

## STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

*The world is strange but nothing surpasseth man in strangeness – Sophocles.*

As I've suggested up until now, JGB's approach to essence and existence was to a large extent based on Thomism, the classical Aristotelian-based ideology of the Catholic Church. JGB was aware of another tradition of sorts, **Gnosticism**, but at the time he was writing it was not as widely known as it is now.

In his book *The Gnostic Religion* author Jonas links Gnosticism with existentialism. Very briefly, this is because it starts from a stark existential experience that can strike any of us and has severely affected many. It is rather like 'waking up' and looking round and intensely feeling that *I do not belong here*. Sometimes this gives us the ancillary sense that the world is somehow *wrong*. Or, that *I am an alien*.

Gnosticism has innumerable forms – every Gnostic created their own system, which was part of the reason that the Church suppressed them, wanting one defined belief or dogma. From some of them came various versions of *dualism*. Perhaps there was a distant source for all these in the Zoroastrian religion of the twin gods, one dark and one light – Ahriman and Ahura Mazda – but there would have been many transformations and tweaks over the centuries. We can think of the Manicheans and the Cathars who tended to contrast this world with the next.

One of the most interesting ideas that emerged was that this world, the world we know and seem to inhabit, is in fact *false*, and acts as a *prison for our souls*. *This world* is a dream created by a lesser God in imitation of the true God. This world is mechanical and a nightmare. *We can awaken from the nightmare but we need help*. Hence the deep meaning of *salvation*.

The notion of two gods like this is to be found in one interpretation of the Bible: the Old Testament is about the Creator God Yahweh who is really a monster, while the New Testament is about the True God, Our Father, who is the source of compassion and mercy. (In kabala there are the two sides of justice and mercy). In Catholic doctrine the *Genesis* report that 'God looked upon it and saw that it was good' implied that this world is part of the true God's will and there is no dualism.

In JGB, the limited Creator God appears in the guise of our Sun and he specifically says that the arising of life required an act from beyond the Sun, because life represents the Reconciling Force (the Sun the Affirming).

But, let's get back to the experience. It is a sense of mismatch, of disjunction. It is, I would like to say, a taste of what essence-existence means and without this taste it is all just so many words. In this experience we face the vast infinite content 'within' us that can never be accommodated in this frail apparatus of body and mind even if we lived a million lives.

The whole world of existence with all its possibilities can never even begin to express the essential world. We are merely tokens of this cosmic dilemma. However we interpret it, it alerts us to a requirement to act. Kierkegaard for example, urges the 'leap into faith' and shows that it can never be reasoned or explained.

JGB in his gentle way expressed it in terms of a domain of *harmony*. This is where the two opposing principles find agreement. But it is not some kind of 'heaven'. Rather it is, as JGB came to at the end of his life, in the *perfection of doing*.