

LECTURE 3

CHRISTIAN HERESIES - INTRODUCTION

Christians can argue about the propositions of their religion, in complete disagreement with each other--every person, every group tending to think they are right and everyone else wrong. This has happened from the very beginning. Somehow, Christianity has survived despite all distortions and divisions, as a recognizable world religion.

If Christianity were to survive as a religious vehicle for humankind, some kind of 'ORTHODOXY' was essential. Since no general theory of behaviour or doctrine was provided, it is amazing that by the early 2nd cent. CE a set of doctrines and rules had been formed which were understandable to a wide variety of nations and peoples. The so-called "Great Church" was recognized to be either followed or attacked.

Bishop Ignatius in the first century was the first to use the term "heretic" and it was against those who seemed to him to be confusing the true understanding of Christ. It was not until the great controversies of the 4th century that the derogatory meaning was fully fixed.

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FIRST DIVERGENCES

The most difficult question was (and always would be) who was this teacher, this Jesus of Nazareth? What manner of being was he? There were conflicting answers from the very first.

This question is at the root of almost all the great heresies and any answer provokes more questions.

JEWISH VS. GENTILE CHRISTIANS

The first believers were, of course, Jews and they continued worshiping in the Temple, and obeying the law. The first major controversy came over whether Gentile converts to Christianity must also keep the law.

The Council of Jerusalem about 49 CE was over this issue. Paul was told to continue converting gentiles and they did not have to be circumcized. However, not all Jews agreed and they continued to cause problems. These Judaizing Christians became less important in the early church after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE but emerged as a sect, the EBIONITES, mainly in Arabia and were still in existence in the 4th century.

THE EBIONITES (the 'poor ones') thought of Jesus as the Messiah, but rejected the belief in his divine nature. They only accepted the Gospel of Matthew but had to reconcile the God ordained status of a Messiah and the amazing deeds attributed to Jesus in this Gospel.

Some argued that the Spirit of Christ" came to Jesus at his baptism and left him at the crucifixion, when he died as an ordinary man. This idea was to appear later in many forms, not only in 'hereitical' doctrines, but in the theological controversies among Churchmen.

DOCETISM - is a heretical 'tendency' that was to appear in many schools of thought. It is found in all systems which regard Christ primarily as a symbol, or as a mythological explanation of

man's relation to divinity. St. John's epistles, as well as the gospel. give warnings against those holding Docetic ideas :

For many deceivers have entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist."(2 John 7)

From the first there were 2 opposing ideas: first, Jesus, a man, although a great and divinely inspired one nad second: Christ, the pure Spirit of God, untrammled by humanity. So, who was he?

For the Jews, the understanding of the unity of God had to be reconciled with a belief in the Incarnation.

For the Greeks, whose philosophy (Plato) brought them to the idea of one eternal principle underlying everything the idea of pure spirit being connected with material creation was nonsense.

To the initiates of the Mystery religions or the cults of the dying/rising god, Christian beliefs had to be defined and understood by all these questioners.

Paul's writings were the first ~~to be circulated~~ in the early church and the 2 events he dwelt upon was the death and resurrection of Jesus and the spiritual and cosmological meaning behind these events. He was the first Christian theologian.

The four canonical gospels appeared during the last 2 decades of the 1st cent. They were accepted as self-authenticating, tho many other gospels were being and would be written. By 185 the Muratorian canon, pretty much what we have today in the New Testament was accepted.

GNOSTICISM

Until the discovery of the gnostic texts hidden at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the only thing we had concerning the gnostics were the writings of Ireneus "Against Heresies" from the end of the 2nd century. These ^{Nag Hammadi} texts had been translated into Coptic and evidently buried to keep them from the 'orthodox' christians who were destroying them in the 4th and/or 5th century.

Where did their Ideas come from? This is unknown, but many of their ideas are influenced by Plato, who was influenced by the Indian ideas of the one eternal principle, reincarnation, and the need to realize ones own divinity.

Gnosticism in its widest sense means the belief in salvation by knowledge---that is, by comprehension of the nature of reality. To the gnostic, this meant comprehension of the soul's origin, its predicament in this world and the way out of the predicament. This knowledge was not intellectual but experiential. (intuitive)

Nowhere is there a 'pure' form of gnosticism; it is always built on earlier, pre-existing religions or their traditions. The so called "new age" leaders have done the same in our own time. The gnostics held that revealed truth was witnessed in many religions and that people who knew the truth would know the same truth.

CORPUS HERMETICA. In the centuries just before and following the Christian era a body of literature was current in Egypt -the corpus hermetica. The oldest, the Poimandres, and others written in Greek were circulating in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and all

have the same outlook and religious basis with many ideas in the hermetic literature similar to Gnostic themes.

In the Hermetica, there is one god who is good and demands no service but virtue. Salvation can only be through knowledge, but this knowledge is knowledge of God, not about him. To know Him is to be like Him. AS ABOVE, SO BELOW is an axiom.

Hermetic explanations of creation and the human soul are found in many forms of gnosticism. Primal Being (Mind, Light) created the Universe and the archetypal man in His own image. The planets rule humans but one can ascend thru the 7 spheres to heaven. Knowledge is the key that unlocks the gates.

Ignorance of God is the greatest evil among humans. Hermetic literature was not Christian but it had great influence on all the mystic and gnostic schools connected with early Xianity

VALENTINIAN Gnostics

The problem of evil is one of the most fundamental questions in all religious systems. The question is: If there is an all powerful and perfect Being, the originator of all things, how did error and misfortune enter into the Universe?

Part of the knowledge which gave the Gnostics their name was the knowledge of this mystery of good and evil. They claimed that somebody had this knowledge and would give it to those human minds which could receive it, but only in the form of myth. Even the church fathers who attacked them accepted a meaning lay beneath these myths. They treated most Gnostic schools as Christian, but as misguided and therefore harmful.

VALENTINIUS (teaching around 137 CE)

Probably the greatest of the 2nd cent. gnostics, he established schools in Egypt and Cyprus (still flourishing in the 4th cent.), then moved to Rome. He probably is connected with the "Gospel of Truth" found at Nag Hammadi.

He thought of himself as a Christian and his aim was to formulate a Christian Philosophy that would make Christian ideas intellectually acceptable to the Hellenized society of Egypt and Rome.

The Fall, unlike the story of Adam and Eve, took place BEFORE the creation of the world. In Valentinius system the Pre-beginning was termed Bythos--the depth, boundless and unqualified. Together with Bythos, Thought (the female principle) also called Grace or Silence--produced Mind and Truth; and these four principles or Powers are the root of all.

From these came the AEONS, in male/female pairs, the 30th was Sophia, the desire for wisdom. It was the error of Sophia that brought about the fall and made our Universe.

Sophia fails to understand her limits and strives to return to the Father of All. She can't, is prevented by Horus, and in her grief gives birth to Ildebaoth, the shapeless one, from whom came our material world. The idea of this myth is that trapped in matter there are sparks of the eternal, spiritual light.

Irenaeus' repudiated this dualism because the Hebrew scripture says God saw everything he had made and it was Good. It is in how the gnostics understood the conception of a Creator God that they departed most clearly from 'orthodoxy.'

The Gnostics often equated the God of the Old Testament with the creator of our material world.--a lesser power than the Father of All. The Creator God (for Valentinius) was limited by ignorance. Other Gnostic sects had him malicious.

All Gnostic systems made a distinction between the unknown and the unknowable beginning and the lesser Power who was responsible for the material world.

Valentinius used Plato's ideas of emanations believing the Father of All contained all within Himself and produced emanations, who produced more emanations spreading ever further from the source. The further away from the original source, the more "ignorance of the Father brought terror and fear, so came error and made forgetfulness." This was the Gnostic answer to the question of how error entered the Universe.

Thus the aim of the Gnostic, "those who know" was for the spark of the divine to return to its source, and the aim of gnostic teaching was to show how to achieve this. thus the Valentinian definition of Gnosis is "The redemption of the inner spiritual man."

Self-knowledge is the key; "He is a Gnostic because he knows by revelation who his true self is"

Valentinius believed there were only certain people who could even come to this knowledge. This became the view of almost all gnostic groups. Basically, humans were in three categories:

HYLIKOS (choics)- these were those who were carnal, fleshy and had no hope of salvation. They simply could not understand.

PSYCHIKOS- were those who were 'soulish', they were mired in this world but with work they MIGHT come to the knowledge which could bring salvation.

PNEUMATIKOS means the spiritual, these were the persons who could be saved thru knowledge, in fact, are saved, all they have to do is wake up and realize it.

Today the idea of different levels of humanity would be anathema but in the first centuries it was not this that made the doctrine heretical, but the implicit denial of Free Will contained in it. It implied predestination. The existence of a pre-ordained elect was a central tenet of Gnosticism.

Strangely, St. Augustine (and later John Calvin) was stronger in his ideas on predestination than gnostics ever were.

HEAVENLY REVEALOR For Valentinus and most other gnostic systems, a heavenly revealer had come to enlighten and deliver the immortal part of humans, and to save them from being cast back into the sinful world after bodily death. From what we know of their writings, the gnostics seem to have believed in cycles of rebirth.

Salvation thru a Redeemer, who came to earth and found his way back to the Father of All, on order to show the way, was the center of Valentinus Gnosticism. This redeemer/revealer was Jesus. "He became a Way, a Gnosis, a Discoverey and a Confirmation" (gos. of 'Truth')

This "Aeon", Jesus, the summary of all the perfections of the God-head, descended into the womb of the Virgin and thus

entered into the earthly Christos. Thus Jesus had two persons-- the psychic Christ, appearing as a man, and the in-dwelling Jesus, known only to the true Gnostic. At death he divested Himself of these perishable rags, He clothed himself in imperishability." (Gos. of Truth)

It is two principles--The intrinsic evil of Matter and the mystical, as against the historical, conception of Christ which caused Gnosticism to be considered by the Church as heretical, and dangerously so. The problem is that the 'orthodox' teaching has never been completely clear on either point.

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THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

This was probably the most important book found at Nag Hammadi for it is the most complete apocryphal gospel we have. It is written in Coptic and dates from around 400 CE, but was translated from an earlier Greek version. Some scholars think it might be the oldest gospel, predating even Mark.

It resembles the source hypothesised for the synoptics called Q, which was a sayings collection. However, it has been "gnosticized" and is called "the Secret Sayings of Jesus" by the gnostics. It begins: "These are the secret words which Jesus, the Living, spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote. He who will find the interpretation of these words will not taste death."

The only canonical gospel to name Didymus Judas Thomas is John and, given the way John's gospel handles Thomas "the doubter," it is very possible that John knew This gospel and used

his to refute the teachings found in it. There are many passages from John's gospel which contradicted very distinctly the Thomas tradition. for example:

Thomas says: Whoever has ears, let him hear. There is light within a man of light, and he lights up the whole world."

John's gospel: "I am the light of the world, he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (8) John 3:16 is a very distinct anti-gnostic statement: He who BELIEVES in him should not perish but have everlasting life. This in opposition to He who KNOWS will have salvation.

Bishop Hippolytus in the 3rd century says Thomas was used by the Naassenes, a 2nd century Gnostic sect, whose doctrines were closely related to the Gospel of Thomas. They revered the snake as a symbol of wisdom, which they may have identified with Christ

Like all other gnostics, they believed humanity was made up of three types of people. They also believed there were three types of "churches" "The Elect" who were the gnostics, "the called" which was probably the regular Christian churches of the time, and "the captive" which was everyone else.

The main theme of Thomas is that true religious experience is the recognition of one's own identity. "When you know yourselves, then you will be known; and you will know that you are the sons of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you are in poverty and you are poverty."

They believed that the Canonical gospels, as read in the churches, were merely "psychic teaching" and should be

interpreted by those who knew the secret tradition. The Gospel of Thomas was such an interpretation.

Thomas, like all other gnostic writings, considered that the inner meaning of Jesus sayings were alone important. The kingdom of Heaven is not a future event but a state within humans, selfknowledge.

Thus, there is no mention of a Resurrection (or crucifixion, for that matter) and the idea of resurrection is given in purely spiritual terms: "Come into being as you pass away." Human existence is not true being and is only achieved when it is transcended. Knowledge of where a person comes from, who one is and where one is going is the kernel of Gnosticism.

MARCIONITES

Even in Paul's writings, people are taking the name of different teachers and Paul is arguing against this (I cor 1,12). In post-apostolic times, divergences were growing greater. Marcion was one of these teachers. What we know of Him comes from Ireneus "against Heresies".

the Marcionites formed a church which they claimed to be universal based on the authentic institution of Christ. While the Gnostics taught the true knowledge that would restore one to the origin, with Christianity only one of the ways to do so, Marcionites considered themselves to be the only true Christians, and their aim was to preach pure Christianity, which alone could bring salvation. This was a simple, ascetic form of Christianity.

Marcion lived between 130 and 180 CE and his system incorporated some gnostic ideas, which he had studied. The idea of Dualism, matter was hostile to the Good. He believed the creator god, the demiurge, was limited and evil; and his material creation was thus evil.. The Old Testament God was this creator.

It was the true Father of Light who is the father of Jesus and whom the demiurge caused to be crucified. The supreme God was clothed in the phantom body of a man of 33 and was a purely spiritual being, not subject to birth and death.

The "Risen Christ" charged the Demiurge with acting against his own Law. And so, to make amends, the Demiurge had to deliver to the Good God the souls of the redeemed who had died. To draw the living to Himself, the "good god" raised up Paul, who was the only one who understood the doctrine of the God of Love and the God of Law (demiurge).

Marcion held that only Paul knew and kept the true traditions of Christ. Thus Marcion took as his scriptures The Gospel of Truth, Paul's letters, and Luke's Gospel (which he believed Paul had written) and anything found at variance with their concept of Christian teaching the attributed to falsifications introduced by the 'judaizers' and by apostles opposed to Paul.

Because matter is evil, they practiced a strict asceticism. The "Perfect" were those who were baptized and had to remain celibate thenceforward. The Ordinary believer could lead a normal, married life and was baptized only at the time of death.

They believed that only faith in God's love was needed for salvation, humanity having been freed from the legislation of the Old Testament God. This emphasis attracted increasing numbers of converts into their community. Marcionite communities spread rapidly, and in some places outnumbered the "Great Church". However, by the end of the 3rd century it had either died out or been engulfed by other sects.

It is primarily the great numbers of the Marcionites and the size of their church that makes the heresy important. Oversimplification and other illogical things caused them to break into factions. Tertullian writing in the 3rd century says: "Marcionites make churches as wasps make nests."

Proliferation and division may well be the distinguishing marks of what constitutes a heresy.

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MURATORIAN CANON

The Great Church reacted to Marcion by gathering in 185 and deciding what should constitute the canon of scripture. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, France, was the main spokesman. The decision was made to accept the letters of Paul, the writings of others who were believed to be direct apostles to Jesus (we know now some were not), and 4 gospels believed to be written by eyewitnesses (again, we know now they were later)

Irenaeus said there should be four gospels because of the 4 directions. The fact is, they were among the earliest writings and were a 'cut above' the others around. One major criteria was that they had a passion and resurrection account, which not all

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell;
The third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy Catholic Church;
The communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting. Amen.

did. John's Gospel was 'doctored' to make it acceptable to the great church. But the New Testament pretty much as we now have it was decided in 185, even tho it was not totally ratified until the late 4th century.

As part of this same reaction to Gnostic thought and to Marcion, Apostolic succession was instituted so bishops would have control over who was ordained. By the time the 3rd century opened, there was already an established collection of 'orthodox' beliefs binding on those who considered themselves part of the Catholic church; 'catholic' was now synonymous with 'orthodox' 'Christianity. The Apostles' creed had been formulated and adherence to it was obligatory.

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MARY MAGDALENE

Although a minor character in the orthodox N. T., Mary of Magdala played a larger part in some of the gnostic writings found at Nag Hammadi in such works as the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary. She is portrayed as one of Jesus' favored disciples and perhaps his wife or lover.

She is mentioned in Luke's gospel as one from whom 7 devils had be cast out. She, and others, are mentioned as financing Jesus ministry. Mary Magdalene has been confused with 2 other Mary's, a prostitute who annointed Jesus feet and Mary the sister of Martha. However, Mary was a common name so it is unlikely.

Mary of Magdala is placed at the crucifixion and at Jesus' tomb in several gospel accounts. Both Mark and John say Jesus

appeared first to Mary of Magdala after his resurrection. The Gnostics made a great deal out of his first appearing to her. Since she was a disciple but not one of the all male 12, this made her a fitting channel for secret teachings, particularly those that showed how women as well as men could achieve salvation, or that dealt with a feminine aspect of the divine.

Some gnostic gospels show Mary Magdalene in doctrinal conflict with Simon Peter, who, as founder of the papacy in Catholic tradition, represents the voice of orthodoxy in contrast to her heterodoxy.

In the GOSPEL OF THOMAS, these two clash. Simon Peter says: Let Mary go out from us because women are not worthy of the Life." but Jesus replies, "See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

This verse, believed to be a later addition to the text, must be interpreted symbolically. Elaine Pagels in The "Gnostic Gospels" says "female" may be equated with "human" and "male" equals "divine". In other words, disciples must overcome their human natures, and for women that probably meant avoiding what another text called "the works of femaleness"--sexual intercourse and childbearing.

In the GOSPEL OF MARY Peter scoffs at Mary knowing more than the male disciples. She weeps but Levi defends her saying Jesus loved her more than us." Mary in this account has not seen Jesus in the flesh but in a vision questioned by Peter. Again,

Elaine Pagels says this distinction is crucial in reinforcing the gnostics' claim that anyone could experience the saviour directly--as Mary did--without going thru the hierarchy symbolized by Peter.

The GOSPEL OF PHILIP which some scholars ascribe to Valentinus, describes Mary as one of three women "who always walked with the Lord." and as the "companion of the Saviour" whom Christ loved more than all the disciples, thus making the men jealous.

Meanwhile, the orthodox church was circulating a text called "The Apostolic Church Order" in the 3rd century. It was attributed to Paul and puts women in a subordinate place. This says that Jesus did not offer the bread and cup to the women at the last supper, and states clearly that only men may be priests and bishops.

Mary Magdalene's special role in non-mainstream Christianity did not cease with the early Gnostics. Some legends make her Jesus's wife--the Marriage at Cana during which he turned water into sufficient wine for a large crowd is their wedding. (according to the Mormons, Jesus married three women at Cana).

This reading of her story is based on the question of how a healthy Jewish male could get to 30 without a wife and family. Mary's ambiguous character in both the canonical and gnostic gospels derives from her special status as his wife.

A related story, told in HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL, brings her from Palestine to southern France, carrying with her either the cup or dish used at the last supper, ie, the Holy Grail. In more

far reaching speculations, she brings here child (or children) fathered by Jesus, who then becomes a progenitor of the royal family of France. In that interpretation, the Holy grail becomes a metaphor for her womb, which carried the "blood of Jesus"

This interpretation makes the various Black Madonnas of Mediterranean France and Spain into a representation of her carrying Jesus's son rather than of the Virgin Mary Carrying the infant Jesus.

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GNOSTICISM TODAY

In spite of efforts to suppress and eliminate the gnostics, they still exist today. Gnostic groups of various kinds existed in the French provencis throughtout history, the best known and most numerous being the Cathers (I will deal with them when talking about dualistic heresies.)

It is interesting to note that every time the hold of the Roman church weakened on the government of France, Gnostic religious bodies emerged, usually to be suppressed soon after.

By the late 19th and early 20th century, at least one major public gnostic church, the Eglise Gnostique Universalle, was moderately active in France. The revival of a Catholic Gnostic public movement was thus accomplished.

The question is Why should occult or gnostic persons aspire to the office of bishop in the catholic sense and why practice the sacraments of the Catholic church? The answer is that although they differed from Rome and were often persecuted by her, they still regarded her as the model of ecclesiastical life.

The content of faith was different but the form of their worship was still the one that ancient and universal christendom had always practiced.

French Gnosticism established its own ecclesiastical life, following the example of Roman Catholic practice. As late as March, 1944 the head of the major gnostic religious body in France, Monsignor Constant Chevillon was cruelly executed after the kVichy collaborationist government suppressed the Gnostic Church. Still, the movement spread to Germany, Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and such french speaking countries as Haiti. This was the status untill after WW II.

The gnostic tradition, which originally had its home in France, came to be established in England and later in the United States, initially as a result of the efforts of a bishop of French descent who was rasided in Austrailia. Robert Powell took the name Richard Jean Chretien Duc de Palatine. He was the pioneer of sacramental gnosticism in both England and the U.S.

His tradition survives chiefly in the Ecclesia Gnostica, based in L.A. and headed today by Dr. Stephen A. Hoeller, who was consecrated in 1967. Other gnostic churches have sprung up in recent years in increasing numbers. Today there are vigorous and stable descendants of the French gnostic movement functioning in New York, Chicago, and Barbados. The first woman bishop rosamonde Miller, who has founded the Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum in Palo Alto California.

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CARL JUNG AND Gnosticism

Finally, much of gnosticism's present-day prestige is due to the value that Jung (1875-1961) placed on it as a forerunner of psychoanalysis. "From various hints dropped by the anti-gnostic writer Hippolytus, it is clear that the gnostics were nothing other than psychologists," Jung wrote. "Gnosis is undoubtedly a psychological knowledge whose contents derive from the unconscious".

He concluded that the gnostics like Valentinus were in reality theologians who, unlike the more orthodox ones, allowed themselves to be influenced in large measure by natural inner experience. In Valentinus's description of the true God's existence before the Demiurge created the world, Jung saw a parallel with the personal unconscious, described as a "God w/o consciousness." Jung equated the demiurge with the ego and Christ as the Complete person, the unified self.

He liked the gnostic ideas so well that the Jung institute bought the "Gospel of Truth" from the Nag Hammadi discovery. Although Jung did much to elevate the reputation of (his version) of gnosticism this century, other novelists, artists, and filmmakers have been drawn to gnostic themes also. A short list would include Philip K. Dick, Jack Kerouac, Zena Henderson, Harold Bloom and Lawrence Durrell. Even the comic-book and movie story of Superman can be interpreted as a quasi-gnostic fall from a better world into this one.

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