

Why were they not included in the Bible? They were not included for three primary reasons: First, their origin could not be traced to the apostolic age and genuine apostolic authorship. Second, they were not permitted to be read at Mass. For example, none of these Gnostic writings appeared in the Muratorian Fragment (155), one of the earliest attestations of the books of Sacred Scripture which were permitted to be read at Mass. Third, these Gnostic writings were condemned for their heretical teachings. Even though they had elements of genuine Christianity, their substance was heretical. Great Church authors such as St. Justin Martyr, Origen, St. Hippolytus, St. Irenaeus — to name a few — identified the errors and condemned the works as heretical. Therefore, for these three reasons, none of these Gnostic writings has ever been included in the canon of Sacred Scripture defined and affirmed repeatedly by the Church.

The Gnostic writings have received more attention lately because they support a new form of Gnosticism — a radically feminist form of Christianity, which is really nothing more than neo-paganism. This movement uses the teachings found in Gnostic writings to support their desire for female priesthood, contraception, abortion, and deviant lifestyles. They focus their worship on Sophia, the feminine god, not the Heavenly Father or Jesus, true God who became true man. They blame the exclusion of the Gnostic writings on the "patriarchal" Church, instead of admitting the real reasons stated above. They even try to pervert the

study of Sacred Scripture to meet their needs, for example, stating that the gospels were not written until after the legalization of Christianity in 313 to support a hierarchical Church. Once again, the Gnosticism that tries to disguise itself as legitimate Christianity.

St. Irenaeus taught, "It is possible, then, for everyone in every Church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the Apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world" (*Adversus haereses*, 3, 3, 1). Read the Bible. Read the *Catechism*. Read the Church Fathers and the great saints. Forget the Gnostic gospels.

Copyright © Arlington Catholic Herald, Inc.
All rights reserved. Used with permission.
Printed with ecclesiastical approval.

Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Ranchero Road

Hesperia, California, USA

Telephone: 760-220-6818

FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net

www.pjpiisoe.org

Pamphlet 053

The Gnostic Gospels

Fr. William P. Saunders, Ph.D

The Gnostic gospels are attributed to the work of a community known as the "Gnostics," which existed in the early Church. (*Gnosis* in Greek means "knowledge.") However, before addressing the issue of the Gnostic gospels, we must first understand more about the Gnostic community and the heresy entitled "Gnosticism."

The origins of Gnosticism are unclear. The first traces of Gnosticism arise centuries before Christianity and are rooted in the ancient religions of Syria, Babylonia, Phoenicia and Persia, and in the Greek Platonic schools of philosophy. Gnostic communities existed throughout the Roman Empire, and because of the religious apathy toward traditional religion and the fascination with mystery cults, they caused some curiosity. In a sense, they were like the "new-agers" of today's society. With the founding of our Church and the spread of Christianity, the Gnostics incorporated elements of Christianity into their beliefs. Keep in mind that each Gnostic leader supplied his own nuances to the Gnosticism. Nevertheless, the basic points are as follows:

- Gnosticism is a dualistic theological system. God is all good and the source of all goodness. Everything spiritual is of God and therefore good. Light too is of God and therefore good.

- Equal to God but diametrically opposed is the devil who is evil and the source of all evil. Everything material is of the devil and therefore evil. Darkness too is of the devil and therefore evil.
- Regarding creation, the Gnostics rejected Christian teaching. Instead, they posited that a series of aeons emanate from God in descending order. These aeons are paired, being called "syzygies," in almost a male-female sense: so the aeons depth and silence produce mind and truth, which produce reason and life, which produce man and state. All together they form the "pleroma."
- As these aeons recede from God, they become less perfect. The last aeon, the Demiurge, creates the material world due to some flaw, sin or passion. Man is created, but because of some primordial fault, his soul has fallen to this world and is imprisoned in the physical body. While his physical being is corrupt, his spiritual soul is good. In a sense, the good soul is the prisoner of the evil body; therefore, redemption is to release the soul from its bodily prison. To release the soul necessitates awakening the "gnosis," (the wisdom) within, a gnosis which "has fallen asleep" in physical matter.
- According to the Gnostics, individuals fall into three categories: the *pneumatikoi* are influenced by the spirit, have the necessary gnosis, and are

assured salvation; the *psychikoi* may be saved; and the *hylikoi* are so influenced by matter that they have no hope of salvation.

The Gnostic version of Jesus is not the Jesus of Christianity. For the Gnostics, an aeon united itself with the human person Jesus (just a regular human being for the Gnostics) at the time of his baptism at the Jordan. The Gnostics thereby denied the mystery of the incarnation, that Jesus is one divine person with a divine nature and a human nature. Instead, the aeon united with the human Jesus, appeared as human, and revealed the gnosis needed for redemption. At the crucifixion, the human Jesus died on the cross while the aeon departed; in other words, the human Jesus suffered and died, while the divine escaped. Redemption then is freeing the soul from the body using the gnosis. This form of Gnosticism is called docetism.

This teaching impacted their morality. On one hand, since material things were considered evil, many Gnostics refrained from eating meat, marriage and conjugal love (because one would not want to imprison another soul). On the other hand, since a person who had the gnosis and was under the influence of the spirit was assured salvation, some Gnostics lived licentious lives of debauchery.

In the end, universal salvation will come when the *pneumatikoi* achieve redemption, the Demiurge is conquered and the material world destroyed.

One last point: the Gnostics also had the Sophia or Wisdom myth. Sophia represented the supreme female principle. In some of the myths she was once a virgin goddess who fell from her original purity and is the cause of the sinful world. In other myths, she is simply Wisdom.

Here is Gnosticism in a nutshell. Does this sound like Christianity to you? I hope not. Sure, there are hints of Christian themes like body and soul, light and darkness, God and the devil. However, the Gnostics corrupted genuine Christian belief, denying fundamental truths, such as the goodness of creation; the saving actions of our Lord's incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection; and the sacramental system. Rightly, the Gnostics were condemned by the early Church as heretics. The great defender of the faith was St. Irenaeus (140 -202), who decimated the heresy in his work "*Adversus haereses*" or "Detection and Overthrow of the Gnosis Falsely So-called."

Now let's address a few questions: What are the Gnostic gospels? The Gnostics did produce writings, some of the more well known being the Gospel of St. Thomas, the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, the Gospel according to the Egyptians, the Gospel of St. Peter, Acts of Peter, and Acts of Andrew. These books were written between the years 150 and 250.