

GNOSTICISM

Derived from the Greek word meaning "pertaining to knowledge," Gnosticism is a generic term mainly used of sects that broke with Christianity during the second and third centuries, though one can also speak of Jewish and other gnostics, some of whom were independent of the Jewish-Christian tradition and formed syncretistic movements in the Middle East. Simon Magus, Basilides, Valentinus, and Manichaean gnostics derived many of their doctrines from Christianity. Although gnostic groups differed more among themselves than did Christian groups because they had no "Book," most had certain beliefs in common:

(a) Rejection, as in Hellenized Zoroastrianism and late Jewish apocalyptic, of the material universe as an emanation of an evil spirit—darkness as opposed to light, which was identified with the good.

(b) A view of the universe as the creation not of the high god, but of an incompetent, perhaps even malign demiurge. Human beings ought not replicate his mischief by engaging in procreative sex; other forms might be acceptable, however.

(c) An assertion that souls in the elect are imprisoned temporarily in bodies, awaiting a redeemer to awaken them and help them to escape and ascend to heaven.

Gnostics held that all religions provided partially valid myths describing the human condition. Because the world, and not man, was evil, most sects advocated extreme asceticism. The Christian gnostic sect, the Carpocratians, however, advocated sexual licence based in part on an antinomian reading of Pauline predestination and antitheses between grace and law, between soul and body. Some groups incorporated Mithraism's ascent of the soul through seven planets, and angelology and demonology from such disparate sources as the Old Testament, noncanonical scriptures, Philo Judaeus, and the

Pauline epistles. Anti-Judaism and antinomianism often occur, even when Old Testament myths and personages are utilized as the basis for Gnostic speculations.

The account of the Naassenes in Hippolytus' *Refutation of All Heresies* asserts that the serpent in Genesis (*naas*, from Hebrew *naḥaš*) was the first pederast, since he had homosexual intercourse with Adam and introduced depravity into the world. The passage further ascribes to the Naassenes a text incorporated in Romans 1:18–32 that blames idolatry for departure from the sexual order of nature that provoked the deluge and the destruction of Sodom. In Gnostic thinking, the primal man was androgynous, and the intercourse of woman with man wicked and forbidden, while the restoration of androgyny was tantamount to the abolition of sexuality. A profound malaise in regard to the origin of sexuality and the meaning of sexual dimorphism is evident in the Gnostic thinkers, who equated sexual reproduction with prolonging the soul's enslavement in the material universe of the body, taking as their point of departure Jewish (and ultimately Babylonian) anthropogonic and cosmogonic myths.

For centuries after the end of classical antiquity, knowledge of the Gnostic systems came almost exclusively from the writings of Christian heresiologists who opposed and condemned them. In 1945, however, a cache of Gnostic manuscripts in the Coptic language came to light at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. These, together with other writings such as those in the Hermetic tradition, the Manichean literature in languages of Central Asia, and magical and astrological texts preserved in manuscript or on papyrus, have broadened the picture of the religious life of the late Roman Empire.

The *Paraphrase of Shem*, a Gnostic text from Nag Hammadi, even makes heroes of the Sodomites for having opposed the will of the Jewish creator God. "The Sodomites, according to the will of the Majesty, will bear witness to the uni-

versal testimony. They will rest with a pure conscience in the place of their repose, which is the unbegotten Spirit. And as these things happen, Sodom will be burned unjustly by a base nature. For the evil will not cease." Another such work, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, declares: "The great Seth came and brought his seed. And it was sown in the aeons which had been brought forth, their number being the amount of Sodom. Some say that Sodom is the place of pasture of the great Seth, which is Gomorrah. But others say that the great Seth took his plant out of Gomorrah and planted it in the second place, to which he gave the name Sodom."

In the view of some scholars, Gnostic elements in Christianity helped to differentiate it from Rabbinic Judaism. Judaism developed in the following centuries, to a considerable degree, as a dialectical reaction to the spread of Pauline Christianity in the Roman Empire. What in Judaism had been concrete and national was in Gnosticism metamorphosed into the symbolic and cosmic. The legacy of Gnostic speculation framed the incarnation and death of Jesus as an event of universal import in which the whole of mankind was redeemed from the sin of Adam and offered the possibility of salvation; it also strengthened the ascetic, world-rejecting tendencies of primitive Christianity that led to a devaluation of sexuality and exaltation of virginity which remained foreign to Judaism in any form. In this way, Gnosticism reinforced ascetic Zoroastrian and Stoic motifs familiar to the Greco-Roman environment. As the upshot of this complex process, a radical denial of sexual expression which neither biblical Jewish law nor classical Greek philosophy had urged became for later Christian thinkers an ethical ideal, and one to which homosexual gratification was counterpoised as the ultimate moral evil.

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GOD, HOMOSEXUALITY AS A DENIAL OF

In the debates on the Wolfenden Report and later proposals for decriminalization, some Christian clergy asserted that "homosexuality is a denial of God" because it is "an affront to the Creator who made them male and female" (cf. Genesis 1:27). The underlying assumption is that since God divided the human race into opposite sexes, any sexual dalliance with one's own gender frustrates his express purpose and command.

The critique of this argument can take various lines. First, there is good evidence from the early text of the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) and its daughter versions, as well as from some passages in Rabbinic literature, that the original reading of Genesis 1:27 was "And God created man; in the image of God he created him male-and-female," which is to say **androgynous**, since the Semitic languages have no formal way of compounding two nouns, and must express the relationship paratactically—by juxtaposing them. The verse in question would then be a mutilated fragment of an earlier Babylonian myth in which the future heterosexual pair is a male-female, an *androgynos*. Modern evolutionary theory recognizes that man is sprung from phylogenetic ancestors who were **hermaphroditic**, and from them, even with the later sexual dimorphism, he has inherited the archaic capacity for erotic response to members of both sexes.

But a more fundamental objection to this line of thinking noted at the outset lies in the very notion of purpose (or **teleology**). Economy and purpose itself are functions of a reflective consciousness that is aware of the scarcity of the resources at its disposal. An intelligence that had at its command infinite time, infinite space, infinite matter, and infinite energy could have no notion of economy, or even of purpose, because anything and everything would be possible, anywhere and anywhen. Man is forced to organize his activity on