

Turn of an Age

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In Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Alchemy



Alfred Ribi

Translated by Mark Kyburz

Foreword by Lance S. Owens

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Zeitenwende

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Alfred Ribi, *Zeitenwende: Die geistigen Wurzeln unserer Zeit in Hellenismus, Hermetik, Gnosis und Alchemie* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001)
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Biographical note: Alfred Ribi was born in 1931. He studied medicine in Zurich, followed by specialization in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy FMH. In 1963, he began analysis with Marie-Louise von Franz—a close associate of C.G. Jung—and subsequently worked for many years as a colleague with Dr. von Franz. He is a diplomat of the C.G. Jung Institute, Zurich, where he has served as Director of Studies, a teaching and control analyst, and a lecturer and examiner of the Institute. He is past President of both the Foundation for Jungian Psychology and of the Psychological Club in Zurich. Since 1968, Dr. Ribi has been in private practice in Meilen and Erlenbach.

Cover image: Mosaic of Hermes Trismegistus, Cathedral of Siena.

Foreword

Lance S. Owens

This is the second volume of Alfred Ribi's two-volume opus magnum exploring the spiritual roots of Jungian psychology in Gnostic, Hermetic, and Alchemical tradition. Both volumes initially appeared in German language editions, published in 1999 and 2001. The first volume, *The Search for Roots: C.G. Jung and the Tradition of Gnosis*, was translated and issued in a new English edition in 2013. That publication stimulated a wider awareness of the historical significance of Alfred Ribi's scholarship. In response, and with Dr. Ribi's assistance, efforts were thereafter undertaken to prepare an English translation of this second volume, originally titled *Zeitenwende*. Nancy Swift Furlotti and Recollections LLC generously agreed to give the project major financial support, and Mark Kyburz was enlisted to translate the German edition.

Translating this book was, however, a daunting task. Dr. Ribi initially addressed this volume to a readership familiar with Gnostic and Hermetic studies. He accordingly embraced a more academic exposition than was employed in the introductory volume, *The Search for Roots*. Various quotations and footnotes were presented in their original languages, including Latin and Greek. Several of the scholarly works he cited are currently in very limited circulation and practically impossible to find. In addition, many of the texts Ribi quoted have no available English translation; this required the translator to render original translations of quotations in multiple languages. Mark Kyburz capably met all these many challenges in his exacting translation of the German edition of *Zeitenwende*. The work as published here

incorporates some editorial emendations to the text, and revises or updates several citations.

In this book Alfred Ribi reaches back across two millennia, gathering and engaging an extraordinary collection of writings. With authority and fluency, Ribi spins together the antique texts of Hellenism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Alchemy, and illustrates how these all conjure and nurture the visionary work of Jung. Into this tapestry Ribi weaves personal insights gained over half a century of experience as an analytical psychologist. He illuminates how the dreams and visions of modern individuals intertwine with the legacy that Jung indicated to be the spiritual foundation of his psychology. This was a complex task and the result is a complex and multifaceted book. It will richly reward those who diligently engage it.

The Spiritual Roots of Jungian Psychology

In November of 1960, seven months before his death, C.G. Jung suffered what he called “the lowest ebb of feeling I ever experienced.” He explained the sentiment in a letter to Eugene Rolfe:

I had to understand that I was unable to make the people see what I am after. I am practically alone. There are a few who understand this and that, but almost nobody sees the whole.... I have failed in my foremost task: to open people’s eyes to the fact that man has a soul and there is a buried treasure in the field and that our religion and philosophy are in a lamentable state.¹

Looking back over the last half-century, it appears Jung had reason to lament. He has not been wholly understood. But the cause lay not just in the sprawling scope and complex tenor of his writings. In retrospect, it is evident Jung had not revealed the whole. During his life, Jung cautiously and consciously elected not to publicly share the

¹ Eugene Rolfe, *Encounter with Jung* (Boston: Sigo Press, 1989), p. 158.

experiential key to his vast opus. He knew it, too, would not—at least, not then—be understood.

The missing key was, we now see, his long-sequestered Red Book, the work Jung formally titled *Liber Novus*, the “New Book.” Begun when he was thirty-eight years old and based on experiences carefully recorded in his journals between 1913 and 1916, *Liber Novus* contained Jung’s account of a life-altering journey into the depths of vision.

Nearly a century after its composition, the publication in 2009 of *The Red Book: Liber Novus* instigated a broad reassessment of Jung’s place in cultural history. Among many revelations, the visionary events recorded there expose the experiential foundation of Jung’s complex association with the Western tradition of Gnosis.

In 1951 Jung asserted, “For the Gnostics—and this is their real secret—the psyche existed as a source of knowledge.”² The human experience of psyche as a source of knowledge was the root matter of a perennial praxis Jung identified with Gnosis. Hermetic tradition and the traditions proximate to alchemy were, in Jung’s view, historical manifestations of this perennial praxis. They interlinked historically with his psychology, forming a golden chain leading back to the Gnosis born at the turn of time two thousand years ago. In this volume, Dr. Ribi provides extensive textual evidence to support Dr. Jung’s assertion.

Zeitenwende is the original German title of this book. The word literally means “a turn in time.” It implies the moment of change, such as the moment when the ocean tides turn, or the turn of the season and year at Christmas. Historically it denotes the turn that marked the beginning of the Christian age. Jung suggested we are now approaching another *Zeitenwende*. To understand what awaits the coming epoch, we must comprehend what happened at that last great turn of an age two millennia ago. Alfred Ribi here dedicates himself to that task.

² *Aion*, CW 9ii, §174.

Ribi and Jung

Alfred Ribi is a formidable scholar, known to all those who have studied at the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich over the last half century. His many books have, however, appeared heretofore in German language editions, and he has not received due recognition from English readers. Since the historical importance of this volume and the preceding volume, *The Search for Roots: C.G. Jung and the Tradition of Gnosis*, are uniquely interwoven with the author's personal background, let me introduce Dr. Alfred Ribi and tell a bit about how these two volumes came to be written.

Jung traced the historical lineage of his psychology back to the Gnostic communities that existed two thousand years ago at the beginning of the Christian age. That ancestry was important to Jung; he asserted, "The uninterrupted intellectual chain back to Gnosticism, gave substance to my psychology" (MDR, p. 201). Alfred Ribi took Jung's assertion seriously; he stands apart in the analytical community for the erudition and intellectual rigor he has applied to investigation of Jung's association with the Gnosis, and to the "uninterrupted intellectual chain" that reached back through alchemy and Hermetic tradition to that ancient root source. Allowing that Jung was correct, Ribi recognized that there was a natural and fraternal dialogue awaiting exploration between the burgeoning fields of Gnostic and Hermetic studies and Jungian psychology.

Dr. Ribi entered the C.G. Jung Institute in 1964 after having completed his medical training and a few years of scientific research. Marie-Louise von Franz, for many years Jung's closest associate, became Ribi's analyst. Jung had died three years before Ribi arrived at the Institute, but memory of him was still a vital presence. Like many others of his generation in Zurich, Ribi was introduced to Jung not only through his writings, but also by the insights, private perspectives and personal recollections of people who knew Jung well. For decades

thereafter Ribi enjoyed collegial relationships with Dr. von Franz and others still active in Zurich who had worked closely with Jung.

During his association with the C.G. Jung Institute over the past fifty years, Dr. Ribi has worked continuously as an analyst, teacher, and examiner of the Institute; he also served as the Institute's Director of Studies. He is an eminent past president of both the Foundation for Jungian Psychology and the Psychological Club of Zurich. After a half-century of engagement, it is safe to say that Ribi knew Jung and the Jungian tradition from the ground up. But even more noteworthy, he recognized Jung's deeper spiritual roots, and he vigilantly sought them out.

A natural scholar with a keen talent for textual research, Ribi committed himself not only to his work as an analyst and a teacher, but also to the study of the historical and spiritual foundations of Jung's psychology. Jung's indispensable assistant during the twenty years he labored with the alchemical tradition, Dr. Marie-Louise von Franz, assisted Ribi in his early investigation of alchemical texts. In addition to studying all that Jung wrote about alchemy, he went further: he acquired and read the original sixteenth and seventeenth century documents Jung had studied, ultimately accumulating a library of original alchemical works equal to Jung's own. His studies branched out into a close reading of the Hermetic texts that nurtured alchemy, and thence back to the origins of alchemy in ancient Hellenistic traditions.

Dr. von Franz eventually provided Dr. Ribi with the rare opportunity to closely study Jung's private alchemical notebooks, composed between 1935 and 1953. Methodically working page by page through these notes and indexes, Ribi observed the method underlying the development of Jung's hermeneutics of alchemy. He further discovered that throughout these notes, Jung continued to admix excerpts from Gnostic literature he was still reading—a revealing fact not previously known.

Ribi was searching for the roots of Jung's psychology, and they apparently ran back two thousand years to the Gnostics, Jung's purported "first psychologists." It was time, Ribi saw, to extend the historical understanding of analytical psychology into the textual tradition of the Gnosis, and to do so while also linking the historical lineages of alchemy and Hermeticism.

This was a natural continuation of Jung's prior effort. But Ribi now had available what Jung did not: an extensive collection of Gnostic texts recently discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Although Jung had studied Gnostic materials for many decades, prior to the Nag Hammadi discovery only a limited number of classical Gnostic writings were available, and much existed only in recensions composed by ancient opponents of the tradition. Jung had stated as much, and therefore correctly judged that he lacked adequate primary material to solidly link his own observations and experiences with the Gnostics in the first centuries. With the addition of the Nag Hammadi materials, the situation had changed, and Ribi saw the effort was now both possible and necessary.

Toward a New Hermeneutics of Gnosis

When I asked Dr. Ribi at what point during the course of his work he first perceived the importance of the Gnostic tradition to Jung, he responded without hesitation: "At the beginning." I then questioned whether others around him in the Jungian community over the years had shared his interests or perceptions. He replied, "No. Only Quispel understood; he was the only one I could talk with."

Gilles Quispel (1916-2006) was a Dutch scholar who in 1952—with financial assistance facilitated by Jung—acquired the first "codex" (as these ancient books are termed) from the cache of Coptic Gnostic texts that had very recently been uncovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. This manuscript became known as the Jung Codex, or Codex I. It was formally presented to Dr. Jung and the C.G. Jung Institute in 1953 and

remained with the Institute until being repatriated to Egypt in 1975. This was the first portion of the large collection of Nag Hammadi manuscripts to reach academic hands, and Gilles Quispel was one of the first scholars to fully recognize the immense importance of the discovery for Gnostic studies. Quispel would spend the rest of his long career laboring over the Nag Hammadi materials.

With the friendship and assistance of Gilles Quispel—by then a renowned scholar of Gnosticism—Ribi met other specialists studying and translating the ancient library of Gnostic writings recovered at Nag Hammadi. Before final publication of the entire Nag Hammadi collection in 1977, Ribi read every translation published in German, French and English academic editions and monographs.³ In this current volume, Ribi cites many of these early works.

Over the years, Ribi worked methodically through each of the some fifty Gnostic texts recovered at Nag Hammadi, analyzing the translations in various languages, noting key words, concepts and recurring themes: essentially, following the same techniques Jung used in his study of alchemy. Ribi indexed the terminological interrelationships and the visionary formations appearing in the texts. In the process he compiled thousands of pages of intricate notes, all transcribed in a beautiful calligraphic hand. These notes are now bound in several volumes as a witness to his work.

Ribi's study expanded beyond the Nag Hammadi texts to Gnostic material that Jung had read, and to a careful examination of the usages Jung made of this material. Eventually, Ribi established that Jung had understood the core of Gnostic tradition very well, despite his lacking the supplementary material from Nag Hammadi. While the Nag Hammadi scriptures vastly broaden the textual evidence

³ Dr. Ribi's library contains a comprehensive collection of commentaries, manuscript facsimiles, and translations of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts; it may comprise one of the most extensive archives of Nag Hammadi related publications in private collection.

concerning the classical Gnostic experience, the writings Jung had available to him provided an adequate foundation for his conclusions. For the most part, the newly available texts garnered support for Jung's reading.

Throughout this labor, Dr. Ribí engaged in dialogue with specialists working in the then still developing field of Gnostic studies. At the same time, he was intensely occupied in the parallel study of Hermetic and alchemical materials, much as Jung had been. Ribí's interest was not only in the scholarly work of those immersed in these specialized fields, but in sharing with these scholars psychological perspectives on the experience underlying Gnosis. The wider field of Gnostic studies needed awareness of the psychological nature of the tradition, and in Ribí's judgment, Jung's hermeneutics served that need.

The efforts of Alfred Ribí, Gilles Quispel, and others with like interests had their effect. In 2005, Dr. Marvin Meyer, the general editor and primary translator of the definitive 2007 international edition of *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, proclaimed that in Gnostic writings, "The story ... is as much a story about psychology as it is about mythology and metaphysics."⁴

Gnostic writings are a story about psychology. Coming from Marvin Meyer, the leading academic author in this field, and stated in an introduction addressed to the general reader, this is a transformational affirmation about the root of Gnostic tradition. If these ancient manuscripts reveal a story about psychology, then where in the modern world do we find a hermeneutics for, or an analog of their ancient psychology? In the first volume of this two-volume work, Dr. Ribí offered an initial answer. In this second volume, *Turn of an Age*, he extends that study to include the chain of tradition Jung identified as reaching back across the millennia to a primal Gnostic source.

⁴ Marvin W. Meyer, *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. xxiv.

The Problematic Heresy

In preceding decades, Jung's connection with Gnostic tradition naturally received comment, and occasionally it generated controversy. Plentiful evidence regarding his sympathetic interest in Gnosticism appeared throughout his published writings. More evidence came in comments he made in private conversations. And then, there was a little book he had printed, titled the *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos* (*Seven Sermons to the Dead*), which at an early date robustly signaled the Gnostic foundation of Jung's vision.

Jung privately printed the *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos* in 1916, not long after their transcription in his journal. In 1917 Jung added these Sermons—along with an amplifying Gnostic commentary spoken by his spirit guide Philemon—to the final manuscript section of *Liber Novus*, where they stand as a summary revelation of his experience.

In the mid-1930s Jung began his intense study of the alchemical tradition; over the next twenty years alchemy's symbolic language was a central theme in his many publications. In alchemy Jung believed that he had found crucial evidence for an enduring Western cultural transmission of Gnostic vision spanning two millennia, reaching from the beginnings of the Christian age forward to his own experiences of psychic reality. Readers of Jung often overlooked the fact that this study of alchemy was wed historically with his Gnostic studies—at least in Jung's appraisal. Thus, in his writings on alchemy, one finds abundant references to Gnostic texts presented with parallel commentaries. Near the end of his life Jung affirmed to Aniela Jaffé, "The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis, but rather with the approach to the numinous."⁵ For Jung, this was the primal experience of Gnosis.

⁵ Aniela Jaffé, *Was C.G. Jung a Mystic? And Other Essays* (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1989), p. 16.

Following Jung's death in 1961, the analytical community, along with a growing number of C.G. Jung Institutes dedicated to clinical training, became the primary custodians and propagators of Jung's work. For these communities, the persistent and troubling issue was whether Jung's psychology would be viewed as a spiritual discipline with historical roots in Hermeticism and Gnosticism, or as a clinically validated form of psychological therapy. There was obviously no professional profit in nominating Jung as a Gnostic prophet. Of course, many Jungian therapists continue to affirm the essentially spiritual aspects of their work, and they quote Jung in support. But culturally and professionally, it remains problematic to associate a school of clinical psychology with a widely anathematized heresy intimately entangled in the origins of Christianity. For many Jungian analysts, empathetic links between Jung and Gnostic tradition remain inimical to the scientific respectability of their profession. As Barbara Stephens stated in 2001, the issue of therapy as a spiritual praxis is the paradigmatic ground for "Holy Wars" within a fragmenting Jungian analytical tradition.⁶

In *Turn of an Age: The Spiritual Roots of Jungian Psychology in Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Alchemy*, Alfred Ribi presents ample evidence that Jung did indeed stand himself and his work in an historical and spiritual lineage. That ancient rhizome nurtured Jung's labor. The remembrance and rejuvenation of that tradition was Jung's task at this turn in time. In *Liber Novus*, Carl Gustav Jung received a vocation. He declared it thus:

To give birth to the ancient in a new time is creation. This is the creation of the new, and that redeems me. Salvation is the resolution of the task. The task is to give birth to the old in a new time.⁷

⁶ *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 2001, 46, p. 457.

⁷ *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, p. 311.

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