



Phil Smith
 MA – Applied Linguistics, Biblical
 Archeology; PhD in Biblical
 Archeology; Doctor of Religious
 Education

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is a set of religious beliefs and spiritual practices teaching that intuitive knowledge is the way to salvation of the soul from the material world. It was an early religious following that related to Christianity. It taught an unacceptable heresy that was at odds with Christianity near the time of the 2nd century church. The church did not accept them as part of the Christian Church. With the advance of Islam, those who were left of the Gnostics in the Middle East converted to Islam.

Gnosticism

You can easily see many related heresies that are akin to Gnosticism even today. As the anti-Christian voice increases, there are more calls to acknowledge heresies as being as acceptable as Christianity. So, the main reference here on Gnosticism is an article by Douglas Groothuis, copyrighted 1994 by the Christian Research Institute in North Carolina.

Gnosticism is a set of religious beliefs and spiritual practices teaching that intuitive knowledge is the way to salvation of the soul from the material world. It was an early sect that taught an unacceptable heresy near the time of the 2nd century church. With the advance of Islam, those who were left of the Gnostics in the Middle East converted to Islam.

Like the New Age movement, Gnosticism appeals to those wanting a less ordinary spiritual experience. The Gnostic heresy was rejected early in the church and was eventually forced out of mainstream Christianity by the end of the third century. But it was ripe in the early days of Christianity. However; then this heresy was encouraged by what became known as the Gnostic gospels written in the second century AD. Many of these so-called gospels are available today through the find near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. These documents were dated back to AD 350. Altogether, around 52 of these documents were eventually recovered. These were indeed an exciting find from the viewpoint of ancient literature alone. They were eventually published in English in 1977. As mentioned, these manuscripts were discovered in upper Egypt. The mountain where they were found was honeycombed with more than 150 caves. Some of these caves were actually graves dating back to over 4,000 years. Many were inadvertently burned. Later, many of the manuscripts were being sold on the Egyptian black-market. In Elaine Pagels popularization of these books; she said that Gnosticism should be considered at least as legitimate as orthodox Christianity because the 'heresy' was simply a competing strain of early Christianity. Of these documents, The Gospel of Thomas has a reputation of being the fifth Gospel. It consists of 114 alleged sayings of Jesus having a cryptic, epigrammatic bite to them in a non-thematically arrangement. The book is presented as a 'secret knowledge' and that in itself shows the Gnostic redemptive nature of the writings. In general it represents unorthodox material about Jesus. Whatever authentic material Thomas may have had about Jesus, the book shows signs of Gnostic alterations and tampering. But for the sake of clarification, the Gnostic Gospels including Thomas are nothing more than a group of religious texts surrounding a heresy to the Christian Faith in the early 2nd century AD. They are not lost books of the Bible. Any

arguments associated with this must deal with the historical accuracy of the New Testament Gospels which centres on Jesus, the Christ, and the promised Messiah who inaugurates the kingdom of God with power. In addition, the Gnostic Gospels are an entirely different genre of material. These documents are simply not New Testament materials. The actual integrity, authenticity and veracity of these documents are all in question. They just do not match to the integrity and authenticity and of the New Testament documents.

With the introduction of the New Age movement, interest in Gnosticism re-surfaced. To the Gnostics, Jesus was an illumined Illuminator. The basic Gnostic and also Buddhist idea is that like Jesus, we can have the Christ nature in us. This is an awakening of the power or enter-knowledge in us being mystical in nature. In other words, we can become, not like God, but God. This knowledge is limited to the gnostic few who break through to the surface of the esoteric spiritual knowledge of God. Gnosticism was further supported by recent publications such as the 'Journal of Western Inner Traditions,' a Gnosis publication that began in 1985 and by 1990 reported a circulation of 11,000 copies. In Palo Alto, the Church of Gnostic Mysteries is officiated with a group of 40 to 60 people. Each Sunday, readings are held from the Gnostic ancient books mentioned above. As already mentioned, Gnosticism just presents another avenue to those attracted to the New Age Movement. Yet, the Gnostic documents present themselves as an explanation of the origin and operation of the universe. Some 52 texts were what was left. There was the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip plus the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel to the Egyptians. Many of these manuscripts were actually Coptic translations. They were dated anywhere between 120 to 400 AD.

And with Gnosticism, there is the rejection of matter as illusory, evil, or, at most, second-best. New Agers should realize that this is at odds with their own philosophy regarding the value of nature and the need for an ecological awareness and ethic. The texts of some of the manuscripts tells a different story of creation where Adam and Eve were threatened by death. The following are two pages from the Gospel of Thomas.

It seems that a variety of esoteric groups have roots in Gnosticism. To the Gnostics, the universe was created by a lesser god through ignorance. The ‘Gospel of Philip’ says that the world came about

through a mistake. This was caused by a ‘fall out’

between the Father-God and substandard deity who demands worship and even proclaims supremacy as the one true God. The being is not the Ultimate Reality.

This entity accidentally infused into humanity the ability to become one with God. This is done through the liberation of humans



from the so-called matrix of matter. Gnostic literature presents a redeemer figure, like Christ, who descended from the spiritual realm with a message of ‘self-redemption.’ Christ did not come as a sacrifice for sin but as a Revealer, nor is Christ the creator-god revealed in the Old Testament. Jesus speaks of the kingdom being inside you and outside of you. Other cryptic statements like, ‘When you come to know yourself, then you will become known,’ are common. Most of these statements focus the person on self and the divine spark within you. The heart of the human problem is ignorance (see how this relates to Hinduism?) but Jesus redeems a person from such ignorance. One such document, the teaching of Valentinus says, ‘his death is life for many,’ but Gnostics say this is Jesus imparting the ‘gnosis’ not removing sin. The Gospel of Truth sees the crucifixion as discovering the divine self within. In the Treatise on the Resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus is affirmed, ‘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.’ In the resurrection of Jesus, secret wisdom was imparted to a selected few. After his suffering, he showed himself to these people and presented proof that he was alive. Interestingly there seems to be a division of Jesus from the Christ. In Valentinus, Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism and left before his death. In the gospel of the Egyptians, the ultimate reality is said to be the, ‘unrevealable,

unmarked, ageless, unproclaim-able Father.’ But the early Christian theologian Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of the apostle John) affirms 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 Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again. One such manuscript read:

For I am the first and the last. I am the honoured one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin....

I am the barren one, and many are her sons....

I am the silence that is incomprehensible....

I am the utterance of my name.

So we have seen that Gnosticism is an ancient philosophy and heresy that contented in some ways with the early Christian Church over aspects of the doctrine of Christ. They taught the doctrine of self-having the potential to become like God. Some of them mention Jesus but their Jesus is not the Gospel’s Jesus. The ancient manuscript found in Egypt called the Gnostic Gospels provides us with the information we have today. Interest in the New Age has re-awakened the interest in Gnosticism. I have never studied anything like this on Gnosticism and found it to be extremely interesting and informative to say the least. The Author did a marvellous job in its presentation to the reader. For recommendations, I think it would have been good to include one the Gnostic Gospels as a required study text. In addition, there has been a lot said on the news about the Gospel of Thomas. With this knowledge I can easily present evidence against any idea that the Gospel of Thomas is the fifth Gospel of the New Testament.

As far as critiques, ‘it is said that a variety of esoteric groups have roots in Gnostic soil.’ It seems that down through the years the ideas behind Gnosticism has lingers on behind closed doors. It would not surprise me if these roots extended into various sects of Christianity today. These documents that were found at Nag Hammadi were an impressive find from the viewpoint of ancient literature and an impressive archaeological find, but they are not Gospels. I am continually amazed at the nonsensical comments and ideas that come from non-Christians and nominal Christians alike. Words like orthodox Christianity are words developed to show the inherent nature of those who follow the main doctrines of

Christianity. And legitimate, by whom? Main stream doctrines are not books or literature; they are beliefs for those who have experienced Jesus Christ personally. Why would we care about such ancient heretical writings in relation to Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Why would committed Christians be interested in any such legitimatization?

These gospels are often referred to by Muslim theologian in arguing their cause. For example, in the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, Jesus says, "I did not die in reality, but in appearance." Those "in error and blindness....saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was rejoicing in the height over all....And I was laughing at their ignorance." Of course non-Christians use these statements to argue against Christians along with Muslims who use these statements to support their ideas on Jesus.

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