CHAPTER 3

The Self Divine

Know Ye Not that Ye are Gods?

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Introduction

We affirm the inseparable oneness of God and humankind, the realization of which comes through spiritual intuition, the implications of which are that we can reproduce the Divine perfection in our bodies, emotions and in all our external affairs.

Anderson and Whitehouse 1995, 5

I come to this project as part of my ongoing scholarship in the area of African American religious diversities. My work contributes to the growing array of scholars who seek to move African American religious practices from the margins. The discourse, with only a few exceptions, notably Islam, is usually dominated by Christian theologians who discuss matters of church and Jesus, and too often those conversations that happen outside of Christian normativity are excluded as foreign, false, other or even demonic. My intent is to portray the multi-vocal nature of African American religious practices, where all voices are welcome within the discourse, and appreciated as legitimate, valid religious expressions. As the body of research continues, we all begin to see that these presumably foreign doctrines are in fact not so foreign to people of African descent. Parallels and spiritual points of continuity can be found between African traditional religions and the ways in which African-Americans practice various forms of religions including Christianity (Spence and Adofo 2011).

I employ ethnographic methods of research such as participant-observation and direct interviewing to examine not only the visible, exoteric religious practices of New Thought beliefs, but also to uncover the esoteric meanings and practices that these believers have constructed, and from which they derive ongoing purpose and meaning. Furthermore, by adding African American voices to the traditionally Eurocentric focus of Western Esotericism, the borders of that disciplinary discourse are likewise expanded. Even a casual glance through the table of contents or bibliographies of a leading scholar such as Antoine Faivre reveals a limited and narrow perspective in terms of what makes up the study of esotericism (Faivre 2010). While the case may be made
that these scholars qualify their research as being focused upon the West, it would nevertheless be important to acknowledge esoterica within other cultures, and that perhaps there are some mutual influences among them. Such a work as *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: “There Is A Mystery”*...allows for a broader perspective of the esoteric presence throughout the African Diaspora as critically important and necessary for the more comprehensive education of students in the fields of religion, antiquities, and anthropology to name a few.

Thus, in this essay I focus upon *African American New Thought* in an effort to broaden the discourse. I propose that New Thought can be considered Gnostic insofar as it requires followers to either possess or actively grow toward specialized knowledge, and it is esoteric insofar as it promotes spiritual practices that both lead to said knowledge and allows an individual to expand in consciousness and/or transcend into as yet unnamed realms of knowledge or being for ultimate fulfillment. In this project, I am exploring the Gnostic and esoteric teachings within New Thought religions with a particular eye to discovering how such teachings function for African-American followers. Given the traditional models of Christianity that most African-Americans have followed since the massive conversion efforts of the Methodists and Baptists during the slave era and the later Pentecostal revivals, it is a matter of considerable curiosity and importance how some African-Americans find their way to a seemingly inaccessible, cerebral, metaphysical religious system full of eastern mysticism and delivered through the legacy of White 19th century New Englanders.

I begin with some explanation regarding how I apply the terms Gnosticism and esotericism within this essay. Gnosticism is an elusive term. It is often used to describe those amorphous 2nd to 5th century religions that the early Christian theologians saw as doctrinal corruptions to their own burgeoning true religion. Although these religions were numerous and varied, they have been categorized together by ancient heresiologists such as Irenaeus and Tertullian as false gnosis or false knowledge in their efforts to distinguish true Christianity from what they considered heretical threats (Unger and Dillon 1992; Roberts and Donaldson 1896). Their mission was not to define such groups accurately, but to identify them collectively as false and illegitimate. Later scholars have generally continued this collectively arbitrary category in the discourse of Gnosticism, which only further complicates the matter into the present because much of what we know of these Gnostic religions is actually through the heresy hunting lens of early Christian apologists. Thus, it has been rather difficult to sort out the actual teachings of such groups, as their teachings have been distorted and maligned by the earliest Christian