



GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism

To grow spiritually, we must also ponder thoughts other than those written by our Christian masters. Gnosticism is one of those systems of ideas. It was deemed heretical by the early church fathers but is still a tiny minority within certain Judeo-Christian groups.

The great book critic Harold Bloom surveyed the wide varieties of Protestant and post-Protestant religious faiths that originated in the United States and argued that, in terms of their psychological hold on their adherents, most shared more in common with Gnosticism than with historical Christianity. The exception was the Jehovah's Witnesses, whom Bloom regarded as non-gnostic.

Gnosticism is a collection of religious ideas and systems merged in the late 1st century AD among Jewish and early Christian sects. These groups emphasized personal spiritual knowledge (gnosis) above the orthodox teachings, traditions, and authority of religious institutions.

Viewing material existence as flawed or evil, Gnostic cosmogony generally distinguishes between a supreme, hidden God and an evil lesser divinity (sometimes associated with the Yahweh of the Old Testament) who is responsible for creating the material universe.

Gnostics considered the principal element of salvation to be direct knowledge of the supreme divinity in the form of mystical or esoteric insight. Many Gnostic texts deal not with concepts of sin and repentance but with illusion and enlightenment.

Heresy?

In his book *The Great Heresies*, Hilaire Belloc defines heresy as a sort of thing that takes a system of thought and – rather than depart wholesale from the previously established tradition – picks out one part of that system and, through either overemphasis or removal, leaves the structure marred, yet in-tact enough to still draw adherents of the previous

approach to it; thus Belloc states that "The denial of a scheme wholesale is not heresy" but "it is of the essence of heresy that it leaves standing a great part of the structure it attacks... wherefore, it is said of heresies that 'they survive by the truths they retain'".

In this way, Arianism denied the divinity of Christ, Docetism rejected the humanity of Christ, while the various Trinitarian heresies such as Monarchianism or Sabellianism overemphasized the oneness of God. In approaching early Christian heresies, it is necessary to look at them and determine what the major tenets of these systems were, in turn, where they departed from the orthodox tradition.

However, when looking at a system such as that of Gnosticism, there is not merely one (or even two or three) doctrines or pieces of the conventional approach which have been removed or overemphasized. Instead, one finds that the Gnostic system is – for all intents and purposes – a wholesale denial of the Christian scheme. Thus, when one composes a list of the tenets of Gnosticism, one finds that this list in every way departs from Christianity; indeed, it merely borrows Christian language and categories to tell an entirely different story.

In demonstrating this, one may look at the Gnostic views of God, man, creation, Christ, salvation, and Scripture, each bearing no resemblance to the conventional system, which is said to be a heresy.

View of God

As with anything dealing with theology, the first place to begin is with God, and from the beginning, Gnosticism takes a radical departure from orthodox Christianity; indeed, rather than merely overemphasizing one quality of the Christian Trinity (such as The oneness of his threeness), Gnosticism substitutes the Christian God for a plurality of gods, demoting the creator-god of the Genesis narrative to a minor and somewhat evil being, and putting in his place a being of pure thought.

From this thought, the myriad of lesser gods' emanate,' one of these being the Jewish creator-god who contaminated the previous existence through the creation of the material world. Rather than being a god to be revered, the creator-god of Genesis is looked down upon and is said to have sinned when he claimed to be the only God. Thus, the Gnostic gods – and especially their interpretation of the Old Testament – are far removed from the God of Christianity, who is upheld not only as the only God but as a wholly holy God, deserving all honor and worship.

View of Creation

Just as Gnosticism has a radically different view of God than Christianity, so does it have a fundamentally different view of man.

The Gnostic view of man is made of somewhat disparate elements. In *The Secret Book of John*, man is created through angels and demons working together to construct a natural body. At the same time, in *The First Thought in Three Forms*, it is the creator-god of Genesis as a great demon who creates the body of a man while a higher being gives his spirit. In *On the Origin of the World*, man is made "when Sophia let fall a droplet of light" which "flowed onto the water, and immediately a human being appeared "[...] yet, while the origins of mankind vary in the Gnostic mythos, it is generally agreed in some form or another that the soul of man "is a precious thing which came into a worthless body." Thus the soul of man is held in high regard, while the material body of man is seen as something degenerate; this is quite far from the view of man – body, and soul – being made as essentially good and in the image of God their creator.

Just as the creation of fleshly man is seen as a negative thing in Gnosticism, so is the creation of the entire material world. Here again, the Gnostic views vary; in most accounts, such as in *The Gospel of Philip*, the material world "came into being through an error," most often the error of the lesser God of Genesis. In contrast, *The Secret Book of John* has the material world created by various lesser beings. Once again, even though how the material world came into being may vary in the Gnostic system, it is agreed that this creation was not a

good thing (i.e., an error). Thus, just as the Gnostic view looks down upon man's body, it also looks down upon the entirety of the material world – entirely dissimilar from everything being counted as 'good' in the Genesis narrative.

View of Christ and His Work

Just as the Gnostic views of God, man, and creation bear no resemblance to the Christian system, so the Gnostic view of Christ is at great odds with the orthodox position, with the primary point of their design being that Christ did not indeed come in the flesh, but rather merely possessed the body of a man named Jesus.

This divergence can be seen throughout the Gnostic writings, such as in *The First Thought in Three Forms*, where it is stated that "As for me, I put on Jesus," or in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, which says, "I visited a bodily dwelling. I cast out the one who was in it previously, and I went in". In keeping with the theme that Christ did not become incarnate, the Gnostic system holds that he also did not die, such that in "... I died, though not in reality...". Rather than suffer on the cross, the divine part of Jesus – according to *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* – was "above the cross, glad and laughing" while his human counterpart died. For this reason, the Gnostics ridicule the orthodox, claiming that "they will hold fast to the name of a dead man while thinking that they will become pure." This view is opposed in the more orthodox writings – such as *The Letter of Barnabas* – with statements noting that "the Son of God came in the flesh for this reason..." and "this is why he allowed himself to suffer." This notion is echoed in *The Epistle of the Apostles* where the author asserts that "he has truly risen in the flesh."

Because the Gnostics have a radically different view of both God and man, and thus of Christ, they also have a further understanding of why Christ came and what salvation entails; perhaps the primary way in which the Gnostic idea of salvation differs from the Christian view is that while the Christian perspective deals with bringing man back into right relationship with God through the covering of his sins (and thus revolves in a large degree around morality), the Gnostic view of salvation is primarily epistemological. Therefore,

mankind does not need to be saved from their sins. They need to be protected from their ignorance. This theme is pretty consistent in the Gnostic writings: in The Gospel of Truth, it is stated that "He has brought back many from error" and "knowledge to those who have sinned in their error"; in The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, it is said of certain people that "they have become ignorant and have not been saved"; in The Second Treatise of the Great Seth that "they did not know the Gnosis of the Greatness"; in The Gospel of Philip that "Folks do not know the right meaning"; and finally in The Secret Book of John one is made perfect when they are "liberated from the forgetfulness and acquires knowledge." The common theme here is that there is no absolute moral or sinful quality to speak of, but the focus is instead on a lack of knowledge and ignorance of the truth. The Letter of Barnabas also responds to this error, stating that "he renewed us through the forgiveness of our sins." Indeed, Christianity also speaks of having proper knowledge, but this is not the central focus of its soteriology.

View of Scripture

Just as the Gnostics differ from the orthodox view on every other position, so they also hold the Scriptures in a different manner, which is likely a significant contributing factor to the other errors; because they have an inadequate view of Scripture, they, therefore, have a faulty view of everything on which Scripture speaks.

When one reads the early church writers in the more orthodox position, one is struck with the high view of the Biblical Scriptures they had. Thus, when they reference the Old Testament texts, they do so to use them as proof-texts, using the sources of the Old Testament to build their theologies. In sharp contrast to this, the Gnostic texts may quite often be seen ridiculing the Old Testament characters and directly stating that they are departing from the traditionally understood narrative (which, in turn, demonstrates that there must have been a traditional narrative already in place to leave from). In this way, they refer to a large number of the significant figures in the Old Testament as "laughingstocks." stating that the law of Moses has been misunderstood, attacking authority and leaders as

such, and criticizing the orthodox for "proclaiming the doctrine of a dead man and falsehoods to resemble the freedom and purity of the perfect assembly."

That the more orthodox writers held in much higher esteem the writings which are now referred to as the canonical Scripture can be seen not only in their use of the Old Testament texts as reference material but also in the way they stress the keeping of tradition. This departure is particularly noted when the Gnostic texts use such statements as "in our view," which assumes they disagree with some pre-established view. Thus in *The Didache*, it is stated that "if the teacher should himself turn away and teach something different, undermining these things, do not listen to him," or in *The Third Letter to the Corinthians* that "anyone who remains in the rule received through the blessed prophets and the holy Gospel will receive a reward." When the more orthodox writers turned to critique the Gnostic writings, they most often attacked them because they were written "very recently, in our times," that is, the sources that the Gnostics did use were of a later date than that of the more orthodox and therefore did not hold the same authority as those writings which were contemporary to the apostles.

Looking at each of these areas of doctrine, it can be seen that Eusebius was quite right when he claimed that "they are as different as possible from truly orthodox works."

Indeed, the Gnostic narrative possesses only the barest similarity to Christianity's. Each of these departures is a particular problem with the Gnostic system, yet on the more general level, the Gnostic system faces a grander problem. This problem is the way mentioned above in which the Gnostic texts disagree, presenting often conflicting narratives. One group wrote that the world was made in error by a Demon, another by a host of demons; one writer claims that that same demon made man, another from a droplet of light, another through angels and demons working together. There is a common element of material creation (and therefore the creator god) being wrong, ignorance is the problem, and Christ not genuinely coming in the flesh; it is these overarching themes that give some coherence to the Gnostic system, while the individual details vary depending on whoever might be telling the story. Apart from this, the Gnostic system also presents writings that are much more mythical than that of traditional Christianity, generally without any practical value. Once again, they self-consciously depart from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

On the whole, the Gnostic system can be called a Christian heresy in a loose sense, for it is an entirely different religious system, as diverse as possible from the Christian tradition. Gnosticism has a different view of God, man, creation, Christ, salvation, and Scripture; thus, unless one is judging by some standard other than Christianity, it must be asserted that the entirety of Gnosticism is itself a problem. In the words of Belloc, it is a denial of the scheme wholesale; it is simply a complete departure from the systems of either Judaism or Christianity, albiet one which still uses some language of Christianity and feigns some reliance upon the Judeo-Christian texts (even if only to refute them).