

Gnosticism: Origins, Beliefs and Modern Tendencies

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Introduction

Until about 50 years ago it was very hard to state some definite facts about the Gnostics and their beliefs since we had very few examples of first hand copies of their writings. The orthodox¹ Christians eagerly burned all of the Gnostic writings as soon as they became the dominant sect. Gnosticism was labeled heretical and Gnostics - heretics. The little that was known of Gnosticism and the Gnostics was from the writings of their enemies. This was the situation until the find of Nag Hammadi in 1945. A wealth of source Gnostic documents was discovered together with other valuable manuscripts providing basis for a much more detailed insight into the beliefs and doctrine of the Gnostics..

One of the main things which separated the Gnostics from orthodox Christians was the mysticism of their beliefs. It started with their views of God and creation and

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The term “orthodox” is used here to signify the supporters of a body of interpretation of the New testament different from the Gnostics. These “orthodox” Christians were also called “Pistics”, from the word Pisces (Fish) which they took as their symbol, because of the materialization of fish and bread by Jesus during his

ended with the person of Christ. They viewed *The One* which they called the true God as having a feminine part which was the Spirit. Jesus was a result of the union between God (the masculine side) and the Spirit (the feminine side), and together they formed the Holy Trinity..

In the Gnostic version of creation of the world the Spirit of God is referred to as the Wisdom of God or Sophia (from the Greek word for wisdom) who is also a feminine creative force. The Gnostics teach that she wished to give birth to a creature like herself. She did so without the permission of God - the Father. The result was something imperfect and different from her in appearance and so, She, being ashamed of it, threw it outside of the heaven and hid it in a cloud so none of the Immortals would see it. According to the Gnostics this horrible child became the one they called the Demiurge, the enemy. The Demiurge was the Gnostic version of Satan, the embodiment of the evil principle. The story further goes that his mother, Sophia, gave him some of her power which contained the Spirit. The Demiurge thought the power which his mother gave him was his own, and with it he started creating the physical world. In doing this the Gnostics believed the Demiurge entrapped the Spirit in matter. They taught that this Demiurge was in fact YHVH, Yehovahs or Yahveh, from the old testament, and they supported their claim with one of the ten commandments which says, "I am God, and there is no one besides me." Why would a omnipresent, omnipotent God from whom everything originated have a need for such a statement?

sermon. This term "orthodox" used here is not to be confused with the division to Catholic, Orthodox, Protestants, etc. Christians used today.

The other issue in which Gnostics disagreed with the orthodox Christians was the person of Jesus. For them Jesus was a special person who did not come from the Demiurge but had come directly from God and the Holy Spirit. The Gnostics claimed that they are in a possession of secret knowledge, taught by Jesus to selected disciples, and to unknown to the learned men of the official church of their days. This sort of claim was not accepted too well by the official Church at a time when it was striving to gain strength and power.

Another point where Gnostics disagreed was on the “original sin” issue. The Gnostics claimed that man was not sinful by nature, but believed man erred through ignorance. By knowledge, they said, man could correct his ways and gain salvation. The special knowledge which the Gnostics subscribed to was known as "gnosis." Gnosis was not a logical type of knowledge as one might gain in the study of the empirical sciences or



by reading books, but it was an intuitive or reflexive type of knowledge which comes from the study of man's inner self or soul. It is very close to the oriental definition of Meditation, which claims that by concentration on man's inner nature one can reach the full knowledge of God, since we all have the spark of God within us. This was the

supreme knowledge for the Gnostics, the most elevated goal in one's life. Any other knowledge did not matter to the Gnostics, and they had no interest in studying it. They

called this gnosis, the inner knowledge which they valued above all, the illuminated Logos² because they believed it led to man's salvation.

Another important point concerning Jesus which caused discord was that the Gnostics did not accept that Jesus was born of a virgin. Claiming that Jesus came from God and the Spirit, they said he entered a body brought about by sexual intercourse between Mary and Joseph. They did not need any complicated theories to explain how could Mary give birth to Jesus, has many other children and still remain a virgin because they did not want to incorporate in their teachings the numerous pagan virgin cults. They had their path to Salvation outlined without that, and they didn't care much for the additional income that would come from the converted pagans. Most of the Gnostics scoffed at the idea of an Immaculate Conception which the Pistic Christians held.

Early History of Gnosticism

As early as AD 38, the Church of Antioch was founded by James, Peter and Thomas in Antioch, Asia Minor. This church taught a doctrine which had a lot in common with the Gnostic teachings. The other sect in Christianity, the sPistic Christianity, taught that the salvation could only be achieved by fate, and not by any other means. They were especially against the Gnostic claim that salvation can be achieved by knowledge alone, which was central to the Gnostic teachings. In AD 64, Pistic (unlike

² Logos comes from a Greek word meaning word, spirit, science, etc. It is used to signify the power of the word of God with which he created the world. This power is considered to be the spiritual element that descended on Jesus to make him Christ.

Gnostic) Christianity began growing very fast when Nero began throwing Christians to the lions in the arena. Roman courts offered Christians to denounce their religion and go free. The Pistics refused and died for it. The Gnostics were horrified by the sight and the very thought of it. Their fellow Christians (although in another sect) were committing willful mass suicides by willingly throwing themselves into the lions' jaws, and all that in the name of faith, and salvation by faith. The



Gnostics were even more saddened because they knew for fact that “gnosis” is needed for salvation and union with God, faith alone was not enough.

The Gnostics respected the honesty and sincerity of their comrades, but they respected life much more, and they knew that by dying in the arenas they won't achieve anything besides that there will be less people with a chance of achieving salvation. They became hated and despised by the Pistics for refusing to die with them, and the two sects became more and more separated from each other. One reaction that the Gnostics did not foresee, was how this mass suicides affected the masses. The arena made converts by the droves, and it was Pistic Christians that they sought out to learn more about this powerful religion, not the Gnostics, so the number of the Pistics grew exponentially.

Since the foundation of the Catholic Church, which finally fortified Pistic Christianity as orthodox and “the only right one,” its legitimacy was built on the doctrine of the Pope being the successors of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome, who was allegedly the first bishop. History, however, does not show Peter to have been in Rome, or to have ever

been a bishop anywhere. This fact did not hinder the claims of the Catholic Church that they are the only right ones, since only their church was built on “The Rock.”³

The new church set to a task to absorb all the other religions present in the Roman Empire and convert as many people as possible. An effective unification of all of Rome's religions had to, not only include the major deities of those religions, but it also had to place them in a position subordinate to the over-god, who was to pull them all together, and to grant him the higher authority. Mithraism, which the dominant religion in the Roman Empire before the popularity of the Pistics, basically fused with Christianity embedding within the Christian doctrine many of its own elements. Christmas, for example, is a Mithraist holiday, the birthday of Mithra. There is no mention in the Bible or in any other historic material of the exact birthday of Jesus. The use of crosses, as symbols, was almost non-existent before. They were regarded as a violation of the second commandment, and were seen as a reminder of Christ's suffering. The Pistic Christianity had also its doubts about the ability of the women to be saved. A vote was cast to decide whether women had souls. The women won by a difference of one vote in their favor. Among early Christians, however, which for the most part shared the Gnostic beliefs, it was the women, as much as the men, who had visions and were leaders of communes. The representatives of the Church of Antioch demonstrated open disagreement with the newly adopted principles within the Christian doctrine, which the orthodox Church did not forgive. Members were persecuted as far away as Malabar, India.

³ Peter's name in Hebrew meant a rock.

The new Catholic Church was virtually Christian in name only. Early Christians, not only from the Gnostic sect, were devoted pacifists. They refused to enter the military, or any kind of government work. Not even a hundred years after Pisticism became the dominant doctrine almost every soldier and civil servant was a Catholic. The traditional Christian virtues of love, tolerance and forgiveness were mostly used only in sermons, while the behavior of the Church representatives was much grimmer. One of the founders of the Church, according to the Catholic teachings, Constantine, actually was converted only on his deathbed. "Saint" Eusebius, who was a heretic, entered his chambers, sprinkled holy water on him, and declared him baptized. Constantine, ruthless as he was, had put a stop to the persecution of Christians, but his successors began the persecution of Gnostics with the same fervor.

Gnostics and Jesus Christ

There is some evidence that suggest that Gnosticism, its main concepts and viewpoints, existed much more before Christianity. There are traces of it in Judaism, in some of the variations of the Egyptian religions, and even so far as the Buddhism in the Far East. However, what we regard today as Gnosticism is the Christian Gnosticism within the teachings of Jesus Christ have a central place, although some Gnostic fractions denied even his physical existance. Some historians believe that the early so-called Docetic teaching, that Jesus was not a man but a spiritual being associated with the Logos, who could adopt any form , was based on the apparent contradiction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Jesus' earthly life was so largely one of

humiliation that it seemed the simplest way out was to deny the reality of his earthly life altogether.

The Pistic current within the Christianity, which came to be dominant later rejected the Gnostic view that Jesus was only apparently physical but in reality a spiritual being, insisting that he, like the rest of humanity, was born, lived in a family, became hungry and tired, suffered and died. They even went so far as to insist that he rose bodily from the dead, and made this a dogma, so anyone who disbelieved was automatically labeled heretic. The orthodox tradition implicitly exalts bodily experience as the central fact of human life, while the Gnostics viewed the material world and physical life as nearly completely evil and as an obstacle to salvation. This was something that the later orthodox Christianity could not allow, since now the bishops and the high church officials held great wealth in land and money, so the Gnostic teachings were prosecuted with all means.

At the end, the conflict between Gnosticism and what later became orthodoxy eventually centered on the dispute about the bodily nature of Jesus. The orthodox insisted that a belief in the historical Jesus was essential for one's salvation, while the Gnostics, on the other hand, either denied those so-called historical facts or considered them irrelevant to their salvation. If we want to understand better why the bodily resurrection was so important for the orthodox Christians, we have to look at the social and political consequences of the supposed bodily resurrection of Jesus. The difference may not strike us now as very important, but for the early Christians it was essential. We have to take into account that traditionally all church authority derived from someone who had actually witnessed the resurrection. It was Peter who, according to Catholic tradition, was

the first witness, although both Mark and Luke mentioned Mary Magdalena as the first one, but since the Pistic Christians had their doubts about the spirituality of the woman, Peter remained the first witness in the church tradition, and the rightful founder of the church. Since of all the cities he traveled to, he liked Rome the best, he became a bishop there and passed his authority to the Catholic Church. End of story. The belief is so basic to Catholic theology that no differing view could be tolerated without endangering the legitimacy of the entire clerical hierarchy from the Pope down to the village priest. The Gnostics, therefore, were one of the most dangerous heretics.

Gnostics texts differ in their treatment of the resurrection of Jesus. Their writings range from total disbelief to joyful affirmation. In the Gnostic "Treatise on the Resurrection" we read: "Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! Indeed, it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion rather than the resurrection." Yet, the nature of the post-resurrection appearances differs from the biblical accounts since for the Gnostics Jesus is the spiritual Revealer who imparts secret wisdom to the selected few. This exclusiveness just added heat to the fire of the prosecution against them. The tone and content of Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection appearances is a great distance from Gnostic accounts: "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).



As in much modern New Age teaching, the Gnostics tended to separate the concepts of Jesus and the Christ. For Valentinus, a Gnostic writer, Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism and left before his death on the cross. Much of the burden of the treatise "Against Heresies," written by the early Orthodox Christian theologian Irenaeus, was to affirm that Jesus was, is, and always will be, the Christ. He says: "The Gospel...knew no other son of man but Him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but Him who was born it knew as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again." Irenaeus goes on to quote John's affirmation that "Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31) against the notion that Jesus and Christ were "formed of two different substances," as the Gnostics taught.

For Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of the apostle John), the suffering of Jesus the Christ was of vital importance, and a fact that cannot be disputed. It was indispensable to the apostolic "rule of faith" that Jesus Christ suffered on the cross to bring salvation to His people. In Irenaeus's mind, there was no divine spark in the human heart to rekindle; self-knowledge was not equal to God-knowledge, and Gnostics were dangerous Heretics for claiming such things. In his understanding, humans were stuck in sin and required a God to be sacrificed for the forgiveness of their sins. Because "it was not possible that the man...who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself," the Son brought salvation by "descending from the Father, becoming incarnate, stooping low, even to death, and consummating the arranged plan of our salvation."

The Basic Beliefs of the Gnostics

Gnosticism within itself contained many sects that sometimes drastically differed in their practices, ranging from ascetic to orgiastic, but if we take a look at their teachings we may be able to pinpoint several main pillars on which most of them agreed.

The main Gnostic belief is in the Godhead, which as in Hinduism and theosophy, is eternal, infinite, and absolute. It is, in fact, beyond the range of human thought. Silence can best express it. He or It does not create in the Biblical sense, making something out of nothing, but he emanates from himself manifestations as reflections, and among those emanations is the creator of earth and material things, known as the Demiurge and usually identified with the Old Testament YHVH, Jehovah, the God of Israel. Jehovah, according to the Gnostics, is said to have created an imperfect, even evil, world and he is ignorant of the existence of the real Godhead, believing himself to be the absolute ruler of the universe. So while the God of the Old Testament was rejected as the lower deity who created the evil material world, it was Jesus the Christ who revealed the Godhead, the Father within. Jesus was the Logos, the power that existed before anything was being created, and even before Jehovah was created.

Gnostics saw man is a mixture of spirit and matter but with a spark of the Highest



- the Pleroma. For man to be saved he must be freed from his bondage to the visible world and its rulers, the planetary spirits. The means of his salvation is “gnosis,” a mystical, spiritual enlightenment for the

initiated, which brings them into contact with the realm of spiritual realities and unites them with God. This process is described in the Nag Hammadi text called “The Gospel of Truth,” which contains a powerful statement on the human condition as an emptiness, ignorance, and dereliction to be healed by the saving revelation of Christ. Many Gnostics insisted that ignorance, not sin in the orthodox Christian meaning, is what involves mankind in suffering, and they denied that man is sinful by nature. Most Gnostics believed that man must wake up, must become aware of his condition and the possibility of his release.

We can find in Many Gnostic treatises that the ultimate reality or Godhead is beyond any conceptual apprehension. Any hope of contacting this reality, a spark of which is lodged within every person, must be filtered through numerous intermediary beings of a lesser stature than the Godhead itself. In the “Gospel of the Egyptians,” the Godhead is described as the “unrevealable, unmarked, ageless, unproclaimable Father.” The Godhead emanates three entities: “They are the Father, the Mother, (and) the Son, from the living silence.”

We can already see the rift between the New Testament and the Gnostic documents is growing wider and wider. While the orthodox Christianity insists that Christ is the God in flesh, Gnostics hold that the true God is ineffable; he is “silence.” Further more, the knowledge of God is not to be obtained through reading of the Bible and the teachings of the holy fathers of the church, but through knowing oneself, personal self-exploration and mystical experience. Obviously, such teachings had to be destroyed to the very root, if the institutionalized Church was ever to prosper.

Gnosticism and Jung

Gnosticism would have probably remained forgotten in history as one of the many unsuccessful Christian Heresies if there were not for one person - Karl Gustav Jung. Jung found in the teachings of Gnosticism proofs of his own theories and viewpoints, and elevated it to a level of psychical reality. Jung's theory of archetypes, when limited to the domain of psychology, provides a brilliant model of the way natural, human personality arises from and organizes its longings around the instincts. It explains why many people from different cultures are prone to have the same spiritual concepts and tend to



interweave the same general models into their local beliefs. We can say that this theory is a revival of the ancient Gnostic teachings, expressed with the language of the modern world.

One of the most interesting things in Jung's theory is his view of good and evil and their sources, shaping his view of morality. Jung, viewing morality in terms that were precisely the opposite of Freud's, nevertheless arrived at precisely the same end. For Freud, good and evil devolve into mere constructs that arise out of man's morally neutral biosocial nature - the cognitive derivatives of animal pleasure and animal pain-and are hence, as absolutes, illusory. Jung disagrees with Freudian reduction of all the urges within man to mere biological reflections. For Jung, good and evil evolve into two equal,

balanced, cosmic principles that belong together in one comprehensive synthesis represented in the "Self," and in their union they are transcended.

Thorough all of his writings Jung explicitly identified analytical psychology, especially his own, as a continuation of the thought of the Gnostic tradition, especially in what he considered its superiority over orthodox Christianity in its handling of the problem of evil: "In the ancient world the Gnostics, whose arguments were very much influenced by psychic experience, tackled the problem of evil on a much broader basis than the Church Fathers."

Jung identified matter with the feminine and spirit with the masculine, and had incorporated into his conception of the Godhead both matter and evil. This is the main theme of one of his more important works, "Aion," especially the chapter entitled "Christ, a Symbol of the Self":

There can be no doubt that the original Christian conception of the imago Dei embodied in Christ meant an all-embracing totality that even includes the animal side of man. Nevertheless the Christ-symbol lacks wholeness in the modern psychological sense, since it does not include the dark side of things but specifically excludes it in the form of a Luciferian opponent.

Most of the New Age traditions that developed during the XX century have Jungian view of Gnosticism, and have incorporated in their teachings the ancient Gnostic concepts expressed through the language of Jungian Analytical Psychology. Jung himself has always ascribed great value to symbols, calling them "psychological machines for converting energy" and Gnostics expressed many of their greatest secrets through

symbols, diagrams, talismans and kameas⁴. One reason for such representation of knowledge was the claim that the knowledge of the Highest cannot be expressed with words, another was to protect the knowledge from non-initiates using symbolism understandable only for the initiated, and finally the most practical reason was to hide the true meaning from the church prosecutors and evade the stake. Jung himself has been noted for wearing a ring with Gnostic symbols all of his life. He is noted saying that the symbols on that ring (after a few changes he made to make them more Christian) are in complete conformity with his inner self

Modern Gnosticism

Mostly because of the Jungian translation in psychological terms Gnosticism is experiencing something of a revival in the XX century. The magazine "Gnosis" (which has also its own web site), a "journal of western inner traditions," began publication in 1985 with a circulation of 2,500. As of September 1990, it sported a circulation of 11,000. Gnosis regularly runs articles on Gnosticism and Gnostic themes such as "Valentinus: A Gnostic for All Seasons." It is also notable that they have "topic of the issue" in every number which explores in depth some part of the Western Spiritual Tradition, usually closely connected with Gnosticism.

There is an increasing number of Gnostic Churches around the world, which all claim to be the "Original Successors of the Ancient Gnostics." In Palo Alto, California, priestess Bishop Rosamonde Miller officiates the weekly gatherings of "Ecclesia

⁴ The images that appear throughout the pages are Gnostic kameas, amulets, talismans and symbols.

Gnostica Mysteriorum” (Church of Gnostic Mysteries), as she has done for the last eleven years. Miller says she knows of twelve organizationally unrelated Gnostic churches throughout the world. Stephan Hoeller, a frequent contributor to Gnosis, who since 1967 has been a bishop of “Ecclesia Gnostica” in Los Angeles, notes that "Gnostic churches have sprung up in recent years in increasing numbers." He refers to an established tradition of "wandering bishops" who retain allegiance to the symbolic and ritual form of orthodox Christianity while reinterpreting its essential content. But the real challenge of Gnosticism is not so much organizational as intellectual. Gnosticism in its various forms has often appealed to the alienated intellectuals who yearn for spiritual experience outside the bounds of the ordinary, but has remained unattractive and remote to the masses.

Many Esoteric societies and cults have drunk on the source of Gnosticism even before Jung explained it in scientific terms. Madame Helena P. Blavatsky, who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, viewed the Gnostics as precursors of modern occult movements and hailed them for preserving an inner teaching lost to orthodoxy. Theosophy and its various offspring - such as Rudolf Steiner's “Anthroposophy,” Alice Bailey's “Arcane School,” Guy and Edna Ballard's “I Am” movement, and Elizabeth Clare “Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant” - all draw water from this same well; so do various other esoteric groups. These groups share an emphasis on esoteric teaching, the hidden divinity of humanity, and contact with nonmaterial higher beings called masters or adepts. The famous order of “Golden Dawn” has also incorporated many Gnostic concepts in its teachings and the most (in)famous member of the Order, Aleister Crowley, has founded the church “Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica” as the outer form of his order “Argentum Astrum.”

And at the end of this short overview of Gnosticism we might speculate that the Gnostic teachings today are becoming popular as a consequence of the global awakening of the modern man. The advances in Science have by far outnumbered any advance in the spiritual areas, and the modern man has a growing feeling of emptiness and alienation within him. Because of that he seeks outside of the boundaries of the socially accepted orthodoxies for a teaching that can show him his place within the world and the universe. Among many other ancient teachings brought to the light after many years of anonymity Gnosticism (or Neo Gnosticism) proved to be one of the strongest, successful in infiltrating into the teachings of almost every major Esoteric current. This is mainly due to its universality and non-dogmatism, as opposed to institutional religion. From here it can either disperse into the modern teachings it is influencing and become their integral part, or it can develop into a distinct spiritual path regaining the glory of the early Christian Gnosticism.

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