

“For the seed of true humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.” *Gospel of Mary*



America's Neo-Gnostic Literature

What's Really Going on in Philip K. Dick's *Valis* Trilogy

“SCIENCE FICTION WILL NEVER BE LITERATURE WITH A CAPITAL ‘L,’ AND THIS IS BECAUSE IT INEVITABLY PROCEEDS FROM PREMISE RATHER THAN CHARACTER,” SAID SVEN BIRKERTS IN HIS “PRESENT AT THE RE-CREATION.” NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WAS MISTAKEN.

SCIENCE FICTION RELIES ON HUMAN VALUES AS THE ONLY THING THAT READERS CAN FULLY RELATE TO. IT HAS BEEN ARGUED THAT SCI-FI AND FANTASY CAN ALL BE DECONSTRUCTED TO THEMES OF ETHICS, MORALS, OR THEOLOGY.

MUCH OF PHILIP K. DICK'S LATE WORK DEALS WITH THEOLOGICAL THEMES AND INTRODUCES IDEAS THAT DESCRIBE AND TRY TO ASSUAGE WHAT HAS PREVIOUSLY BEEN CALLED “AMERICA'S BLUE FUNK” BY *TIME MAGAZINE*.

ALL OF DICK'S THEORIES AND SYMBOLS POINT TO HIS OWN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND HIS OWN CONVERSION STORY, WHICH TURNS OUT TO BE A GNOSTIC STORY. SUPPOSEDLY, DICK WROTE THE *VALIS* TRILOGY AFTER HAVING HAD A “MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE” IN 1974. DICK DESCRIBED HIS EXPERIENCE AS “AN INVASION OF MY MIND BY A TRANSCENDENTALLY RATIONAL MIND.” THIS OCCURRENCE IS THE MAIN EVENT OF THE NOVEL *VALIS* AND SETS UP THE ENTIRE TRILOGY.

BUT WHAT DOES “GNOSTIC” MEAN? WHAT IS GNOSTICISM? THE EASIEST WAY TO EXPLAIN IT IS A SET OF LOOSELY COMMON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS THAT MODERN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS REFER TO AS A RELIGION, THOUGH IT OFTEN INCLUDES VARIATIONS. BUT WHAT ABOUT THIS RELIGION? WHY IS GNOSTICISM SO INTRIGUING, SO STIMULATING? PERSONALLY, I FIND IT'S BECAUSE, AFTER LISTENING TO THE BRIEFEST SUMMARY IMAGINABLE, THE RELIGION SEEMS TO BE BASED ON A VIDEO GAME, THOUGH IT PREDATES CHRISTIANITY.

THE FACT THAT GNOSTICISM CENTERS ON ASCENDING LEVELS OR SPHERES ABOVE THE EARTH INHABITED BY DEMONS THAT NEED TO BE BEATEN THROUGH RIDDLES SURE SOUNDS LIKE A VIDEO GAME TO ME. BUT IT ALSO MAKES ME WONDER WHAT GEMS OF INTRIGUE AND INSIGHT ARE LURKING BEHIND THOSE FRIGHTENING LEVELS. WHAT'S GOING ON THAT THE GNOSTIC NEEDS TO MOVE FROM ONE LEVEL TO ANOTHER?

“The Empire Never Ended.”
Valis

DICK SEEMED TO THINK THESE QUESTIONS WERE LEGITIMATE, AND HE DEVOTED A LARGE PORTION OF THE LATER PART OF HIS LIFE TO RESEARCHING THESE QUESTIONS. HE ALSO DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO WRITING ABOUT THEM, TRYING TO ANSWER THEM, AND COMING UP WITH HIS OWN THEORIES ABOUT THEM.

OF COURSE, THERE IS MORE TO GNOSTICISM THAN JUST MOVING UP A LEVEL; THIS ISN'T SCIENTOLOGY, AFTER ALL. WHAT IS THE DRIVING FACTOR IN GNOSTICISM? SIMPLE: GNOSIS. GNOSIS? GNOSIS IS THE ANCIENT GREEK TERM FOR “KNOWLEDGE.” GNOSTICS SOUGHT KNOWLEDGE ABOVE ALL THINGS. THE KIND OF KNOWLEDGE THEY LOOKED FOR WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE KIND OF KNOWLEDGE YOU AND I MIGHT LOOK FOR, THOUGH. THEY WERE A TYPE OF RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENTALISTS. THEY LOOKED FOR KNOWLEDGE OF THEMSELVES AND OF GOD.

WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID DICK WRITE THAT MAKE ME THINK OF GNOSTICISM WHEN I READ THESE THREE NOVELS? TO START, I READ EVIDENCE OF DICK'S BELIEF IN HIS USE OF LEVELS AND SPHERES THAT IMPRISON THE EARTH. I READ ANCIENT GREEK WORDS THAT GNOSTICS KNEW REFERRED TO SPECIFIC SPIRITUAL INFORMATION. I SAW EVIDENCE OF A DIVINE MESSENGER BEING SENT INTO THE WORLD TO HELP GUIDE PEOPLE THROUGH THE SPHERES, ALMOST LIKE A VIDEO GAME CHEAT-CODE.

BY PRESENTING STORIES THAT BRANCH FROM TRUTH—DICK'S OWN LIFE EXPERIENCES—AND ARE PERMEATED BY GNOSTIC SYMBOLISM AND TERMINOLOGY, I FEEL DICK IS USING THESE NOVELS AS MODERN DAY NEO-GNOSTIC GOSPELS. THEY TELL MOVING STORIES OF THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE; THEY INVOLVE INSIGHT FROM TRUE EXPERIENCES; AND THEY BEAR THE MESSAGE OF GOOD NEWS THROUGH THEORY, GUESSTIMATION, AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH.

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