

The Gnostic Matrix

In the wake of the mega-hit movie The Matrix, which features gnostic themes, Don Closson examines gnosticism and the influence this philosophy has on our culture.

When *The Matrix* came out in 1999, it became an instant hit movie and a trend setter for the science fiction genre. The story takes place in a future dystopia where intelligent machines have taken over and are farming humans to generate electrical power. The matrix itself is a computer program that gives humans the illusion that they are living in a late twentieth century world when, in reality, they are existing in womb-like pods that provide nutrients while siphoning off the natural electrical current that human bodies create. The movie is known both for its visual style and its references to many postmodern and religious ideas. The writers used a biblical motif throughout their story. The main character of the movie Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is called the "one." He dies and comes to life again after being kissed by a love interest named Trinity. In this resurrected state he is able to destroy the evil agents within the matrix and appears to ascend into the heavens at the end of the movie. A ship called the *Nebuchadnezzar* is used by the rebel humans to hide from the intelligent machines and to search for the lost city of Zion. However, in spite of its use of many biblical terms, this is not a Christian movie.

In fact, *The Matrix* is syncretistic; it uses ideas from a number of religious traditions that are popular in American culture. Along with Christian notions, the authors have incorporated ideas from Zen Buddhism and Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a belief system named after the Greek word "gnosis" or knowledge. If the authors had been attempting to portray a Christian view of the human condition, they would have focused on sin and the need for a savior. Instead, the movie's characters find a kind of salvation in discovering secret knowledge and in realizing that the world is not what it appears to be. Neo becomes a Gnostic messiah, one chosen to be a way-shower out of the illusion of the matrix.

Gnostic gospels began to compete with Christianity in the second century after Christ. Our first clue to their existence is found in the writings of early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus who defended Christian orthodoxy from these heretical ideas. The popularity of Gnosticism began to decline by the end of the third century and lay largely dormant until the recent discovery of Gnostic texts in Egypt in 1945. Now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, this remarkable find was made available in English in 1977 and has been used by both religious leaders and secular scholars to argue that a Gnostic gospel should be considered alongside the orthodox Christian message.

In this article we will consider both the content of Gnosticism and influence Gnostic ideas are having on our culture.

The Birth of Gnosticism

In December 1945, an Arab named Muhammad Ali found a jar buried in the ground near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, that contained thirteen leather-bound codices or books dating from around 350 A.D. For the first time modern scholars had access to early copies of Gnostic writings which had previously been known only through derogatory references made by early Christians.

The core beliefs of the Gnostic gospel begin with the assertion that the world in its current state is not good, nor is it the creation of a good god. In fact, the cosmos is seen as a mistake, the action of a minor deity who was unable to achieve a creation worthy of permanence. The result is a world of pain, sorrow and death filled with human beings that long to be freed from a material existence. Deep within each person is a divine spark that connects humanity with the ultimate spiritual being

who remains hidden from creation. The only hope for humanity is to acquire the information it needs to perfect itself and evolve out of its current physical state. The Gnostic Jesus descended from the spiritual realm to show the way for the rest of humanity, not to die as an atonement for sin, but to make available information necessary for self-perfection.

Although a common core of ideas is found within Gnostic writings, a variety of religious ideas were popular among its leaders. There are four second century Gnostic teachers who have contributed to our current understanding of Gnosticism. Two consist of mythical reinterpretations of the Old Testament. The *Apocryphon of John* claims to possess a vision of John, the son of Zebedee. It offers a hierarchy of deities based on the names of Yahweh, ultimately concluding with a minor god named Ialdaboath who is the angry and jealous god of the OT who falsely claims there is no other god beside him. The second writer named Justin authored *Baruch*, a work that mixed together Greek, Jewish and Christian ideas. Again, it portrays OT characters as minor deities, but both Hercules and Jesus have a role in this system. Gnostics baptized into this cult claimed to enter into a higher spiritual realm and swore themselves to secrecy.

The other two second century forms of Gnosticism were more philosophically developed. Basilides of Alexandria and Valentinus, who wrote in Rome about 140 A.D., brought together secular Greek thinking with New Testament concepts. Basilides' starting point of absolute nothingness indicates that he may have encountered Indian Hindu ideas in Alexandria. He also regarded the God of the Old Testament as an oppressive angel. But the most important Gnostic concepts are those of Valentinus. It is his system that has been borrowed from by today's New Age followers.

The Gnosticism of Valentinus

Valentinus claimed to have learned his gospel message from a student of the apostle Paul named Theodas. At the center of this Gnostic system is the notion that something is wrong, that the human condition and experience is defective. Orthodox Christianity and Judaism both point to human rebellion as the source of this flawed existence; however Gnosticism blames the creator. Valentinus' version of creation begins with a primal being called Bythos who, after a long period of silence, emanates 30 beings called "aeons" (also known as the "pleroma"). Eventually, one of the lowest aeons, Wisdom or Sophia, becomes pregnant and gives birth to a demiurge, Jehovah, who in turn creates the physical world. The world is not "good" as indicated by the Genesis account. It is flawed and a barrier to humanity's redemption.

Valentinus argued that the fallen nature of the cosmos was not our doing, and that we each have the capacity to transcend the physical creation to achieve redemption. The key is to possess correct knowledge about reality. Like the humans suffering in the movie *The Matrix*, he believed that "the human mind lives in a largely self-created world of illusion from whence only the enlightenment of a kind of Gnosis can rescue it." {1} Valentinus taught that both body and soul are part of the corrupt creation and that redemption is only for the spirit or inner man. His view of personal redemption has more in common with Hinduism and Buddhism than with orthodox Christianity. To the Gnostics, Jesus is significant only because of the knowledge he possessed and the example that he set, not for being God in the flesh or for being a sacrifice for sin. Because the illusion presented to us by the world can only be corrected by the right knowledge, any guilt we feel for our rebellion against an all-powerful holy God is false guilt; for such a God doesn't exist.

The teachings of Valentinus had considerable impact on his world. Modern day Gnostics, however, don't teach all of his ideas. Let's see why.

Modern Day Gnostics

World religion scholar Joseph Campbell writes that, “We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness...,” and that our main problem is that we have merely forgotten this truth. He admonishes us to wake up to this awareness, which he adds, “is the very essence of Christian Gnosticism and of the Thomas Gospel.” {2}

The concept of a “Christ consciousness” is common in New Age literature. The origin of this idea can be traced back to Gnostic ideas that competed with the traditional teachings of the Apostles in the early church.

As New Age thinking has progressed in its many forms, the use of Gnosticism as a theoretical underpinning has grown. Since English translations became widely available in the late 1970s, Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *First Apocalypse of James* have been used in conjunction with Eastern religious writings to support both New Age radical environmentalism and neo-pagan feminist religion. Gnostic writings have motivated scholars like Elaine Pagels and Joseph Campbell to find parallels between Buddhism and Christianity. They have also lent support to the belief that it was a Christ (or Buddha) consciousness that made Jesus a powerful example of how humans can experience enlightenment. But are the Gnostic scriptures faithfully represented in these modern ideas?

Author Douglas Groothuis argues that the Gnostic worldview is often misrepresented by its modern adherents. For instance, Pagels and psychologist Carl Jung translate the teachings of the Gnostics into general psychological truths while rejecting their teachings regarding the origin and operation of the universe. It seems inconsistent at best to adopt the supposed outcomes of the Gnostic faith while rejecting its core teachings.

Neither does Gnosticism affirm current attitudes towards the environment found among many New Agers. Gnosticism teaches that all matter, including mother Earth, is seen as a deterrent towards reaching our true spiritual state. In fact, Gnosticism holds that all matter is a mistake. It is certainly not to be worshipped or revered as many of our pantheistic friends do.

Although female divinities are part of the Gnostic hierarchy of emanations and the New Age journal *Gnosis* devoted an entire issue to the Goddess movement, the Gnosticism of the early church era was decidedly not feminist. The divinity Sophia is at the heart of the problem facing humanity; her offspring brought into existence the physical world from which the Gnostic must escape.

Women in general do not fair well in the Gnostic texts. The *Gospel of Thomas* quotes Peter as saying, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus supposedly adds, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” {3} Jesus shows no sign of Gnostic influence in the New Testament. He never demeans women for being female, nor does he suggest that they become men.

Finally, Gnostic texts are used to support the New Age doctrine of tolerance for those on a different spiritual journey, and the popular belief in reincarnation. But Groothuis notes that “several Gnostic documents speak of the damnation of those who refuse to become enlightened, particularly apostates from Gnostic groups.” {4} It’s interesting that these passages aren’t often taught by New Age followers.

The Reliability of Gnostic Texts

Is the *Gospel of Thomas* a more reliable witness to the real teachings of Christ than the New Testament? Is it factually more trustworthy? Famed Bible scholar F. F. Bruce is pretty blunt regarding the competing truth claims. He writes, "There is no reason why the student of this conflict should shrink from making a value judgment: the Gnostic schools lost because they deserved to lose." {5} Few would question the historical record that Gnosticism was rejected by the church in the second and third centuries. But what about today? Are there valid reasons to reevaluate the legitimacy of the Gnostic writings?

First, a decision must be made between the two conflicting depictions of Christ. The content and the literary style of the Gnostic writings compared to the biblical record are so different that they cannot both be accurate.

It's significant to note that the Gnostic texts do not offer a recounting of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Much of what is attributed to Jesus is detached from any historical setting. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* depicts Jesus "more as a lecturer on philosophy than a Jewish prophet." {6} The Apostles supposedly ask Jesus, "Lord, we would like to know the deficiency of the aeons and of their pleroma." {7} Jesus responds with Gnostic teachings about God the Father and a female deity whose disobedience results in the physical cosmos. This is not the Jesus of the New Testament.

Another question regarding Gnostic texts is their date of origin. The documents found at Nag Hammadi are quite old, probably dating from A.D. 350-400. The original writings are even older, but not prior to the second century A. D. Thus, the consensus of most scholars is that they appeared after the New Testament had been completed. *The Gospel of Truth*, which is attributed to Valentinus, actually quotes the New Testament at length. It would be odd to accept its authority over the New Testament.

Unfortunately, the documents have also experienced considerable physical deterioration. The English translation of *The Nag Hammadi Library* exhibits many ellipses, parentheses, and brackets that point to gaps in the text due to this deterioration. Since most of the texts have no other manuscript copies available, their accuracy is questionable.

There is also the question of authorship. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* is usually dated at the end of the second century or possibly into the third. {8} Since this is long after Peter's death, it is considered to be pseudepigraphic, falsely attributed to a noteworthy individual for added credibility.

Finally, the most popular and ardently defended text, the *Gospel of Thomas*, was not mentioned in the early church until the early third century.

The Gnostic view of Jesus was rejected by the early church and should be rejected today.

Notes

1. >Stephan A. Hoeller, *Valentinus: A Gnostic For All Seasons*, <http://www.gnosis.org/valentinus.htm> on 12/20/2002
2. Douglas Groothuis, *Jesus In an Age of Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 74.
3. *Gospel of Thomas*, 114.
4. Groothuis, 100.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon Of Scripture*, (InterVarsity Press, 1988), 277.

6. Groothuis, 104.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 107.

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