

# Gnostics Reloaded

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How well does *The Matrix Reloaded* (TMR) continue in the tradition of its predecessor? The Wachowski brothers, soon to be known just as “The Wachowskis” (more on that later), do not disappoint. While the Gnostic themes in the first movie were rather cleverly hidden behind common Christian symbols, TMR has begun to fully reveal the Hindu and Gnostic roots of the Wachowski vision.

As in its predecessor, TMR begins with a dream sequence. This one starts at midnight – the witching hour – with what appears to be Trinity’s death. When Neo awakes from the dream, we find that he is sleeping with Trinity. This sets the theme for the movie: man’s purpose and ability to choose will be examined in the light of our ability to trust. The question of trust will itself be studied within the context of human sexuality. The answer is, in part, likewise given within the first five minutes of the movie – sex and death are somehow intertwined. The remainder of the film explores this connection and its ramifications from a predominantly Gnostic viewpoint that is informed by Hindu and Buddhist elements. It is, after all, not for nothing that the opening “waterfall” display is populated by Japanese script.

Catholic elements continue to play to the forefront of the movie’s symbolic language. Neo now habitually wears a priestly cassock while within the Matrix, but while the first movie’s sequence of events were linked to baptism, the Last Supper, the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, TMR will step back and tell the Gnostic version of Creation and the Fall.

## **The Death of Christianity**

Trinity begins the movie’s conversation with a plea for Neo’s trust. Neo replies, “They’re just dreams” – an interesting answer given that his captain is Morpheus, king of dreams. Trinity’s approaching fate within the Matrix is, however, foreshadowed by the combination of Neo’s near-encounter with Agent Smith and his defeat of a trinity of agents (three persons speaking as one). Neo’s last encounter with Agent Smith in *The Matrix* brought about his own death. By the end of the movie, we will understand that Agent Smith’s appearance will always be a harbinger of death. Smith’s appearance during the discussion of Zion’s fate does not, therefore, bode well for Zion.

When the Nebuchadnezzar returns to Zion, we are almost immediately given three sets of contradictory visual images: the Matrix is contrasted with Zion control - an impossibly white, peaceful, heaven-like sphere – and Zion itself, which is a welded amalgamation of dripping, rusted metal. We are meant to understand that Zion does not live up to its Scriptural image.

The combination of Trinity's death at the witching hour of midnight and a rusted-out Zion, tells us where the Wachowski's, both fallen-away Catholics, believe mainstream Christianity is headed. This is confirmed by the first person Neo meets in Zion:

"You saved me," he says with admiration.

"You saved yourself," replies Neo, dismissively over his shoulder.

If Neo is the Christ figure, this single exchange overthrows the entire basis for all Christian belief.

And Neo is definitely the Christ figure. He is met at the elevator by a vast crowd who offer him food in exchange for the promised care of loved ones aboard various ships. Significantly, however, it is not he who speaks at "The Gathering", rather it is Morpheus – the dream-weaver. The liturgical sequence which follows is important to one significant sub-plot in the film: the connection between trust, sex and death. The sequence is shot in the only part of Zion that is not composed of metal. It is, instead, a huge cavern carved from the living rock, with an earthen floor; lit by candles, not electric light. When one enters, s/he takes off shoes, as Moses did before the burning bush in Exodus, as Hindus and Moslems still do today in their temples and mosques, for this is holy ground.

Oddly enough, a passage from Pope John Paul II helps elucidate the sequence that follows. In his July 4, 1984 Wednesday audience, Pope John Paul II pointed out:

"The liturgy, liturgical language, elevates the conjugal pact of man and woman... to the dimensions of mystery... The 'language of the body' as an uninterrupted continuity of liturgical language, is expressed not only as the attraction and mutual pleasure of the Song of Songs, but also as a profound experience of the (mystery of the) holy. This seems to be infused in the very masculinity and femininity... This mystery sinks its roots precisely in the beginning, that is, in the mystery of the creation of man, male and female, in the image of God, called from the beginning to be the visible sign of God's creative love.

So, therefore, that reverence for Christ and respect which the author of Ephesians speaks of, is none other than a spiritually mature form of that mutual attraction – man's attraction to femininity and woman's attraction to masculinity, which is revealed for the first time in Genesis... The spiritual maturity of this attraction is none other than the blossoming of the gift of fear – one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit...

Liturgical language, that is, the language of the sacrament and of the mystery, becomes in [the life of the married couple] the

language of the body in a depth, simplicity and beauty hitherto altogether unknown... This seems to be the integral significance of the sacramental sign of marriage. ...through the language of the body, man and woman encounter the great mystery... Thus, conjugal life becomes in a certain sense liturgical.”

The Wachowskis recognize at least one part of what the Holy Father beautifully describes: liturgy and sex are intrinsically linked.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Wachowski's representation of liturgy is sexually charged, and is intimately connected with the single sexual encounter portrayed between Neo and Trinity. Scenes from the liturgy and the sexual encounter are interspliced, and the liturgy is itself obviously sexually charged. As Neo and Trinity lie post-coitally intertwined within a womb-like room, Neo experiences an aspect of what the Pope describes: fear. He has a second, waking vision of Trinity's death. The fear he experiences in Trinity's embrace is exactly that fear of losing the beloved that drives the *theophilus*, the lover of God, towards a life of holiness and away from sin. Thus, although it may sound perverse, in at least these aspects the Wachowskis have captured the Pope's message to the world about sex and liturgy.

But note the differences between John Paul's vision and the Wachowski's understanding. For the Pope, sexual attraction between man and woman is meant to draw each person to spiritually mature attraction, attraction to God. For the *theophilus*, it is one's own death through sin that is to be feared, for through sin, each of us deliberately discard our ability to love Trinity, the One who is Love. Here, Neo's fear is grounded in the loss of Trinity through *Trinity's* death. That is, he does not fear the loss of his own ability to love, rather, he fears the loss of the one whom he loves.

This distinction lies at the heart of the difference between Gnostic and standard Christianity. Christians are saved by the One who is Love and Who cannot lose the ability to love; not even death removes it. For Gnostics, it is different. Since every Gnostic saves himself from the world by ascending beyond it through the acquisition of special knowledge, adherence to the flesh, even in the liturgical act of procreation, leads to death. Neo is aware of this, Trinity is not. Only Neo has the special knowledge. But for Trinity, all hope is not lost. As the camera makes a three-step retreat from the room, the image fades to white and transforms into a glowing light. It does not fade to the darkness of death.

For the city, the image is not so happy. The lights are going out. Morpheus, who just finished weaving a dream of trust in the sex-charged liturgy, wishes Zion sweet dreams. At the end of the film, we see the poignant difference between Morpheus and Neo. While Morpheus trusts blindly in the Oracle, and has, through the sexual act of the liturgy, made Zion his trusting lover, Zion will be

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Mediterranean pagan societies all had women priestesses, and these priestesses were always temple prostitutes, precisely because the pagans understood that there had to be some connection between the liturgical language of holiness and sex.

destroyed, Morpheus will be unable to rescue her. Neo trusts nothing but his own ability and the fact of his and Trinity's mutual love. For these reasons, though Trinity is killed, Neo can and does rescue her.

### **The Fall**

After Morpheus wishes the city sweet dreams, the roots of Zion's fall are sown. Agent Smith displays a new power: vampire-like, he can clone himself and leave the Matrix. At the same time, Councilor Hummond makes two statements that point to the weakness of Zion: he notes that Neo is "still human", thereby confirming the point made by the three agents at the beginning of the movie. He follows this with an extended commentary on the inter-reliance of man and machine. Neo points to the ability of men to "shut these machines down" as evidence of their control over the machines (an evidence he will demonstrate at the end of the movie), but the councilor points out that such an action would have consequences. In this respect, he is echoing exactly the points that will later be made by both the Oracle and the Architect. Unlike Neo, he is unable to conceive of near-total self-reliance. Like Morpheus' trust in the Oracle, the councilor trusts in the machines. He shares the viewpoint of the Oracle and the Architect. This is the view that created the Matrix to begin with. He may have left the Matrix, but the Matrix world-view is still embedded in his head. He can't break out of the box.

The priestly Neo now appears in a Japanese setting, passing several images of the Sacred Heart of Christ and of the Virgin of Guadalupe. For fallen-away Catholics, both images are associated with blind trust. There, he encounters Seraph, the Oracle's guardian. Seraph takes his name from the seraphim, the choir of angels called "the burning ones", who are closest to God in standard Christian Trinitarian theology. Unlike the Christian seraphs, who worship God, Seraph's purpose is to "protect that which matters most."

In a certain sense, Neo breaks through the Seraph's guardianship by breaking with the images he had earlier passed. He demonstrates a certain lack of trust in the Oracle and, due to his distrust, he has an insight no one else has had – the Oracle is a program, not a person. The Oracle gives the first hint of the movie's close: she admits that she is a program, but she also knows Neo is not sleeping. That is, she knows of events that happen outside of the Matrix. This is only possible if the "outside world" is actually nothing more than a program wrapped around the program that is the Matrix. This would make Zion and its supporting images simply more software to be transcended. When Neo asks what would happen if he failed to be the One, she answers, "If you fail, Zion will fall." By the end of the movie, Neo will specifically repudiate the Oracle, and he will refuse to play by the rules of the Oracle or the Architect.

Several ancient Jewish commentaries, speak of a woman who existed before Eve, the woman Lilith, who is ultimately supplanted by Eve. In Gnostic philosophy, Lilith is linked to the serpent of Genesis. In Gnostic philosophy, the

serpent that helped bring about mankind's fall is not an evil serpent. The reason for this interpretation derives from the Gnostic understanding of creation.

For Gnostics, the Godhead is not a Trinity of persons, rather, it is a collection of roughly thirty or so spiritual entities called *aeons*. Together, these *aeons* comprise the *pleroma*, the Fullness, which is the Gnostic term for the Godhead. One of the *aeons* in the *pleroma*, an aeon named Sophia ("wisdom") generated a spiritual being of great power, but small intelligence, who thought he was the ultimate God. This being took a portion of the *pleroma's* divine essence and with it fashioned both the whole of the created world, and the *archons*, the spiritual rulers of the world. This work earned him the name Demiurgos, which means "semi-Creator." The Demiurgos created and trapped souls in the physical world by uniting them with physical bodies. Mankind is just a bunch of souls imprisoned in bodies; the imprisonment taking place through the act of sexual intercourse.

According to the ancient Gnostic reading of Genesis, the *aeon* Lilith-Satan attempted to enlighten Adam and Eve to reality by having them disobey the Demiurgos, eat of the apple, and thereby allow the soul to escape the body (die) and ascend into heaven, its true home. When this didn't work as well as planned, Satan's brother, Jesus, entered into the world to explain things more fully.

From the moment Neo meets the Oracle, the Wachowski's tell the Gnostic version of Genesis one through three with a few minor variations. The Oracle, representing certain aspects of both Sophia and Lilith, informs Neo of what he must do to prevent Zion's fall. Implicitly, both acknowledge that by choosing to save Zion, he is choosing to Trinity's death.

Immediately following this realization, Neo has his first encounter with Agent Smith, who comments on the fact that he and Neo are linked together. The Wachowski's are beginning to establish a three-way link between Agent Smith, Neo and Neo's next target, the Merovingian.

Agent Smith intends to take Neo's purpose, and oddly enough, he manages to do so, but not in the way that he thought. His attempt to vampirically clone Neo into another Agent Smith fails. But the subsequent fight with numerous agent Smiths, when connected to his conversation with the Oracle, is a turning point for Neo. When asked, he connects the fight to his death in the first movie: it "was like being back in the hallway. It felt like dying." He has begun to die to the possibility that Zion can be saved. His purpose as "the One" will die with his choice in the Architect's lair.

As *The Vigilant* and *The Logos* (both symbolic references to the beginning of the Gospel of John) move to assist Neo, Neo finds the Merovingian on floor 101. This is significant for several reasons. The apartment he occupied in the first movie was number 101. The Merovingian speaks with a strong French aspect and loves the French language best. According to a New Age conspiracy theory

first described in the 1982 book, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the Merovingian line of Frankish kings is, descended directly from the sexual union of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The Merovingian's wife will confirm the connection between them when she notes that "he used to be like you." Thus, the Gnostic link between good and evil, Jesus and Satan, is repeated in the links between Agent Smith, Neo and the Merovingian.

The Merovingian is linked to the underworld, and therefore to Satan, in two further ways. In Greek mythology, Persephone was unwillingly betrothed to the king of the underworld.<sup>2</sup> The connection between the Merovingian and Agent Smith is further consolidated by the fact that the Merovingian uses vampires, another symbol of the underworld, to guard the Keymaker. Indeed, Agent Smith's ability to clone himself is simply an upgraded version of the vampire myth.

The Merovingian sequence is interesting both in its commentary on the liturgical scenes we witness immediately before he is introduced, and in how it illustrates the series of betrayals we are about to witness. The Merovingian asserts that causality is the only truth – the "why" is what matters, "Why is the only real source of power... Choice is an illusion created by those with power for those without."

In order to illustrate his point, he uses the woman in pink (reminiscent of the first movie's "woman in red") to illustrate his point. As she consumes a piece of cake, which he has specifically rigged, her lust will be inflamed. Driven to consummate this lust, she leaves the room. Later, we discover that the Merovingian will join her and have his own lust consummated by her.

Thus, even as he uses sexual passion to illustrate how those who are strong control those who are weak, it will be precisely his own extra-marital sexual activity, his inability to deny his lusts, that causes Persephone to betray him. Similarly, the way in which she betrays him also smacks of the sexual – Persephone refuses to lead them to the Keymaker<sup>3</sup> until Neo kisses her as if he loved her. Further, she implicitly demands he do this in front of Trinity, his lover.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Merovingian sequence begins with an inside joke. As soon as the Merovingian introduces his wife, Persephone, he offers the trio of visitors something to eat or drink. They decline. According to legend, Persephone was captured by being tricked into eating while in Hades.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the very name "Keymaker", also has a very specific phallic connotation – brought forward most obviously when Neo thrusts the key into the lock to enter through the door of light.

<sup>4</sup> The sunglasses worn by Neo, Morpheus and Trinity are signs of revelation. When they are worn, the person wearing them is not fully revealed. When they are removed, the person is fully revealed to another and therefore in some way vulnerable. Two notable places where this may be seen: Neo removes his glasses in order to kiss Persephone as if he loves her. Sunglasses also appear prominently on the ledge next to Trinity immediately after she is resurrected, as Neo kisses her. In this regard, it is significant that Trinity does *not* remove her sunglasses when Neo kisses Persephone, lending some credence to Persephone's remark, "such things were not meant to last."

In fact, at the moment he consents to this kiss, he betrays Trinity to her death, for this begins the immediate sequence of events that will bring about the Keymaker's release and Trinity's death.<sup>5</sup> In this, Persephone is a Lilith figure, a rival for the New Adam's attention. It is therefore significant both that the woman in pink is betrayed by eating a piece of cake and that the doorway Persephone guides them toward is accessed through the kitchen, for it was precisely the act of eating which describes the sin of disobedience in Genesis chapter three. Her prediction concerning the love between Neo and Trinity, , "such a thing was not meant to last", may have implications in the third movie for – as the Merovingian later observes - "Nothing gets by that woman."

### **The Rescue**

The Keymaker is delivered from his vampire guardians and a tomb-like crypt. Neo fights a scene in which images of Norse gods are destroyed. Ragnarok, the final battle of Norse mythology, is coming. Then, as Neo rescues Morpheus and the Keymaker from otherwise certain death on the freeway, we see an image of the borehole with a quarter-million sentinels gathered, waiting to enter Zion. Again, the sexual imagery is stark – the sentinels look like sperm with multiple flagella, as the drill bores towards the virgin city, Zion.

After the Keymaker explains the way the final assault has to be accomplished, Morpheus spends several minutes describing the significance of the three goals and the three ships. While *The Logos* accomplishes its part of the mission, the crew of *The Vigilant* is killed by three sentinels scant minutes before accomplishing its critical part of the mission. This necessitates the entry, success mission completion, and fatal wounding of Trinity. As she falls from a great height, a bullet pierces her side, rendering her into a female Christ figure. She is plucked from the depths at the last possible second by Neo. Neo will resurrect her by placing his hand in her side and directly massaging her heart.

But, important as these elements are for plot development and Gnostic Christian meaning, the whole movie is building up to the moment of decision immediately preceding Trinity's rescue – the encounter with the Architect, the creator of the Matrix. He is the Propater figure, the most powerful *aeon* of the pleroma, the one who started it all. He is overseeing the sixth destruction of Zion, which is about to take place even as he and Neo talk. Though the Architect presents Neo with two choices, he clearly wants Neo to make "the right" choice – to enter the mainframe, disseminate his code, and re-establish Zion by walking through the door on the right. According to the Architect, the left-hand door would represent an ultimately futile attempt to save Trinity, "She is going to die and nothing you can do can change that." From the Oracle's point of view, from the Architect's point of view, Neo fails. He chooses the left-hand route. In Latin, the word for left is "sinister", in Christian iconography, the left is Satanic. As the Oracle predicted,

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<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on infidelity is captured beautifully in the screen-shot of the kiss, as Persephone's left hand, with wedding ring, is in the foreground.

Zion does indeed fall, but contrary to the Architect's statements, Trinity is indeed saved.

Later, as Neo informs Morpheus of the imminent destruction of Zion, the impeccably dressed Morpheus is seen with a rent in his sweater. His dream and his faith, like his sweater, is beginning to unravel. When Neo and his friends exit the Matrix, and find themselves back aboard *The Nebuchadnezzar*, several earlier hints coalesce to provide the cliff-hanger transitional ending which leads to the third movie. After *The Nebuchadnezzar* is destroyed, Neo discovers he has the power to change reality outside of the Matrix.

And herein lies the question the third movie will answer. The Oracle had earlier indicated that she knew what was happening to Neo even when he was outside the Matrix. She knew about his dreams of Trinity's death and of the shining door. As Morpheus leaves the Nebuchadnezzar and sees it destroyed, he says, "I have dreamed a dream, but now that dream is gone from me."

In the last sixty seconds of the film, Neo's ability to "bend the rules of the Matrix" is now clearly evident outside of the known confines of the Matrix. Thus, the truth is demonstrated: the exterior reality in which Neo has been working is not reality at all, but a second program wrapped around the program called "the Matrix". Neo has learned to manipulate not only the inner reality, but is now manipulating the guardian reality that surrounds the Matrix. Though he has died to the possibility of being "the One" to save Zion, and is rendered unconscious by this first manipulation of the outer guardian software, *Revolutions* will undoubtedly find him resurrected, reborn into a fully articulated saviour role. The saviour role he played in the first two movies was an illusion, a dream. Had he played the role to the hilt, he would have re-established Zion and re-started the endless cycle. It was not true salvation. True salvation will come only after he awakens from this last mini-death. In this, the Wachowski vision mirrors the Hindu and, to a certain extent, the Buddhist understandings of reality – the endless cycle must be broken.

## **Conclusion**

How much of this Gnostic symbolism do the Wachowski's actually believe? The life of Larry Wachowski is, perhaps, a signal demonstration of the degree to which at least one of them accept some version of Gnosticism as the truth. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Larry Wachowski believes himself to be a woman trapped in a man's body, and is undergoing a sex change operation so that the externals might match the internals. He made this discovery while under the ministrations of a dominatrix in an L.A. torture dungeon. Thus, he consciously seeks to live out in his body the life that Gnostic philosophy tells him he is living – he is a being trapped in his body, living in the torturous dungeon that is physical reality. Like the pagans before him, Larry Wachowski is a man living out in his body what it means to be without hope.

As many have noted, the correspondences between Gnosticism and two religions of the Far East, Hinduism and Buddhism, are significant. In all three, reality is but a dream, and self-annihilation, in some form, is the goal. For Gnostics, suicide eventually became a sacrament, as the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Albigensians can attest and 21<sup>st</sup>-century “post-Christian” countries are discovering. For Buddhists, the sacrament is the attainment of Nirvana, which is No-Self. In Hinduism, the annihilation of what the West would call the ego is likewise the supreme height to be reached. This movie series is meant to bring a deeper appreciation for Gnostic-Hindu-Buddhist thought to the masses. In each philosophy, sex and procreation are inevitably linked with death, with the viciously endless cyclic prison that is this world. There is no purpose to this world, there is no “why”, there is only the endless circling walk. Self-annihilation, whether physical (Gnosticism) or spiritual (Hinduism and Buddhism) are the only realistic solutions.

The incredible popularity of the movies demonstrates how seriously this theme of hopelessness resonates with the general public. The Wachowskis have developed a specifically American version of Gnosticism, eclectic but compelling. There is an answer, an answer the Wachowskis rejected long ago, if only because they were never fully informed of it. The Gnostic is one who seeks a hidden knowledge. The great irony is, of course, that the knowledge they seek has been present all along, but was never properly presented to them. It is under their noses, but because it is hidden in plain sight, they cannot see it.

The culture of death, like the demons that spawned it, seeks the annihilation of the human race. Only He Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, can combat it. The answer to the questions the *Matrix* series poses lies in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Like all Christians who have gained the adult, mystical understanding of Christ, having superseded the juvenile Christian understanding indoctrinated in us in grade school and never superseded, the Pope knows how we are to live out in our own bodies the sacramental presence of Christ Jesus. He understands the connection between sex and liturgy, between the holy and the life-giving, between man, woman and Christ. Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* is the only response possible to the culture which can produce the intensely moving, darkly beautiful work of despairing art which is *The Matrix* movie series. Until we learn to speak to this culture in an adult fashion, instead of spooning out the juvenile Christianity that we have dished out to date, until we can show these men and women the meaning of hope that is written into their very bodies, we will be unable to effectively combat *The Matrix*.