

No. 7
Conducted
6-3-05

VLT

NORMAN MAILER INTERVIEW

WITH J. MICHAEL LENNON

JUNE 3, 2005

I'd like
JML: I just want to say a few words about Gnosticism ~~it because it~~ is not a

religious movement that people necessarily know much about. *(and it)* It has been

shunted
~~wiped~~ pretty much off the face of the ideological earth.

NM: I agree. ~~I know so little about it~~

~~DM: Here are some of the general traits, I picked up lately by reading.~~

First, a disdain for authority and Orthodoxy: A celebration of difference and diversity, although Gnostics did not, of course, use the word diversity. A great belief, however, in self knowledge, of studying the self, seeing the self as a phenomenon that you had to understand in order to attain larger knowledge. The self as a pathway to larger knowledge. They were dualists, but not absolute about it. They got that from the Greeks. They saw the body and the spirit as separate but mutually dependent.

NM: Did they have a sense of Apollo and Dionysus? I'm thinking of how Nietzsche was obsessed by them in his early career.

JML: Yes, that would not be foreign to them at all but there was more of an

opposition ~~in them~~ between the Judaic and the Hellenic. They were very

taken with Jewish mysticism which of course had been around long before *Christ*.

~~then.~~ *The Gnostics* as a sect seems to have come into existence around the

second century B.C. and they were an esoteric ~~sect~~ *branch* of Judaism when they

began. ~~They were constantly being overlaid~~ *by the sects,* *however,* they were not separate. The

the sects interpenetrated each other as you know from reading in The Golden *Bough*

~~Bough~~ *T* there were many competing religious sects at this time and this was

~~just one of them.~~ *The Gnostics* But they had great respect for Judaism on one hand and at

valued the same time the Greeks belief in knowledge and self examination ~~was~~

~~something that~~ *that* they prized very highly.

NM: My knowledge of Jewish mysticism is not profound, but I did some reading in the Kabbalah and the Zohar. ^{But} ~~Only~~ the Zohar didn't exist at that point.

JML: No, it didn't. Although later ~~on~~ when the Kabbalah did develop, the Gnostics were not opposed to it. They liked it. As they liked certain Buddhist texts—

NM: You're talking about a thousand years later.

JML: That's right.

NM: The Gnostics, in other words, continue ^{well} (into the Middle Ages.

JML: Probably they end with the Inquisition.

NM: I thought ~~the~~ various uprooting of the heresies in the early centuries of Christianity took care of the Gnostics. Not so?

JML: Well ~~it~~ ^{its strength} diminished them greatly. Gnosticism came into existence around the second century B.C. and built ^{by} taking in Jewish strains, ~~a lot of~~ Christian strains even Buddhist strains right up to the fourth century A.D.

^{Sp?} At that point the Christian church, especially under St. Augustine and St. Irenaeus, mounted a strong campaign against ^{them using} ~~it~~ and used St. John as the point of their ^{attack.} ~~speech.~~ Because St. John was a big believer in revelation, ^{and} The Gnostics ^{did} ~~do~~ not believe in revelation. Augustine was ^{it} ~~a~~ fierce opponent of ^{another} ~~of~~ ^{? sp} ~~Gnosticism~~ Irenaeus and of course St. Irenaeus wrote five volumes against the heresy.

~~so in the early years of the Christian church they were always fighting~~

battles against the Gnostics. Many of the tenets of Christianity, after that, for

example Original Sin, Resurrection, and Jesus as God were later additions to

Christianity. In other words, ^{however,} in the year 200 ^{there} was no sense of Original

Sin, ^{and} The resurrection was barely an idea.

^{assumption}
~~JML:~~ And the notion that Jesus was God also came later. ^{In good part,} Many of these

ideas came in opposition to Gnosticism.

^{Could you say}
NM: In other words you could state that the first purpose of Original Sin
was to forge a powerful weapon against the Gnostics. [?]

JML: Yes. Gnosticism advocated individualism in search of enlightenment.

It believed in reincarnation. It believed that all humans had some kind of

divine spark. The spark may be trapped, impossible to free, one might be out of touch with it, but it was there.

NM: I agree ~~can~~ agree with so much of this.

I thought you might. It's no accident that
JML: Today the Fundamentalists ~~to~~ ^{today} the extent that they know anything

about Gnosticism see it as a ~~fact~~ ^{now} disreputable part of early Christianity,
~~and~~ best kept in the closet. If Gnosticism survives at all ~~today~~ ^{now} it may be among
~~some~~ ^{sp?} sects that live on the border of Iraq and Iran the Mandaeans, who are

still there. ^{key attribute} The thing to remember is that ~~the word~~ ^{the} *Gnosis* means

"knowledge" in Greek. *Gnosticos* is someone who is seeking knowledge by

^{plumbing} ~~plumbing~~ the depths of the self, looking at the self as ^{available} ~~the~~ ground for

enlightenment and knowledge. When it came to the body they were more

divided. Some saw a division between the spirit and the flesh, some felt that

the flesh wasn't important at all and therefore they could go out and fuck

themselves silly because it didn't make any difference. There was another

branch of the Gnostics ~~who~~ ^{SP?} were purifiers. To the Zoroastrians ^{and}, fire was

holy because it purified. Water was holy. But they didn't believe in sex.

Ergo, they died out. They didn't believe in procreation. ~~So Gnosticism~~ ?

~~itself is the opposite of a monolithic religion~~ And while Christianity

became monolithic, Gnosticism divided. And that is ^{another} ~~probably~~ one of the

reasons it didn't survive. Nor did it have Augustine and Ireneus and the

church fathers and St. Paul drawing everything together, ~~centralizing~~ and

organizing the belief system.

NM. Well, I think it hardly matters whether it was a conscious ~~or~~

~~unconscious determination~~ on the part of the early church fathers, ~~Whether it~~

~~was a conscious recognition of the problem~~ or an instinctive ~~that~~ Christianity

had to be ~~an~~ absolute as ~~Socialism~~—other wise it was not going to work. To

hold it together there had ~~to be~~ ^{must not be} no questions. There must ~~be~~ ^{only} be answers.

So the Gnostics were directly offensive to the church fathers. What they

~~Gnostics were saying~~ ^{is} is what some of us are saying today: That there are no

answers. There are only questions. The mark of a good society we argue—a

society that has not yet come into existence—is that you move from one set

of questions to a higher level of questions. Whereas, the ^{early} ~~first~~ Christian

philosophers built on the conclusion that people must be given absolute

certainty about life and death. Particularly about death. An absolute

statement of Heaven and Hell was required. The notion of reincarnation was

too nuanced, too special, too elegant, too delicate, too possible. So, it had to

be absolutely forbidden; as it is ^{off the board} ~~today~~ for fundamentalists.

I was reading Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* a few days ago, and at a certain point he says, "All priests are liars." It's a marvelous remark because it

happens to ^{be} not only daring but true. Whenever you speak with absolute authority about something that you cannot prove, the decision ^{itself} to speak with such authority means that you are ready to live as a ~~willful and determined~~ liar. It seems to me that Christianity, because of its determination to be wholly authoritative, was able ultimately to create huge societies. ^{Now, if} These huge societies half-work and half don't. Certainly, for centuries, they functioned well enough to limp along full of unanswerable questions and hideous inequalities ^{ready to sweep all unanswerable questions} all capable of being swept under the ~~all~~ but all pervasive rug of absolute faith. ~~Don't ask! It's god's mystery.~~

} Close-up

But, let me return from my bias to my ignorance. Tell me more about the Gnostic sense of Cosmology.

JML: I would say they posited a supreme god who was behind everything ^{and then}
unknown. And this supreme God gave birth to a lesser divine being, ^{indeed,}
a whole series of lesser divine beings ~~for that matter~~. One ~~of them~~ was called
Sophia which in Greek means wisdom. ~~And~~ Sophia created another creature
usually referred to as the Demiurge. Sophia created this creature out of a
desire to learn more ^{about} ~~To come to understand~~ where Sophia had come from
himself, or herself. It is, however, endlessly more complex than that. The
Demiurge thinks that it is the God of the Old Testament. ^{is} ~~It's~~ very similar. It
is a jealous God, an angry God. The Demiurge then creates the flora and the
fauna, ~~and then creates people~~, and does it imperfectly. Even though humans
are three times removed from the highest God out there, they still feel this
divine spark within them amidst a general feeling of loneliness,
incompleteness and abandonment. In this scheme of things, Jesus becomes a
messenger from Sophia or the God behind Sophia ~~and~~ Jesus is there to keep

Manicheanism which says that good and evil are at war, evil dominates the world, but good is going to win out.

NM: That does bring up a question. Where in this schemata is Satan?

JML: Satan could be the Demiurge.

NM: Yes, but this creates confusion. For some Jehovah is Jehovah. For others, Jehovah becomes Satan.

JML: Let us say that Sophia creates many figures, some very strong like the Demiurge and some are lesser evil figures. A whole range of figures emanate from the higher source. Any one of these can be used to exercise Evil.

NM: Well, ~~on top of that~~, let's add that ~~until Judaism and Christianity came~~ ^{long before the Gnostics}

~~along~~, it was taken for granted that there were many ~~Gods~~ ^{gods}. This is true of

the Egyptians and of the Greeks. Certainly the Hindus believed in a variety

~~of deities~~ ^{of deities},

~~of gods. I don't know about the Chinese or the Japanese~~ ^{And the Africans}

certainly believed in all kinds of ~~deities~~ ^{high} and spirits. It is as if Judaism ~~first~~

and then Christianity came to this ^a profound determination that it ~~didn't~~ ^{did not serve}

~~to look for~~ ^{shepherd} ~~matter what the cosmic truth might be. Human beings had to be~~ ^{corrected}

into believing that there was one truth.

JML: And one God.

and had a host of negative feelings about the Old Testament and Jehovah.

as Jehovah we can ask: gods.
~~So~~ jealous a God? What was he jealous of? Maybe other ~~Gods~~. So the

became
Gnostics ~~were~~ the losers in this huge struggle.)

can
~~But~~ But you ~~could~~ see, at least personally I see in the narrowness and the

Orthodoxy of Christianity from the time of Augustine on, how narrow ~~it is~~ *is*
Christianity in relation to its roots

A hatred of the flesh, the concept of Original Sin, the insistence that Jesus

must be God, he cannot merely be God's messenger. *And to*
counter such concepts, remarkable

~~IM: My interest (if I have one ambition that is vastly larger than my~~

~~capacity) is to help to overthrow fundamentalism~~

came
~~IML: Yes. But if you stop to think of all the remarkable figures who came~~

came
(out of the Middle East—John the Baptist, Jesus, Mani, Zoroaster, Adonis,

OS (1113) —
Dionysus, Orsis — all these incredible figures. From a Gnostic point of view

they would all be messengers sent down ~~someone~~ to keep alive the spark.

NM: Wouldn't it also be an early attempt to understand the mechanics of

existence? So many of these minor gods did explain aspects of ^{life} existence,
that are ignored by ~~early Christianity~~ ^{curiosity about the nature of God}
And it was precisely this quibbling over ~~these aspects~~ ^{these aspects} that Judaism and

Christianity saw as the great enemy. Because you cannot build a solid,

sound-wholly-integrated society so long as there are ^{too} ~~so~~ many ^{ways to} possibilities for

elaborate) *this* *can*
improving the details. In a ~~certain~~ ^{can} sense you could look upon the Judeo-

enterprise) *an*
Christian movement ~~as~~ ^{an} determined to become the absolute arbiter over the *more*

mysterious,
(details of existence.

should have been
JML: And if there is a debate, it is to be resolved by the supreme leaders of

the Church.

variety of ways and complemented each other in a ~~variety~~^{other} of ways.

Christianity can be seen as the synthesis of many of those ideas.

NM: Well, this is a ~~very large~~ assumption on my part, but I would say that

~~wasn't~~ Judaism ~~was~~^{with} more of a complete religion in that all the details ~~were~~ worked

out and authorized? But ~~it was small~~^{relatively} Judaism was small. So, to explain

how this Christian sect of Judaism took over ~~so~~^{that} much of the Western World

in a few centuries it is necessary, I think, to assume that Rome was at the

core of that development. If Rome hadn't existed, then Gnosticism might

have continued. Gnosticism had to be congenial ~~for~~^{to} many, many Upper

Class Romans. That would be my guess.

JML: Yes.

NM: They loved it. It gave them a chance to explore themselves. When

people are wealthy, they want to do just that, explore themselves. But there

were other leaders in Rome, ^{and they} ~~They saw that who~~ believed that Rome was the

answer to existence; Rome, not religion, but Rome. They saw. Government

was the answer to existence. So, some of them also saw that with

Christianity they could fortify the notion of central government, of

authoritative government. ~~Their~~ existence could be dictated from the top

down. They could even overcome their own upper classes. ^{so this becomes my} ~~And this is my~~

assumption, ^{It} ~~it~~ took the Romans to recognize that belief in Jesus Christ was

going to be very good for Rome. ^{Immediately, however,} ~~In fact,~~ they were wrong. Over the next

centuries, Christianity softened Rome. Nonetheless the fundamental Roman

notion ~~did~~ prevail. ~~It was~~ that it was vital to have an immensely powerful

government at the top, ^{did prevail as a concept} ~~And Rome became the seed-bed of the idea that for~~

^{the middle Ages that for society} ~~such kingdoms~~ to exist there be absolute authority at the center.

The large point, I think, is we don't know if ^{it was necessary} they were right or wrong.

~~to have~~ ^{to have} such authority at ~~the~~ ^{the top} if human society ^{was necessary} was to develop. That, without the ^{centrality,}

Roman spur to ^{centralists} centralists, our civilization could not have been built. In

~~other words~~ ^{that sense}, the authoritative lie upon which ^{Christianity} it was founded did create ^{Western} ~~even if it took twelve centuries~~

civilization. And in much the same way that irritation in the oyster shell ~~to reach the Renaissance. Of course, irritation~~ ^{in the oyster shell does create the pearl. The} creates the pearl. You could almost say that the essential lie implicit in this ^{new}

theologically ordained faith, this respect for order from ^(the invisible above) above did present

~~such~~ ^{those centuries. They} obstacles to the finest minds of each period — since they were obliged

~~willy nilly~~ ^{obst} to believe in dogma to some large degree since it was ^{their} their lives,

after all, ~~that~~ ^{which can account for the length} were at stake — so the length they went to in order to make the ~~philosophical distances they travelled to make~~ ^{the illogic} ~~logic (or illogic)~~ of faith palatable to themselves. ^{Medieval} created philosophy.

^{became a} Western philosophy is the study of the ways in which you can arrive at your

~~desired end by the special means you discover in favoring the language so~~ ^{the special means of language that} ^{explaining}

marriage. ^{with} ~~Out of~~ that, we ~~at~~ stumble forward, blunder into further

intimations of existence, ^{not knowing whether} ~~Whether~~ there are forces in existence larger than

our God, ^{but} ~~quite~~ possibly. Whether our God has to satisfy those higher Gods, —

quite possibly. ^{All} ~~But~~ that is not knowable. What we can discern is that we

live in an existential universe where the end is not known. And, so the

reason we are having these dialogues—and I cringe at the ^{original} ~~crudity~~ of my

presentation of my ideas, but nonetheless it is what I can offer—I feel, yes,

the reason we are having these dialogues is that I think ~~the~~ fundamentalist

notions of absolute authority have come to a point where they are too

expensive to live under, ^{— too excruciating to serve good purposes} ~~There was a period, let's say, when without~~

fundamentalism, there might not have been a civilization. That period is

now gone. In our age those same ideas are choking us, distorting us,

perverting and blinding us. They wreck our ability to think.

and
too
much
of
a
manic
Racism-
machine
→
capable
of
inspiring
world
disasters

JML: You have not spoken today of your intimation that there is not only a God but a force opposing that God.

NM: Well, I do believe that Satanic forces are as powerful as God-like forces. Both are at war within us. We humans are the battlefield for that war. How it will turn out is not known. In that sense, if there is such a thing

as victory in these matters, God can win or Satan can win. But that ^{bumps us} gets into

^{once more into} such rank speculation that I leave ^{these} such matters for the novelist ^{in me} not the

~~theologian~~. I will say that if I feel ready to dismiss the eloquent and

exceptional rationale of the best theologians and philosophers, I have to add

that their need to justify very improbable propositions made them go through

wonderful intellectual gymnastics. Embarking on an immense error

demands huge powers of development ⁱⁿ of the brain of the person who is

working on that vast error. Even though they ^{fail} feel ultimately (and ~~even~~ so

egregiously that we have to pay for their failures through centuries)

afterward, nonetheless, the powers of ^{human} ratiocination have been increased.

That's part of the perversity of philosophy.

JML: So I guess from what you've said you now understand why here and

there in commentary on your work and writing people will say, "Oh, Mailer,

he's sort of a Gnostic."

NM: Well, yes I do understand ^{now}. Not that it matters. What I do want to

emphasize before we finish is that I want to accomplish something with

these dialogues which ^{intellectually} people normally don't look to ~~to~~ engage in.

~~Which is:~~ You are not supposed to talk about religion unless you know a

^(formally speaking can't then you are wise to say little.)
great deal about it. ^{have} And I proceeded to ^{ponder these questions} talk about it without being highly

^{qualified} qualified. Yet, my basis argument is that of course I am ^{qualified} We all are. That is

why I can say yes, if you want to get down to it, I probably am a Gnostic in

the sense that the inner feeling I have about these matters is so clear and so

acute to me; ^{this} the notion that God is existential, that God is doing the best that

~~He~~ or ~~She~~ can do is so fundamental, that I do feel ready to talk about it.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that ~~Oxymorons~~ pollute the mind, and ~~the~~

~~Great Oxymoron~~)
~~All-Good and All-Powerful~~ is the most toxic of them all - ^{which} ~~which~~ is equal to

saying that modern-day fundamentalism is ^{poison} ~~toxic~~ for the human spirit.

JML: Whereas Gnosticism as the great opposing way of viewing life]

^{now} indicates the road to take?

NM: ~~Yes~~. Perhaps we can now afford to be Gnostics. In their early

Christian time, the fundamental wisdom of human beings may have been:

"We need order. We do not need stimulation. We do not need thought that

is lively and novel and new. We need order. We need command from above.” That was a stage in human existence. It’s much like the stages of existence children pass through where they must live under order at a certain point or it all comes apart.

JML: You’re talking like a Hegelian now.

NM: Well, I don’t care about the labels. I think ~~we’re~~^{we are} at a stage of development now where Gnosticism is our future. For to live in a world of science and technology that does not believe in a God, is also an oxymoron.

JML: I can imagine how you as a new Gnostic must think about corporations *too*.

Right now

NM: Well, we don't have to go there. ~~That's the fulmination hour.~~ I much
forests
prefer to wander through the ~~woods~~ of theology than the quicksand of
economics.

~~END~~

Word count: 3,738