Gnosticism

Gnosticism (from Ancient Greek: γνωστικός *gnostikos*, "having knowledge", from γνῶσις *gnōsis*, knowledge) is a modern name for a variety of ancient religious ideas and systems, originating in Hellenistic Judaism and the Jewish Christian milieux in the first and second century AD. Many of these systems believed that the material world is created by an emanation or 'works' of a lower god (demiurge), trapping the divine spark within the human body. This divine spark could be liberated by *gnosis*, spiritual knowledge acquired through direct experience. Gnosticism is not a single system, and the emphasis on direct experience allows for a wide variety of teachings, which may include but are not limited to the following:

1. All matter is evil, and the non-material, spirit-realm is good.
2. There is an unknowable God, who gave rise to many lesser spirit beings called Aeons.
3. The creator of the (material) universe is not the supreme god, but an inferior spirit (the Demiurge).
4. Gnosticism does not deal with "sin", only ignorance.
5. To achieve salvation, one needs *gnosis* (knowledge).

The Gnostic ideas and systems flourished in the Mediterranean world in the second century AD, in conjunction with and influenced by the early Christian movements and Middle Platonism. After the second century, a decline set in. In the Persian Empire, Gnosticism in the form of Manicheism spread as far as China, while Mandaeism is still alive in Iraq.

A major question in scholarly research is the qualification of Gnosticism, based on the study of its texts, as either an interreligious phenomenon or as an independent religion.

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Etymology

Gnosis refers to knowledge based on personal experience or perception. In a religious context, *gnosis* is mystical or esoteric knowledge based on direct participation with the divine. In most Gnostic systems, the sufficient cause of salvation is this "knowledge of" ("acquaintance with") the divine. It is an inward "knowing", comparable to that encouraged by

Plotinus (neoplatonism), and differs from proto-orthodox Christian views.[1] Gnostics are "those who are oriented toward knowledge and understanding – or perception and learning – as a particular modality for living".[2]

The usual meaning of *gnostikos* in Classical Greek texts is "learned" or "intellectual", such as used by Plato in the comparison of "practical" (*praktikos*) and "intellectual" (*gnostikos*).[note 1] Plato's use of "learned" is fairly typical of Classical texts.[note 2]

By the Hellenistic period, it began to also be associated with Greco-Roman mysteries, becoming synonymous with the Greek term *musterion*. The adjective is not used in the New Testament, but Clement of Alexandria[note 3] speaks of the "learned" (*gnostikos*) Christian in complimentary terms.[3] The use of *gnostikos* in relation to heresy originates with interpreters of Irenaeus. Some scholars[note 4] consider that Irenaeus sometimes uses *gnostikos* to simply mean "intellectual",[note 5] whereas his mention of "the intellectual sect"[note 6] is a specific designation.[5][note 7][note 8][note 9]

The term "Gnosticism" does not appear in ancient sources,[8][note 10] and was first coined in the 17th century by Henry More in a commentary on the seven letters of the Book of Revelation, where More used the term "Gnosticisme" to describe the heresy in Thyatira.[9][note 11] The term *Gnosticism* was derived from the use of the Greek adjective *gnostikos* (Greek γνωστικός, "learned", "intellectual") by St. Irenaeus (c. 185 AD) to describe the school of Valentinus as *he legomene gnostike haeresis* "the heresy called Learned (gnostic)."[10][note 12]

Origins

The earliest origins of Gnosticism are obscure and still disputed. The proto-orthodox Christian groups called Gnostics a heresy of Christianity,[note 13][13] but according to the modern scholars the theology's origin is closely related to Jewish sectarian milieus and early Christian sects.[14][15][note 14][16] Scholars debate Gnosticism's origins as having roots in Neoplatonism and Buddhism, due to similarities in beliefs, but ultimately, its origins are currently unknown. As Christianity developed and became more popular, so did Gnosticism, with both proto-orthodox Christian and Gnostic Christian groups often existing in the same places. The Gnostic belief was widespread within Christianity until the proto-orthodox Christian communities expelled the group in the second and third centuries (C.E.). Gnosticism became the first group to be declared heretical.

Some scholars prefer to speak of "gnosis" when referring to first-century ideas that later developed into gnosticism, and to reserve the term "gnosticism" for the synthesis of these ideas into a coherent movement in the second century.[17] No gnostic texts have been discovered that pre-date Christianity,[note 15] and "pre-Christian Gnosticism as such is hardly attested in a way to settle the debate once and for all."[18]

Jewish Christian origins

Contemporary scholarship largely agrees that Gnosticism has Jewish Christian origins, originating in the late first century AD in nonrabbinical Jewish sects and early Christian sects.[19][14][15][note 14]

Many heads of gnostic schools were identified as Jewish Christians by Church Fathers, and Hebrew words and names of God were applied in some gnostic systems.[20] The cosmogonic speculations among Christian Gnostics had partial origins in Maaseh Bereshit and *Maaseh Merkabah*. This thesis is most notably put forward by Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) and Gilles Quispel (1916–2006). Scholem detected Jewish *gnosis* in the imagery of the merkavah, which can also be found in "Christian" Gnostic documents, for example the being "caught away" to the third heaven mentioned by Paul the Apostle.[19] Quispel sees Gnosticism as an independent Jewish development, tracing its origins to Alexandrian Jews, to which group Valentinus was also connected.[21]

Many of the Nag Hammadi texts make reference to Judaism, in some cases with a violent rejection of the Jewish God.[15][note 14] Gershom Scholem once described Gnosticism as "the Greatest case of metaphysical anti-Semitism".[22] Professor Steven Bayme said gnosticism would be better characterized as anti-Judaism.[23] Recent research into the origins of Gnosticism shows a strong Jewish influence, particularly from Hekhalot literature.[24]

Within early Christianity, the teachings of Paul and John may have been a starting point for Gnostic ideas, with a growing emphasis on the opposition between flesh and spirit, the value of charisma, and the disqualification of the Jewish law. The mortal body belonged to the world of inferior, worldly powers (the *archons*), and only the spirit or soul could be saved. The term *gnostikos* may have acquired a deeper significance here.[25]

Alexandria was of central importance for the birth of Gnosticism. The Christian *ecclesia* (i. e. congregation, church) was of Jewish–Christian origin, but also attracted Greek members, and various strand of thought were available, such as "Judaic apocalypticism, speculation on divine wisdom, Greek philosophy, and Hellenistic mystery religions."[25]

Regarding the angel Christology of some early Christians, Darrell Hannah notes:

> [Some] early Christians understood the pre-incarnate Christ, ontologically, as an angel. This "true" angel Christology took many forms and may have appeared as early as the late First Century, if indeed this is the view opposed in the early chapters of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Elchasaites, or at least Christians influenced by them, paired the male Christ with the female Holy Spirit, envisioning both as two gigantic angels. Some Valentinian Gnostics supposed that Christ took on an angelic nature and that he might be the Saviour of angels. The author of the *Testament of Solomon* held Christ to be a particularly effective "thwarting" angel in the exorcism of demons. The author of *De Centesima* and Epiphanius' "Ebionites" held Christ to have been the highest and most important of the first created archangels, a view similar in many respects to Hermas' equation of Christ with Michael. Finally, a possible exegetical tradition behind the *Ascension of Isaiah* and attested by Origen's Hebrew master, may witness to yet another angel Christology, as well as an angel Pneumatology.[26]

The pseudepigraphical Christian text *Ascension of Isaiah* identifies Jesus with angel Christology:

> [The Lord Christ is commissioned by the Father] And I heard the voice of the Most High, the father of my LORD as he said to my LORD Christ who will be called Jesus, 'Go out and descend through all the heavens...[27]

The Shepherd of Hermas is a Christian literary work considered as canonical scripture by some of the early Church fathers such as Irenaeus. Jesus is identified with angel Christology in parable 5, when the author mentions a Son of God, as a virtuous man filled with a Holy "pre-existent spirit".[28]

Neoplatonic influences

In the 1880s Gnostic connections with neo-Platonism were proposed.[29] Ugo Bianchi, who organised the Congress of Messina of 1966 on the origins of Gnosticism, also argued for Orphic and Platonic origins.[21] Gnostics borrowed significant ideas and terms from Platonism,[30] using Greek philosophical concepts throughout their text, including such concepts as hypostasis (reality, existence), *ousia* (essence, substance, being), and demiurge (creator God). Both Sethian Gnostics and Valentinian Gnostics seem to have been influenced by Plato, Middle Platonism, and Neo-Pythagoreanism academies or schools of thought.[31] Both schools attempted "an effort towards conciliation, even affiliation" with late antique philosophy,[32] and were rebuffed by some Neoplatonists, including Plotinus.

Persian origins or influences

Early research into the origins of Gnosticism proposed Persian origins or influences, spreading to Europe and incorporating Jewish elements.[33] According to Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), Gnosticism was a form of Iranian and Mesopotamian syncretism,[29] and Richard August Reitzenstein (1861–1931) most famously situated the origins of Gnosticism in Persia.[29]

Carsten Colpe (b. 1929) has analyzed and criticised the Iranian hypothesis of Reitzenstein, showing that many of his hypotheses are untenable.[34] Nevertheless, Geo Widengren (1907–1996) argued for the origin of (Mandaean) Gnosticism in Mazdean (Zoroastrianism) Zurvanism, in conjunction with ideas from the Aramaic Mesopotamian world.[21]

Buddhist parallels

In 1966, at the Congress of Median, Buddhologist Edward Conze noted phenomenological commonalities between Mahayana Buddhism and Gnosticism,[35] in his paper *Buddhism and Gnosis*, following an early suggestion put forward by Isaac Jacob Schmidt.[36][note 16] The influence of Buddhism in any sense on either the *gnostikos* Valentinus (c. 170) or the Nag Hammadi texts (3rd century) is not supported by modern scholarship, although Elaine Pagels (1979) called it a "possibility".[40]

Characteristics

Cosmology

The Syrian–Egyptian traditions postulate a remote, supreme Godhead, the Monad. From this highest divinity emanate lower divine beings, known as Aeons. The Demiurge, one of those Aeons, creates the physical world. Divine elements "fall" into the material realm, and are locked within human beings. This divine element returns to the divine realm when Gnosis, esoteric or intuitive knowledge of the divine element within, is obtained.

Dualism and monism

Gnostic systems postulate a dualism between God and the world,[41] varying from the "radical dualist" systems of Manichaeism to the "mitigated dualism" of classic gnostic movements. Radical dualism, or absolute dualism, posits two co-equal divine forces, while in *mitigated dualism* one of the two principles is in some way inferior to the other. In *qualified monism* the second entity may be divine or semi-divine. Valentinian Gnosticism is a form of monism, expressed in terms previously used in a dualistic manner.

Moral and ritual practice

Gnostics tended toward asceticism, especially in their sexual and dietary practice.[42] In other areas of morality, Gnostics were less rigorously ascetic, and took a more moderate approach to correct behaviour. In normative early Christianity the Church administered and prescribed the correct behaviour for Christians, while in Gnosticism it was the internalised motivation that was important. Ritualistic behaviour was not important unless it was based on a personal, internal motivation. Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora* describes a general asceticism, based on the moral inclination of the individual.[note 17]

Concepts

Monad

In many Gnostic systems, God is known as the *Monad*, the One.[note 18] God is the high source of the pleroma, the region of light. The various emanations of God are called æons. According to Hippolytus, this view was inspired by the Pythagoreans, who called the first thing that came into existence the *Monad*, which begat the dyad, which begat the numbers, which begat the point, begetting lines, etc.

The Sethian cosmogony as most famously contained in the Apocryphon ("Secret book") of John describes an unknown God, very similar to the orthodox apophatic theology, but different from the orthodox teachings that this God is the creator of heaven and earth. Orthodox theologians often attempt to define God through a series of explicit positive statements: he is omniscient, omnipotent, and truly benevolent. The Sethian hidden transcendent God is, by contrast, defined through negative theology: he is immovable, invisible, intangible, ineffable; commonly, "he" is seen as being hermaphroditic, a potent symbol for being, as it were, "all-containing". In the Apocryphon of John, this god is good in that it bestows goodness. After the apophatic statements, the process of the Divine in action is used to describe the effect of such a god.

Pleroma

Pleroma (Greek πλήρωμα, "fullness") refers to the totality of God's powers. The heavenly pleroma is the center of divine life, a region of light "above" (the term is not to be understood spatially) our world, occupied by spiritual beings such as aeons (eternal beings) and sometimes archons. Jesus is interpreted as an intermediary aeon who was sent from the pleroma, with whose aid humanity can recover the lost knowledge of the divine origins of humanity. The term is thus a central element of Gnostic cosmology.

Pleroma is also used in the general Greek language, and is used by the Greek Orthodox church in this general form, since the word appears in the Epistle to the Colossians. Proponents of the view that Paul was actually a gnostic, such as Elaine Pagels, view the reference in Colossians as a term that has to be interpreted in a gnostic sense.

Emanation

The Supreme Light or Consciousness descends through a series of stages, gradations, worlds, or hypostases, becoming progressively more material and embodied. In time it will turn around to return to the One (epistrophe), retracing its steps through spiritual knowledge and contemplation.

Aeon

In many Gnostic systems, the aeons are the various emanations of the superior God or Monad. From this first being, also an æon, a series of different emanations occur, beginning in certain Gnostic texts with the hermaphroditic Barbelo,[43][44][45] from which successive pairs of aeons emanate, often in male–female pairings called *syzygies*.[46] The numbers of these pairings varied from text to text, though some identify their number as being thirty.[47] The aeons as a totality constitute the *pleroma*, the "region of light". The lowest regions of the pleroma are closest to the darkness; that is, the physical world[48]

Two of the most commonly paired æons were Christ and *Sophia* (Greek: "Wisdom"); the latter refers to Christ as her "consort" in *A Valentinian Exposition*.[49]

Sophia

In Gnostic tradition, the term *Sophia* (Σοφία, Greek for "wisdom") refers to the final and lowest emanation of God. In most if not all versions of the gnostic myth, Sophia births the demiurge, who in turn brings about the creation of materiality. The positive or negative depiction of materiality thus resides a great deal on mythic depictions of Sophia's actions. She is occasionally referred to by the Hebrew equivalent of *Achamoth* (this is a feature of Ptolemy's version of the Valentinian gnostic myth). Jewish Gnosticism with a focus on Sophia was active by 90 AD.

Sophia, emanating without her partner, resulted in the production of the *Demiurge* (Greek: lit. "public builder"),[50] who is also referred to as *Yaldabaoth* and variations thereof in some Gnostic texts.[43] This creature is concealed outside the pleroma;[43] in isolation, and thinking itself alone, it creates materiality and a host of co-actors, referred to as archons. The demiurge is responsible for the creation of mankind; trapping elements of the pleroma stolen from Sophia inside human bodies.[43][51] In response, the Godhead emanates two savior aeons, *Christ* and *the Holy Spirit*; Christ then embodies itself in the form of Jesus, in order to be able to teach man how to achieve gnosis, by which they may return to the pleroma.[52]

Demiurge

The term *demiurge* derives from the Latinized form of the Greek term *dēmiourgos*, δημιουργός, literally "public or skilled worker".[note 20] This figure is also called "Yaldabaoth",[43] Samael (Aramaic: *sæm'a-'el*, "blind god"), or "Saklas" (Syriac: *sækla*, "the foolish one"), who is sometimes ignorant of the superior god, and sometimes opposed to it; thus in the latter case he is correspondingly malevolent. Other names or identifications are Ahriman, El, Satan, and Yahweh.

A lion-faced deity found on a Gnostic gem in Bernard de Montfaucon's *L'antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* may be a depiction of Yaldabaoth, the Demiurge; however, cf. Mithraic Zervan Akarana[53]

The demiurge creates the physical universe and the physical aspect of humanity.[55] The demiurge typically creates a group of co-actors named archons who preside over the material realm and, in some cases, present obstacles to the soul seeking ascent from it.[43] The inferiority of the demiurge's creation may be compared to the technical inferiority of a work of art, painting, sculpture, etc. to the thing the art represents. In other cases it takes on a more ascetic tendency to view material existence negatively, which then becomes more extreme when materiality, including the human body, is perceived as evil and constrictive, a deliberate prison for its inhabitants.

Moral judgements of the demiurge vary from group to group within the broad category of Gnosticism, viewing materiality as being inherently evil, or as merely flawed and as good as its passive constituent matter allows.[56]

Archon

In late antiquity some variants of Gnosticism used the term archon to refer to several servants of the demiurge.[51] In this context they may be seen as having the roles of the angels and demons of the Old Testament.

According to Origen's *Contra Celsum*, a sect called the Ophites posited the existence of seven archons, beginning with Iadabaoth or Ialdabaoth, who created the six that follow: Iao, Sabaoth, Adonaios, Elaios, Astaphanos, and Horaios.[57] Similarly to the Mithraic Kronos and Vedic Narasimha, a form of Vishnu, Ialdabaoth had a head of a lion.[43][58][59]

Other concepts

Other Gnostic concepts are:[60]

- sarkic – earthly, hidebound, ignorant, uninitiated. The lowest level of human thought; the fleshly, instinctive level of thinking.
- hylic – lowest order of the three types of human. Unable to be saved since their thinking is entirely material, incapable of understanding the gnosis.
- psychic – "soulful", partially initiated. Matter-dwelling spirits
- pneumatic – "spiritual", fully initiated, immaterial souls escaping the doom of the material world via gnosis.
- kenoma – the visible or manifest cosmos, "lower" than the pleroma
- charisma – gift, or energy, bestowed by pneumatics through oral teaching and personal encounters
- logos – the divine ordering principle of the cosmos; personified as Christ. See also Odic force.
- hypostasis – literally "that which stands beneath" the inner reality, emanation (appearance) of God, known to psychics
- ousia – essence of God, known to pneumatics. Specific individual things or being.

Jesus as Gnostic saviour

Jesus is identified by some Gnostics as an embodiment of the supreme being who became incarnate to bring *gnōsis* to the earth,[61][52] while others adamantly denied that the supreme being came in the flesh, claiming Jesus to be merely a human who attained divinity through gnosis and taught his disciples to do the same. Among the Mandaeans, Jesus was considered a *mšiha kdaba* or "false messiah" who perverted the teachings entrusted to him by John the Baptist.[62] Still other traditions identify Mani and Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, as salvific figures.

Development

Three periods can be discerned in the development of Gnosticism:[63]

- Late first century and early second century: development of Gnostic ideas, contemporaneous with the writing of the New Testament;
- mid-second century to early third century: high point of the classical Gnostic teachers and their systems, "who claimed that their systems represented the inner truth revealed by Jesus";[63]
- end of second century to fourth century: reaction by the proto-orthodox church and condemnation as heresy, and subsequent decline.

During the first period, three types of tradition developed:[63]

- Genesis was reinterpreted in Jewish milieus, viewing Jahweh as a jealous God who enslaved people; freedom was to be obtained from this jealous God;
- A wisdom tradition developed, in which Jesus' sayings were interpreted as pointers to an esoteric wisdom, in which the soul could be divinized through identification with wisdom.[63][note 21] Some of Jesus' sayings may have been incorporated into the gospels to put a limit on this development. The conflicts described in 1 Corinthians may have been inspired by a clash between this wisdom tradition and Paul's gospel of crucifixion and arising;[63]
- A mythical story developed about the descent of a heavenly creature to reveal the Divine world as the true home of human beings.[63] Jewish Christianity saw the Messiah, or Christ, as "an eternal aspect of God's hidden nature, his "spirit" and "truth", who revealed himself throughout sacred history".[25]

The movement spread in areas controlled by the Roman Empire and Arian Goths,[65] and the Persian Empire. It continued to develop in the Mediterranean and Middle East before and during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but decline also set in during the third century, due to a growing aversion from the Catholic Church, and the economic and cultural deterioration of the Roman Empire.[66] Conversion to Islam, and the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229), greatly reduced the remaining number of Gnostics throughout the Middle Ages, though a few Mandaean communities still exist. Gnostic and pseudo-gnostic ideas became influential in some of the philosophies of various esoteric mystical movements of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe and North America, including some that explicitly identify themselves as revivals or even continuations of earlier gnostic groups.

Relation with early Christianity

Dillon notes that Gnosticism raises questions about the development of early Christianity.[67]

Orthodoxy and heresy

The Christian heresiologists, most notably Irenaeus, regarded Gnosticism as a Christian heresy. Modern scholarship notes that early Christianity was very diverse, and Christian orthodoxy only settled in the 4th century, when the Roman Empire declined and Gnosticism lost its influence.[68][66][69][67] Gnostics and proto-orthodox Christians shared some terminology. Initially, they were hard to distinguish from each other.[70]

According to Walter Bauer, "heresies" may well have been the original form of Christianity in many regions.[71] This theme was further developed by Elaine Pagels,[72] who argues that "the proto-orthodox church found itself in debates with gnostic Christians that helped them to stabilize their own beliefs."[67] According to Gilles Quispel, Catholicism arose in response to Gnosticism, establishing safeguards in the form of the monarchic episcopate, the creed, and the canon of holy books.[73]

Historical Jesus

The Gnostic movements may contain information about the historical Jesus, since some texts preserve sayings which show similarities with canonical sayings.[74] Especially the Gospel of Thomas has a significant amount of parallel sayings.[74] Yet, a striking difference is that the canonical sayings center on the coming endtime, while the Thomas-sayings center on a kingdom of heaven that is already here, and not a future event.[75] According to Helmut Koester, this is because the Thomas-sayings are older, implying that in the earliest forms of Christianity Jesus was regarded as a wisdom-teacher.[75] An alternative hypothesis states that the Thomas authors wrote in the second century, changing existing sayings and eliminating the apocalyptic concerns.[75] According to April DeConick, such a change occurred when the endtime did not come, and the Thomasine tradition turned toward a "new theology of mysticism" and a "theological commitment to a fully-present kingdom of heaven here and now, where their church had attained Adam and Eve's divine status before the Fall."[75]

Johannine literature

The prologue of the Gospel of John describes the incarnated Logos, the light that came to earth, in the person of Jesus.[76] The *Apocryphon of John* contains a scheme of three descendants from the heavenly realm, the third one being Jesus, just as in the Gospel of John. The similarities probably point to a relationship between gnostic ideas and the Johannine community.[76] According to Raymond Brown, the Gospel of John shows "the development of certain gnostic ideas, especially Christ as heavenly revealer, the emphasis on light versus darkness, and anti-Jewish animus."[76] The Johannine material reveals debates about the redeemer myth.[63] The Johannine letters show that there were different interpretations of the gospel story, and the Johannine images may have contributed to second-century Gnostic ideas about Jesus as a redeemer who descended from heaven.[63] According to DeConick, the Gospel of John shows a "transitional system from early Christianity to gnostic beliefs in a God who transcends our world."[76] According to DeConick, *John* may show a bifurcation of the idea of the Jewish God into Jesus' Father in Heaven and the Jews' father, "the Father of the Devil" (most translations say "of [your] father the Devil"), which may have developed into the gnostic idea of the Monad and the Demiurge.[76]

Paul and Gnosticism

Tertullian calls Paul "the apostle of the heretics",[77] because Paul's writings were attractive to gnostics, and interpreted in a gnostic way, while Jewish Christians found him to stray from the Jewish roots of Christianity.[78] In I Corinthians Paul refers to some church members as "having knowledge" (Greek: τὸν ἔχοντα γνῶσιν, *ton echonta gnosin*).[79] James Dunn claims that in some cases, Paul affirmed views that were closer to gnosticism than to proto-orthodox Christianity.[80]

According to Clement of Alexandria, the disciples of Valentinus said that Valentinus was a student of a certain Theudas, who was a student of Paul,[80] and Elaine Pagels notes that Paul's epistles were interpreted by Valentinus in a gnostic way, and Paul could be considered a proto-gnostic as well as a proto-Catholic.[60] Many Nag Hammadi texts, including, for example, the *Prayer of Paul* and the Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul*, consider Paul to be "the great apostle".[80] The fact that he claimed to have received his gospel directly by revelation from God appealed to the gnostics, who claimed *gnosis* from the risen Christ.[81] The Naassenes, Cainites, and Valentinians referred to Paul's epistles.[82] Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy have expanded upon this idea of Paul as a gnostic teacher;[83] although their premise that Jesus was invented by early Christians based on an alleged Greco-Roman mystery cult has been dismissed by scholars.[84][note 22] However, his revelation was different from the gnostic revelations.[85]

Major movements

Syrian-Egyptian Gnosticism

Syrian-Egyptian Gnosticism includes Sethianism, Valentinianism, Basilideans, Thomasine traditions, and Serpent Gnostics, as well as a number of other minor groups and writers.[86] Hermeticism is also a western Gnostic tradition,[66] though it differs in some respects from these other groups.[87] The Syrian–Egyptian school derives much of its outlook from Platonist influences. It depicts creation in a series of emanations from a primal monadic source, finally resulting in the creation of the material universe. These schools tend to view evil in terms of matter that is markedly inferior to goodness and lacking spiritual insight and goodness rather than as an equal force.

Many of these movements used texts related to Christianity, with some identifying themselves as specifically Christian, though quite different from the Orthodox or Roman Catholic forms. Jesus and several of his apostles, such as Thomas the Apostle, claimed as the founder of the Thomasine form of Gnosticism, figure in many Gnostic texts. Mary Magdalene is respected as a Gnostic leader, and is considered superior to the twelve apostles by some gnostic texts, such as the Gospel of Mary. John the Evangelist is claimed as a Gnostic by some Gnostic interpreters,[88] as is even St. Paul.[60] Most of the literature from this category is known to us through the Nag Hammadi Library.

Sethite-Barbeloite

Sethianism was one of the main currents of Gnosticism during the 2nd to 3rd centuries, and the prototype of Gnosticism as condemned by Irenaeus.[89] Sethianism attributed its *gnosis* to Seth, third son of Adam and Eve and *Norea*, wife of Noah, who also plays a role in Mandeanism and Manicheanism. Their main text is the *Apocryphon of John*, which does not contain Christian elements,[89] and is an amalgam of two earlier myths.[90] Earlier texts such as Apocalypse of Adam show signs of being pre-Christian and focus on the Seth, third son of Adam and Eve.[91] Later Sethian texts continue to interact with Platonism. Sethian texts such as Zostrianos and Allogenes draw on the imagery of older Sethian texts, but utilize "a large fund of philosophical conceptuality derived from contemporary Platonism, (that is, late middle Platonism) with no traces of Christian content."[31][note 23]

According to John D. Turner, German and American scholarship views Sethianism as "a distinctly inner-Jewish, albeit syncretistic and heterodox, phenomenon", while British and French scholarship tends to see Sethianism as "a form of heterodox Christian speculation".[92] Roelof van den Broek notes that "Sethianism" may never have been a separate

religious movement, and that the term refers rather to a set of mythological themes which occur in various texts.[93]

According to Smith, Sethianism may have begun as a pre-Christian tradition, possibly a syncretic cult that incorporated elements of Christianity and Platonism as it grew.[94] According to Temporini, Vogt, and Haase, early Sethians may be identical to or related to the Nazarenes (sect), the Ophites, or the sectarian group called heretics by Philo.[91]

According to Turner, Sethianism was influenced by Christianity and Middle Platonism, and originated in the second century as a fusion of a Jewish baptizing group of possibly priestly lineage, the so-called *Barbeloites*,[95] named after Barbelo, the first emanation of the Highest God, and a group of Biblical exegetes, the *Sethites*, the "seed of Seth".[96] At the end of the second century, Sethianism grew apart from the developing Christian orthodoxy, which rejected the docetian view of the Sethians on Christ.[97] In the early third century, Sethianism was fully rejected by Christian heresiologists, as Sethianism shifted toward the contemplative practices of Platonism while losing interest in their primal origins.[98] In the late third century, Sethianism was attacked by neo-Platonists like Plotinus, and Sethianism became alienated from Platonism. In the early- to mid-fourth century, Sethianism fragmented into various sectarian Gnostic groups such as the Archontics, Audians, Borborites, and Phibionites, and perhaps Stratiotici, and Secundians.[99][31] Some of these groups existed into the Middle Ages.[99]

Samaritan Baptist sects

According to Magris, Samaritan Baptist sects were an offshoot of John the Baptist.[100] One offshoot was in turn headed by Dositheus, Simon Magus, and Menander. It was in this milieu that the idea emerged that the world was created by ignorant angels. Their baptismal ritual removed the consequences of sin, and led to a regeneration by which natural death, which was caused by these angels, was overcome.[100] The Samaritan leaders were viewed as "the embodiment of God's power, spirit, or wisdom, and as the redeemer and revealer of 'true knowledge' ".[100]

The Simonians were centered on Simon Magus, the magician baptised by Philip and rebuked by Peter in Acts 8, who became in early Christianity the archetypal false teacher. The ascription by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others of a connection between schools in their time and the individual in Acts 8 may be as legendary as the stories attached to him in various apocryphal books. Justin Martyr identifies Menander of Antioch as Simon Magus' pupil. According to Hippolytus, Simonianism is an earlier form of the Valentinian doctrine.[101]

The Basilidians or Basilideans were founded by Basilides of Alexandria in the second century. Basilides claimed to have been taught his doctrines by Glaucus, a disciple of St. Peter, but could also have been a pupil of Menander.[102] Basilidianism survived until the end of the 4th century as Epiphanius knew of Basilidians living in the Nile Delta. It was, however, almost exclusively limited to Egypt, though according to Sulpicius Severus it seems to have found an entrance into Spain through a certain Mark from Memphis. St. Jerome states that the Priscillianists were infected with it.

Valentinianism

Valentinianism was named after its founder Valentinus (c. 100 – 180), who was a candidate for bishop of Rome but started his own group when another was chosen.[103] Valentinianism flourished after the middle of the 2nd century. The school was popular, spreading to Northwest Africa and Egypt, and through to Asia Minor and Syria in the east,[104] and Valentinus is specifically named as *gnostikos* by Irenaeus. It was an intellectually vibrant tradition,[105] with an elaborate and philosophically "dense" form of Gnosticism. Valentinus' students elaborated on his teachings and materials, and several varieties of their central myth are known.

Valentinian Gnosticism may have been monistic rather than dualistic.[note 24] In the Valentinian myths, the creation of a flawed materiality is not due to any moral failing on the part of the Demiurge, but due to the fact that he is less perfect than the superior entities from which he emanated.[108] Valentinians treat physical reality with less contempt than other

Gnostic groups, and conceive of materiality not as a separate substance from the divine, but as attributable to an *error of perception* which becomes symbolized mythopoetically as the act of material creation.[108]

The followers of Valentinius attempted to systematically decode the Epistles, claiming that most Christians made the mistake of reading the Epistles literally rather than allegorically. Valentinians understood the conflict between *Jews* and *Gentiles* in Romans to be a coded reference to the differences between *Psychics* (people who are partly spiritual but have not yet achieved separation from carnality) and *Pneumatics* (totally spiritual people). The Valentinians argued that such codes were intrinsic in gnosticism, secrecy being important to ensuring proper progression to true inner understanding.[note 25]

According to Bentley Layton "Classical Gnosticism" and "The School of Thomas" antedated and influenced the development of Valentinus, whom Layton called "the great [Gnostic] reformer" and "the focal point" of Gnostic development. While in Alexandria, where he was born, Valentinus probably would have had contact with the Gnostic teacher Basilides, and may have been influenced by him.[109] Simone Petrement, while arguing for a Christian origin of Gnosticism, places Valentinus after Basilides, but before the Sethians. According to Petrement, Valentinus represented a moderation of the anti-Judaism of the earlier Hellenized teachers; the demiurge, widely regarded as a mythological depiction of the Old Testament God of the Hebrews, is depicted as more ignorant than evil.[110]

Thomasine traditions

The *Thomasine Traditions* refers to a group of texts which are attributed to the apostle Thomas.[111][note 26] Karen L. King notes that "Thomasine Gnosticism" as a separate category is being criticised, and may "not stand the test of scholarly scrutiny".[112]

Marcion

Marcion was a Church leader from Sinope (present-day Turkey), who preached in Rome around 150 CE,[113] but was expelled and started his own congregation, which spread throughout the Mediterranean. He rejected the Old Testament, and followed a limited Christian canon, which included only a redacted version of Luke, and ten edited letters of Paul.[114] Some scholars do not consider him to be a gnostic,[115][note 27] but his teachings clearly resemble some Gnostic teachings.[113] He preached a radical difference between the God of the Old Testament, the Demiurge, the "evil creator of the material universe", and the highest God, the "loving, spiritual God who is the father of Jesus", who had sent Jesus to the earth to free mankind from the tyranny of the Jewish Law.[113][2] Like the Gnostics, Marcion argued that Jesus was essentially a divine spirit appearing to men in the shape of a human form, and not someone in a true physical body.[116] Marcion held that the heavenly Father (the father of Jesus Christ) was an utterly alien god; he had no part in making the world, nor any connection with it.[116]

Hermeticism

Hermeticism is closely related to Gnosticism, but its orientation is more positive.[66][87]

Other Gnostic groups

- Serpent Gnostics. The Naassenes, Ophites and the Serpentarians gave prominence to snake symbolism, and snake handling played a role in their ceremonies.[113]
- Cerinthus (c. 100), the founder of a heretical school with gnostic elements. Like a Gnostic, Cerinthus depicted Christ as a heavenly spirit separate from the man Jesus, and he cited the demiurge as creating the material world. Unlike the Gnostics, Cerinthus taught Christians to observe the Jewish law; his demiurge was holy, not lowly; and he taught the Second Coming. His gnosis was a secret teaching attributed to an apostle. Some scholars believe that the First Epistle of John was written as a response to Cerinthus.[117]

- The Cainites are so-named since Hippolytus of Rome claims that they worshiped Cain, as well as Esau, Korah, and the Sodomites. There is little evidence concerning the nature of this group. Hippolytus claims that they believed that indulgence in sin was the key to salvation because since the body is evil, one must defile it through immoral activity (see libertinism). The name Cainite is used as the name of a religious movement, and not in the usual Biblical sense of people descended from Cain.
- The Carpocratians, a libertine sect following only the Gospel according to the Hebrews
- The school of Justin, which combined gnostic elements with the ancient Greek religion.
- The Borborites, a libertine Gnostic sect, said to be descended from the Nicolaitans[118]

Persian Gnosticism

The Persian Schools, which appeared in the western Persian province of Babylonia (in particular, within the Sassanid province of Asuristan), and whose writings were originally produced in the Aramaic dialects spoken in Babylonia at the time, are representative of what is believed to be among the oldest of the Gnostic thought forms. These movements are considered by most to be religions in their own right, and are not emanations from Christianity or Judaism.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism was founded by the Prophet Mani (216–276). Mani's father was a member of the Jewish-Christian sect of the Elcesaites, a subgroup of the Gnostic Ebionites. At ages 12 and 24, Mani had visionary experiences of a "heavenly twin" of his, calling him to leave his father's sect and preach the true message of Christ. In 240–41, Mani travelled to the Indo-Greek Kingdom of the Sakhas in modern-day Afghanistan, where he studied Hinduism and its various extant philosophies. Returning in 242, he joined the court of Shapur I, to whom he dedicated his only work written in Persian, known as the *Shabuhragan*. The original writings were written in Syriac Aramaic, in a unique Manichaean script.

Manicheanism priests writing at their desks, with panel inscription in Sogdian. Manuscript from Khocho, Tarim Basin.

Manichaeism conceives of two coexistent realms of light and darkness that become embroiled in conflict. Certain elements of the light became entrapped within darkness, and the purpose of material creation is to engage in the slow process of extraction of these individual elements. In the end the kingdom of light will prevail over darkness. Manicheanism inherits this dualistic mythology from Zurvanist Zoroastrianism,[119] in which the eternal spirit Ahura Mazda is opposed by his antithesis, Angra Mainyu. This dualistic teaching embodied an elaborate cosmological myth that included the defeat of a primal man by the powers of darkness that devoured and imprisoned the particles of light.[120]

According to Kurt Rudolph, the decline of Manichaeism that occurred in Persia in the 5th century was too late to prevent the spread of the movement into the east and the west.[121] In the west, the teachings of the school moved into Syria, Northern Arabia, Egypt and North Africa.[note 28] There is evidence for Manicheans in Rome and Dalmatia in the 4th century, and also in Gaul and Spain. From Syria it progressed still farther, into Palestine, Asia Minor and Armenia. The influence of Manicheanism was attacked by imperial elects and polemical writings, but the religion remained prevalent until the 6th century, and still exerted influence in the emergence of the Paulicians, Bogomils and Cathari in the Middle Ages, until it was ultimately stamped out by the Catholic Church.[121]

In the east, Rudolph relates, Manicheanism was able to bloom, because the religious monopoly position previously held by Christianity and Zoroastrianism had been broken by nascent Islam. In the early years of the Arab conquest, Manicheanism again found followers in Persia (mostly amongst educated circles), but flourished most in Central Asia, to which it had spread through Iran. Here, in 762, Manicheanism became the state religion of the Uyghur Empire.[121]

Mandaeanism

The Mandaeans are Semites and speak a dialect of Eastern Aramaic known as Mandaic. Their religion has been practised primarily around the lower Karun, Euphrates and Tigris and the rivers that surround the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, part of southern Iraq and Khuzestan Province in Iran. Mandaeanism is still practiced in small numbers, in parts of southern Iraq and the Iranian province of Khuzestan, and there are thought to be between 60,000 and 70,000 Mandaeans worldwide.[124]

Mandaean house of worship in Nasiriya, Iraq

The name of the group derives from the term *Mandā d-Heyyi*, which roughly means "Knowledge of Life". Although the exact chronological origins of this movement are not known, John the Baptist eventually came to be a key figure in the religion, as an emphasis on baptism is part of their core beliefs. As with Manichaeism, despite certain ties with Christianity,[125] Mandaeans do not believe in Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed. Their beliefs and practices likewise have little overlap with the religions that manifested from those religious figures and the two should not be confused. Significant amounts of original Mandaean Scripture, written in Mandaean Aramaic, survive in the modern era. The primary source text is known as the Genzā Rabbā and has portions identified by some scholars as being copied as early as the 3rd century. There is also the Qolastā, or Canonical Book of Prayer and The Book of John the Baptist (sidra ḏ-iahia).

Middle Ages

After its demise in the Mediterranean world, Gnosticism lived on in the periphery of the Byzantine Empire, and resurfaced in the western world. The Paulicians, an Adoptionist group which flourished between 650 and 872 in Armenia and the Eastern Themes of the Byzantine Empire, were accused by orthodox medieval sources of being Gnostic and quasi Manichaean Christian. The Bogomils, emerged in Bulgaria between 927 and 970 and spread throughout Europe. It was as synthesis of Armenian Paulicianism and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reform movement.

The Cathars (Cathari, Albigenses or Albigensians) were also accused by their enemies of the traits of Gnosticism; though whether or not the Cathari possessed direct historical influence from ancient Gnosticism is disputed. If their critics are reliable the basic conceptions of Gnostic cosmology are to be found in Cathar beliefs (most distinctly in their notion of a lesser, Satanic, creator god), though they did not apparently place any special relevance upon knowledge (*gnosis*) as an effective salvific force.

Islam

The message of the Islamic prophet Muhammad shows close similarities to many Gnostic ideas. The Quran, like Gnostic cosmology, makes a sharp distinction between this world and the afterlife. The notion of four rivers in heaven, as mentioned in the Quran, separating this world from the other , also appears frequently in Mandaean literature. God is commonly thought of as being beyond human comprehension. In some Islamic schools of thought, somehow identifiable

with the Gnostic Monad.[126][127] However, according to Islam and unlike most Gnostic sects, not rejection of this world, but performing *good deeds* leads to the heaven. And according to the Islamic belief in strict Oneness of God, there was no room for a lower deity; such as the demiurge.[128] According to Islam, both *good* and *evil* come from one God, a position especially opposed by the Manichaeans. Ibn al-Muqaffa depicted the Islamic deity as a demonic entity who "fights with humans and boasts about His victories" and "sitting on a throne, from which He can descend". It would be impossible that both light and darkness were created from one source, since they were regarded as two different eternal principles.[129] Muslim theologists countered this accusation by the example of a repeating sinner, who says: "I laid, and I repent";[130] this would prove that good can also result out of evil.

Islam also integrated traces of an entity given authority over the lower world in some early writings: Iblis is regarded by some Sufis as the owner of this world, and humans must avoid the treasures of this world, since they would belong to him.[131] In the Isma'ili Shia work *Umm al Kitab*, Azazil's role resembles whose of the Gnostic demiurge.[132] Like the demiurge, he is endowed with the ability to create his own world and seeks to imprison humans in the material world, but here, his power is limited and depends on the higher God.[133] Such Gnostic anthropogenic can be found frequently among Isma'ili traditions.[134] However, Ismailism were often criticised as non-Islamic. Ghazali characterized them as a group who are outwardly Shias but were actually adherence of a dualistic and philosophical religion. Further traces of Gnostic ideas can be found in Sufi anthropogenic.[135] Like the gnostic conception of human beings imprisoned in matter, Sufi-traditions acknowledges the human soul is an accomplice of the material world and subject to bodily desires similar to the way archontic spheres envelop the pneuma.[136] The Ruh must therefore gain victory over the lower and material-bound psyche, to overcome his animal nature. A human being captured by his animal desires, mistakenly claims autonomy and independence from the "higher God", thus resembling the lower deity in classical gnostic traditions. However, since the goal is not to abandon the created world, but just to free oneself from ones own lower desires, it can be disputed whether this can still be Gnostic, but rather a completion of the message of Muhammad.[129] It seems that Gnostic ideas were an influential part of early Islamic development but later lost its influence. However the Gnostic light metaphorics and the idea of unity of existence still prevailed in later Islamic thought.[127]

Kabbalah

Gnostic ideas found a Jewish variation in the mystical study of Kabbalah. Many core Gnostic ideas reappear in Kabbalah, where they are used for dramatically reinterpreting earlier Jewish sources according to this new system.[137] The Kabbalists originated in 13th-century Provence,[note 29] which was at that time also the center of the Gnostic Cathars. While some scholars in the middle of the 20th century tried to assume an influence between the Cathar "gnostics" and the origins of the Kabbalah, this assumption has proved to be an incorrect generalization not substantiated by any original texts.[139] On the other hand, other scholars, such as Scholem, have postulated that there was originally a "Jewish gnosticism", which influenced the early origins of gnosticism.[140]

Kabbalah does not employ the terminology or labels of non-Jewish Gnosticism, but grounds the same or similar concepts in the language of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible).[141] The 13th-century Zohar ("Splendor"), a foundational text in Kabbalah, is written in the style of a Jewish Aramaic Midrash, clarifying the five books of the Torah with a new Kabbalistic system that uses completely Jewish terms.[142]

Modern times

The Mandaeans are an ancient Gnostic sect that have survived to this day and are found today in Iraq.[143] Their namesake owes to their following John the Baptist and in that country, they have about five thousand followers.[143] A number of ecclesiastical bodies that think of themselves as Gnostic have set up or re-founded since World War II, including the

Ecclesia Gnostica, Apostolic Johannite Church, Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the Gnostic Church of France, the Thomasine Church, the Alexandrian Gnostic Church, the North American College of Gnostic Bishops,[144] and the Universal Gnosticism of Samael Aun Weor.[145]

A number of 19th-century thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer,[146] Albert Pike and Madame Blavatsky studied Gnostic thought extensively and were influenced by it, and even figures like Herman Melville and W. B. Yeats were more tangentially influenced.[147] Jules Doinel "re-established" a Gnostic church in France in 1890, which altered its form as it passed through various direct successors (Fabre des Essarts as *Tau Synésius* and Joanny Bricaud as *Tau Jean II* most notably), and, though small, is still active today.[148]

Early 20th-century thinkers who heavily studied and were influenced by Gnosticism include Carl Jung (who supported Gnosticism), Eric Voegelin (who opposed it), Jorge Luis Borges (who included it in many of his short stories), and Aleister Crowley, with figures such as Hermann Hesse being more moderately influenced. René Guénon founded the gnostic review, *La Gnose* in 1909, before moving to a more Perennialist position, and founding his Traditionalist School. Gnostic Thelemite organizations, such as Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica and Ordo Templi Orientis, trace themselves to Crowley's thought.

The discovery and translation of the Nag Hammadi library after 1945 has had a huge effect on Gnosticism since World War II. Intellectuals who were heavily influenced by Gnosticism in this period include Lawrence Durrell, Hans Jonas, Philip K. Dick and Harold Bloom, with Albert Camus and Allen Ginsberg being more moderately influenced.[147] Celia Green has written on Gnostic Christianity in relation to her own philosophy.[149]

Alfred North Whitehead was aware of the existence of the newly discovered Gnostic scrolls. Accordingly, Michel Weber has proposed a Gnostic interpretation of his late metaphysics.[150]

Sources

Heresiologists

Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 Gnosticism was known primarily through the works of heresiologists, Church Fathers who opposed those movements. These writings had an antagonistic bias towards gnostic teachings, and were incomplete. Several heresiological writers, such as Hippolytus, made little effort to exactly record the nature of the sects they reported on, or transcribe their sacred texts. Reconstructions of incomplete Gnostic texts were attempted in modern times, but research on Gnosticism was coloured by the orthodox views of those heresiologists.

Justin Martyr (c. 100/114 – c. 162/168) wrote the *First Apology*, addressed to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, which criticising Simon Magus, Menander and Marcion. Since this time, both Simon and Menander have been considered as 'proto-Gnostic'.[151] Irenaeus (died c. 202) wrote *Against Heresies* (c. 180–185), which identifies Simon Magus from Flavia Neapolis in Samaria as the inceptor of Gnosticism. From Samaria he charted an apparent spread of the teachings of Simon through the ancient "knowers" into the teachings of Valentinus and other, contemporary Gnostic sects.[note 30] Hippolytus (170–235) wrote the ten-volume *Refutation Against all Heresies*, of which eight have been unearthed. It also focuses on the connection between pre-Socratic (and therefore Pre-Incantation of Christ) ideas and the false beliefs of early gnostic heretical leaders. Thirty-three of the groups he reported on are considered Gnostic by modern scholars, including 'the foreigners' and 'the Seth people'. Hippolytus further presents individual teachers such as Simon, Valentinus, Secundus, Ptolemy, Heracleon, Marcus and Colorbasus. Tertullian (c. 155–230) from Carthage wrote *Adversus Valentinianos* ('Against the Valentinians'), c. 206, as well as five books around 207–208 chronicling and refuting the teachings of Marcion.

Gnostic texts

Prior to the discovery at Nag Hammadi, a limited number of texts were available to students of Gnosticism. Reconstructions were attempted from the records of the heresiologists, but these were necessarily coloured by the motivation behind the source accounts.

The Nag Hammadi library [note 31] is a collection of Gnostic texts discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt. Twelve leather-bound papyrus codices buried in a sealed jar were found by a local farmer named Muhammed al-Samman.[152] The writings in these codices comprised fifty-two mostly Gnostic treatises, but they also include three works belonging to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a partial translation/alteration of Plato's *Republic*. These codices may have belonged to a nearby Pachomian monastery, and buried after Bishop Athanasius condemned the use of non-canonical books in his Festal Letter of 367.[153] Though the original language of composition was probably Greek, the various codices contained in the collection were written in Coptic. A 1st- or 2nd-century date of composition for the lost Greek originals has been proposed, though this is disputed; the manuscripts themselves date from the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Nag Hammadi texts demonstrated the fluidity of early Christian scripture and early Christianity itself.[note 32]

Academic studies

Development

Prior to the discovery of Nag Hammadi, the Gnostic movements were largely perceived through the lens of the early church heresiologists. Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1694–1755) proposed that Gnosticism developed on its own in Greece and Mesopotamia, spreading to the west and incorporating Jewish elements. According to Mosheim, Jewish thought took Gnostic elements and used them against Greek philosophy.[33] J. Horn and Ernest Anton Lewald proposed Persian and Zoroastrian origins, while Jacques Matter described Gnosticism as an intrusion of eastern cosmological and theosophical speculation into Christianity.[33]

In the 1880s Gnosticism was placed within Greek philosophy, especially neo-Platonism.[29] Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who belonged to the *School of the History of Dogma* and proposed a *Kirchengeschichtliches Ursprungsmodell*, saw gnosticism as an internal development within the church under the influence of Greek philosophy.[29][155] According to Harnack, Gnosticism was the "acute Hellenization of Christianity."[29]

The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* ("history of religions school", 19th century) had a profound influence on the study of Gnosticism.[29] The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* saw Gnosticism as a pre-Christian phenomenon, and Christian *gnosis* as only one, and even marginal instance of this phenomenon.[29] According to Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), Gnosticism was a form of Iranian and Mesopotamian syncretism,[29] and Eduard Norden (1868–1941) also proposed pre-Christian origins,[29] while Richard August Reitzenstein (1861–1931), and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) also situated the origins of Gnosticism in Persia.[29] Hans Heinrich Schaeder (1896–1957) and Hans Leisegang saw Gnosticism as an amalgam of eastern thought in a Greek form.[29]

Hans Jonas (1903–1993) took an intermediate approach, using both the comparative approach of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and the existentialist hermeneutics of Bultmann. Jonas emphasized the duality between God and the world, and concluded that Gnosticism cannot be derived from Platonism.[19]

Contemporary scholarship largely agrees that Gnosticism has Jewish or Judeo-Christian origins;[19] this theses is most notably put forward by Gershom G. Scholem (1897–1982) and Gilles Quispel (1916–2006).[156]

The study of Gnosticism and of early Alexandrian Christianity received a strong impetus from the discovery of the Coptic Nag Hammadi Library in 1945.[157][158] A great number of translations have been published, and the works of Elaine Pagels, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, especially *The Gnostic Gospels*, which detailed the suppression of some of the writings found at Nag Hammadi by early bishops of the Christian church, has popularized Gnosticism in mainstream culture,[web 3][web 4] but also incited strong responses and condemnations from clergical writers.[159]

Definitions of Gnosticism

According to Matthew J. Dillon, six trends can be discerned in the definitions of Gnosticism:[160]

- Typologies, "a catalogue of shared characteristics that are used to classify a group of objects together."[160]
- Traditional approaches, viewing Gnosticism as a Christian heresy[161]
- Phenomenological approaches, most notably Hans Jonas[162]
- Restricting Gnosticism, "identifying which groups were explicitly called gnostics",[163] or which groups were clearly sectarian[163]
- Deconstructing Gnosticism, abandoning the category of "Gnosticism"[164]
- Psychology and cognitive science of religion, approaching Gnosticism as a psychological phenomena[165]

Typologies

The 1966 Messina conference on the origins of gnosis and Gnosticism proposed to designate

> ... a particular group of systems of the second century after Christ" as *gnosticism*, and to use *gnosis* to define a conception of knowledge that transcends the times, which was described as "knowledge of divine mysteries for an élite.[166]

This definition has now been abandoned.[160] It created a religion, "Gnosticism", from the "gnosis" which was a widespread element of ancient religions,[note 33] suggesting a homogeneous conception of gnosis by these Gnostic religions, which did not exist at the time.[167]

According to Dillon, the texts from Nag Hammadi made clear that this definition was limited, and that they are "better classified by movements (such as Valentinian), mythological similarity (Sethian), or similar tropes (presence of a Demiurge)."[160] Dillon further notes that the Messian-definition "also excluded pre-Christian Gnosticism and later developments, such as the Mandaeans and the Manichaeans."[160]

Hans Jonas discerned two main currents of Gnosticism, namely Syrian-Egyptian, and Persian, which includes Manicheanism and Mandaeanism.[19] Among the Syrian-Egyptian schools and the movements they spawned are a typically more Monist view. Persian Gnosticism possesses more dualist tendencies, reflecting a strong influence from the beliefs of the Persian Zurvanist Zoroastrians. Those of the medieval Cathars, Bogomils, and Carpocratians seem to include elements of both categories.

Gilles Quispel divided Syrian-Egyptian Gnosticism further into Jewish Gnosticism (the *Apocryphon of John*)[89] and Christian Gnosis (Marcion, Basilides, Valentinus). This "Christian Gnosticism" was Christocentric, and influenced by Christian writings such as the Gospel of John and the Pauline epistles.[168] Other authors speak rather of "Gnostic Christians", noting that Gnostics were a prominent substream in the early church.[169]

Traditional approaches – Gnosticism as Christian heresy

The best known example of this approach is Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who stated that "Gnosticism is the acute Hellenization of Christianity."[161] According to Dillon, "many scholars today continue in the vein of Harnack in reading gnosticism as a late and contaminated version of Christianity", notably Darrell Block, who criticises Elaine Pagels for her view that early Christianity was wildly diverse.[162]

Phenomenological approaches

Hans Jonas (1903–1993) took an existential phenomenological approach to Gnosticism. According to Jonas, alienation is a distinguishing characteristics of Gnosticism, making it different from contemporary religions. Jonas compares this alienation with the existentialist notion of *geworfenheit*, being thrown into a hostile world.[162]

Restricting Gnosticism

In the late 1980s scholars voiced concerns about the broadness of "Gnosticism" as a meaningful category. Bentley Layton proposed to categorize Gnosticism by delineating which groups were marked as gnostic in ancient texts. According to Layton, this term was mainly applied by heresiologists to the myth described in the *Apocryphon of John*, and was used mainly by the Sethians and the Ophites. According to Layton, texts which refer to this myth can be called "classical Gnostic".[163]

In addition, Alastair Logan uses social theory to identify Gnosticism. He uses Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge's sociological theory on traditional religion, sects and cults. According to Logan, the Gnostics were a cult, at odds with the society at large.[163]

Deconstructing Gnosticism

According to Michael Allen Williams, the concept of Gnosticism as a distinct religious tradition is questionable, since "gnosoi" was a pervasive characteristics of many religious traditions in antiquity, and not restricted to the so-called Gnostic systems.[170] According to Williams, the conceptual foundations on which the category of Gnosticism rests are the remains of the agenda of the heresiologists.[170] The early church heresiologists created an interpretive definition of Gnosticism, and modern scholarship followed this example and created a *categorical* definition. According to Williams the term needs replacing to more accurately reflect those movements it comprises,[170]and suggests to replace it with the term "the Biblical demiurgical tradition".[164]

According to Karen King, scholars have "unwittingly continued the project of ancient heresiologists", searching for non-Christian influences, thereby continuing to portray a pure, original Christianity.[164]

Psychological approaches

Carl Jung approached Gnosticism from a psychological perspective, which was followed by Gilles Quispel. According to this approach, Gnosticism is a map for the human development, in which an undivided person, centered on the Self, develops out of the fragmentary personhood of young age. According to Quispel, gnosis is a third force in western culture, alongside faith and reason, which offers an experiential awareness of this Self.[164]

According to Ioan Culianu, gnosis is made possible through universal operations of the mind, which can be arrived at "anytime, anywhere".[171] A similar suggestion has been made by Edward Conze, who suggested that the similarities between *prajñā* and *sophia* may be due to "the actual modalities of the human mind", which in certain conditions result in similar experiences.[172]

See also

- The Esoteric Character of the Gospels
- Marcellina (gnostic)
- Mithras

Notes

1. In Plato's dialogue between Young Socrates and the Foreigner in his *The Statesman* (258e).[subnote 1]
2. 10x Plato, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman 2x Plutarch, Compendium libri de animae procreatione + De animae procreatione in Timaeo, 2x Pseudo-Plutarch, De musica[web 2]
3. In Book 7 of his *Stromateis*
4. For example A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, translators of the French edition (1974),[4]
5. As in 1.25.6, 1.11.3, 1.11.5.
6. Adv. haer. 1.11.1
7. Irenaeus' comparative adjective *gnostikeron* "more learned", evidently cannot mean "more Gnostic" as a name.[5]
8. Williams: "But several of Irenaeus's uses of the designation gnostikos are more ambiguous, and it is not so clear whether he is indicating the specific sect again or using 'gnostics' now merely as a shorthand reference for virtually all of the"; p. 37: "They argue that Irenaeus uses *gnostikos* in two senses: (1) with the term's 'basic and customary meaning' of 'learned' (savant), and (2) with reference to adherents of the specific sect called 'the gnostic heresy' in Adv. haer. 1.11.1."; p. 271: "1.25.6 where they think that *gnostikos* means 'learned' are in 1.11.3 ('A certain other famous teacher of theirs, reaching for a doctrine more lofty and learned [*gnostikoteron*] ...') and 1.11.5 ('... in order that they [i.e.,]).'"[5]
9. Of those groups that Irenaeus identifies as "intellectual" (*gnostikos*), only one, the followers of Marcellina use the term *gnostikos* of themselves.[6][subnote 2] Later Hippolytus uses "learned" (*gnostikos*) of Cerinthus and the Ebionites, and Epiphanius applied "learned" (*gnostikos*) to specific groups.
10. Dunderberg: "The problems with the term 'Gnosticism' itself are now well known. It does not appear in ancient sources at all"[8]
11. Pearson: "As Bentley Layton points out, the term Gnosticism was first coined by Henry More (1614–1687) in an expository work on the seven letters of the Book of Revelation.29 More used the term Gnosticisme to describe the heresy in Thyatira."[9]
12. This occurs in the context of Irenaeus' work *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis*, (Greek: *elenchos kai anatrope tes pseudonymou gnoseos*, ἔλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως) where the term "knowledge falsely so-called" (*pseudonymos gnosis*) is a quotation of the apostle Paul's warning against "knowledge falsely so-called" in 1 Timothy 6:20, and covers various groups, not just Valentinus.[11]
13. Clement of Alexandria: "In the times of the Emperor Hadrian appeared those who devised heresies, and they continued until the age of the elder Antoninus."[12]
14. Cohen & Mendes-Flohr: "Recent research, however, has tended to emphasize that Judaism, rather than Persia, was a major origin of Gnosticism. Indeed, it appears increasingly evident that many of the newly published Gnostic texts were written in a context from which Jews were not absent. In some cases, indeed, a violent rejection of the Jewish God, or of Judaism, seems to stand at the basis of these texts. ... facie, various trends in Jewish thought and literature of the Second Commonwealth appear to have been potential factors in Gnostic origins.[15]
15. Robinson: "At this stage we have not found any Gnostic texts that clearly antedate the origin of Christianity." J. M. Robinson, "Sethians and Johannine Thought: The Trimorphic Protennoia and the Prologue of the Gospel of John" in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 2, Sethian Gnosticism, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), p.662.
16. The idea that Gnosticism was derived from Buddhism was first proposed by the Victorian gem collector and numismatist Charles William King (1864).[37] Mansel (1875) [38] considered the principal sources of Gnosticism to be Platonism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism.[39]

17. Ptolemy, in *Letter to Flora*: "External physical fasting is observed even among our followers, for it can be of some benefit to the soul if it is engaged in with reason (*logos*), whenever it is done neither by way of limiting others, nor out of habit, nor because of the day, as if it had been specially appointed for that purpose."
18. Other names include The Absolute, *Aion teleos* (The Perfect Æon), *Bythos* (Depth or Profundity, Βυθος), *Proarkhe* (Before the Beginning, προαρχη), and *HE Arkhe* (The Beginning, ἡ ἀρχή).
19. The relevant passage of *The Republic* was found within the Nag Hammadi library,[54] wherein a text existed describing the demiurge as a "lion-faced serpent".[43]
20. The term *dēmiourgos* occurs in a number of other religious and philosophical systems, most notably Platonism. The gnostic demiurge bears resemblance to figures in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic*. In *Timaeus*, the *demiourgós* is a central figure, a benevolent creator of the universe who works to make the universe as benevolent as the limitations of matter will allow. In *The Republic* the description of the leontomorphic "desire" in Socrates' model of the psyche bears a resemblance to descriptions of the demiurge as being in the shape of the lion.[note 19]
21. According to Earl Doherty, a prominent proponent of the Christ myth theory, the Q-authors may have regarded themselves as "spokespersons for the Wisdom of God*, with Jesus being the embodiment of this Wisdom. In time, the gospel-narrative of this embodiment of Wisdom became interpreted as the literal history of the life of Jesus*.[64]
22. The existence of Jesus is explored in other Wikipedia articles, such as: Christ myth theory, Historicity of Jesus, Sources for the historicity of Jesus, Historical Jesus, Quest for the historical Jesus
23. The doctrine of the "triple-powered one" found in the text Allogenes, as discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library, is "the same doctrine as found in the anonymous Parmenides commentary (Fragment XIV) ascribed by Hadot to Porphyry [...] and is also found in Plotinus' Ennead 6.7, 17, 13–26."[31]
24. Quotes:
    * Elaine Pagels: "Valentinian gnosticism [...] differs essentially from dualism";[106]
    * Schoedel: "a standard element in the interpretation of Valentinianism and similar forms of Gnosticism is the recognition that they are fundamentally monistic".[107]
25. Irenaeus describes how the Valentinians claim to find evidence in Ephesians for their characteristic belief in the existence of the Æons as supernatural beings: "Paul also, they affirm, very clearly and frequently names these Æons, and even goes so far as to preserve their order, when he says, "To all the generations of the Æons of the Æon." (Ephesians 3:21) Nay, we ourselves, when at the giving of thanks we pronounce the words, 'To Æons of Æons' (for ever and ever), do set forth these Æons. And, in fine, wherever the words Æon or Æons occur, they at once refer them to these beings." *On the Detection and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So Called* Book 1. Ch.3
26. The texts commonly attributed to the Thomasine Traditions are:
    - *The Hymn of the Pearl*, or, the *Hymn of Jude Thomas the Apostle in the Country of Indians*
    - *The Gospel of Thomas*
    - *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
    - *The Acts of Thomas*
    - *The Book of Thomas: The Contender Writing to the Perfect*
    - *The Psalms of Thomas*
    - *The Apocalypse of Thomas*
27. Encyclopædia Britannica: "In Marcion's own view, therefore, the founding of his church—to which he was first driven by opposition – amounts to a reformation of Christendom through a return to the gospel of Christ and to Paul; nothing was to be accepted beyond that. This of itself shows that it is a mistake to reckon Marcion among the Gnostics. A dualist he certainly was, but he was not a Gnostic".
28. Where Augustine was a member of the school from 373–382.[122][123]
29. Joseph Dan: "The first kabbalistic text with a known author that reached us is a brief treatise, a commentary on the Sefer Yezira written by Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham the Blind, in Provence near the turn of the Thirteenth Century.[138]
30. This understanding of the transmission of Gnostic ideas, despite Irenaeus' certain antagonistic bias, is often utilized today, though it has been criticized.
31. Sometimes popularly known as the *Gnostic Gospels* after Elaine Pagels' 1979 book of the same name, but the term has a wider meaning

32. According to Layton, "the lack of uniformity in ancient Christian scripture in the early period is very striking, and it points to the substantial diversity within the Christian religion."[154]
33. Markschies: "something was being called "gnosticism" that the ancient theologians had called 'gnosis' ... [A] concept of gnosis had been created by Messina that was almost unusable in a historical sense."[167]

Subnotes

1. perseus.tufts.edu, LSJ entry: **γνωστ-ικός, ή, όν,** A. of or for knowing, cognitive: ἡ -κή (sc. ἐπιστήμη), theoretical science (opp. πρακτική), Pl.Plt.258e, etc.; τὸ γ. ib.261b; "ἕξεις γ." Arist.AP0.100a11 (Comp.); "γ. εἰκόνες" Hierocl.in CA25p.475M.: c. gen., able to discern, Ocell. 2.7. Adv. "-κῶς" Procl.Inst.39, Dam.Pr.79, Phlp.in Ph.241.22.[web 1]
2. Williams: "On the other hand, the one group whom Irenaeus does explicitly mention as users of this self-designation, the followers of the Second Century teacher Marcellina, are not included in Layton's anthology at all, on the grounds that their doctrines are not similar to those of the "classic" gnostics. As we have seen, Epiphanius is one of the witnesses for the existence of a special sect called 'the gnostics', and yet Epiphanius himself seems to distinguish between these people and 'the Sethians' (Pan 40.7.5), whereas Layton treats them as both under the 'classic gnostic' category."[7]

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8. Dunderberg 2008, p. 16.
9. Pearson 2004, p. 210.
10. Stephen Charles Haar *Simon Magus: the first gnostic?* p. 231
11. Dominic J. Unger, John J. Dillon, 1992. *St. Irenaeus of Lyons Against the heresies*, Vol.1 p. 3. Quote: "the final phrase of the title 'knowledge falsely so-called' is found in 1 Timothy 6:20."
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