The Strayed Angel: Gnosticism in the Works of George William Russell (A.E.)

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This project, funded by a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) from the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, explored the relationship between the writings of George William Russell, an Irish mystic, and Gnosticism, a complex of ancient religious beliefs associated with early Christianity. Using historical analysis of Russell’s writings and writings of his contemporaries, I compiled a list of Gnostic texts that inspired Russell’s work. Through careful reading and intertextual analysis of this Gnostic literature alongside Russell’s writings, I then established which of his conceptual themes were Gnostic.

Russell (1867–1935; better known by his pseudonym AE) was an Irish writer and a member of the Theosophical Society. Theosophy, a highly syncretic religious system, blended elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, and esoteric currents of other religions. Russell’s work exhibits many of the telltale signs of Theosophical literature, such as references to Hindu figures and reincarnation. Prior literature on Russell (namely That Myriad Minded Man—A.E. by Henry Summerfield) focused almost solely on the themes in his corpus which could be attributed to Hindu/Buddhist concepts. Scholars labeled these themes “Theosophical,” which, while technically true, occludes the aspects of the Theosophical belief system that were drawn from non-Hindu/Buddhist sources. In Russell’s case, a large number of these themes (both those left unexamined by prior scholarship and many that were investigated, I contend, incompletely) can be traced to Christian/Gnostic sources. Russell’s version of Theosophy, as expressed in his writings, is at least equally as influenced by Gnostic ideas as it is by Hindu/Buddhist ideas, if not more so. It is this contention that formed the basis of my project.

The Gnostic texts I examined were gleaned from references within Russell’s writings. In his spiritual autobiography, The Candle of Vision, Russell describes his first encounter with Gnosticism. After seeing the word Aeon in a vision, he stumbled upon an entry for the word in a religious dictionary, which told him that the word was used by Gnostics as a label for emanations of God. Later, in The Interpreters, Russell identified this dictionary as The General History of the Christian Religion and Church by Augustus Neander. In addition to consulting Neander, I consulted the work of G.R.S. Mead, a scholar and translator of Gnostic texts, who was widely read by Theosophists during Russell’s lifetime. Specifically, Mead’s translation of Pistis Sophia, a Gnostic Gospel, and Fragments of a Faith Forgotten, Mead’s scholarly investigation of the Gnostics, oriented my understanding of Russell’s relationship with Gnosticism.

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Areas of Gnostic Influence in Russell’s Work

With the texts for comparison established, I identified three thematic areas of influence: (1) the introduction of a specifically Gnostic realm to Russell’s cosmology; (2) narratives of ascent to that Gnostic realm, often hindered by celestial intermediary beings; and (3) dualism between Light, usually identified with Good, and Darkness, usually identified with Evil.

First, I refuted Henry Summerfield’s contention that Russell’s cosmology was directly taken from the Hindu system. Russell’s cosmology exhibits Hindu influences, but its unique innovation is the introduction of the “God-world” alongside the “Heaven-world.” The God-world is home to a supreme, true God, whereas the Heaven-world is aligned with the religions of the world. This concept is taken directly from Gnostic texts, which posit the existence of an unknown God beyond traditional Christianity or Judaism.

Second, I identified Russell’s recurring motif of ascent into the God-world as Gnostic. Ascent narratives in Russell’s work all follow a similar structure. A hero, usually in the Heaven-world, attempts to ascend into an unknown region to meet God. Along the way, they are met by a celestial intermediary being (more than a human, but less than a god) who attempts to stop them. I connected the narrative motif of ascent to *Pistis Sophia*, a text that provides instructions for how humanity can surpass certain intermediary beings in the heavens to reach God in his realm. Russell’s narratives conform strongly to that of *Pistis Sophia*, often borrowing language directly from the text.

Third, I discovered that Russell’s usage of Light-Dark dualism draws from Augustus Neander’s description of Gnostic dualism. In both Russell’s and Neander’s narratives, the world we live in is the product of a power struggle between two forces in the Heaven-world. The first, Light, is generally identified with the forces of Good and the True God. The second, Darkness, is generally identified with the forces of Evil and celestial intermediary beings. I found that Russell often reproduced and innovated upon Neander’s account of this narrative, which was attributed to the Syrian Gnostics.

Significance of This Research

This project is the first investigation of Gnostic influences on the works of George William Russell and is notably the first piece of scholarship to investigate Russell’s religious framework on its own merits, outside of the Theosophical Society. Prior scholarship often mistakenly referred to Theosophical doctrine first, but I prioritized what Russell believed, as expressed in his work. The three conceptual areas discussed above are explored in detail in a full-length paper I am presenting at the Society of Biblical Literature’s 2021 Annual Meeting.

In the future, I plan to examine other spiritual influences in Russell’s work, disambiguating which aspects came from Theosophy and which came from traditions beyond Gnosticism, such as Hinduism and Neoplatonism.

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References


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Camden Roy came to the University of New Hampshire from his hometown of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to major in classics and Italian studies. He is a member of Eta Sigma Phi, a classics honor society, and Gamma Kappa Alpha, an Italian honors society, and plans to graduate with a bachelor of arts degree in May 2022. Camden has been fascinated with George William Russell since high school, and while reading a collection of his mystical works for fun he noticed connections with Gnosticism, which he was studying at the time in a class. The research Camden conducted with a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) was a culmination of over a year of research exploring those connections. Through this, he experienced, among other things, the value of researching with primary sources: “It was only by returning to Russell’s own writings (especially letters—there was nothing more fun than reading his private letters), that I was able to develop my argument.” He views this research experience as a springboard into his academic career. As Camden explains, “It touches on various themes (Gnosticism, Theosophy, religious experience) that I want to explore further in my scholarship.”

Paul Robertson is a lecturer in the Department of Classics, Humanities, and Italian Studies at the University of New Hampshire, College of Liberal Arts. Dr. Robertson is a specialist in ancient Mediterranean religion and philosophy, the history of western thought, and the theory of religion that looks to answer what religion is and why it exists.