

# Gnosticism

## The Gnostic Philosophy, The Gnostic Religion, The Gnostic Mind

Joel DiGirolamo

Most people, upon hearing the term Gnosticism, feel an air of mystery or a sense of going somewhere they aren't supposed to be. I would like to strip away the mystery from Gnosticism for you and explain my view, that at heart, many of us are Gnostics, that Jesus taught Gnosticism, and how we can use modern psychology to assist us in experiencing the Kingdom of God that Jesus encouraged us to strive for.

### What is the Meaning of Gnosticism?

The term "Gnosticism" is difficult to define. Our interest is piqued due to the heretical nature and mystery surrounding this term. The difficulty is that the term has many meanings and connotations, and an incredibly controversial history.

The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word "Gnosis," meaning "knowledge." At the heart, this knowledge is knowing God within our selves and the world around us. It is much like Taoism, where the Tao (the way) is the universal energy that exists in everything. Brought into contemporary terms, I think we can relate this to our desire to live in the present moment, to immerse ourselves in the world fully and deeply.

In another context, a more religious context, the word Gnosticism means a duality of materialism (evil) and immaterialism (good). This duality implies an ethereal sense of God, a God that takes us away from this immoral or loathsome daily existence. The Gnostic religions built an elaborate hierarchy and structure to define this duality.

---

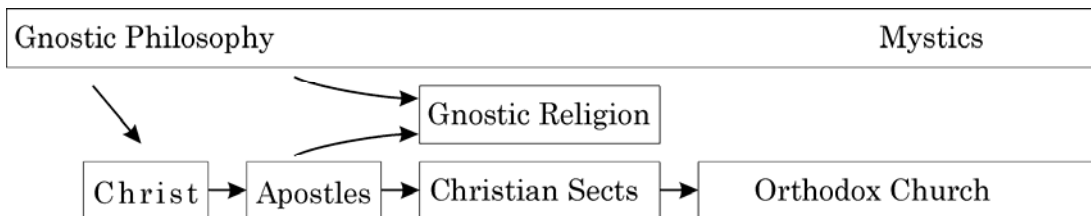
*Gnosticism comes from the Greek word "Gnosis," meaning "knowledge"*

---

We can relate this to contemporary efforts to escape our fast-paced, over-stimulated, 21st century lives. Many folks use meditation, spiritual studies or religious activities to transcend this mundane existence. They feel a need to transcend above the mundane to see God.

### A Bit of History

It is impossible to definitively state how Gnosticism emerged and flourished since the vast majority of Gnostic texts were destroyed during the Church's



banishment in the 4th and 5th centuries CE. Gnosticism most likely began in the 2nd or 3rd century BCE as an offshoot of mystical Jewish beliefs (Kabbalah) or mystical pagan beliefs. Much like most organized religions, a kernel of spirituality was used as a basis for the Gnostic religion and rituals and dogma were built around it.

As Christianity grew, Gnostics wove their beliefs into Christianity and many Christian Gnostic sects emerged. These sects became entangled in Church power struggles as rival factions fought for supremacy and domination. Ultimately, the Emperor Constantine formally recognized the Christian Church and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. His efforts to unify the Church succeeded and the Orthodox, or Catholic (universal) church as we know it today was created.

Over the next century the Gnostic sects were criticized, banished and wiped out. Their books were banned and destroyed. The destruction was so complete that very few remain. For centuries our knowledge of the Gnostics was mainly from writings of those actively engaged in squashing the Gnostic beliefs, most notably St. Irenaeus.

Fast forward to the 20th century, to the outskirts of the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It was here in 1945 that two Egyptian brothers discovered an earthen jar filled with fifty two partial and whole ancient texts (codices). These texts were written in the Coptic language and were largely in the Gnostic vein. Some of these texts have corroborated existing knowledge while most have greatly expanded our knowledge of Gnosticism.

## The Gnostic Philosophy

Let us turn now to what I call the Gnostic philosophy. As I mentioned previously, my thought is that the kernel of Gnosis is the inherent knowing we have inside ourselves. This knowing is that everything, from inanimate material objects, to us humans, to the universal energy spirit, is God. This is the God of life.

My feeling is that when we strive to immerse ourselves deeply into our daily life we are attempting to see and feel God deeply and to have an intuitive sense of the presence of God. When we talk about living fully in the present moment I feel that we are attempting to “know” the present moment as fully as possible. A very significant part of knowing the present moment is knowing ourselves and reasons for our behavior.

When I ask myself what Jesus may have thought about this subject I reflect upon several verses:

The Pharisees asked him, “When will the kingdom of God come?” He answered, “You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. You cannot say, ‘Look, here it is.’ or ‘There it is!’ For the kingdom of God is among you!”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the (Father’s) kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Father’s kingdom is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will

be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."<sup>2</sup>

Beware that no one lead you astray, saying, "Lo here!" or "Lo there!" For the Son of Man is within you. Follow after Him!<sup>3</sup>

This Gnostic philosophy most likely evolved in pre-Christian times within mystical Jewish, pagan and other groups. Mystics of all ages have kept this philosophy alive despite being labeled heretics and facing persecution.

This philosophy is not for the masses, it is for the seekers. It is for those individuals seeking greater meaning in their everyday lives. Since this philosophy is rather abstract and does not entail any rituals or external embodiments, it is sometimes difficult for us to perceive or grasp.

## The Gnostic Religion

Gnostics involved in what I call the Gnostic religion believe in a complex hierarchy which embodies the duality of our world, material and immaterial. This structure was built to describe many of the "mysteries" in our lives. A fundamental difference between the Gnostic philosophy and Gnostic religion is that the philosophy has us looking for God within, whereas the religion has us looking for God outside ourselves.

There were many adherents to these beliefs, but the beliefs were quite complex and difficult to fully understand. This

made it difficult for the masses to comprehend and accept. Those involved in the Orthodox church wanted to appeal to the masses and felt that the Gnostic movement was antithetical to their drive toward the masses.

The many Orthodox Christian, Gnostic Christian and other sects made it difficult for people at the time to understand what Christianity really was. Enter Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and the result is a very singular, unified vision of today's Christian church. The basic tenets of Orthodox Christianity have remained stable for these hundreds of years due to the simplicity of its message, appeal to humanity and extraordinarily effective organization.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Orthodox church for creating and maintaining this stable religion. The Church has provided a framework for stability and consistency of message that allows us to continue to evangelize Jesus' message to all around us.

---

*Gnostic religion... a complex hierarchy which embodies the duality of our world, material and immaterial*

---

I feel that the difficulty with both the Orthodox Christian religion and the Gnostic religion is that this dogma can be far from the enlightened state many of us seek and is against what Jesus taught. From The Gospel of Mary, we hear what

Jesus told Mary, “do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed you, and do not give a law like the lawgiver lest you be constrained by it.”<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that this Gospel did not make the cut as a canonical Gospel. I often wonder what Jesus might say if he showed up for a Sunday service in a “Christian” church.

Jews and Christians celebrate the world as God’s creation, Gnostic religion’s rejection of the material world was an opposing view. This was a major barrier to acceptance of the Gnostic beliefs.

As an interesting side note, for those familiar with David Hawkins and his map of human consciousness, protestant religions calibrate at a consciousness level in the range of 500 (love) whereas Christ calibrates at a consciousness level of 1,000 (enlightenment), one of the highest ratings ever. A major decline in the calibration of Christianity occurred around 325 CE, the time of the Council of Nicaea.<sup>5</sup>

## The Gnostic Jesus

My feeling is that Jesus learned of the Gnostic philosophy and utilized these concepts in his teaching. I have provided several quotes of his where he exhorts followers to look for the Kingdom of God within.

Let us step back for a moment from the position that the canonical Gospels are the only sacred and holy texts. If we take a fresh look at all known Christian texts, Gnostic, Orthodox and others, we can ask ourselves what kind of texts the proponents of the Orthodox church would desire. Obviously they would desire those that support the structure of the church and the necessity for church rituals and authority.

The texts which promote the search for the Kingdom of God within, mostly Gnostic, will obviously be left behind. That is why we see very few references to this concept in the canonical Gospels and must turn to Gnostic ones to supplement our understanding of Jesus’ teaching.

A consistent theme in Gnostic texts is that Jesus reserved secret teaching for Mary Magdalene and a few others. The cynic in me would like to toss aside this notion that there is some secret teaching that was handed down orally from Jesus to others through the ages, but there are too many references to discount the idea of some additional teachings beyond those he gave to the masses.

According to the canonical Gospel of Luke, Jesus is to have said, "It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but the others have only parables, so that they may look but see nothing, hear but understand nothing."<sup>6</sup> In the Gospel of Mark we read; When Jesus was alone with the Twelve and his other companions they questioned him about the parables. He answered, “To you the secret of the kingdom of God has been given; but to those who are outside, everything comes by way of parables...”<sup>7</sup>

It makes sense to me that Jesus would have taught a general message to large and unfamiliar audiences and given specific teachings to those close to him. We see such a structure in our world today.

It is my feeling that Jesus taught Gnostic philosophical teachings in private since these teachings are more abstract and appeal only to those actively seeking deeper meaning in their lives. So there is no mystery here, just teaching in an organized fashion as we would today.

## Jung and Gnosticism

Eminent psychologist Carl Jung took a sojourn into the world of Gnosticism in his early years, which shaped his ideas on alchemy.<sup>8</sup> One of Jung's major themes was that we humans have what he calls "unconsciousness." This is what we are born with. As we grow and evolve in our lifetimes we develop an ego, or a sense of "I."

Once our ego is developed we have within ourselves a duality of unconsciousness and consciousness, or ego. "Seekers" is Jung's description for those of us reaching out to reconnect with our unconscious, to unify this polarity. He calls this the "contemporary" stage of humanity, where our goal is unity of consciousness and unconsciousness.

Contrast this with the Gnostic religion where the view is that we began in a state of divinity and evolved into the material, physical world. For these Gnostics the goal is to continue evolving, but back to the state of divinity, or essence, while relinquishing the material world.

Jung views his psychology as a counterpart to the Gnostic ideal. Where Jung seeks a unification of consciousness and the unconscious, the Gnostic religion strives to disavow the material world so that we may live solely in the world of divinity.

## The Gnostic Mind

The final issue in this triad is what I call the Gnostic mind. My definition of the Gnostic mind is the human mind once it is free of all trauma, pride, self-importance, fear, shame and other barriers to happiness we collect in our lives.

To have a Gnostic mind is to have the mind of a child. In the Gospel of Thomas

we hear Jesus say, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill you."<sup>9</sup>

---

*To have a Gnostic mind is to have the mind of a child*

---

One of the texts in the Nag Hammadi Library highlights this point;

So, there is no other one hidden except God alone. But he is revealed to everyone, and yet he is very hidden. He is revealed because God knows all. And if they do not wish to affirm it, they will be corrected by their heart. Now he is hidden because no one perceives the things of God. For it is incomprehensible and unfathomable to know the counsel of God. Furthermore, it is difficult to comprehend him, and it is difficult to find Christ. For he is the one who dwells in every place, and also he is in no place. For no one who wants to will be able to know God as he actually is, nor Christ, nor the Spirit, nor the chorus of angels, nor even the archangels, as well as the thrones of the spirits, and the exalted lordships, and the Great Mind. If you do not know yourself, you will not be able to know all of these.<sup>10</sup>

Modern psychology is replete with issues that cause dysfunction in our daily lives. I believe that today we are experiencing a confluence of what Christ taught in terms of finding the Kingdom of God within ourselves and finding happiness in our daily lives through the elimination of trauma, depression and other maladies.

It is my belief that Jesus was calling upon us to look inside ourselves so that we may know what trauma or difficulty we may have, what drives our behavior and whatever else keeps us from seeing God in the present moment. We frequently read in the canonical Gospels, after Jesus healed someone, he said to them, “your faith has healed you.” He doesn’t say, “I have healed you.”

Today we have a clear understanding of how PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), depression and attachment can cause us to get stuck in a loop rehashing old memories, stuck in what seems to be a pool of molasses or clinging to some vision that is not attainable. Even such simple issues such as situations not meeting our expectations can keep us from seeing God. Our scientific knowledge is so great at this moment that we are beginning to unlock the mysterious physical manifestations of activities such as meditation and the physical trauma in our bodies causing emotional dysfunction.

The joy is that after a relatively quiescent period of 2,000 years we have come full circle. Combine the recent increase in knowledge of Gnostic history and concepts, the acceptance and openness of “New Age” and metaphysical concepts with powerful, new, therapeutic techniques such as EMDR and PEAT and you have a powerful combination of

elements to free our minds so that they may soar to heights of new consciousness.

## A Fresh Look

We can look at a few ramifications on the dawn of this new age. What does this mean for the future of Christianity? Does this mean we should abandon the Orthodox Church?

I feel that Christianity truly is on the cusp of a new age, an age where we return to teaching what Christ meant us to teach – that the Kingdom of God is within ourselves and that we can free ourselves from our emotional bondage. In this new age we can embrace the heritage of the Orthodox Church while at the same time focus on our personal relationship with God.

Those of the masses who wish to continue to believe and practice within the framework of the traditional Orthodox church will certainly do so. Those seeking deeper meaning in their lives, who are motivated and have the desire may embrace the Gnostic philosophy either within or outside the framework of the Orthodox Church. I believe that both avenues are valid Christian paths that we should embrace. This is an age where more of us than ever are seeking something deeper in our lives.

I believe that Jesus would want us to work diligently to eliminate our traumas and break free from our emotional bondage so that we can experience every moment of our lives as deeply as possible. He would want us to use whatever means we have available to calm our minds and experience joy, bliss and happiness in every moment.

## Further Reading

### Primary

Robinson, James M. (Editor) *The Nag Hammadi Library*, (HarperSanFrancisco), 1988  
particularly *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Teachings of Silvanus*

Segal, Robert A., *The Gnostic Jung* (Princeton University Press), 1992.  
*The Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer.

### Secondary

Hurtak, J. J. & Hurtak, Desiree, *Pistis Sophia* (The Academy for Future Science), 1999.  
Marjanen, Antti, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (E.J. Brill), 1996.  
Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books), 1989.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Revised English Bible* (Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989),  
Luke 17:20-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Gospel of Mary*, translated by George W. MacRae and R. McL. Wilson, 8,18-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8,22-9,4.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkins, David R., *Power vs. Force* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1995), 272-273.

<sup>6</sup> *The Revised English Bible* (Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989)  
Luke 8: 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Mark 4: 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Segal, Robert A., *The Gnostic Jung*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8-11.

<sup>9</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, 70.

<sup>10</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus*, translated by Malcolm L. Peel and Jan Zander, 116,12-117,5.