

“You Know, I’ll Be Free”:
Gnosticism, Feminism, and
Creativity in David Bowie’s *Blackstar*
Album

Nandita Naik
Stanford University
nanditan@stanford.edu

“Look up here, I’m
in heaven.”

Blackstar
(released 2016)



How can the creative process help us reckon with
impending mortality?

Gnosticism: Two Worlds

Our world



People who
achieve gnosis

Divine realm



“Blackstar” video



“Lazarus” video



“Blackstar” Characters



Man with cloth
over eyes



Woman in
patterned dress



Religious leader

“Lazarus” Characters



Man with cloth over eyes



Woman in patterned dress



The creator



Process Philosophy

In contrast to the ... snapshot view of reality, with its typical focus on eternalist being and *what there is*, process philosophers analyze becoming and *what is occurring* as well as *ways of occurring*.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

“Creativity [the ‘Life Process’] signifies a dynamism which is the very act of being there at all.”



John B. Cobb, Jr., process theologian



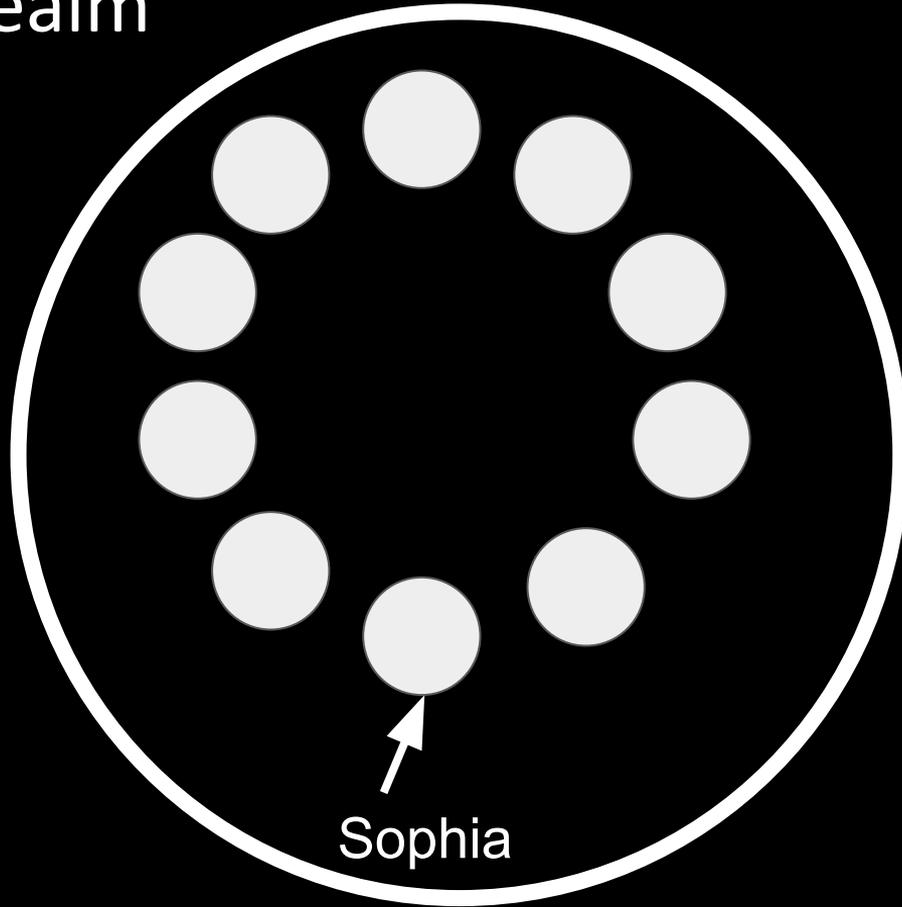


Alfred Whitehead,
founder of process
philosophy

It is as true to say that
God creates the world,
as that the world creates
God.

Understanding Gnosticism

Divine realm



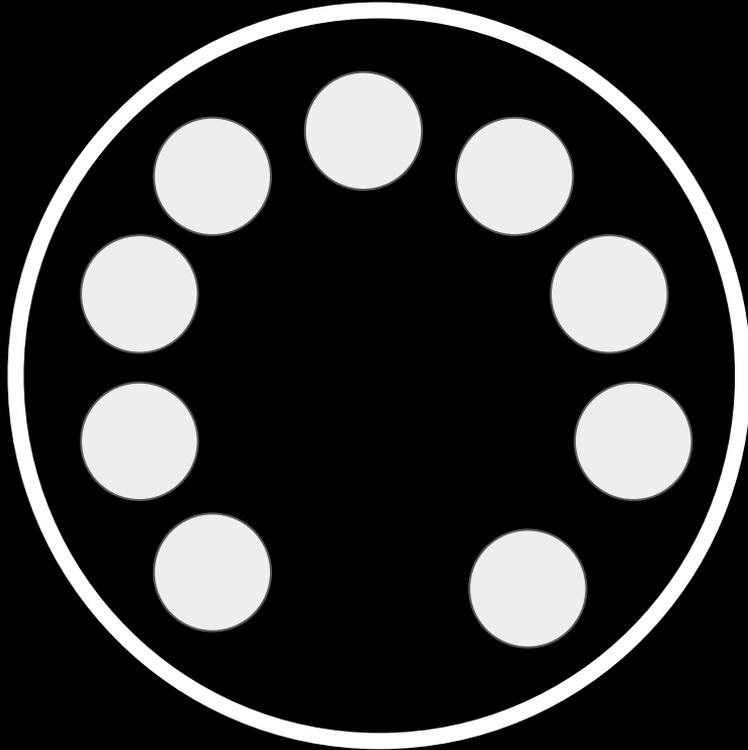
It happened that the realm Wisdom (Sophia)
began to **think for herself** ...

She brought it into being ...

Something **imperfect** came out of her.

The Secret Book of John

Divine realm



Earth



Demiurge and Sophia

How does one achieve gnosis?

As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as 'insight,' for gnosis involves **an intuitive process of knowing oneself**. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny.



Elaine Pagels, author of
The Gnostic Gospels

Bowie and Gnosticism

I have no sympathy for organized religion. What I need is to find a balance, spiritually, with the way I live and with my demise. And that period of time from today until my demise is the only thing that fascinates me.



David Bowie

Bowie and Gnosticism



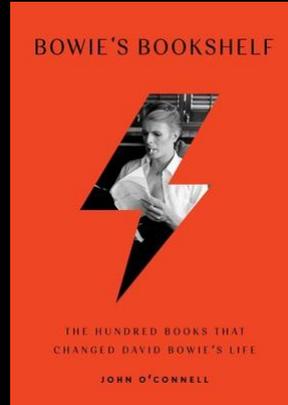
“Knowledge comes with death’s release.”
- David Bowie,
“Quicksand,” *Hunky Dory*

“There exists an abiding need in me to vacillate between atheism and a kind of Gnosticism. I keep going back between the two things because they mean a lot in my life.”

- David Bowie, interview with *Q Magazine*

“Bowie seems to have viewed gnosticism as an active religion, not a dusty museum artifact.”

- John O’Connell, music journalist, “Bowie’s Bookshelf”



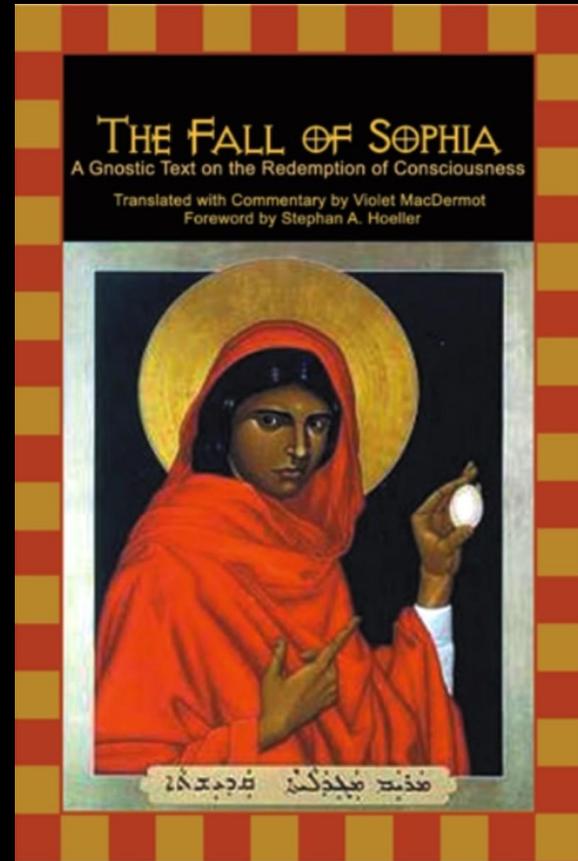
Gnosticism in the “Blackstar” Video







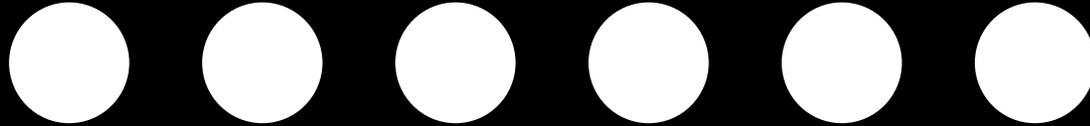
[The number of the Pleroma] denotes perfection and in contrast to this concept is the notion of the unordered universe after the fall as deficiency or shapelessness.



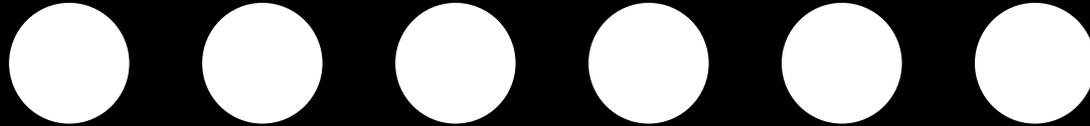
Violet MacDermot

Gnostic Pleroma: Pairs of male-female

Male



Female



“[t]he essential nature of the cosmos is female intelligences, that is, goddesses. There are several rather than one, indicating that multiplicity is a fundamental characteristic of all that is.”



Paula Gunn Allen, feminist theologian



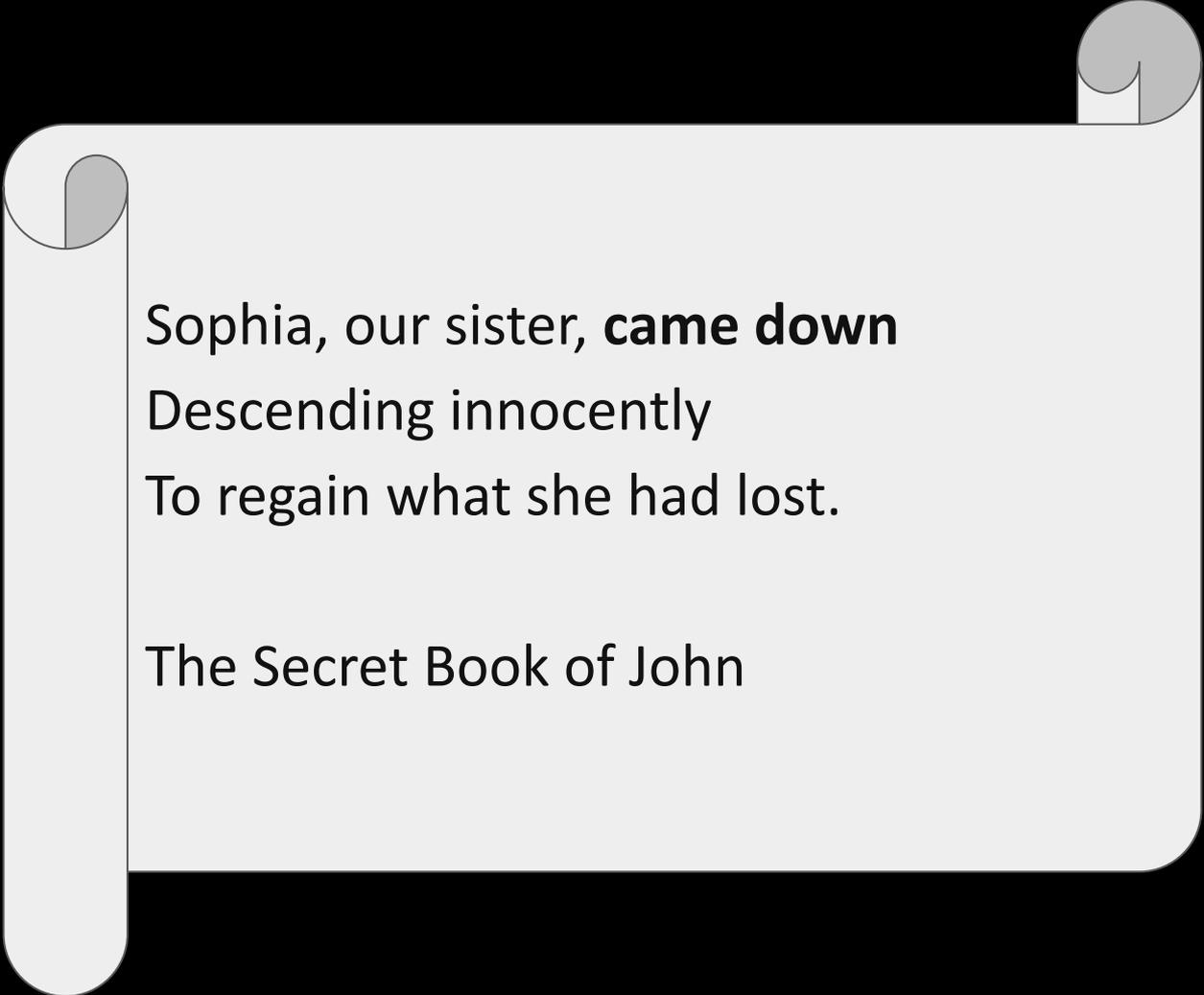




Gnosticism in the “Lazarus” Video







Sophia, our sister, **came down**
Descending innocently
To regain what she had lost.

The Secret Book of John

In the darkness of ignorance
She [Sophia] began to forget. She
began to be ashamed.
But she could not yet return above.
Yet she began to move.
And so she **moved back and forth.**

The Secret Book of John





Why indeed must God be a noun? Why not a verb - the most active and dynamic of all.



Mary Daly, feminist theologian



Conclusion



