

Gnosticism

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The term Gnosticism describes a variety of philosophies and spiritual movements that flourished from the second to fourth centuries, although elements of Gnostic thought are still found in religious movements today. Gnosticism draws on some aspects of Christian thought, but distorts them and ultimately denies the orthodox Christian faith, offering instead a salvation attained through *gnosis*, an elite spiritual knowledge.

Founder(s):

Gnosticism has no single founder, but the movement is associated with early teachers such as Simon Magus (first century; Acts 8:9-24), Valentinus (second century), Basilides (second century), Marcion (d. c. 160 A.D.), and Mani (c. 216-276 A. D.).

Statistics:

There are no statistics concerning the precise number of Gnostic religious movements or adherents in its early or modern forms.

History:

Early Gnostic thought incorporated and adapted ideas from a variety of sources, including Greek philosophy, the Old and New Testaments, Christian thought, Jewish (especially sectarian or heretical) thought and the religions of Syria, Asia Minor, Persia and India. Scripture warns of likely Gnostic influence in the first century (for example, 1 Tim. 6:20, 1 Cor. 8:1-3, and 1 John 4:1-3). By the second century, the growing Gnostic movements linked pagan religious ideas with the Christian faith. Early Christian teachers such as Irenaeus (c. 130-c.200) and Tertullian (c. 160-c.225) condemned the Gnostic blend of Christian and pagan beliefs.

Gnostic thought also found expression in later centuries. The Manichees, a Gnostic sect founded by the Persian teacher Mani, continued into the thirteenth century, and some medieval sects promoted Gnostic teachings.¹ Gnostic ideas are expressed in movements such as the Theosophical Society, Rosicrucianism and Scientology.² The Gnostic idea of Jesus as a revealer of secret knowledge is found in the writings of German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who viewed Jesus “not as the agent of atonement, but as the Revealer of the

¹ The Albigenses and Cathars (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) followed Gnostic thought, teaching that the material creation was evil and that salvation meant the liberation of the soul from the flesh.

² The goals of the Theosophical Society, which began in the 1800s, are to defend the universal brotherhood of humanity, encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science and investigate unexplained powers in man and nature. Rosicrucians are members of a secret society that began in Germany in the 1600s, although its adherents trace the movement’s origins to ancient Egypt. See an evaluation of Scientology from a Lutheran perspective at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=373>.

ultimate God-Consciousness.”³ The Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung (1875-1961) drew on ancient Gnostic teachings in his work.⁴

Interest in Gnostic thought was renewed when, in 1945, a collection of over fifty Gnostic texts, Coptic translations of Greek originals, was discovered in Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The Gnostic text, *The Gospel of Judas* (likely written between 130 and 170 A. D.), was found on the antiquities market in 1983 and published in 2006. Gnostic ideas also find their way into contemporary thought, for example, in a denial or neglect of the doctrine of the bodily resurrection on the Last Day, in revisionist retellings of the Jesus story and even in the claim to be “spiritual but not religious.”

Texts:

Among the most well known Gnostic texts are *The Gospel of Judas* and works from the Nag Hammadi collection, which includes *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Gospel of Truth*, *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, *The Apocryphal Epistle of James*, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, *On the Resurrection*, *Dialogue of the Redeemer*, and *The Apocalypse of Adam*.⁵

Beliefs and Practices:

There is no single form of Gnosticism, and from its earliest centuries, Gnostic thought found expression in a variety of movements. The early church father Irenaeus complained that among the Gnostics “no one is deemed ‘perfect,’ who does not develop among them some mighty fictions.”⁶ There are, however, common elements in these Gnostic “fictions” concerning creation, salvation, the person and work of Jesus, the body and spirit, and sources of authority.

According to most Gnostics, the creator of the physical universe was actually an evil demiurge (a lesser divine being), identified by some Gnostics as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. Since Gnostics viewed the material world as evil, and the non-material or spiritual world as good, they believed that the evil creator misled human beings and blinded them to the knowledge of the ultimate God and Father. This ultimate God sent a redeemer, referred to as Seth or Christ, to enlighten people and bring the secret knowledge to light.

³ David P. Scaer, “Gnosis in the Church Today,” *The Springfielder* (March 1975): 342.

⁴ For Jung, “Gnostic myth was really just a poignantly confused way of talking about the universal human tragedy of the ego’s alienation from the unconscious, which each of us enacts in growing out of childhood.” David Bentley Hart, “Jung’s Therapeutic Gnosticism,” *First Things* (January 2013) at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/01/jungs-therapeutic-gnosticism#print>.

⁵ F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “Nag Hammadi Papyri” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1129.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 1.18.1, 343.

According to Gnostic teaching, the spirit is imprisoned in the physical body, which is controlled by animal passions. In Gnosticism, therefore, salvation is the escape of the spirit (at death) from the material world into union with the true God.⁷ Possession of *gnosis*, the saving knowledge, meant that the spirit “would know what to say (like a password) to each of the emanations by which he would have to pass on his way to union with God.”⁸ Since Gnostics thought of physical things as evil, they believed that the ultimate God would never reveal himself in a human form. He instead sent a redeemer (Seth or Christ) to lead people to the secret, spiritual knowledge.

Gnostics believed that Christ only *appeared* to be human in Jesus (a false teaching called Docetism), and that the spirit of Christ left Jesus before He died on the cross.⁹ In *The Gospel of Judas*, the enlightened disciple Judas tells Jesus, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you.”¹⁰ Through his betrayal Judas helps to release Jesus from His physical body. Jesus tells Judas, “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”¹¹ For Gnostics, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and in the resurrection of the body on the Last Day was “the ‘faith of fools.’ The resurrection, they insisted, was not a unique event in the past: instead, it symbolized how Christ’s presence could be experienced in the present. What mattered was not literal seeing, but spiritual vision.”¹²

The Gnostic view of material things as evil resulted in contradictory views and practices concerning the body. Many Gnostics practiced asceticism, the spiritual discipline of bodily self-denial. Others indulged the body and its passions, believing themselves free from moral obligations imposed on the physical body. Irenaeus wrote that some Gnostics “yield themselves up to the lusts of the flesh with the utmost greediness, maintaining that carnal things should be allowed to the carnal nature, while spiritual things are provided for the spiritual.”¹³

Valentinian Gnostics thought of the true God as both Father and Mother of All. Wisdom (Sophia, identified in some texts as the Holy Spirit), or Eve, brought forth the evil demiurge as her agent.¹⁴ In Gnostic teaching, Eve and the serpent are in touch with the true knowledge of the ultimate God. The serpent of Eden “convinces Adam and Eve to partake of knowledge while ‘the Lord’ threatens them with death, trying jealously to prevent them from attaining knowledge, and

⁷ Irenaeus commented that among the Gnostic heretics “there are as many schemes of ‘redemption’ as there are teachers of these mystical opinions.” *Against Heresies*, 1. 21.1.345.

⁸ Paul E. Deterding, *Concordia Commentary: Colossians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 10. The “emanations,” sometimes identified as aeons or angels, issued from God, each one a lesser being than the one before. In some Gnostic teachings, the last emanation was the evil demiurge, who created the material world.

⁹ According to the Gnostic teacher Basilides, Jesus exchanged his outward appearance with that of Simon of Cyrene so that Simon was crucified in his place. Basilides also taught that those who confessed Jesus as the crucified Savior were still enslaved to the evil creator. *Against Heresies*, 1. 24.4.349.

¹⁰ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, ed., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 22-23.

¹¹ Kasser and Meyer, 43.

¹² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 11.

¹³ *Against Heresies*, 1.6.3, 324.

¹⁴ Louis A. Brighton, “The Ordination of Women: A Twentieth-Century Gnostic Heresy?” *Concordia Journal* (January 1982), 14.

expelling them from Paradise when they achieve it.”¹⁵ Gnostic thought had feminist aspects and promoted feminine characteristics, such as love and nurture, as positive spiritual traits in contrast to physical, masculine qualities such as aggression and strength. Mary Magdalene is often an important figure in Gnostic thought, and there may have been female leaders among Gnostics. However, in keeping with the Gnostic disparagement of the body, *The Gospel of Thomas* states, “For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹⁶

Irenaeus said that the Gnostics “proclaim themselves as being ‘perfect,’ so that no one can be compared to them with respect to the immensity of their knowledge ... They assert that they themselves know more than all others, and that they alone have imbibed the greatness of knowledge of that power which is unspeakable.”¹⁷ Gnostics valued the fictional gospels they created more highly than the four divinely inspired Gospels of the Church. The followers of Valentinus boasted “that they possess more Gospels than there really are.”¹⁸ Similar opinions remain popular today. In his best-selling book, *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown claims that the Gnostic gospels, supposedly suppressed by the emperor Constantine, were earlier and more accurate than the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.¹⁹

Gnostics taught that there was a divine spark trapped within the body. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus, as the teacher of *gnosis*, says, “If you bring forth that within yourselves, that which you have will save you.”²⁰ Some contemporary spiritual movements advocate a similar claim to inward knowledge, believing that a person “may have a direct experience with the divine without any necessary reference to God or revelation. As in the New Age, the emphasis is on me ... I have the potential to be divine, creating and experiencing my own reality.”²¹ The author of a book on contemporary beliefs writes that she does not believe in God, but is “inclined to think there is a spiritual dimension to life. A kind of life force that animates nature, a storehouse of wisdom we can draw on when we meditate, a kind of cosmic energy permeating the universe from which we come and to which we must return.”²² Another author comments, “I don’t really like religion. Religion keeps us away from Jesus ... It’s a spiritual thing.”²³

¹⁵ Pagels, xvii.

¹⁶ A. Guillaumont et al, ed., *The Gospel According to Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 57.

¹⁷ *Against Heresies* 1.13.6, 335. The people of Samaria said of the Gnostic teacher Simon Magus, “This man is the power of God that is called great” (Acts 8:10).

¹⁸ *Against Heresies*, 3.11.9, 429.

¹⁹ Ben Witherington III, review of *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, *Bible History Daily* (January 4, 2012) at <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/reviews/the-da-vinci-code/#>.

²⁰ Guillaumont, 41.

²¹ Richard Kyle, *The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 303. Contemporary advocates of Gnostic thought include popular authors and speakers such as spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, New Age author Deepak Chopra, and psychic Colette Baron-Reid. Tolle, for example, writes of finding his true nature, “the ever-present *I am*: consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form” and living in states of “indescribable bliss and sacredness.” Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1999), 5.

²² Christel Manning, *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 195-196.

²³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 1-2.

A Lutheran Response

Christian thought and, more importantly, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments themselves, place a very high value on knowledge. Zechariah prophesies that his son John will prepare the ways of his Lord by giving “knowledge (*gnosis*) of salvation” (Luke 1:77). Paul counts everything else as loss when compared with “the surpassing greatness of the knowledge (*gnosis*) of Christ Jesus” his Lord (Phil. 3:8). In Christ, Paul tells the Colossians, are hidden “all treasures of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnosis*)” (Col. 2:3). Peter closes his second letter with a prayer and blessing, desiring that his readers “grow in the grace and knowledge (*gnosis*) of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). As late as the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria could refer to a Christian as a “gnostic” because the Christian alone possessed the knowledge of the truth.²⁴ “We have been created, not to eat and drink,” wrote Clement, “but to come to the knowledge (*epignosis*) of God.”²⁵ It is a sad fact of history that *gnosis* quickly became a word reserved for the false and secret knowledge of the so-called “Gnostics.” Our most important response to all forms of such false knowledge is to proclaim to the world today the true knowledge of salvation, the treasure of the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Scripture, the historic creeds of the Church, and the Lutheran Confessions address the errors of the secret knowledge called Gnosticism. The apostle Paul warns of such false, elite knowledge: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20). The apostle promotes Christian love over any claims (Gnostic or otherwise) to superior knowledge: “Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God” (1 Cor. 8:1-3) and “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).

The apostle Paul uses the words “secret” and “mystery” (Rom. 16:25, Col. 1:26, 1 Cor. 2:7) to refer to the long-promised and now revealed good news of salvation, but he is not referring to a secret, spiritual *gnosis* revealed only to an elite few. God is a very public God (Acts 26:25-26). The good news of salvation is for *all* people. God our Savior “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4; see also 2 Cor. 5:19). The birth of Jesus was announced as “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness must be proclaimed in His name “to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

Holy Scripture identifies the Creator as the God of Israel (Is. 43:1), the Father of our Lord and, by His grace through faith in Christ, our Father: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God

²⁴ See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, VI. 18, in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, *Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 518-520.

²⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon P. Wood, vol. 23, *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 106. II.1.xiv.

created us?” (Mal. 2:10; see also Eph. 4:6). He is the one true God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who “created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). We confess in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.” The Lutheran Confessions reject Gnostic errors concerning the true God, stating that “it is with one accord taught and held, following the decree of the Council of Nicea, that there is one divine essence which is named God and truly is God ... Rejected therefore, are all the heresies that are opposed to this article, such as the Manichaeans, who posited two gods, one good and one evil; the Valentinians ... and all others like them.”²⁶

Against the Gnostic belief that Christ only temporarily inhabited the human body of Jesus, the apostle John testifies: “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3). John asks, “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (1 John 2:22). The Lutheran Confessions teach that the Son of God “took upon himself human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary so that there might be two natures, divine and human, inseparably conjoined in the unity of one person, one Christ, truly God and truly a human, being ‘born of the Virgin Mary,’ who truly ‘suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried,’ that he might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of human beings.”²⁷ In His physical body, the crucified and risen Lord ate with His disciples and invited them to touch the scars in His hands, feet and side (Luke 24:38-43; John 20:27).

Gnostics viewed material things as evil, believing that the physical universe was the creation of an evil demiurge. We know, however, that when God finished His work of creation, He “saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The physical universe is God’s good creation, created through and for our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). As managers and caretakers of God’s creation, we receive and use with thanksgiving His material gifts (Gen. 1:28; 1 Tim. 4:4-5). As we wait for our Lord’s return on the Last Day, all of creation waits with us in “eager longing” for the day when it too “will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19, 21).

Our bodies, too, though fallen and frail, are still good creations of God (Gen. 1:27; Ps. 139:13-16). We are not merely spiritual beings or souls trapped in a physical body. Explaining the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther wrote, “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.”²⁸ We have been redeemed—soul *and* body—by Jesus Christ: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Just as Jesus was raised bodily from the dead (Luke 24:39), when He returns on the Last Day our bodies will be raised and glorified, for “when he appears we shall be like him, because we

²⁶ The Augsburg Confession, Article 1, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 36.1.

²⁷ The Augsburg Confession, Article 3, *The Book of Concord*, 39.1-3.

²⁸ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 322.

shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2; Luke 24:38-40). A blessing in the Lutheran graveside service testifies to our hope of bodily resurrection: “May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh.”²⁹

As Lutherans, we know that salvation does not come from an elite, secret knowledge or a divine spark within ourselves. We are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who was and is true God *and* true man (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 3:21-25; John 1:1, 14). God sustains and strengthens our faith through His Word, spoken to all who have “ears to hear” (Luke 8:8), and through His Sacraments in the physical means of water, bread and wine. We do not draw our teachings from the invented “fictions” of Gnosticism, but from the inspired Word of God: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

For Further Reading

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²⁹ Committal, *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 130.