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GNOSTICIZING TENDENCIES IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

CAROLE SPENCER

When I first read Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*, some thirty years ago, I thought that a more liberating vision of Christianity, especially for women, had been discovered. A whole new world of suppressed versions of a more egalitarian Christianity seemed waiting to be explored. But Gnostic texts on further reading through subsequent years seemed far more ambiguous and less egalitarian than they initially appeared through Pagels' lens.

At the same time that my early interest in Gnosticism was sparked, other Quaker scholars working in the field of Quaker studies were arguing that George Fox himself was Gnostic and his experience of the Inward Light paralleled Gnostic teachings that the soul was innately divine.¹ A quick Google search of "Quakerism and Gnosticism" will turn up many sites and blogs identifying, and even celebrating, affinities between the two, and a fair share of the expected heresy-hunting sites that denounce Quakers, including evangelicals like Richard Foster, as neo-Gnostics. It is true that many Quakers today have fallen in love with the Gospel of Thomas and find it to be closer to their understanding of Quakerism than the canonical gospels. Depending on how you define Gnosticism, George Fox is Gnostic, Quakers are Gnostic, the Apostle Paul is Gnostic, and Christian mysticism is Gnostic.

My purpose in this paper is not to enter the debate as to whether early Quaker spirituality contained Gnostic elements but to explore whether "gnosticizing" influences can be clearly identified within Christian spirituality as a whole, and if so, how that has affected our relationship to the material world. My approach to this question has evolved and is still evolving as I continue to digest the recent literature on Gnosticism, which is opaque, confusing, and contradictory (Marjanen, 2008). Since a much greater lack of consensus on defining Gnosticism exists now than fifty years ago, I can only offer some tentative conjectures to this question of Gnosticizing influences. A more fruitful approach might be to recover materialist and ecological

tendencies in the history of Christian spirituality in order to provide resources for a new spiritual paradigm of embodiment. This will be the focus of my conclusion.

Gnosticism, a religious phenomenon of late antiquity, mixed Greek metaphysics and mythology with biblical exegesis to create narratives of the nature of God, the origin of the world and human salvation (King, 2009, vii)². The texts that became canonized as the Christian Bible did not contain the explicit and complex metaphysics, nor the extravagant mythology, found in many Gnostic texts. However both Gnostic and Orthodox theologians freely incorporated Greek metaphysics in interpreting Scripture. Traces of Gnostic thought and practice clearly exist within the “single, orthodox church” of the Fourth and later centuries, but in largely transformed modes.³ Most contemporary scholars contend that the Gnostics were lively participants in the developing narrative of Christianity, in the shaping and reshaping of Christianity, as opposed to earlier views that the church rejected Gnosticism (Brakke, 2010, 89).

Earlier scholars of the twentieth century, such as William Ralph Inge, best known for his works on Plotinus, Neo-Platonism, and Christian mysticism, wrote “Gnosticism was rotten before it was ripe,” a standard, but graphic summary of Catholic reaction to Gnosticism since the second century.⁴ But his contemporary Adolph von Harnack began the first of many re-evaluations with his claim that Gnostics were actually the first Christian theologians.⁵

Interest in Gnosticism exploded with the discovery in 1945 of a cache of unknown papyrus documents near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt that were labeled a Gnostic library. Since then scholarly debates about Gnosticism have created a vast literature, with a flourishing industry of popular books reinterpreting Gnosticism as the lost tradition of original Christianity, such as Bart Ehrman’s *Lost Christianities*. While the Nag Hammadi discovery has given us ample primary texts to analyze, many essential questions about Gnosticism remain unanswered, and all prior characteristics of Gnosticism have been called into question (Brakke, 2010; King, 2003; Williams, 1996).

Among contemporary scholars the word is so notoriously hard to define, that some have suggested we abandon the designation entirely. Karen King claims Gnosticism is “a rhetorical term that has been confused with a historical entity.” (King, 2003, 1) And further “there was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that

some kind of religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics.” (King, 2003, 2)

The word *Gnostic* is simply the adjective form of the Greek word *gnosis*, which means knowledge, specifically experiential knowledge, or wisdom. *Sophia*, which also means wisdom, would be essentially a synonym. Both mean participatory knowledge, an integral head/heart/body knowledge through direct experience. Gnosis is not empirical or intellectual knowledge, but rather a change in the orientation of the mind, a change in consciousness. A *gnosis* or wisdom consciousness is central to the New Testament writings, especially the letters of Paul, and remained dominant in theological understanding in both Eastern and Western Christian traditions for more than twelve centuries (Barnhart, 2007, 1). Hans Jonas⁶ argued that Christianity, not only in its heretical forms but even with thought forms within the New Testament, should be considered as belonging to the Gnostic domain (King, 2003, 134). In that case both Gnosticism and Christianity share the same DNA.

In this sense all Christian mysticism is Gnostic. Paul was Gnostic, John was Gnostic. Jesus was Gnostic. In fact Gnostics loved Paul; he was their hero! Gnosis was a soundly biblical term, thus early Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen would not abandon the term to their theological opponents.

But this broader, New Testament meaning of *gnosis* as wisdom gets confused with what we associate with the term *Gnosticism*. When we examine the ancient texts themselves we find the term Gnosticism does not actually appear.⁷ Since the seventeenth century historians of religion have refined and developed the category of Gnosticism to mean at its essence a dualistic world-view and belief in a demiurge or a lower, inferior god who created the world (Brakke, 2010, 19). Yet today scholars are asking, was there a Gnostic church, or Gnostic religion in the second century that witnessed to a belief in Jesus, or simply a variety of diverse and competing groups calling themselves Christian? (McGinn, 1997, 90). Most scholars today conclude there was a Gnostic school of thought, but clearly the Gnostics never had a unified theology. Did they disdain the cosmos, the world, and the body or were they simply detached contemplatives with an inclination for mythology? The content of gnosis as “a dualistic transcendent religion of salvation” was characteristic not only of Gnostic thought, but also of the second phase of Hellenistic culture in general. (King, 2003, 120, quoting Jonas, 1963, 32).

The philosophical views that shaped the gnosis of most church fathers was heavily influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism (the dominant theologies of the time), and introduced a quasi-Gnostic vertical dualism (spirit or mind as opposed to matter and body) into theology which tended to suppress the radical bodiliness of the incarnation (Barnhart, 2007, 9). In addition most church fathers tended towards a spiritualizing other-worldliness that demeaned the realities of human earthly existence, which included the undervaluing of the feminine and an adoption of the patriarchy of the Greco-Roman society.

Although I continue to have reservations about the meaningfulness of the term “Gnosticism,” in this paper I will use the term to refer to a cosmic-dualism, the split between heaven and earth, between the phenomenal world and true reality, and between body/mind and spirit/matter, a dualism that diminishes the goodness of creation, the material and bodily, and which leads away from the earth towards the transcendent, heavenly realms above. With the ecological crisis we must reconstruct the body/mind and spiritual/material dualistic tendencies in Christian spirituality to refashion a different relationship to the earth. But I believe our efforts are misdirected by demonizing a typological construct, Gnosticism, as the source of Christian spirituality’s anti-worldly, anti-body biases, and by continuing to borrow the polemics of the early church Fathers to project our own inherent dualism onto the “other.” The most dualist and Platonizing of the early Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Origen were both anti-Gnostic, and the Platonist Plotinus was just as much an opponent of the Gnostics as the early Church Fathers.

Both Gnostic and Christian mystics could use the same words for the goal of redemption: divinization, perfection, unification, union, deification, vision of God, but take on different meanings in “terms of how one viewed the soul’s origin” if divine or not (McGinn, 1997, 96). Christianity claimed the soul is not created divine but can become divine through grace. We become by grace what God is by nature is the orthodox understanding. The soul is capable of divinization, but not naturally or innately divine. For Christian orthodoxy, gnosis grew out of faith.⁸

According to McGinn, “Those elements in later Christian mysticism that appear similar to aspects of Gnostic mysticism can also be explained through appeal to common Jewish, Greek, and New Testament roots rather than any real contact with Gnostic

sources themselves” (McGinn, 1997, 95). McGinn admits that many later Christian mystics (and I would include George Fox)⁹ will echo positions found in Gnostic texts, though usually without any possibility of direct dependence (McGinn, 1997, 99).

McGinn claims the Gnostic debates created the boundaries which Christian mysticism (and spirituality in general) would not cross (McGinn, 1996, 95):

1. The soul is not naturally divine but is created. It is capable of divinization but is not innately divine.
2. There is a distinction between the divine realm and the created realm.
3. The Christian mysteries (mystical revelation) was open to all, not an esoteric message reserved for the few, even though true Gnostics (as Clement would call them), understood it on a deeper level, and might even require ascetical disciplines, but the mysteries were available to all Christians.

It is true that Clement of Alexandria and Pseudo-Dionysius brought aspects of Gnostic traditions into what became known as orthodox Christian spirituality. Clement argued that there is a true gnosis that should be acknowledged and a false gnosis that should be rejected.

Jean Leclercq, the great Benedictine scholar of monasticism describes monastic theology as true Christian gnosis: “that kind of higher knowledge which is the complement, the fruition of faith, and reaches contemplation in prayer and contemplation” (Barnhart, 2007, 28). It is characterized by personal experience and loving knowledge. But it is also characterized by a principle of separation from the world and from the Church, of containment within a cloistered community. Such separation also generated an anti-incarnational and vertical vision in which the goal of life was pure interiority. It also implies a negative view of the world and the person. Monastic *gnosis* was strongly Platonic, vertical, and interiorizing which created a spirituality of upward ascent.

Yet all monasticism includes some form of active engagement with the world, for example, the cloistered monks practiced radical hospitality to strangers and pilgrims, and physical work was a part of the rhythm of prayer. *Ora and labora* became a counter to Platonizing

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tendencies in Benedictine monasticism. For the Platonic philosophers, manual labor was relegated to slaves, not contemplative thinkers.

The monastic theologians largely accepted the Augustinian theological system of fall and ascent, which became the dominant one in the West. This included a pessimistic view of humanity and the world, and of history, and a psychology and anthropology which focused almost entirely on the mind and the will, ignoring the body, the psyche, and the material world.¹⁰

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ASCENT

The “spirituality of ascent” is one of the most prominent motifs in Gnostic thought. Eco-theologian Paul Santmire claims that “Gnosticism is perhaps the most extreme example in Western history of a world view shaped by the metaphor of ascent...” (1985, 34.)¹¹

When spiritual traditions rely on vertical imagery shaped by Platonism, convinced the human person is bound to some transcendent place, then spiritual practices will develop to facilitate that transition, and the world of nature is left behind to pass away. Many spiritual classics suggest this vertical ascent: the image of the ladder to heaven, such as the seventh century John Climacus’ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. One could contend that most spiritual classics describe the spiritual life as an ascent from matter to spirit, and the world merely the staging ground for one’s exit strategy (O’Keefe, 2011, 54). The spirituality of ascent is dependent on a platonic cosmology in which the material world lies below the spiritual world. Humans lived partly in the world of matter and partly in the world of spirit. (O’Keefe, 2011, 54)

Origen, for example, believed in the preexistence of human souls, which were created before they were embodied, a belief posthumously condemned. These souls fell from their spiritual existence down a chain of being into the material world which God provided in order to prevent them falling into oblivion and as a way for their reconciliation and return. So embodiment made possible a return to spirit. So for Origen the material world was good and necessary as the context for salvation, but it was also temporary, and transient.

However, not all Christian spirituality focused primarily on an ascent out of matter. The remainder of this paper will focus on what might be termed “anti-Gnosticizing” tendencies in Christian

spirituality. For example, John O’Keefe posits a spiritual tradition that is pre-platonic and strongly anti-gnostic, the monastic tradition of Egypt and Syria. Though highly ascetical, these monks “displayed a remarkably physicalist tendency” (O’Keefe, 2011, 58.) This stream of spirituality finds its source in the aggressive anti-Gnosticism of Irenaeus of Lyons, and could be called a materialist strain. O’Keefe claims that Irenaeus was certain that “excess fascination with philosophy was one of the primary errors of his Gnostic opponents” (O’Keefe, 2011, 59). Whether or not Irenaeus was fair to his opponents, his belief that they abhorred the material world energized his anti-Gnostic polemic.

O’Keefe suggests that Irenaeus, despite his polemicism, can be a source for a recovery of a Christian materialism, an incarnational spirituality. O’Keefe hopes that “The anti-Gnostic and pro-materialist worldview that [Irenaeus] preached and that the early monks enacted with their bodies could serve as one possible source of inspiration by which Christians desiring to cultivate a spirituality of sustainability can re-conceive the understood purpose of their spiritual practice” (O’Keefe, 2011).

Paul Santmire also finds incarnational and ecological motifs that counter the ascent motif in Christian spirituality, emerging with Irenaeus in the second century. He identifies these as the motifs of fecundity, the overflowing goodness of God, and migration (to a good land) where one’s identity is with the land, a Hebraic theme. These motifs express “the human spirit’s rootedness in the world of nature and the desire of self-consciously embodied selves to celebrate God’s presence in, with, and under the whole biophysical order . . .” (Santmire, 1985, 9). Thus, unlike the ascent motif’s emphasis on God as a being separate from humanity and the natural world, these ecological motifs stress the immanence of God as the power of life itself, which is a presence in nature, humanity, and the rest of the cosmos (Santmire, 1985). But Irenaeus’ incarnational spirituality, centered on a positive view of matter and creation, with history as an immense process of incarnation, was never as dominant in Christian tradition as the ascent model.

The pivotal point in Christian spirituality away from the ascent model takes place in the thirteenth century with Francis of Assisi. (Although there are earlier precedents in Hildegard of Bingen.) Francis was given a new vision, a new way of seeing, that recognized an organic relationship between nature, the human and God. Nature was sacred and not something separate from God. He saw traces of God in

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all creation, even in earthworms. Francis ascended the mountain but then returned to embrace in joy and love the fecundity of God in the whole material world below. He felt joy in each creature as he saw it flowing from the fountain of divine fecundity (Cousins, 1992, 135).

Francis's biographer Bonaventure shares his eco-mysticism even though he draws from the same Greek speculative tradition that so deeply influenced the Gnostic school of thought. Yet Bonaventure finds a compensating current to an ascent spirituality in a return to the world. Bonaventure made a spiritual ascent to God, and there, like Francis, he touched the fullness (*pleroma*) –the divine fecundity that “caused God to overflow and express himself in the finite realm” (Cousins, 1992, 149). Bonaventure was also in touch with the great archetypal symbols that are common in both Gnosticism and Greek metaphysics. Yet Bonaventure's cosmology integrated the ascent motif with a creation spirituality that returned to the earth as the outflow of divine self-giving love.

Bonaventure used two images for creation, a mirror and a book. As a mirror, creation reflects the glory of God but, as a book, creation can be found to contain a vestige, an image and likeness of God. The vestige is shared by all creation from “every grain of sand, every star, every earthworm,” as manifested by St. Francis in his intimate love for all of God's creation. “Every creature is an aspect of God's self-expression in the world, and since every creature has its foundation in the Word, each is equally close to God” (Delio, 2001, 57).

Thus, Bonaventure in his Neoplatonic-inspired theological masterpiece, *The Soul's Journey into God*, is nevertheless able to invert the Gnosticizing tendencies of a world transcending ascent mysticism into a positive and ecologically incarnational spirituality.

Although Franciscan spirituality had integrated devotion to Christ with identification with nature, redemption and creation continued to be split in Christian spirituality overall. In spite of Francis' wide influence, an eco-mysticism that senses the participation of all creatures in the mystical reality of God's creation, common to many Christian mystics--the split between nature and the human widened until the ecological crisis we face in our time.

Within Christianity are alternative spiritualities, such as the Franciscan tradition that counter Gnosticizing tendencies and are world-affirming even though Gnostic elements are not entirely absent. These alternatives can be found even within the strongly Platonizing

mysticism of Bonaventure. Attending to these currents will highlight the opposing trends within Christian spirituality (the paradox of “the coincidence of opposites”), and enable us to find resources for the recovery of an embodied and incarnational spirituality to counteract the overemphasis on the transient and spiritual, and the devaluing of nature that have contributed to our environmental crisis.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Richard Bailey, "Was Seventeenth-century Quaker Christology Homogeneous?" and Glen Reynolds "George Fox and Christian Gnosis, in *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, ed. Pink Dandelion, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004
2. Karen King claims that the Gnostic myth in the *Secret Book of John* is the first Christian writing to form a comprehensive narrative of God, creation and salvation (2009, vii).
3. Judging the compatibility or incompatibility of Greek philosophy with Christian revelation is beyond the scope of this very limited paper. But the answer to Tertullian's question "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem" has been answered at length by Jewish and Christian theology down through the centuries. Many scholars claim that Greek metaphysics is alien to Christianity, and a distortion of it, while others claim they are compatible. Some wax poetic that Christianity was the fulfillment of Greek philosophy, such as historian of religion, Friedrich Heiler who claimed: "It was indeed the fusion of these two currents, of Biblical Christianity and Hellenism, that created the incomparable wealth of Christian contemplative piety. It began in the age of the New Testament and continued in the following centuries. The profoundest contemplative experience of the ancient world entered into Christianity, where it was purified and completed." Friedrich Heiler, *Spiritual Disciplines: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, 1960, 162
4. Quoted in McGinn, *Christian Mysticism, The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, 89.
5. Ibid.
6. Jonas' (1963) brought a phenomenological and existentialist approach to Gnosticism. He claimed its deepest impulses were in existential alienation and revolt.

7. Bentley Layton (1995, 348–9) notes that the term ‘Gnosticism’ was coined by a seventeenth-century English theologian, Henry More, a Cambridge Platonist. The timing of the coining of the word interestingly corresponds to Quaker beginnings, and some of the philosophers in More’s inner circle, such as Ann Conway and George Keith, were influenced by Robert Barclay, and became Quakers.
8. Gnosticism has been traditionally characterized as depending not on faith, but on “knowledge” (usually “secret”) that is given to “elect souls” but not all.
9. In the seventeenth century Neoplatonists, hermeticists, kabbalists, Paracelsians, alchemists, and magicians abounded along with the general Renaissance interest in uncovering and presenting ancient wisdom. Fox, as a mystic would hardly be immune from these “Gnosticizing” influences, and though he distanced himself from these movements in time, and had no interest in metaphysical speculation, traces can be found in his thought.
10. A dualistic view of Christianity, perhaps as a result of this Manichean phase, the most unarguably dualistic of the Gnostic religions—though some scholars question whether it belongs in the Gnostic category.
11. Santmire’s critique of Gnosticism is based on the classic work of the Gnostic scholar Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston: Beacon, 1963, which does not take into account more recent studies of Gnosticism.