheskogo recidiva’ Odo Markvarda,” 246–81.

<sup>21</sup> Wallace, “Introduction,” xviii.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Jonas and the attempted “third overcoming of Gnosticism,” see Lazier, “Overcoming Gnosticism.”

<sup>23</sup> For more details see, for example, Sheppard, “The Ouroboros and the Unity of Matter in Alchemy,” 83–96. On ouroboros in Ancient Egypt, check: Assmann, “Ouroboros,” 58–63; see also, Reemes, *The Egyptian Ouroboros*.

<sup>24</sup> Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Second Edition, 246–7.

This cycle, first of all, is *unified* and *all-encompassing*, it embraces all existing things. It is not for nothing that in the culture of Antiquity the idea of *εν το παν*, i.e. “One is All,” corresponded to ouroboros. Or as the caption under one of the ancient alchemical illustrations reads “One is the Serpent having the two compositions and the poison. ... One is All and through it is All, and to it All, and if it has not All, All is nothing.”<sup>25</sup> As one commentator explains this inscription: “The cyclic nature of the Unity of All is dualistic – the separation of the All out of the One, and the ultimate return of the All into the One – hence it seems likely that allusions to two compositions of serpent poison, or venom, are symbolic of the two parts of this cycle.”<sup>26</sup>

It follows from this explanation that dynamism, secondly, is *cyclic* – it is the cyclic, eternally rotating unity of all existing things. That is, nothing in this unity disappears, but passes into each other, creating an endless harmonious spinning in fixed natural orbits. The meaning of “ouroboros” “embraces all cyclic systems (unity, multiplicity and the return to unity; evolution and involution; birth, growth, decrease, death, etc.).”<sup>27</sup> These are the life cycles of “both the universe and each individual being: the circular dance of nature in the eternal process of creation and destruction.”<sup>28</sup> According to Plato, who gave the most detailed description of the ouroboros in the *Timaeus*: the demiurge created the Cosmos in such a way that it “was made to move in the same manner and on the same spot, within his own limits revolving in a circle.”

Thirdly, which logically follows from the previous, the universal cycle is *self-absorbed* and *self-sufficient*. Ouroboros reflects the idea “of self-fecundation, or the primitive idea of a self-sufficient Nature – a Nature, that is, which, à la Nietzsche, continually returns, within a cyclic pattern, to its own beginning.”<sup>29</sup> And again, to quote Plato

nor would there have been any use of organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which went from him or came into him: for there was nothing beside him. Of design he was created thus, his own waste providing his own food, and all that he did or suffered taking place in and by himself. For the Creator conceived that a being which was self-sufficient would be far more excellent than one which lacked anything.<sup>30</sup>

One can even ask: what could be more beautiful than such a Cosmos – this beautiful harmonious cyclic system that reproduces itself forever? In the language of Charles Taylor, the ouroboros is an “immanent frame,”<sup>31</sup> so popular with supporters of secular worldview and admirers of the natural-scientific picture of the world: it is not without reason that the ouroboros periodically pops up in the works of contemporary scientists.<sup>32</sup>

Why suddenly in certain religious traditions ouroboros becomes something negative, frightening, and threatening. In particular, in Gnosticism. Actually, the apotheosis of this tendency is Christianity, where the ouroboros turns into a giant Leviathan, a monster, a seven-headed dragon symbolizing Satan, who descends to Earth in the “Book of Revelation” to eventually be thrown into the abyss by an angel after a short triumph.

So, what did the Christian Gnostics see as sinister about this serpent biting itself? What concern can humans today have with this ancient symbol? Is it possible to see behind this symbol something directly related to everyday human existence?

In principle, the rejection of the ouroboros should have become clear already from the first section, in which the uniqueness of Gnosticism was discussed – if the Gnostics changed the evaluation of the Cosmos from plus to minus (from positive to negative), then, accordingly, they should have changed the evaluation with regard to the symbol, which expressed the idea of an eternal self-sufficient universe closed to itself. It is now necessary to consider this negation in a little more detail. As a point of support for my reasoning, I will take the

<sup>25</sup> Sheppard, “The Ouroboros and the Unity of Matter in Alchemy,” 87.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 48.

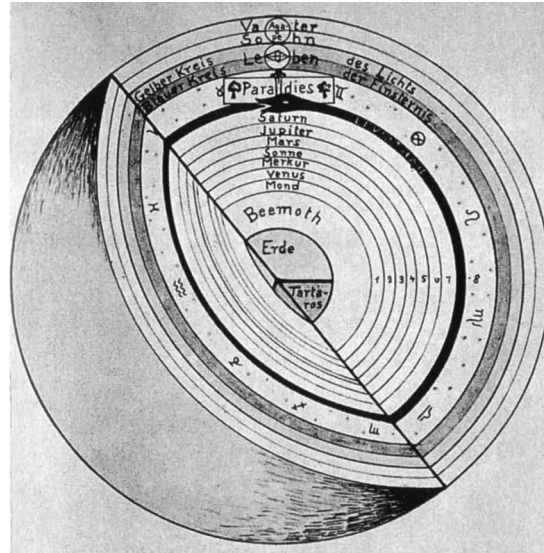
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>30</sup> *Timaeus* 33d.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *The Secular Age*, 539–93.

<sup>32</sup> For example: Primack and Abrams, *The View from the Center of the Universe*, 156–78.



Picture 1: The Ophite diagram.<sup>37</sup>

so-called Ophite diagram. The Ophite diagram is known to us thanks to Origen’s work “Against Celsus”<sup>33</sup>: Origen in his apologetic work criticized the Platonic philosopher Celsus, who wrote a polemical work against Christians, in which this diagram of Ophites was actually given (what is intriguing is that Celsus regarded it as Christian<sup>34</sup>, while Origen tirelessly condemned it as Gnostic<sup>35</sup>). About the Ophites themselves we know from Irenaeus of Lyons “Against All Heresies” (I, 30). The most famous reconstruction of this diagram is presented in the monograph by Kurt Rudolph (Picture 1).<sup>36</sup>

On the scheme, we see three dimensions – the largest part in the center, girdled by Leviathan (the lower universe); the intermediate dimension; and, finally, the highest sphere. Since in this essay I am interested in the question of enslavement, I will accordingly be interested in the scheme of the lower universe. But I would like to make two corrections to it.

Firstly, the dragon Leviathan and Behemoth (also visible on the scheme) are, apparently, a single entity or two components of a single essence, where Leviathan is the female element (“the soul of all things,” according to Origen (Against Celsus. Book VI, Ch. 25)) and Behemoth is the male element.<sup>38</sup> Their battle, described in the Book of Job, is like a clash of male and female (Yin and Yang).<sup>39</sup> That is, it is a gigantic creature that encompasses the entire Cosmos, as Origen clearly points out when he reports that “the inventor of this accursed diagram had inscribed this leviathan at its circumference and centre, thus placing its name in two separate places” (Against Celsus. Book VI, Ch. 25). Leviathan is the outer ring framing the Universe and at the same time its inner contour (Behemoth).

<sup>33</sup> Grant, “The Ophite Diagram,” 89–92. For an exhaustive bibliography of studies on the interpretation of the diagram, see DeConick, “The Road for the Souls is through the Planets,” 37–74; see also, Hilgenfeld, *Die Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums*, 277–83; Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism*, 94–121.

<sup>34</sup> Apparently not unreasonably so, see, e.g., DeConick, “The Road for the Souls is through the Planets,” 52–3. Both Origen and Celsus described the Diagram, but not in the same way, perhaps because they had two different diagrams in their hands (I am grateful to reviewer for this comment).

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to reviewer for this comment.

<sup>36</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 68. Kurt Rudolph is not the author of this reconstruction; he borrowed it from earlier studies. For other visualizations, check Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, 168ff; Witte, *Das Ophitendiagramm nach Origenes’ Contra Celsum VI 22–38*, 142–3.

<sup>37</sup> From Kurt Rudolph.

<sup>38</sup> On the possible identity of Behemoth and Leviathan, see Botterweck, “Behemah,” 19–20.

<sup>39</sup> William Blake’s famous engraving for the Book of Job (No. 15).

Secondly, following one of the interpreters, I would place the lines of Tartaros/Gehenna not inside the Earth, but above Leviathan – this is the very “barrier of evil” that separates the lower aeon from the higher spiritual aeons.<sup>40</sup> This fits better with Origen’s own text (he writes – “the diagram was ‘divided by a thick black line, and this line he asserted was called Gehenna, which is Tartarus’”), besides it fits better with the Gnostic worldview: why put hell under the Earth, if the universe itself is hell? As Kurt Rudolph writes: in Gnosticism “the realm of this anti-divine pole is very widely extended: it reaches even into the visible heavens and includes this world and the rulers who hold it in slavery, in particular the creator of the world with his auxiliary troops, the planets and the signs of the zodiac.”<sup>41</sup>

In the center of the Universe, we see the Earth, which is surrounded by concentric circles on which seven planets (including the Moon and the Sun) known in antiquity are depicted. To these seven planets correspond seven “archons” headed by Yaldabaoth, who was identified with Saturn.<sup>42</sup> The word “archon” (ἄρχων), translated from Ancient Greek as “ruler,” is extremely important for my analysis – in antiquity this word was used to designate officials, bureaucrats, high-ranking nobles; in Christian-Gnostic texts, this word denotes “rulers” of all kinds – from earthly bureaucrats to spiritual beings controlling the sector of the Universe allotted to them.<sup>43</sup> Finally, surrounding the entire earthly universe is Ouroboros, which is called Leviathan (לִיַּתָּן), i.e. “dragon” (in Hebrew).<sup>44</sup> Ouroboros surrounds the Universe both from the outside and from the inside, i.e. it is possible to imagine this Universe as a giant dragon with seven heads (according to the number of planets/archons).

The identification of the ouroboros with Leviathan was particularly perplexing to Origen: why is “this leviathan, which is so clearly depreciated by the Psalmist” called “the soul which had travelled through all things”?<sup>45</sup> Why does the ouroboros become a symbol of Satan, of the evil, to whom the Lord in the Psalms “crushed the heads ..., gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness” (Ps 74:14), who rises in the “Book of Revelation” (“a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads” Rev 13:1) to be crushed by God in the final battle?

The answer of the Gnostics is obvious: contrary to the ancient principle of “One is All,” the Gnostics proclaimed the good news that this world is only a provincial aeon, the periphery of existence, a prison for the human spirit. Ouroboros does not exhaust all existing things – there is something higher than this endless “wheel of life.” This Cosmos is not the homeland for the properly human element in human, i.e. for the spirit; and the wanderings of this spirit through the labyrinths of the orbits of the ouroboros are not eternal – there is a way out, there is a way up.

Ouroboros takes on an ominous dimension precisely because it symbolizes the closing of the horizon over human beings; it attempts to self-appointedly exhaust all that exists by twisting humans into an endless merry-go-round, the spinning of which should convince him that there is nothing else but these merry-go-round orbits. “Outer darkness” is “a great dragon, whose tail is in his mouth, outside the whole world and surrounding the whole world” (Pistis Sophia, Book IV, ch. 126). Unity becomes *pseudo*-unity, eternity becomes *pseudo*-eternity, and harmony becomes *pseudo*-harmony.

The essence of this *pseudo*-harmony, which actually turns harmony into *pseudo-harmony*, is that in its cyclic circles, it completely excludes the spiritual element, that is, what actually makes a human being a human being and not a body–soul machine.<sup>46</sup> The spirit is likened to a pearl lost in the depths of the dark

<sup>40</sup> Vassallo, “The Diagram of the Ophites,” 17–20.

<sup>41</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> The specific names of these archons vary from interpretation to interpretation. But they are obviously tied to the planets and to the qualities, forces, and substances that were associated with these planets. For example, Welburn, “The Identity of the Archons in the ‘Apocryphon Johannis’,” 241–54.

<sup>43</sup> A detailed analysis of this concept: “Appendix 1” in Wink, *Naming the Powers*.

<sup>44</sup> See also Gutmann, “Leviathan, Behemoth and Ziz: Jewish Messianic symbols in art.”

<sup>45</sup> April DeConick also mentions Leviathan the Ouroboros among the unusual (*unconventional*) elements of this diagram, distinguishing it from standard ancient “cosmic charts” (DeConick, “The Road for the Souls is through the Planets,” 54).

<sup>46</sup> One of the most penetrating ideas in the Gnostic treatises is the notion that the closest things to human being, that is, his or her own soul and body in all the parts of their constitution, are the creation of the archons, a component of this Aeon, obviously not

abysses, “girt about by the devouring serpent.”<sup>47</sup> The spirit turns out to be the third extra in this dance of humans and the cosmos, microcosm and macrocosm. Spirit interferes with this harmony, threatens its unity, and ultimately testifies to its nothingness. This is the paradox of the duality of the Demiurge and his archons,<sup>48</sup> and thus of the ouroboros itself, according to the Gnostic treatise “The Hypostasis of the Archons.”<sup>49</sup> They are strong and weak at the same time: “their power is restricted to the sphere of the hylic (ύλη) and the psychic (ψυχή). Their inherent weakness is revealed when they are confronted with pneuma (πνεύμα).” From the spiritual point of view, they are weak; from the material-psychic point of view they are omnipotent.<sup>50</sup> They are blind and seeing at the same time: “what the archon ‘sees’ is the material and lower level of being, he is blind to the pneumatic world. His blindness reveals itself in what he sees and the conclusions he draws.”<sup>51</sup> It is not for nothing that one of the names of the Demiurge is Samael, which means “god of the blind” or “the blind god” in Aramaic.<sup>52</sup>

The duality of the archons causes in them a fear of exposure, they are afraid to appear in their true spiritual light. For this reason, this pseudo-harmony is not merely passive, it protects itself, it deliberately keeps the human spirit within the walls of its labyrinth. As it is said in the “Hymn of the Pearl”: “But somehow they learned that I was not their countryman. / They dealt with me treacherously, and I tasted their food. / I no longer recognized that I was a king’s son, and I served their king. / I forgot the pearl for which my parents had sent me. / And I fell into a deep sleep because of the heaviness of their food.”<sup>53</sup>

“I am the Lord thy God” – this is the fundamental message of the Demiurge, who tries with all his might to conceal the fact of the presence of the higher aeons in relation to him and hence, his jealousy of other gods, of worshipping anything other than himself.

I will call “Ouroboros” with a capital letter the very principle of this pseudo-harmonious cyclic rotation along inhuman orbits, in which the spirit is present only negatively – as that which is excluded, that which is not present, that which is not implied. Ouroboros is a universe closed to itself, turned into a terrible self-feeding aggregate, reminiscent of images from the movie “The Matrix,” where sleeping human beings are fed with compost derived from the remains of other human beings. By “ouroboros” with a small letter, I will understand the specific cycles and microcycles running in the bowels of this gigantic pseudo-harmony. Each of these cycles is in the sphere of responsibility of its “ruler” or “archon,” subordinate to the Demiurge, the creator and patron of this pseudo-harmony.

The cumulative hierarchy of these “authorities” and their system gives a general idea of the structure of the labyrinth in which the human spirit wanders.

### 3 How to Decipher Gnostic Constructions?

So far, I have outlined only the most abstract mythological-symbolic aspects of Gnostic constructions and given the most general conceptual definition of Ouroboros. Now it is time to consider in more detail the realities that may lie behind these constructions: what are the possible approaches to the interpretation of Gnostic ideas? By answering this question, it will be possible to fill our interpretation of Ouroboros with more concrete content.

The simplest and most primitive approach is the literal, positivist. Gnostic fantasies are those ideas with the help of which ancient people tried to explain to themselves the structure of the Universe. In particular, the

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desiring to leave that of which they are a part (for example, the Apocryphon of John [or The Secret Book of John], where the process of assembling this body-soul machine is described in anatomical details).

47 “Hymn of the Pearl” from the Acts of Judas Thomas the Apostle.

48 On Demiurge, refer to O’Brien, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought*.

49 Gilhus, *The Nature of the Archons*, 38.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 40.

52 Specifically, it is referred to as such in The Secret Book of John.

53 The Acts of Thomas, 489.



above diagram is a primitive cosmological model, which, being considered from the viewpoint of modern science, can easily be discarded as outdated and having no relation to reality. Ancient people considered the Earth as the center of the universe, on the circumference of this universe there was a celestial ocean, in which Leviathan-Ouroboros, this “celestial dragon,” was splashing. These people knew only seven planets – which included the Moon and the Sun – and this fact was reflected in the diagram. However, after Uranus was discovered in the eighteenth century, and then other planets, not to mention the refutation of the geocentric picture of the world, this model can simply be ignored, along with all its fantastic entities as relevant at best to the history of human misconceptions.

This approach is convincing, but it cannot satisfy me since Gnostic – as well as other religious – ideas reproduce themselves all the time throughout human history. So, you can’t get away from them by simply straightforwardly pointing out that they are literally falsifiable. In the case of Gnostic constructions, we are talking about the whole complex, which included physical cosmology as one of the elements of this complex. Falsification of this element allows us not to take Gnostic cosmology seriously in the sense of a literal description of the universe, but the element is only an element and not the whole complex. Thus, there are still parts of this complex that need to be studied more deeply.

If we talk about the aspects of this approach – i.e. searching for some literal, positivist, material, naturalistic truth behind Gnostic constructions – that are of interest for my reflections, it is the understanding of the Gnostic mood as the experience of the most obvious laws of nature, felt by human on the most visible bodily level – cycles of birth and inevitable death, cycles of hunger and other physiological needs that can never be satisfied once and for all. These and other basic laws of human existence were experienced by Gnostics as the oppression of the Cosmos, whose laws they did not understand and whose negative influence they sought to avoid by means of their mythological-magical constructions.

From here it is easy to pass to the next level of understanding, which is mythological-magical. The various entities of the Gnostic constructions and, in particular, of the Ophite diagram become mythological beings with whom the subject deals, for example, after his death. There is a marked advantage here over a literal cosmological reading, for a completely different immaterial dimension of life is revealed. After death, the soul undertakes a journey in the course of which a number of encounters await it on each of the tiers of the celestial hierarchy. Origen gives a description of those spells that had to be pronounced during the passage of each of the seven ruling demons.<sup>54</sup>

Most likely, it is this – mythological-magical – understanding that was basic for the Gnostics themselves. In particular, this was the view of Hans Jonas, who believed that for the Gnostics “myth is a chosen style of speculation.”<sup>55</sup> That is, at least the first generation of Gnostics literally understood their diagram as a chart of the soul’s flight after death – that is, an “objective, spatial journey of the soul,”<sup>56</sup> which encounters real mythological entities that it must overcome by calling their names and reciting special magical incantations preserved in numerous Books of the Dead. According to this reading, this diagram is a map of the soul’s movement through the celestial spheres.

In this sense, there is nothing unique in these constructions. The theme of the soul’s journey is a rather traditional motif for the religions of antiquity.<sup>57</sup> Franz Cumont describes the standard journey of the soul in the ideas of late antiquity in the following way:

After death it went back to its celestial home .... Then as it traversed the zones of the sky, it divested itself of the passions and faculties which it had acquired during its descent to earth, as it were of garments. To the moon it surrendered its vital and

<sup>54</sup> “Against Celsus,” Book VI, Ch. 31. See a detailed and very convincing analysis of the soul ascension/descension chart in the Ophite diagram: DeConick, “The Road for the Souls Is through the Planets,” 55–65.

<sup>55</sup> Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon – Typological and Historical,” 101. See also *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>57</sup> This is also true for early Christianity, as evidenced, for example, by a prayer from an early version of the Acts of Philip apocrypha: “Let not their dark air cover me, that I may pass the waters of fire and all the abyss. Clothe me in thy glorious robe and thy seal of light that ever shineth, until I have passed by all the rulers of the world and the evil dragon that opposeth us” (James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*. This is a version of the text prior to the 1974 findings on Mount Athos). Also, see Culiuanu, *Out of This World*.

alimentary energy, to Mercury its cupidity, to Venus its amorous desires, to the sun its intellectual capacities, to Mars its warlike ardour, to Jupiter its ambitious dreams, to Saturn its slothful tendencies. It was naked, disencumbered of all sensibility, when it reached the eighth heaven, there to enjoy, as a sublime essence, in the eternal light where lived the gods, bliss without end.<sup>58</sup>

We will need this description one more time when we consider below the next level of interpretation of Gnostic ideas.

Although the mythological–magical approach cannot satisfy me either, it is still much more profound than the first, positivist approach. After all, the mythological imagination with its symbols is, following Walter Wink, the only way of sensual perception of the supersensible available to human beings.<sup>59</sup> That is why Carl Gustav Jung valued the Gnostic constructions so much, considering them an authentic psychological experience – through myths a person does not learn something new, through myths a person lives through something happening in his or her unconscious. It is a projection onto the screen of consciousness of what is happening somewhere on a completely different plane not accessible to human perception.<sup>60</sup> However, this strong point of the mythological approach is also its weakness – here the effect is achieved bypassing human understanding. That is, thanks to the mysterial experience of this mythology, the subject is transformed, but this transformation adds nothing to her understanding of what this mythology corresponds to.

The next even deeper level of understanding is psychological-ascetic. It is much closer to the essence of my reflections, because here something extremely close, vivid, and understandable to any person who has reached at least a minimal degree of consciousness is touched upon. Here we are talking about the transformation that the subject undergoes in the process of working on himself – in the process of his spiritual and psychological development.

The most famous psychological interpretation of Gnosticism was proposed by Carl Gustav Jung and the school of analytical psychology created by him. According to this interpretation, the archons and other entities are only projections of the archetypes of the unconscious, which ancient people, due to their general “non-psychological” nature, took for something actually existing in the external world. Ancient man, as Jung believed, “is unpsychological. Psychic happenings take place outside him in an objective way. Even the things he dreams about are real to him; that is his only reason to paying attention to dreams.”<sup>61</sup>

What in the Gnostic vision seemed to be events happening out there in the universe, in the Jungian interpretation becomes a symbolization of processes occurring in the human psyche. The divine becomes the unconscious, matter and the Demiurge becomes the human ego, and the reunion of the Supreme God with the divine sparks becomes “self” or a new synthesis of the conscious ego with the unconscious.<sup>62</sup> In short, Gnostic metaphysics “is really psychological exploration.”<sup>63</sup>

The ascetic understanding is similar in principle to the psychological understanding. It can be seen as its reverse side. Here we deal with conscious efforts to purify one’s own soul. In this case, the map of posthumous adventures becomes a map of ascetic transformation of oneself – the rulers of this world, the rulers of the seven planets, symbolize those passions, those vices that entangle the human soul. The ascension of the soul becomes a metaphor for its purification. The passage of each of the planets corresponds to the overcoming of one of the seven key passions that keep the human spirit in bondage, trapping it in their endlessly repeating cycles. Specific lists of passions and the planets corresponding to them differ,<sup>64</sup> but in general it is possible to

<sup>58</sup> Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism*, 107.

<sup>59</sup> Wink, *Naming the Powers*.

<sup>60</sup> For more on the relationship between Jung and Gnosticism, see the excellent book, *The Gnostic Jung*.

<sup>61</sup> Jung, “Archaic Man,” 128.

<sup>62</sup> Jung, “Gnostic Symbols of the Self.”

<sup>63</sup> *The Gnostic Jung*. [Kindle Edition].

<sup>64</sup> For example, the quotation from Franz Cumont above. Here is a description from the treatise “Poimandres”: “To the first zone he gives the Energy of Growth and Waning; unto the second [zone], Device of Evils [now] de-energized; unto the third, the Guile of the Desires de-energized; unto the fourth, his Domineering Arrogance, [also] de-energized; unto the fifth, unholy Daring and the Rashness of Audacity, de-energized; unto the sixth, Striving for Wealth by evil means, deprived of its aggrandizement; and to the seventh zone, Ensnaing Falsehood, de-energized” (Poimandres I: 25).

give the following picture: Moon – gluttony with its orbits of hunger and satiation; Mercury – covetousness with its orbits of endless pursuit of ever greater gain; Venus – lust with its orbits of excitement and satisfaction; Sun – indolence with its orbits of fruitless dreams; Mars – anger with its orbits of outbursts and cooling; Jupiter – vanity with its orbits of chasing ever greater glory; Saturn – pride with its orbits of exaltation and humiliation. It is the conception of the seven planets, seven demons, and seven vices, which appears to be the basis of the later Christian concept of the seven or eight deadly sins, which was formed in the monastic and ascetic environment.<sup>65</sup>

The psychological-ascetic interpretation, for all its merits, still has an obvious disadvantage: the ouroboros is interiorized and loses its external social dimension. The cosmos shrinks to the contents of the inner world of an individual.<sup>66</sup> Actually, the disadvantage of a purely psychological approach was already realized by Jung himself at the later stages of the development of his theory. In the 1950s, he put forward the theory of synchronicity,<sup>67</sup> according to which what happens in the inner world of a person is a reflection of what happens in the outer world (and *vice versa*). This means that there is not only individual individuation, but also an event of collective human individuation. Individual projection becomes supra-individual – the individual and the world as a whole is a projection of something supra-individual.<sup>68</sup> As Gilles Quispel writes: "All his life he [Jung] had rummaged in the collective unconscious, but now he had forced a breakthrough from the soul to the cosmos."<sup>69</sup>

This discovery of the external dimension allows us to move logically, if not to the level of Cosmos as a whole, then at least to the socio-political dimension of the Gnostic constructions. According to this approach, the forces of the Cosmos that dominated the Gnostics were a mystified reflection of the bureaucratic hierarchies of the Roman Empire. In the logic of such an interpretation, "aggression against the Greeks and Romans is shifted and transferred to the archons. Accordingly, mythological events reflect political events."<sup>70</sup>

This interpretation, if purged of its vulgar materialist undertones, allows us to see the social background of the ouroboros. This is precisely what Walter Wink does, offering what he calls "social reading of depth psychology."<sup>71</sup> "Rulers and authorities" described by the Gnostics turn out to be the inner spiritual mold of political, social, and economic institutions, the "*the inner shape of outer things*."<sup>72</sup> According to Wink, every social institution and every social structure has its own projection in the spiritual realm. What the Gnostics "called principalities, powers, authorities, dominions, thrones, forces, angels, archangels, elements, and so forth were, on my hypothesis, the real experiences of the spirituality of the monolithic political, economic, and

<sup>65</sup> See more: Bloomfield, "The Origin of the Concept of the Seven Cardinal Sins," 121–8.

<sup>66</sup> This disregard of external reality leads in psychological logic – at least in Jungian logic – to a reharmonization, to a new reunification with the Ouroboros as a pseudo-harmony. The Ouroboros (symbol of the mother's womb), overcome at the moment of the ego's formation and strengthening, returns at the highest final stage of individuation, becoming the symbol of the human "self." As Eric Neumann, who has written the most detailed Jungian analysis of this symbolism, writes: "The same uroboric symbolism that stands at the beginning, before ego development starts, reappears at the end, when ego development is replaced by the development of the self, or individuation." Ouroboros, "traceable in all epochs and cultures, ... appears as the latest symbol of individual psychic development, signifying the roundedness of the psyche, life's wholeness, and perfection regained" (Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, 36). Pseudo-harmony closes its jaws again over human life: "the Great Round of the uroboros arches over man's life, encompassing his earliest childhood and receiving him again, in altered form, at the end" (Ibid., 37). Naturally, this is not the same ouroboros that was at the beginning of the individuation process. It is a transformed ouroboros: "in the beginning it takes the mythological form of paradise; in the end, of the Heavenly Jerusalem" (Ibid., 37). However, this is an illusion; the "Heavenly Jerusalem" is unattainable by purely psychological transformations – its attainment requires much more fundamental, almost cosmic transformations. It is for this reason that later generations of psychoanalysts came to realize that individual treatment is to a certain extent futile without radical social transformation – the subject who has undergone a change returns to the same environment that led him to seek help from psychologists.

<sup>67</sup> Jung, "Synchronicity;" Jung, "On Synchronicity."

<sup>68</sup> Quispel, "Gnosis and Psychology" [Kindle edition].

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Kippenberg, "Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus," 220–1.

<sup>71</sup> Wink, *Cracking the Gnostic Code*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 7.

social forces that dominated and often tyrannized their daily lives.”<sup>73</sup> That is, I am not talking about some abstract spiritual entities, but about those social practices, habitus, and institutions within which the subject was located and which she experienced spiritually as being under the rule of alien and hostile forces (“fallen angels”). This can include corporations that are fixated only on profit, states that place national interests above truth, science that seeks to trap humanity in the “immanent frame” of a purely scientific worldview, etc.

If we combine all the approaches discussed above, we will get a rather multidimensional picture revealing the specific contents of ouroboroses in different layers and dimensions. In the simplest physical dimension, these are basic orbits of bodily existence – birth and imminent death, hunger, cold, disease, and other realities obvious for every carnal being. In the psychic dimension, these are the orbits of psychic metamorphoses with all their passions and affects. Finally, this is not only the individual dimension, but also the social dimension – human communities with all their economic, political, social, and legal spheres also follow their orbits, involving both individuals and humanity as a whole.

I have intentionally left out the metaphysical question – the one that concerns the reality of those spiritual entities that “shepherd” the Universe, having at their disposal the whole arsenal of means from the above-mentioned dimensions. The most reasonable position in this respect seems to be that of Carl Gustav Jung, who constantly emphasized that the question of what is the metaphysical nature of Gnostic or, for example, Christian mythology, is beyond his consideration – he can only assert the *psychological* truth of this experience.<sup>74</sup> I would like to extend this thesis to all the dimensions I have listed. The labyrinth exists – the bodily, mental, social, and other orbits are the quite visible walls of this labyrinth. That said, the question of the metaphysical nature of this labyrinth remains beyond the scope of my consideration – this is the question of faith.

## 4 St. Paul Against “Rulers and Authorities”

To further concretize the ouroboroses, it is necessary to leave the soil of Gnosticism and move on to Christianity. Gnosticism, as noted above, imposes certain limitations on its possible interpretation – after all, we are talking specifically about mythological constructions positioned precisely as mythological constructions.<sup>75</sup> My reading is to some extent an attempt to decipher these constructions, to translate them into the language of concepts and images that are comprehensible to a contemporary rationally thinking person. To confirm that my interpretations are not random, it is necessary to have a primary source and a person who described these ouroboroses in a deciphered or at least in a semi-deciphered form. The key figure here is St. Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles,” whose doctrine of “rulers and authorities” will not only illustrate the ouroboroses more clearly but will also bridge the gap to the present day, to reflections on the ouroboroses today.

This transition from Gnosticism to Christianity is only seemingly arbitrary. In today’s literature, Gnosticism is usually considered a part of the (Judeo-)Christian universe, which was later dismissed as a heresy and then constructed almost as a separate religion.<sup>76</sup> It is important for the logic of my presentation that in the aspect that is key for me – the rejection of the ancient cosmos – early Christianity did not differ much from Gnosticism, even if the rejection of the ouroboros by the Gnostics was expressed in a much more radical form. As Nicolas D. Lewis writes, “both Christians and pagans accepted that celestial *δαίμονες* directly influenced human action, although only in Christianity do we find the conviction that these *δαίμονες* were evil, ‘demons’ in the proper sense of the word.”<sup>77</sup> I have already pointed out above that the Christian concept of the seven or eight deadly sins has its roots in “astrological fatalism.”<sup>78</sup> Even the very idea of the Demiurge or

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>74</sup> Jung, “Religion and Psychology: A Reply to Martin Buber.”

<sup>75</sup> See footnote 55.

<sup>76</sup> See, as an example of such an approach: Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism”*.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Bloomfield, “The Origin of the Concept of the Seven Cardinal Sins.”

Supreme Archon seems to have Jewish roots, and therefore not entirely alien to Christianity: Satan as a former angel who rebelled against God and tried to take the laurels of the Supreme Deity and Creator of the world.<sup>79</sup> I will also remind the already mentioned fact that Celsus, thanks to whom we have the Ophites diagram, believed that it was a Christian diagram, that is, he criticized the Ophites as Christians.

Finally, the most obvious connection is the figure of Paul himself. Paul was extremely close to the Gnostics – they considered him their own, they called his epistles “a primary source of gnostic theology,”<sup>80</sup> they drew inspiration from them, believing that these epistles have at least two semantic dimensions – one for the initiated (i.e., the Gnostics) and one for the uninitiated. We can speak of the existence of “two conflicting images of Paul: on the one hand, the antignostic Paul familiar from church tradition, and, on the other, the gnostic Paul, teacher of wisdom to gnostic initiates!”<sup>81</sup> That is, not only were there Gnostic elements in Paul’s theology, but the Gnostics themselves built their constructs on the basis of what they found in the epistles of St. Paul. Paul’s theological language was “subsequently ... appropriated and developed by the Valentinians (and other gnostics) into a technical theological vocabulary.”<sup>82</sup> To the point that the key for my narrative intuition of “comic pessimism” “within second to fourth-century Christianity (particularly, though by no means exclusively, ‘Gnostic’ Christianity) finds its root not just in prevailing Graeco-Roman conceptions of a malevolent cosmos, but also in later exegeses of the Pauline corpus.”<sup>83</sup>

Paul’s epistles are peppered with references to “rulers”/“beginnings” (*αρχή*), “authorities” (*εξουσία*), “cosmocrators” (*κοσμοκράτωρ*), and other elements of the universe with a corrupted scheme (*σχῆμα*). There is a whole debate in contemporary theological literature as to exactly how these “rulers” should be understood.<sup>84</sup> It is hardly surprising that these interpretations are not very different from the approaches by which I have attempted to decipher the Gnostic “rulers” – in fact, we are talking about the same phenomenon. The traditional spiritualist-mythological interpretation is defended in particular by Clinton Arnold, who opposes attempts to demythologize “rulers.”<sup>85</sup> For Arnold, “superiors and authorities” – are real spiritual entities with which one deals, for example, in moments of obsession or, conversely, of the greatest bliss. At the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum is Rudolf Bultmann with his project of “demythologizing” Christianity, where the mythological elements to be demythologized include the evil and good spiritual entities mentioned in Scripture.

Once demythologized, demons become internal (psychological-existential) and external (socio-political) processes that enslave us. The socio-political dimension of the ouroboros is best spelled out in Hendrik Berkhof’s “Christ and the Powers.” According to his interpretation, St. Paul’s “powers” (or “authorities”) are “the structures of earthly existence,”<sup>86</sup> “the canvas which invisibly supports the tableau of the life of men and society.” And the canvas is predominantly socio-political, consisting of “divers human traditions, the course of earthly life as conditioned by the heavenly bodies, morality, fixed religious and ethical rules, the administration of justice and the ordering of the state.”<sup>87</sup>

The psychological and existential aspects of the “powers” are most vividly and convincingly described by Paul himself, who in this sense is much more interesting than the Gnostics themselves, who apparently never moved beyond magical-mythological ideas. This existential dimension of life, death, sin, and law is what I am going to consider next. Before I do so, however, I must make one clarification: above I spoke of “demythologizing” as a procedure for deciphering religious texts. This procedure is in principle similar to what I am trying to do with regard to Ouroboros, but my approach is a little more cautious – I do not deny the spiritual

<sup>79</sup> Quispel, “The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge,” 213–20.

<sup>80</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*, 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>83</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> For more discussion on this topic, see Moses, *Practices of Power*.

<sup>85</sup> Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*.

<sup>86</sup> Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

metaphysical dimension of Ouroboros and all the forces it contains in its depths, I simply shift the emphasis to those of its orbits that are most obvious and indisputable for contemporary humans.

Actually, this approach is in the spirit of Paul the Apostle himself: he “did believe in spiritual powers and treated the subject with immense seriousness. But the spiritual powers he focused his theological and pastoral concern on were not the ‘rulers and authorities,’ but the powers of sin and death. And these are existential more than ontological realities, the personifications or reifications, or, better, recognition of powers which were (and are) nevertheless all too real in human experience.”<sup>88</sup> It is precisely this shift in focus that I am attempting to make in my analysis.

Speaking of Paul’s “rulers and authorities,” we must clearly note the fundamental difference between the Christian understanding of this phenomenon and the Gnostic one. In contrast to the ontological demonization of authorities in Gnosticism, Christianity has a different logic: “The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.”<sup>89</sup> Christianity does not demonize the Cosmos as such, it simply claims that the Cosmos has been taken over for a time by hostile forces that have distorted its “image,” disrupted its “scheme.” The coming of Christ the Savior marks the “reconciliation of the world” (*καταλλαγή κόσμου*) (Rom. 11:15) with Itself (*εαυτω*) (2 Cor. 5:19), that is, with the spiritual element, the return of the Cosmos to its proper orbits. Leviathan is dragged underground, into Hell, where he remains until the apocalyptic events. Henceforth he no longer encloses the earth in his ring, when the soul can only hope that with the help of prayers and incantations it will make this Dragon “[to] draw his tail out of his mouth and let go that soul” (Pistis Sophia, IV, ch. 128). From now on, the space is free, and despite any residual intrigues of enemies, “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). That is, here Cosmos and Ouroboros diverge – Cosmos is not identical to Ouroboros, Ouroboros is only a certain form of existence of Cosmos, when the latter closes in on itself, turning into a pseudo-harmonious system. In this sense, the Christian solution to the problem of evil represents a middle position between paganism and Gnosticism: paganism in an optimistic impulse tries to reconcile with the unredeemed Cosmos, Gnosticism – flees from it to higher spiritual eons, Christianity – insists on the transformation of the Cosmos to exist peacefully in it.

However, there is an important nuance here: Leviathan has *already been* defeated by the death and resurrection of Christ, but its final overcoming is postponed indefinitely. God’s incarnation “only introduced the possibility that Christians may be saved through his intervention.”<sup>90</sup> Christians find themselves in a hovering mode of waiting for the transition to final victory. Paul himself complains that he has never fully escaped the pull of the “scheme” of the present aeon: “[...] I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:22-24). Accordingly, this intermediate state is a rather favorable environment for ouroboros. Ouroboroses are subordinate to God and in their essence good, but they can turn away from God, they can shut themselves off from God, shut themselves off to themselves, and, if this takes on a large enough scale, circle Creation again.

This is the path for the emergence of socio-political ouroboroses in Berkhof’s description, but it can also be understood as a description of ouroboroses in general: “The Powers are no longer instruments, linkages between God’s love, as revealed in Christ, and the visible world of creation. In fact, they have become gods (Galatians 4:8), behaving as though they were the ultimate ground of being, and demanding from men an appropriate worship. No longer do the Powers bind man and God together; they separate them. They stand as a roadblock between the Creator and His creation.”<sup>91</sup> That is, the “authorities” “continue to fulfill one half of their function. They still undergird human life and society and preserve them from chaos. But by holding the world together, they hold it away from God.”<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 110.

<sup>89</sup> Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 31.

<sup>90</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 68.

<sup>91</sup> Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

So, what is meant by the unkindness of the Cosmos? First of all, it refers to a universe with a distorted “image,” with a malfunctioning “scheme” (σχῆμα) (1 Cor. 7:31). The very concept of κόσμος is considered theologically by Paul “to stand in a state of opposition to God and his saving grace.”<sup>93</sup> He associates this concept “with the fallen world, with flesh, and with corruptibility.”<sup>94</sup> In this universe, there are entities hostile to humans – “rulers,” “authorities,” “the cosmic powers over this present darkness,” “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” – with whom Christians must fight with “the whole armor” (Ephesians 6:11-12). At the head of these entities is “the god of this world” (ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) (2 Cor. 4:4) or “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). However, as Nicolas D. Lewis explains, “Paul does not use a figure equivalent to Satan in his cosmology. Instead, the archons and authorities collectively rule the cosmos until the Eschaton. Paul’s implicit assumption here seems to be that this archontic hold on humankind has been built into the cosmic order.”<sup>95</sup>

In this universe human being becomes a slave to “the elementary principles (στοιχεῖα) of the world” (Galatians 4:3). The concept of στοιχεῖα is extremely curious in our context. It means not only material elements of the world, but something broader, i.e. not only the material elements – earth, air, fire, water – but also those traditions and laws that people follow (e.g., Jewish law).<sup>96</sup> Another shade of meaning is “personal spiritual powers” or “ministers of astral fatalism,”<sup>97</sup> that is, στοιχεῖα as that through which the Law (νόμος) is realized. By the Law, Paul does not mean only Jewish law; he uses the term more broadly, as a synonym for the cosmos. Nicolas D. Lewis points out a striking peculiarity in Paul’s interpretation of the law: “Law as (a) ordained not by God but by angels, and (b) as a mechanism of human enslavement” (Galatians 3:23), it contains a curse (Galatians 3:10). Its adherents are enslaved (Gal 4:24).<sup>98</sup> The law “is a demonic enslaving entity directly opposed to God’s rule.”<sup>99</sup> That is, the very essence of things, not only natural, but social as well, is disrupted; the foundations and the ontological principles that all things follow are disrupted.

In this cosmos, with its scheme corrupted to its very foundation, human moves like a railroad track along distorted orbits. Paul described these distorted orbits by introducing paired dichotomies – flesh/spirit, law/grace, law/spirit, death/life, and sin/love.<sup>100</sup> The first part of the dichotomies corresponds to existence in the fallen Cosmos, and the second to existence in the Cosmos after its “reconciliation” in Christ. It is the first part of these paired categories that will naturally interest me here. In particular, “flesh,” “law,” and “sin.”

The “flesh” is that part of a human being, which is subject to the Cosmos, that part of a human being which is subject to the enslaving Law of a corrupt universe. The laws of the flesh, contrary to human’s goodwill, put him or her on the rails of committing sins, a long list of which can be found in St. Paul’s epistles enumerating the “works of the flesh”: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Galatians 5:19-21). “Incapable of combating the laws which govern the flesh, trapped into enslavement – this is the relentlessly nihilistic picture of the human condition which Paul presents to his listeners.”<sup>101</sup>

One of the pitfalls of “flesh” is detailed by Paul in the context of addressing the other two elements: “law” and “sin.” The description of the dialectic of law and sin is something that has attracted much attention to Paul in our time. Especially, from those thinkers who paradoxically positioned themselves as outspoken atheists.<sup>102</sup> The next and final section of this essay will be devoted to a description of the ouroboroses that can be found in the works of contemporary scholars, in particular, in their understanding of Paul’s dialectic of “sin” and “law.”

<sup>93</sup> Reicke, “The Law and this World According to Paul,” 264–5.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>95</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism*, 58.

<sup>96</sup> For a discussion, see Wink, *Naming the Powers*. Also see Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism*, 60–4.

<sup>97</sup> Reicke, “The Law and this World According to Paul,” 264.

<sup>98</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 71.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>100</sup> Gager, “Some Notes on Paul’s Conversion,” 703.

<sup>101</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 76.

<sup>102</sup> The reasons for such attention to Paul on the part of atheistically minded scholars deserve to be the subject of a separate discussion.

## 5 Contemporary Humans and the Ouroboroses of Desire

Ouroboros is not something unique to people who lived thousands of years ago. They are the orbits that people follow at all times. Numerous examples of these ouroboroses, concerning their manifestations in different dimensions of human existence, can be found in works devoted to the study of both human psychology and human communities. In this section, I will focus on those ouroboroses that concern *desire*, its endless, relentless, and ultimately futile circling. I will begin with the anthropological ideas of René Girard and end with the psychoanalytic ideas of Jacques Lacan and his followers.

René Girard, in his numerous works, was essentially describing the same cyclical mechanism – the scapegoat – which, judging by the number of books devoted to it,<sup>103</sup> concerned him more than anything else. Guided also by Christian apologetic considerations, Girard charted the orbit of violence that human communities follow in their unredeemed by Christ's sacrifice state.

The cycle begins with the stage of “mimetic desire,”<sup>104</sup> when the subject chooses his object of desire, guided by what the other desires. Desire, as Girard writes, is neither objective nor subjective, it “rests ... on the ‘neighbor’.”<sup>105</sup> This desire for what the other desires leads to the appearance of a rival: I can only obtain what I desire by overcoming the will of someone for whom this object is similarly desired. The presence of the rival leads to the next stage, “mimetic rivalry,” in which the desire for something becomes more intense the more your rival wants it. These “rivalries of desires tend to become exasperated, and as they do, they tend to contaminate third parties who are just as addicted as we are to the entanglements of mimetic rivalries.”<sup>106</sup> The next link is violence, into which rivalry inevitably erupts at some stage; there is a “perfect fusion of violence and contagion.”<sup>107</sup> This violence, growing and “scandalizing” more and more members of the community, including children, threatens to turn into a war of “all against all”: very quickly “they become mimetic doubles and forget the object of their quarrel.”<sup>108</sup> Further, individual rival doppelgangers turn into a “mass of interchangeable beings.” And “in this homogeneous mass the mimetic impulses no longer encounter any obstacle and spread at high speed.”<sup>109</sup> Individual private scandals merge, smaller scandals are supplanted by larger ones, until finally “the most polarizing scandal remains alone on the stage.”<sup>110</sup>

It is at this point that a scapegoat appears, that is, someone who is to become a lightning rod for the hatred that threatens to tear society apart: “the contagion that divides, fragments, and decomposes communities is substituted [with] a collective contagion that gathers all those scandalized to act against a single victim who is promoted to the role of universal scandal.”<sup>111</sup> Through the scapegoat – or innocent victim – there is a rapid transformation of all-against-all situation that threatens the community into “a war of *all against one*, thanks to which the unity of the community is reestablished.”<sup>112</sup> “The victim of mimetic snowballing is chosen by the contagion itself; he or she is substituted for all the other victims that the crowd could have chosen if things had happened differently.”<sup>113</sup> Then there is the violence of *all-against-one*, which saves the community from the uncontrolled expansion of violence and restores the unity of the community. After peace is established, a final metamorphosis occurs: the victim – the defeated “evildoer” – transforms into a divine benefactor who saves the community from crisis and establishes a new order,<sup>114</sup> which in turn becomes the setting for a new cycle of mimetic rivalry and violence.

<sup>103</sup> For example, Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*; Girard, *The Scapegoat*; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

<sup>104</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 143ff.

<sup>105</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



Girard traces this logic in all mythological narratives, which turn out, when examined in detail, to be a mystification of the massacre of an innocent victim. In our disenchanting times, myths are replaced by what Girard called “persecutory representations”: when the persecutors paint a heroic image of themselves slaughtering yet another victim who supposedly brought misery and destruction with him. As an example, he refers to the medieval anti-Semitism with its narratives justifying violence against Jews.<sup>115</sup> In Girard’s logic, scapegoating is the universal mechanism on which *any* community is based. “The peoples of the world, – as Girard writes, – do not invent their gods. They deify their victims.”<sup>116</sup>

Girard calls this “mimetic cycle” Satan, who turns out to be, paradoxically, “a principle of order as much as disorder.”<sup>117</sup> That is, it is a force that both destabilizes a community and restores it through the slaughter of an innocent victim. As Girard writes, “Satan can therefore always put enough order back into the world to prevent the total destruction of what he possesses without depriving himself for too long of his favorite pastime, which is to sow disorder, violence, and misfortune among his subjects.”<sup>118</sup> For Girard, this mimetic cycle is the essence of Satan, “his most clever trick, perhaps his only resource.”<sup>119</sup>

Girard’s thesis is a clear illustration of what I mean by ouroboros. The gears that drive human communities are soaked in the blood of innocent victims, peace and tranquility bought at the cost of ruined lives. “Scapegoat” is the perfect “harmonious” cycle in which nothing is left to spare, nothing goes out of orbit – the suffering of the victim becomes the key to its subsequent deification, which in turn ensures the stability of that new order, which consequently becomes the deployment point for the next spin of the bloody cycle. My only disagreement with Girard is that Satan or a corrupted universe has more than one such resource at its disposal. The “scapegoat” is just one example of a more general phenomenon – the vicious cycle, the evil spiral symbolized by the serpent biting its own tail.

René Girard thought about desire in the context of its deployment outside, in the sphere of human communities. Jacques Lacan, and with him the psychoanalytic tradition, analyzed desire in the light of its deployment inside the subject. In general, Lacan, with his “dark vision of the relations among men”<sup>120</sup> deserves a separate article in the light of analyzing ouroboroses. Peter Sloterdijk is right to a certain extent in noting the presence of persistent Gnostic motifs in Lacan’s constructions<sup>121</sup> – the subject loses itself in the Other, be it the Other as an image reflected in a mirror (the “mirror stage”), or the Other as a symbolic system that attaches the subject to signifiers, which then carry it somewhere like a crazy carriage on a broken roller coaster, obeying only its own hyper-rational algorithm. All that remains in this logic that is actually human in human beings, actually subjective in the subject, is “inner distance of ‘substance’ towards itself, the name for this empty place from which the substance can perceive itself as something ‘alien’.”<sup>122</sup> It is only through the experience of his “alienation” that a human being discovers his own human (Gnostic would say “spiritual”) element. Finally, Lacan’s topological models – the Möbius strip, the Borromean knot, and toruses – even on a purely visual level resemble intricately intertwined ouroboroses.<sup>123</sup>

In this article, however, I will limit myself to Lacan’s reflections on human desire. And not just desire, but desire in relation to St. Paul’s dialectic of law and sin.

In the briefest summary, the essence of Paul’s dialectic of law and sin is this: sin and law are connected – it is through the law that we understand what sin is (“if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin”). But this understanding instantly “animates” sin (“when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died”), draws attention to it, and allows it to happen in spite of the law. The result is a paradoxically split subject

<sup>115</sup> See Girard, *Scapegoat*. Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>116</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Falling Like Lightning*, 34.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>120</sup> Badiou and Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan, Past and Present*, 25.

<sup>121</sup> Sloterdijk, *Bubbles. Spheres Volume I*, 537.

<sup>122</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 257.

<sup>123</sup> A similar comparison with a direct reference to Lacan: Killinger, “Uroboros,” 934–7.

tormented by his sinfulness – “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:7-23).

Lacan shows the universal character of this logic, its rootedness in the very nature of human desire, and its psychological truth. The point for Lacan is that “law and repressed desire are one and the same thing.”<sup>124</sup> As Bruce Fink explains this point, “We learn to desire the very thing the law prohibits.”<sup>125</sup> As soon as there is a law against doing something, that something is immediately illuminated, animated by that law. It becomes the thing around which our desire begins to revolve: “the dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes our desire to flare up only in relation to the Law.”<sup>126</sup> However, this desire, “being written or ridden with language embodying the law, is already self-defeating: insofar as desire allows itself to wish for transgression, the punishment is already forthcoming.”<sup>127</sup> The desire that is let through the law becomes inherently sinful and transgressive, because it is a desire for what is forbidden, a desire for what is only truly desirable in its forbidden form. As a result, the subject is tormented by a permanent sense of guilt, haunted by the constant feeling of being in sin – what Paul so clearly complains about.

Moreover, desire is not only transgressive, it not only involves the subject in an unstoppable cycle of guilt and transgression, it is also futile. You can never get what you really want; every time you reach the object of your desire, you will immediately realize that it is, paradoxically, not what you really want – this is the fundamental principle of desire. At the heart of desire is the desire for the Thing (the mother), which is “still attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our desire.”<sup>128</sup> This Thing is the forever lost object of desire, the object of desire that is under an absolute primordial prohibition/law, which in turn is the root of every other moral law. Actually, this Thing itself becomes so seductive precisely by virtue of the law that forbids it. Not being able to obtain what is in the very core of desire, this desire is constantly whirling around trying one object after another, each time being convinced that it is not getting what it needs (and what it needs is by definition unattainable, it is by definition on the other side of attainability).

These reflections on the dialectic of law and sin are continued by Alain Badiou, a longtime student of Lacan. In “Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism,” he develops the logic of desire. Desire associated with the law is not only futile and transgressive, but it also kills the subject (this is what St. Paul is talking about). Law is “one of the names of death in subjective composition.”<sup>129</sup> The point is that “the law, and only the law, endows desire with an autonomy sufficient for the subject of this desire, from the perspective of that autonomy, to come to occupy the place of the dead.”<sup>130</sup> What is meant here? The Law triggers the mechanism of desire (“I desire what the Law forbids”), which henceforth acquires autonomy from the subject’s will. From the point of view of this autonomy, the subject does not exist, it is in a state of death, in a state of “dead” observer of the automatism of “living” desire. And if the desire is transgressive, then this automatism turns into the automatism of sin: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). Sin sins itself in the subject mortified by the law. The human being lives, but the actual human in him is dead, powerless, while the carnal sinful element is full of strength and carries this being along its orbits of transgression fixed by the law.

I could spin the logic of desire further, for example by pointing out the identity of the psychoanalytic logic of desire with the logic of surplus value in the capitalist economy.<sup>131</sup> This would allow me to move into yet another sphere – this time economic – where the ouroboros is no less evident.<sup>132</sup> However, I will allow myself to stop here, leaving these moves for further research.

<sup>124</sup> Lacan, “Kant with Sade,” 660.

<sup>125</sup> Fink, “An Introduction to ‘Kant with Sade’” [Kindle edition].

<sup>126</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, 83.

<sup>127</sup> Fink, “An Introduction to ‘Kant with Sade’” [Kindle edition].

<sup>128</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 79.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> For more details, see: Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 50–5.

<sup>132</sup> In fact, this has already been done in part by John Milbank, again in connection with Paul the Apostle. See Milbank, “Paul Against Biopolitics,” 125–72.

## 6 Conclusion

In this essay, I tried to conceptualize this experience of “alienation,” “otherworldliness,” which eternally haunts human beings, who cannot find their place in the universe. This was done with the help of an ancient mythological image – Ouroboros – which in my interpretation turned into a religious symbolization of the principle of cyclic self-sufficient circling of all that exists. This circling is experienced by the human being revolving in it as their own enslavement to “rulers,” “authorities,” “laws” and other “material elements” of the universe. The orbits of this circle encompass both the most fundamental bases of the Cosmos (fatum, the inevitability of perdition and death hanging over all existing) and the dimensions closest to human existence (his psychophysical constitution, for example).

The cycles of Ouroboros disturb humans because, first, they exclude the intrinsically human in human beings. In religious language, this intrinsically human element is denoted as “spirit”; in the language of secular descriptions, it is conveyed through the idea of the proper subjective in the subject, the aspect of his or her constitution that cannot be reduced to the various “determinisms” that objectify him – for example, the objectification of the subject as derived from economic processes or as derived from its own neurobiology. In these cycles, the human in human being experiences himself as dead, as a dead person, as a willless observer of something within him- or herself that works itself out, obeying the human-less logic of the self-locked universe. Secondly, these are dislocated cycles, these are cycles with some kind of flaw, as if something is broken in them. Giorgio Agamben in one of his books quotes a Jewish parable that in the Kingdom of God everything will be the same as it is now, but only slightly different. All that is missing is a “small displacement” so that everything existing will be fixed the way it should be.<sup>133</sup> That “just a little bit” is the flaw. Everything goes as it should – a dynamic cycle of life, almost “perpetual motion”, the harmony that can even delight some enthusiastic naturalists, but still something is wrong. Blood, violence, innocent victims, desire spinning like a squirrel in a wheel – all these are manifestations of this defect. It is as if some fundamental code has been broken, as if these orbits have been displaced by some catastrophic event.

Gnosticism is valuable precisely because of its stubbornness, its unwillingness to forget this universal corruption, and all that follows from it. Early Christianity – in fact, the Gnostic teachings were part of it – also carried this experience of the corruption of the universe oppressing human beings. Christians understood both the power of “doom,” “astral fatalism,” and the power of insidious “archons,” both earthly and heavenly.<sup>134</sup> Christ was thought of as the one who “corrects the Cosmos”, who subdues the orbits of “rulers” and “authorities”, who remakes the “scheme” of this Cosmos (*Christus Victor*<sup>135</sup>).

Gradually, however, this intuition began to weaken in the Christian consciousness. This was due not least to the successful integration of the Christian Church into the structures of this world, epitomized in particular by the Roman Empire, and then by any authority as such: “talk about principalities and powers now became an embarrassment to the emergent ‘Great Church’. With the crushing of Gnosticism by the power of the ‘Christian’ state, the category of the Powers was lost as a means of ethical discernment.”<sup>136</sup> Gospel events, instead of being the good news of overcoming the ouroboric cosmos, began to be seen as a purely individual relationship between the believer and God. Theology “no longer painted a cosmic-historical-political-spiritual conflict between Christ and the authorities on earth, but rather it was concerned with the struggle between the individual and the Devil, the Devil being... a *rebellion against the church and the states* and all their laws, civil, criminal, and moral, no matter how unjust, inhuman, and degrading they were. *What early Christians would have called ‘Caesar worship’ or ‘complicity with Satan’ henceforth became the very essence of piety.*”<sup>137</sup>

Devil-Leviathan and the “archons” under his control were increasingly spiritualized, more and more transferred to a distant etheric space. The “superiors” were “reduced to disembodied demons in the air,

<sup>133</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 52–5.

<sup>134</sup> Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 185.

<sup>135</sup> For more, see Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

<sup>136</sup> Wink, *Cracking the Gnostic Code*, 28. See also: Weaver, “Atonement for the Non-Constantinian Church,” 307–23.

<sup>137</sup> Wink, *Cracking the Gnostic Code*, 29.

deprived of all institutional reference.”<sup>138</sup> And when the natural-scientific worldview made belief in spiritual entities difficult, the Christian picture began to gradually crumble. Christianity itself was driven into a stalemate: the more densely the Church became embedded in the world, becoming one of the “rulers,” the more difficult it became to explain what were the plagues from which Christianity was going to save man. As early as the second-third centuries, the Gnostics “like early warning radar, ... could already see the direction the God-concept was evolving: toward a God indistinguishable from a world-monarch, ruthless in his hatred of frailty and disobedience, and the ultimate guarantor of the status quo.”<sup>139</sup>

However, Gnosticism’s insight and persistence in its rejection of the Cosmos turned out to be its greatest weakness. The power of the “forces” that dominated the Cosmos seemed so great to the Gnostics that they were unable to offer any constructive solution other than spiritual escape, other than giving up this reality. The downside of Gnostic acosimism was its social and political impotence. This powerlessness, in the end, is tantamount to accepting the existing *status quo* – nothing can be fundamentally corrected anyway. The radicalism of Gnosticism ends in extreme conservatism and acceptance of evil as something inevitable by definition.<sup>140</sup>

At this point, however, we go beyond the purely negative dimension of the universe, to which I have decided to limit the current text, and we are faced with the question of how to correct the damaged orbits. I plan to devote the second part of this text to these problems, in the course of which I will continue to analyze those contemporary thinkers (in particular, Slavoj Žižek and, in general, representatives of the so-called “theopolitical turn”<sup>141</sup>) in whose works – despite their general atheistic character – the theological questions and dilemmas of interest to me begin to surface. The problematics of the Ouroboros echoes the problematics of the “iron cage” of modern society, with its “mechanical foundations” and “mechanized petrification.”<sup>142</sup> And the problematics of the Gnostics resonates with the search for a way out of this “iron cage” by contemporary left thinkers who dream of opening the closed horizon of history, just as the Gnostics dreamed of opening the jaws of the Ouroboros: the problem of the Ouroboros and the search for a way out of it is eternal.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 49–52.

<sup>141</sup> Milbank et al., *Paul's New Moment; Harink, Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others*.

<sup>142</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 124.

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