



## Gnosticism

Albert Stöckl

Contemporary accounts inform us that Gnosticism had its rise in the question: What is the origin of evil? It was natural that such a question should occur to thinking minds at that period. The circumstances of the time suggested it. According to contemporary records, the religious and moral degeneracy of the age had become appalling. The deification of vice had been fatal to morality. The Christians had been subjected to fierce and cruel persecution both from Jews and pagans, and were the objects of general contempt. The sight of all the evil which surrounded them must have suggested to many of them to ask, whence this evil came, and urged them to seek a solution of the problem.

But this question, by itself, was not enough to account for the origin of Gnosticism. For the question as to the origin of evil had already been answered by Christianity; and to have the problem solved it was only necessary to appeal to positive Christian teaching. The chief cause to which the rise of Gnosticism was attributable lay in the fact that the Gnostics, as well in the question of the origin of evil as in those which regarded the nature of God's relation to the world, the nature of man, and other questions were not content with the positive doctrines of Christianity as expounded by the Church, but sought a solution of these problems in non-Christian philosophy, outside the region of revelation. They did not, however, for this, separate themselves from Christianity. The result could only be the introduction into the Christian teaching of notions borrowed from the non-Christian philosophy, and the attempt to adapt the doctrine of Christianity to these preconceived philosophical opinions.

That this result actually occurred is shown both by the method which the Gnostics adopted in the exposition and development of their doctrines, and by their peculiar conception of the Gnosis. With regard to their method, St. Irenaeus tells us that with them, reason, that is to say, their preconceived philosophical opinions, was the standard and criterion of all truth; that to meet the requirements of their system, they carried their arbitrary treatment of the Scriptures so far as to reject some parts of it altogether, and to mutilate and falsify past recognition the portions they retained. Philosophy was to them of much greater authority than the positive teaching of the Church, and consequently the portions of Scripture which established the teaching of the Church had to be put aside.

In the characteristics which they assign to their Gnosis, they follow in the footsteps of Philo. Philo had appealed in support of his opinions to a secret lore which had reached him by oral tradition; the Gnostics put forward pretensions of the same kind. Christ, they maintained, in His exoteric teaching had accommodated Himself to the views of his contemporaries; but in private He had imparted to His apostles a higher (esoteric) teaching, which constitutes the essence of Christian truth, and which, to a large extent, is contradictory of the exoteric doctrines. This teaching the apostles had promulgated among the initiated; for the mere people the exoteric doctrines were sufficient.

The teaching of the Church is nothing more than the exoteric doctrines; it does not contain the pure truth, but only the truth as adapted to the capacity of the people, and it contains, besides, an admixture of many errors. To learn the pure and perfect truth, we must seek it in that secret lore, acquaintance with which is the true Gnosis. The faith of the Church is merely a grade of knowledge. The Gnostics claimed to be alone in the possession of the true and genuine Gnosis which they endeavoured to expound in their works — hence the name Gnosticism. The

Fathers of the Church, on the other hand, described this Gnosis as false and delusive, and on this ground set themselves to combat it.

On the lines we have described, Gnosticism endeavoured at once to accomplish and to justify the overthrow of Christianity by the aid of non-Christian philosophy. Pursuing this design the Gnostics, in reference to the special question of the origin of evil, arrived at the gloomy dualistic notion which represents man as surrounded on all sides by hostile powers, the external world as wholly evil, matter as not created by God, spirit and body as ethically opposed to one another. The Paganism of an earlier period had deified nature; the Gnostics regarded nature as the principle of evil, and thus changed the distinction between nature and spirit into an absolute opposition.

The Gnostic systems were, as a rule, specially antagonistic to Judaism. The Church, in its explanation of the relation borne by the old dispensation to the new, asserted that the former was a preparatory dispensation, the latter the consummation for which the way had been prepared. But the Gnostics explained the relation to consist in a distinct opposition of the one dispensation to the other. They held that the older dispensation was under the control of a principle which was not only distinct from the supreme God who had revealed Himself in Christianity, but (in greater or less degree), opposed and even hostile to that God. The ethical dualism which they had set up in the sphere of being, they here endeavoured to introduce into history, and the contrast which they found to exist between the external and rigid character of the Jewish law and the internal gracious Christian dispensation gave encouragement to the attempt.

The sources from which our knowledge of Gnosticism is drawn, apart from the Gnostic work, *Pistis Sophia* (Berlin, 1851), and a few fragments, are the writings of the opponents of Gnosticism; notably, Irenaeus (*adv. Haereses*), the Pseudo Origen (Hippolytus), as well as the writings of Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Theodoretus and Augustine. We may add to these the treatise of the Neo-Platonist Plotinus against the Gnostics.....

## **The Several Gnostic Systems.**

The earliest Gnostic teachings are ascribed by Irenaeus to Simon Magus, to his pupil Menander, and to Cerinthus, the last of whom St. John the Evangelist had it in his mind to refute, when he wrote his Gospel. Cerinthus is said to have taught that the world was not made by God, but by an inferior power which had no knowledge of the true God. The true God caused the Aeon Christ to descend upon Jesus the Son of Joseph and Mary, at his baptism, fitting Him thereby to preach the unknown Father, and to work miracles. This AEon separated himself from Jesus before the death of the latter, and had no share in His sufferings.

But the chief representatives of Gnosticism were Saturninus, Valentinus, Carpocrates, and Marcion, with a few others of less note. In the teaching of these Gnostics, more especially of those first mentioned, the conceptions of the thinkers are so shrouded in a cloud of fantastic conceits, that it is difficult to penetrate these extravagances of a deranged imagination, and discern the rational thought which underlies them. We must, however, try to find a path through their labyrinth of fantastic trifles.

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Albert Stöckl. *Handbook of the History of Philosophy. (Part 1: Pre-Scholastic Philosophy)*. Trans. T.A. Finlay. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1887.

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