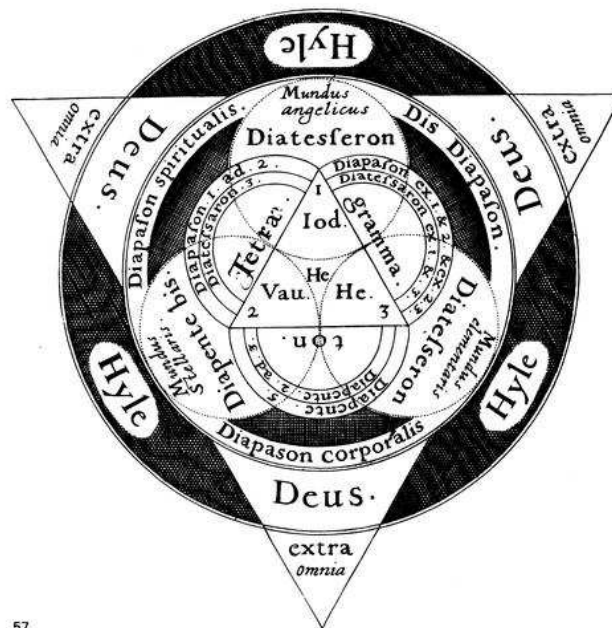


The Cosmic Origins of Religion and Death

An essay by Richard Heath first published in DuVersity Magazine no 36

In order to think about the cosmic world one has to recognise that it is more than the world of life found on the earth and the living world, or biosphere, is most probably a result of how the cosmic world organised evolution on the earth.

The cosmic world is made up of large bodies; planets and the suns around which planets orbit with sophisticated, some say musical, regularity. However, the cosmic world shares with the living world the basic stuff of materiality, that is the atoms and molecules under the sway of various type of force field. The world of material stuff and forces is characteristically less complex than that exhibited in life and therefore seems "less than" or below life, leading to John Bennett's naming of it as being hyponomic (literally "under laws "). Bennett then called the world of Life autonomic and, since Life arises within a cosmic structure, this higher world was termed hypernomic ("above laws"). Bennett's prefix scheme, of hypo-, auto- and hypernomic, divides the whole universe into three naturally different types of structures.



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Threefold Manifestation: The light triangle of the Trinity represents God, who remains 'beyond all things', entering the black hole of matter (hyle). As a result, three worlds arise: the angelic (empyrean), stellar (ethereal), and elemental. From Robert Fludd by Joscelyn Godwin, Thames & Hudson (Shambhala: Boulder, 1979, page 52)

The sky appears as the realm of the hypernomic 'above' life on earth with celestial bodies moving across it in various patterns. As far as we know, humanity has always projected onto

the celestial bodies a role in their own everyday affairs and watched the gods of the sky portraying their own dramas. All early religious ideas appear based upon seeing cosmic bodies as gods which were involved in the fate of human beings and groups even beyond life, after death. Even today, monotheistic religion may have discarded the sky gods but it has retained the role of God in the fate of human life and the status of people in an afterlife in heaven, a concept originating in the actual heavens literally above Life.

In Bennett's terminology therefore, religious ideas and those concerning an afterlife, after death, are tied to the hypernomic world within which Life has evolved, despite the conceptualisation of monotheistic religion. But are our ideas of religion and death tied to the hypernomic world through human projection, as anthropologists insist, or is the hypernomic world actually shaping these ideas? Could it be that this distinctive invariance in human beliefs concerning religion and death, found in some form wherever human cultures established themselves, is actually a manifestation of the hypernomic world in human life?

Perhaps "human projection in seeking answers in the sky" and "hypernomic realities relating to the purpose of Life" are two sides of the same coin and this may explain why early human societies of the ancient near east and of megalithic Europe, turned to the skies to both understand the dynamism of its clockwork and to seek answers as to why existence was as it is to strive to answer a question Gurdjieff formulated as his own: "What is the sense and purpose of life and human life in particular?".

A very interesting question arose historically as to whether being alive was good or whether it was a fallen state of ourselves. This has become somewhat degenerate due to the assumption that humans already have a soul formed and, in a sense, this second question pre-empts the first by implying a negative answer to it; for there can be no "sense and purpose" to life if humans are fallen, apart perhaps from recovering (if possible) from that fall. In other words, the doctrine of original sin is toxic to Gurdjieff's big question.

It seems as if religion has got too wrapped up in the issues of selfhood. One can see that one's own self is actually complemented by another non-self, in the form of one's life or "circumstance". The religious idea that one can die, redeemed by a super-being, because you have been righteous, or that one can escape life's challenges (or purpose) through turning from the world towards a monastery or system of self-development avoids "the elephant in the room" which is your fate, wrapped up in the form of your necessary life experiences. Gurdjieff was very clear in saying "The best conditions for a man's development are those provided by Life"

The reason why religion and death are likely felt through the hypernomic world is because it represents a different part of a cosmic triad. The material stuff of the hyponomic world provides all the functionality required within the Universe and so seems related to what Bennett termed Function, within his triad Function-Being-Will. The three realms of the hyponomic, autonomic and hypernomic correspond to these three fundamental categories. The living stuff of the autonomic world creates all the players on a highly specific stage, the biosphere, and these players are the created beings belonging to a world of beings "similar to the already arisen" i.e. cosmic beings. Beings get their substance from the hyponomic world and their pattern from the hypernomic world, and form a reconciling (autonomous) principle, requiring a type of Being not created with the universe.

At death a created being either becomes a non-being, another being or nothing at all. To become a non-being, one must be able to subsist without a living body and this brings us to the third principle of Will. Whilst alive, one subsists due to the biosphere and hence due to the will of the biosphere which partakes of hypernomic reality. As Bennett reportedly said in reply to someone who said they loved nature (or the biosphere), "It is not you who loves Nature, it is Nature that loves you." To 'have will' is to be more than your life, to "die before you die" and it is through a transformation of the circumstances associated with ourselves.

Religious thought has its origin in wanting to be hypernomic or cosmic. There is some "strange attractor" at work in the human psyche which would want to "leave the biosphere" in the sense of not relying upon the biospheric will to subsist (perhaps echoed in the dream of space travel).

Religious texts often have gods speaking to the human world but it is unlikely that the hypernomic communicates directly to autonomic minds. Instead, what is much more likely is that the hypernomic "speaks" to the human pattern which characterises each individual human psyche, a pattern from beyond Life. The circumstances of a human life, the "other" rather than the "self", has some relationship to the hypernomic world, being part of the hypernomic world through its human pattern. Therefore the individual striving for transcendence can be considered as taking place within a narrative possible only because of the circumstances of one's life, as put by Spanish existentialist philosopher Ortega y Gasset: "I am myself and my circumstance, or surroundings". Ortega appears to be stating the obvious but in a usefully exact way: that the ego or self is effectively a part of the objects within consciousness, without which nothing would mean anything. Indeed, can there be consciousness without objects? More to the point; can the objects, relationships, institutions, etc., "out there", as the "Other", be there to reveal the human pattern in life and its best path of development?

The possible unification of self and non-self (one's circumstance) leads naturally to the notion of a spiritual journey within "the world", often formalised as a pilgrimage but essentially being a series of steps towards developing attunement to the hypernomic world and therefore reducing dependence upon the biospheric sources of will (the values that move it), such as comfort, reproduction, wealth, power and so on. However, the weak part of the equation is what one expects from God or the gods in return for such renunciation, since to enter the hypernomic must be a strengthening of will but will must have an objective other than merely pleasing the gods.

It is obvious that "relationship to surroundings" is somehow a key to "relationship to the hypernomic world". Gurdjieff proposed that our deeper impressions of the world contain elements of the higher worlds of the hypernomic, but all mixed up and only discernible to a consciousness having a similar "vibratory character" to that higher world to which such an impression belongs. This is a very important characteristic of Gurdjieff's teaching, that higher worlds are compresent within our surroundings, this having resonance with an early Christianity in which "... the Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the Earth, but men see it not" [gospel of Thomas Log 113].

Just as a donkey in a library does not see books and cannot read them, a person without the will or "vibratory character" of the hypernomic world cannot make sense of those impressions within their situation. In a world in which the ego is trained from birth to focus on what it wants or what others want, and reject what it dislikes, there is evidently a need to look beyond the boundaries of what selves can do and to look instead at what is possible in the situation that may not be what one simply desires; a development presented by Gurdjieff in Beelzebub's Tales as a movement from attending to one's desires towards attending to non-desires. As a Sufi once put it: "Intelligence is in the situation" indicating that intelligence is not just in the selfhood, as is conventionally thought today.

Religion is doing; a man does not merely think his religion or feel it, he "lives" his religion as much as he is able, otherwise it is not religion but fantasy or philosophy.

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866 –1949)

Addendum - The Role of Death in Ancient Art and Literature

Preparations for death were an important reason for the creation and dissemination of an ancient Model of the cosmos, which had the earth at its centre (being the location of life) and an earth divided into three regions: Heaven in the North, Life in the Equatorial regions and

Hades/Hell to the South. The dead were thought to transmigrate to heaven or hell, long after monotheism had dislocated such destinations from the ancient Model as cosmic regions.

The road travelled after death was along the sun's path (or ecliptic/zodiac) where this connected with the two junctions of spring and autumn equinox, the celestial earth (our present Equator when projected into the starry sky) there crossing the ecliptic. The Galaxy formed a further 'great circle' in the sky, seen to cross the zodiac at two further points; in the last third of the signs of Sagittarius and Gemini. These two pairs of cross-over locations were thought part of a cosmic mechanism or Mill that was slowly drifting due to the Precession of the Equinoxes, moving one sign every 2160 years. In some configurations, the dead had problems during their transmigration whilst the living were also thought to be less blessed than at other golden or silver Ages, exactly due to the Earth's orientation to the Galaxy. By the Classical Greek period the full details of this Model had been forgotten.

The deceased were thought to benefit from knowledge of these structural niceties, a knowledge instilled orally, and through cultural exposure to a wide range of relatively oblique references within mythic tales, rituals and religious symbolisms. The technical nature of the Model meant its truth could not be imparted by direct reason to ordinary people, who instead had to receive it within the pattern of their cultural life. So, whilst ancient myths, books of the dead, pyramid/coffin texts, and religious practices throughout the ancient world are found to have recognisable similarities, this hides a common religious invariance shaped by the hypernomic world, thought corresponding to human experiences after death, in which the Model was thought to become a cosmic reality.



FIG. 2. *Imago Mortis*; woodcut from Schedel, *Buch der Chroniken* (1493).
INSTRUMENTS: rebec and shawms

*From Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death by Kathi Meyer-Baer,
Princeton UP:New Jersey, 1970*