

Gnostic Teachings and Gnostic Christianity

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Up until the mid-twentieth century, religious scholars were aware of Gnostic teachings and Gnostic Christianity, only by way of the writings of their opponents, the early church fathers. But in December of 1945, near the village of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, an Arab peasant discovered a sealed ceramic jar buried near a cave containing fifty-two ancient papyrus texts.



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These ancient texts, containing literature now associated with Gnostic teachings and Gnostic Christianity, have since become known as the 'Nag Hammadi Library'. The location where the ceramic jar was unearthed, happens to be situated near the site of an ancient Pachomian monastery.

Saint Pachomius was an ascetic Christian monk who established the monastery sometime around the year 325 CE. Even though Christianity had only been officially sanctioned by the Roman emperor Constantine since 313 CE, the underground faith had flourished in Egypt since the first century.

Historians believe that the papyrus texts were a part of the monastery's library and that they were buried sometime in the mid-fourth century. This date corresponds closely with the 348 CE death date of Pachomius. The texts were actually fairly diverse, stemming from various religious and esoteric traditions. Scholars now believe that they were buried either as a way to preserve them from possible destruction by the Roman church, or they were buried along with Pachomius at the time of his death, or both.



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If they were buried as a part of Pachomius' funerary procedures, it would suggest a uniquely Egyptian reflex to his death. Over the course of the preceding two thousand years, the ancient Egyptian religion had reigned supreme. One important precept of Egyptian culture was that by burying certain prized material possessions along with the deceased, those objects would become available to that soul in the afterlife.

This phenomenon of fusing various aspects of distinct mythological, ideological, and religious doctrines together is a common feature to the development of new religious strains, especially in this part of the world and at this time in history. What we today call Gnostic teachings and Gnostic Christianity, is actually a fusion of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Neoplatonism and Pythagorean philosophy.

Gnostic teachings may also have been influenced by concepts borrowed from Indian philosophy. One of the church fathers, the 'heresy hunter' Hippolytus, when attacking Gnostic teachings, was quick to draw a parallel to Indian thought.

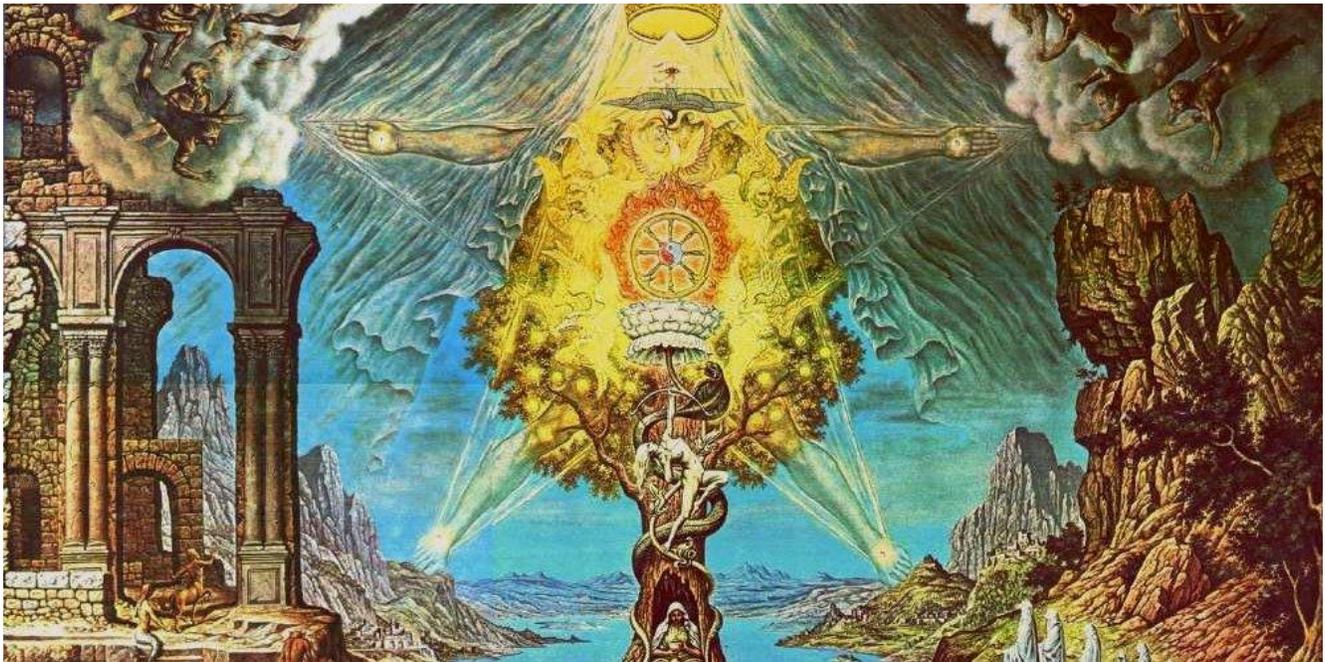
"There is among the Indians a heresy of those who philosophize among the Brahmins, who live a self-sufficient life, abstaining from eating living creatures and all cooked food. They say that God is Light, not like the light one sees, nor like the sun or fire, but to them God is Discourse (sound), not that which finds expression in articulate sounds, but that of knowledge, or gnosis, through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise."

Gnostic teachings show a remarkable similarity to Indian themes, including its cosmology, the process of mystical ascent, and in some cases, ethics. The Greek word, 'gnosis', means the same as the

Sanskrit word, 'jnana', or knowledge, and there are some interesting correlations between Gnosticism and the practice of Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge.

Do the Gnostic Teachings Constitute a Religion?

The Nag Hammadi library was just that; a library. It was not a canonical collection of scriptural texts for a distinct Gnostic religion or for Gnostic Christianity. Each one of the unearthed fifty-two documents originated from a particular ideological source. The content of most of them did relate directly to Gnostic belief and thought, but many others were only indirectly related, such as writings influenced by Greek and Zoroastrian philosophy. But either way, the content of this library demonstrates a body of literature that was deemed important to these fourth century Gnostic Christian monks.



Do the Gnostic teachings constitute a religion? Ninian Smart, a renowned twentieth century scholar, and author of over seventy books on world religion, would say that it does. According to Smart, religion is a seven-dimensional organism, which includes:

1. Doctrines
2. Myths
3. Ethical teachings
4. Rituals
5. Social institutions
6. Religious experience
7. Material objects, such as art, texts, and places of worship

Gnostic teachings appear to check off all of Smart's boxes.

The Origins of Gnostic Teachings

The term 'Gnosticism' was a theoretical construct adopted by scholars in the eighteenth century to describe a spiritual movement that embraced the concept of 'gnosis', or knowing. This knowing referred particularly to the importance of direct mystical experience of the power of God, as opposed

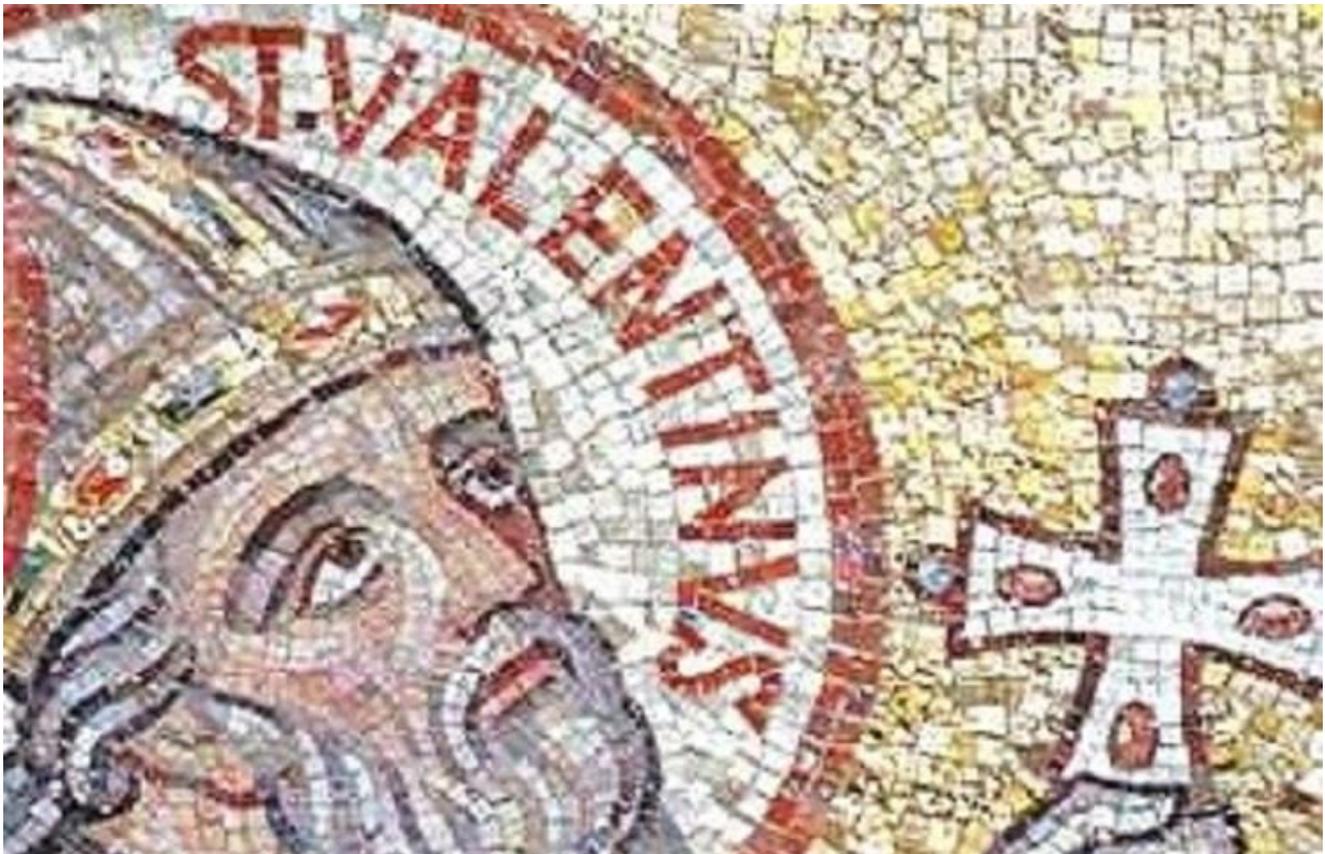
to the emphasis on beliefs and an institutionalized creed, both essential components of Christianity as espoused by the Roman church.

Some have disagreed with attaching the suffix 'ism' to gnostic, because it suggests that Gnosticism comprised a coherent set of religious doctrines, which was not the case. However, since the time of Plato, and even as early as Pythagoras, Greek philosophers had embraced the empirical doctrine of gnosis, and had even referred to themselves as 'Gnostics'.

These early Egyptian Christians also referred to themselves as Gnostics, as did the early Christian fathers who wrote about them. These writers included Irenaeus, considered the original church father. Irenaeus was a loud, fervent opponent of Gnostic teachings. Irenaeus felt that the Gnostic Christian movement threatened to undermine the authority and principles of the Roman church.

The Demise of Gnostic Christianity

Many of the Nag Hammadi documents have a Christian theme, so it is clear that by the middle of the first century, Gnostics had embraced Jesus and recognized his spiritual mission and role as the emissary of God on earth. Some religious scholars would like to associate Gnosticism exclusively with Christianity, but it appears clear from the Nag Hammadi writings that Gnosticism predated Christianity.



Despite the fact that Irenaeus was born in 130 CE, and lived and wrote throughout the second century, two hundred years before Rome officially adopted Christianity, he was instrumental in defeating the Gnostic movement. The principal leader targeted by Irenaeus was a great Christian mystic by the name of Valentinus. While there have been a number of spiritual leaders associated

with Gnostic teachings during the early centuries of Christianity, Valentinus stands out as being the one most instrumental in the development of Gnostic Christianity.

Valentinus was born in the year 100 CE, thirty years prior to the birth of Irenaeus, making them contemporaries. During the first century, and early second century, the 'Jesus movement' was comprised of many distinct strains, with differing, and often conflicting religious concepts. Valentinus, who was an Egyptian, embraced the Gnostic principles of direct communion with, and knowledge of the power of God.

About the time of Irenaeus' birth, Valentinus relocated to Rome and lobbied to be selected as the Bishop of Rome. When he was rebuffed by his fellow Christian elders, he returned to Egypt and concentrated his efforts in developing his own version of mystical Christianity, based on Gnostic teachings. His work established a novel Gnostic tradition, referred to as the 'School of Valentinus'.

Valentinus met with substantial resistance and contempt from his Roman counterparts. Eventually, the younger Irenaeus played a principal role in having Valentinus excommunicated and designated a heretic. From that point forward, the Roman church waged an ideological war on Gnostic teachings, burning manuscripts and disassociating the church from anything and anyone associated with Gnosticism and Gnostic ideas.

This ideological war lasted for 150 years, up to the time when Constantine adopted Christianity as Rome's official state religion. Once the Roman church had clearly defined the tenets of the Christian faith, every other version of Christianity was systematically purged. Timewise, the adoption of Christianity by Rome correlates with the date that scholars believe the Nag Hammadi library was buried for safe-keeping.

The Gnostic Christian Teachings

One recurring storyline contained within the unearthed manuscripts is what has become known as the 'Gnostic myth'. The Gnostic myth contains characters and story elements which are borrowed from Judaism and the Old Testament, with some New Testament characters thrown in.

Within these fifty-two manuscripts we find numerous versions of this myth, written by different authors at different times. Some apparently predate the Christian era, while others were written after Jesus' ministry. While they all are distinct, containing contrasting characters and storylines, they also contain certain themes which are, more or less, common to all.

The Gnostics believed that the world, and the creation of the world, reflected an evil manifestation. The physical world produced a magnetic pull on the soul, attracting a person to the physical life and attachment to physical things, thereby impeding spiritual growth. By attaching ourselves to the outside, the quest for inner spiritual knowledge and for the development of the soul, is neglected. This is the Gnostic 'original sin'.

The Gnostic movement was itself very diverse, with different groups having their own unique ideas and practices. But underlying all of these various sects was a common aspiration; the pursuit of gnosis. The reference here is not to intellectual knowledge, but knowledge of, and direct experience with the divine.

It also includes knowledge of special techniques and practices, including passwords which would allow the soul to become purified as it ascended the various spiritual realms toward the ultimate Father, God. These passwords took the form of unintelligible utterances, which linked various vowel sounds together. They were not unlike the utterances made by Buddhist monks while chanting.

According to the Gnostics, the common denominator of reality is an unknown, nameless God, who is unchanging and immeasurable. In one text, The Apocryphon of John, this Godhead is referred to as “the invisible one who is above everything; the unnamable, since there is no one prior to him to give him a name, and the ineffable one, beyond the aspects of quantity and quality”.

The sleeping spirit is awakened by the Divine Man (Jesus), the Redeemer who takes human form. He descends from the higher spiritual realms to reveal divine secrets and lead souls back to their true home. Some Gnostics, followers of a leader named Mani, believed that the Divine Man incarnates in different human forms throughout history in order to awaken people of different ethnicities, at different times and places. Several Gnostic sects believed that the human soul continues to reincarnate until union with the Divine is realized.

Traditionally, the most ascetic groups practiced continence. Continence was a universally recognized term which meant that a person abstained from wine, meat, and sex. The School of Valentinus relaxed some of the more rigid practices of their predecessors, allowing for sex in raising families, while maintaining the restrictions on wine and meat consumption.

The Gospel of Truth and Other Christian Texts

The Nag Hammadi library includes a number of precious Christian writings, including the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 short sayings, uttered by Jesus during his ministry. Many scholars believe that it is one of the first, if not the very first gospel to have been put onto papyrus. These same scholars also believe that it was used as a source document (or ‘Q’) by the authors of the four New Testament gospels.

Several of the sayings do compare closely with passages out of the New Testament. For example:

“Jesus said; ‘Look, the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered (them). Some fell on the road, and the birds came and gathered them. Others fell on rock, and they didn't take root in the soil and didn't produce heads of grain. Others fell on thorns, and they choked the seeds, and worms ate them. And others fell on good soil, and produced a good crop: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure’.”

The library also includes a collection of narratives dealing with the life of Jesus. These narratives contrast with the New Testament gospels, in that they are clearly fictional in nature, whereas the four canonical gospels were written as historical accounts.

Another interesting writing is the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. This book was in poor, fragmentary condition when unearthed, and incomplete. However, it has a mystical quality to it. In it, Jesus has a dialog with Mary where she testifies to the Master regarding an inner revelation of seeing and speaking to Jesus on the inner spiritual planes, during an out-of-body experience.

Perhaps the most eloquently written manuscript in the library is Valentinus' Gospel of Truth. This gospel is believed to have originally been a sermon written by Valentinus, which was preserved and copied by his disciples. It is a beautifully written work which describes many of the mystical elements embraced by the Gnostics. These elements make reference to mystical experiences involving seeing divine light, hearing divine melodies, and perceiving divine fragrances.

“Do the will of the Father, then, for you are from him. For the Father is sweet and his will is good...For by the fruits one knows the things that are yours, that they are the children of the Father, and one knows his aroma, that you originate from the grace of his countenance. For this reason, the Father loved his aroma; and it manifests itself in every place; and when it is mixed with matter, he gives his

aroma to the light; and into his rest he causes it to ascend in every form and in every sound. For there are no nostrils which smell the aroma, but it is the Spirit which possesses the sense of smell, and it draws it for itself, to itself, and sinks into the aroma of the Father.”

Here, Valentinus describes the phenomenon of experiencing divine fragrance. He states that it is not the physical nostrils that perceive the fragrance, but rather the Spirit which experiences the aroma directly. Some scholars have concluded that this is another example of a doctrine being borrowed from Hindu culture. Divine fragrance is written about by various Indian saints, referred to as 'Amrit'.

However, the phenomenon of divine fragrance is not a theoretical tenet, but rather a universal experience shared by mystics of all times and climes, on their path of inner transcendence toward God Realization.