

The Gnostic Challenge to Christianity -- Part 1

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Photo date and location unknown

Beginning in the first century and expanding greatly in the second, a fusion of Eastern religions and Christianity known as Gnosticism attracted so many people that it is thought that most who claimed to be Christians adhered to Gnosticism in one form or another. Gnosticism is a very general term for a variety of popular practices and systems of thought that eventually was declared to be heretical by Christian councils in the fourth century.

Gnostic components included Orphic and Platonic dualism, Syrian thought, Persian dualism, mystery cults, Mesopotamian astrology, and Egyptian religions. Scholars cannot agree on the precise origins of Gnosticism, although it is known that even before the Christian era, elements of Judaism were incorporated into the general syncretic (fusing) process of the Hellenistic culture.

The origin of the term Gnosticism comes from the Greek word "gnosis," literally, knowledge. However, this knowledge was not a philosophy that issued from man's striving, but meant two things: a revealed knowledge transmitted to the initiated elite, and a mystical vision of the truth.

These two meanings of "gnosis" resulted in elaborate sets of rituals and ceremonies designed to aid the

soul in escaping the material world of darkness and ascend to the light. Gnostic philosophical systems were derived from the rituals and ceremonies in order to satisfy the intellectuals.

Basic concepts common to many versions of Gnosticism include: Spirit is good and matter is evil. Salvation is freeing the spirit from matter. Only "gnosis" can liberate the possessor, giving the soul the secret incantations necessary to overcome many powers opposing the final freeing of the soul from matter. God is without personality and known only as the "First Principle" or the "Unknowable," considered by some to have nothing whatever in common with man.

There are supposed to be descending orders of spiritual beings (some say 365 orders), the lowest of which was responsible for the creation of the world and man. This lowest power, sometimes called the "Demiurge" or the "Old Testament god," is only just, compared to the "Unknowable," who is good. Jesus Christ was an appearance of one of the highest of the spiritual orders, who never had anything to do with the evil flesh. God sent him to free a few select men from the material world by deceiving the "Demiurge." Most Gnostics did not believe that Jesus really suffered on the cross, but someone took his place. The chief emphasis of Gnosticism is redemption, but by this they mean deliverance from the material world. The orthodox view of redemption, by contrast, means being saved from sin. The ethical result of Gnosticism, for the most part, meant asceticism, even to the extreme of abstaining from food and marriage.

Gnostic doctrines were taken from oral Christian traditions and various gospels and epistles which were later declared non-canonical and do not appear in the New Testament. Gnosticism was characterized by extreme diversity of sects. Two men were outstanding leaders: Basildes and Valentinus. Some also consider Marcion and Mani as part of the Gnostic tradition.

(To be continued)