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The Profanity of Materiality:

Gnostic Theology and the Struggle for the Sacredness of Social Justice

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### Gnostic Theology and the Struggle for the Sacredness of Social Justice

*“Orthodoxy is thus whatever is taught in any epoch by the majority of bishops and to be catholic is to concur with this majority.”<sup>1</sup>*

Often the best way to define something is by pointing out those things which it is not. This is so in the case of Christianity whose orthodoxy developed alongside the development of the heretical Gnostics. The Gnostics may be all but gone today, but their influence lasts. My thesis is that it lasts in more than one way. While Christianity was first defined in juxtaposition to this system of beliefs, it contains within its modern form traces of Gnostic theology which, while antithetical to the Biblical message of Christianity, are common nonetheless. The importance of these traces has implications beyond simple tedious academic discussions of theology; I believe that it has a diminishing impact on the importance of social justice that should be so central to Christian belief.

#### Introduction to Gnosticism

To begin with, it is important to note that speaking of the Gnostics as if they were all of a like mind is just as deceiving as speaking about Christians all sharing the same theology and worldview. There are, however, some key points shared by most if not all groups that self-identify as Gnostics or who have been identified by academics as Gnostics. While the topic of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Edwards. *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2009. Page 7.

Gnosticism remains in a nearly constant “state of flux,”<sup>2</sup> it is important to cover ground on some of the essential elements of this theological school.

The Gnostics were an early Christian heretical sect that took form more-or-less contemporaneously with the movement that is the Orthodox/Mainstream church of Peter, Paul, and the rest of the canonical New Testament writers and first generation commentators. It was, in fact, the Orthodoxy's response to the challenges of Gnosticism that shaped many aspects of mainstream theology as we know it today, especially in the concepts of Christology and soteriology. Gnosticism "lost out" to the Orthodox we know today, and for all intents and purposes it died out by the turn of the first millennium AD.<sup>3</sup>

The Gnostics believed that the material world has not in fact created by the one true God, but instead by an evil Demiurge. This Demiurge was a lesser being created by God, or by another creation of God<sup>4</sup>, and often associated with YHWH of the First Testament. Through either malicious intent or ignorance the Demiurge created the material world and trapped the souls, which had been immaterial divine sparks coexisting with God, within flesh. Humans, the meaty carriers of these divine sparks, are trapped within a world that is inherently unholy and evil. Hope is not lost, though, as escape is possible through a certain secret knowledge. This knowledge, this gnosis, available to a select few who choose to believe it, allows for the release of the divine spark from the material world and thus allows one to return to God. Jesus Christ for the Gnostics was the deliverer of this message – that through gnosis salvation from the evils of the material world was possible. Depending on the writer of the "Gnostic Gospel" you read,

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer. “The Challenge of Modern Gnosticism.” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 30.1 (1962): 18.

<sup>3</sup> There are today some self-proclaimed Gnostics. Those practicing in the United States and Europe are primarily a modern phenomenon, most coming on the heels of the discovery of the library at Nag Hammadi, and almost certainly without a direct human link to ancient Gnosticism. Practicing congregations in the India subcontinent, like the St. Thomas Christians, have a slightly stronger, if still unverifiable, possible link to ancient Gnosticism.

<sup>4</sup> Usually the creation of the Demiurge is associated with Sophia, who herself is a creation of God. We'll come back to her later.

Christ usually condemned the practices of most of the apostles (which were usually traditional Jewish activities or activities expounded by mainstream Christianity, like the proto-Eucharist breaking of bread) while finding favor in one apostle who understood the truth of Jesus' ministry. To this apostle, usually the purported author of the text, the true message of gnosis and the evils of the material world was given. The resurrection of which Christ spoke was not, then, a material/physical resurrection, but rather a resurrection of the divine spark, the deliverance of the soul from an evil world back to God. Christ is thought to have been, depending upon the school of Gnostic thought, either only seemingly physical or a physical being who only appeared to be crucified, being saved and lifted up at the last moment.

The foil that was first and second century Gnosticism in many ways shaped mainstream Christianity. Mainstream Christology developed as a response to claims of Christ's immateriality by proclaiming a flesh-and-blood, totally human (yet still divine) Jesus who did in fact die a human death upon a cross. This Jesus was also in some way both human and a part of the Godhead, taking part in the Son of God while still being a son of man. Soteriology developed in response to the theory of gnosis for the elite by expounding a salvation available to all who believed, while the idea of a bodily resurrection (a traditional Jewish belief) was proclaimed in response to the material/spiritual separation of the Gnostics.

While the Gnostics, and their theological siblings like the Manichaeans<sup>5</sup>, have not survived as independent groups in any sort of significant number or influence, their impact has been significant. The “pop-theology” professed by many modern day believers does not

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<sup>5</sup> Manichaeism was a religion that combined elements of Gnostic Christianity, Zoroastrianism, mysticism, and other Iranian belief systems. Most famous for being the one time religion of St. Augustine, the Manichaeans combined the Zoroastrian belief in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil with the Gnostic belief in Jesus as a prophetic voice on the truth of gnosis of materiality and spirituality. Just as the original Gnostics served as the foil that shaped much of early orthodox theology, it was the Manichaeans who arguably affected St. Augustine's writing more than any other outside group; indeed, many of his writings were protreptics aimed directly at his former Manichaean peers.

explicitly mention gnosis; indeed, most would likely have no idea what this term means, and would find implications of unintentional heresy as distasteful as they were undoubtedly untrue. Yet what we find is that many modern beliefs raise the spiritual beyond the material, a trend not found in the early Christian teachings of the Orthodox, but one certainly proclaimed by the Gnostics. Whether that means that the dead are "going to a better place" (and by that they don't mean Sheol) or that human sexuality, which is the means of continuing God's creation, is viewed as immoral, we find a modern popular theological mindset that puts the spiritual as something both separate from and superior to the physical. This is not just theologically backwards but socially dangerous because of the way it treats the creation. If the world is something we are to escape from in order to return to God, instead of something we are to act as stewards for and protectors of, then we are participating in a form of Gnosticism. The dangers of this go beyond being labeled as modern-day heretics, though, to practical matters of whether we choose to engage in social justice and environmental stewardship, or whether we opt out of helping the perpetuation of a creation we'll be leaving anyway once we shed this mortal coil.

### Origins

There are many theories as to the origins of Gnosticism. The only point that is generally agreed upon is that there was no one Gnosticism, and that the (somewhat) similar but different belief systems that eventually were lumped together as Gnosticism did not all share a common genesis. In distant congregations like Africa, Persia, or Egypt, "minor clerics... made free use of foreign arsenals, and in consequence were more vulnerable than the bishops themselves to the imputation of heresy."<sup>6</sup> Due to its complexity, in this matter I choose to defer to the opinions of the experts; without in-depth textual studies (beyond my abilities and time constraints) I cannot

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy*, 2.

hope to form any sort of truly educated opinion. Therefore, I shall simply present the most popular and predominant theories, and in doing so hopefully provide some insight into the vast spectrum of various theories about Gnosticism's origins.

Probably the most common line of thought is that Gnosticism was born as a conglomeration of Hellenistic thought with early Christian theology.<sup>7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18</sup>

While traces have been drawn from both Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy, it is the thought of Plato that seems to have most directly influenced Gnosticism. The parallels are easy to find: the Demiurge removed us from a direct connection with God, placing us into the Platonic Cave; we see only shadows of reality, ignorant to the divine spark and true nature that lies behind all we see; we can only realize the truth through the knowledge of the limitations imposed on us; we were delivered a messenger who shared with us the true knowledge, and instead of believing, we clung to our ignorance and dealt violently with this messiah/philosopher. Platonic thought takes from this material world all higher worth by placing perfection in an unknowable plane, which implicitly implies that this world around us can never be truly good. The only good is the wholly other. Thus, Christ must have been a spiritual being, with a mere reflection appearing here on

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<sup>7</sup> Abraham P. Bos. "'Aristotelian' and 'Platonic' Dualism in Hellenistic and Early Christian Philosophy and in Gnosticism." *Vigiliae Christianae* 56.3 (2002): 273.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham P. Bos. "Basilides as an Aristotelianizing Gnostic." *Vigiliae Christianae* 54.1 (2000): 45.

<sup>9</sup> W. Fairweather. "The Greek Apologists of the Second Century." *The Biblical World* 26.2 (1905): 132.

<sup>10</sup> R. Ferwerda. "Two Souls. Origen's and Augustine's Attitude toward the Two Souls Doctrine. Its Place in Greek and Christian Philosophy." *Vigiliae Christianae* 37.4 (1983): 368.

<sup>11</sup> Paula Fredriksen. "Hysteria and the Gnostic Myths of Creation." *Vigiliae Christianae* 33.3 (1979): 287.

<sup>12</sup> Horace Jeffery Hodges. "Gnostic Liberation from Astrological Determinism: Hipparchan 'Trepidation' and the Breaking of Fate." *Vigiliae Christianae* 51.4 (1997): 359.

<sup>13</sup> Montserrat Jufresa. "Basilides, a Path to Plotinus." *Vigiliae Christianae* 35.1 (1981): 2.

<sup>14</sup> Winrich Alfried Löhr. "Gnostic Determinism Reconsidered." *Vigiliae Christianae* 46.4 (1992): 382.

<sup>15</sup> E. P. Meijering. "God Cosmos History. Christian and Neo-Platonic Views on Divine Revelation." *Vigiliae Christianae* 28.4 (1974): 248.

<sup>16</sup> PHEME PERKINS. "On the Origin of the World (CG II,5): A Gnostic Physics." *Vigiliae Christianae* 34.1 (1980): 37.

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Quispel. "The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic." *Vigiliae Christianae* 50.4 (1996): 334.

<sup>18</sup> R. McL Wilson. "Gnostic Origins Again." *Vigiliae Christianae* 11.2 (1957): 93.

Earth. It is easy to see how an early Christian, faced with the pain of persecution,<sup>19</sup> would find the truth that Christ didn't *actually* suffer and die somewhat relieving! Indeed, one of the greatest early debates between the Orthodoxy and the Gnostics was not over theology, but the practicality of whether or not to face possible torture and death – it is from this discussion that the theology began to form.<sup>20</sup>

Another major influence upon the development of many Gnostic groups was the apocalyptic and mystical aspects of Judaism.<sup>21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31</sup> This development seems to have occurred largely in the Coptic region, likely due the phenomena that Edwards described earlier – the adoption of foreign concepts from satellite communities. There are a number of reasons to suspect direct Jewish influence in the development of Gnosticism. It seems a natural home for some of the more esoteric aspects of Judaism – some of the elements important to Judaism but less-or-nonexistent in biblical Christianity, like angels and demons,<sup>32</sup> were important aspects of the Gnostic cosmological and theological narrative.<sup>33</sup> The question of

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<sup>19</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 88. The early Christian writer Tertullian directly links the rise in heresy, particularly Gnosticism, with outbreak of persecution among Christians. He believed that they were looking for a theological excuse “to justify their cowardice.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-101.

<sup>21</sup> Roelof van den Broek. “Gospel Tradition and Salvation in Justin the Gnostic.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57.4 (2003): 363.

<sup>22</sup> Scott T. Carroll. “The “Apocalypse of Adam” and Pre-Christian Gnosticism.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44.3 (1990): 263.

<sup>23</sup> Paul J. Donahue. “Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 32.2 (1978): 82.

<sup>24</sup> April D. DeConick. “The Original “Gospel of Thomas.”” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56.2 (2002): 167.

<sup>25</sup> James E. Goehring. “A Classical Influence on the Gnostic Sophia Myth.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 35.1 (1981): 16.

<sup>26</sup> P. M. Head. “On the Christology of the Gospel of Peter.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46.3 (1992): 210.

<sup>27</sup> Robert M. Grant. “Notes on Gnosis.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 11.3 (1957): 145.

<sup>28</sup> Robert M. Grant. “Gnostic Origins and the Basilidians of Irenaeus.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 13.2 (1959): 124.

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Quispel. “Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 34.1 (1980): 1.

<sup>30</sup> Tuomas Rasimus. “Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 59.3 (2005): 235.

<sup>31</sup> Madeleine Scopello. “The Apocalypse of Zostrianos (Nag Hammadi VIII .1) and the Book of the Secrets of Enoch.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 34.4 (1980): 376.

<sup>32</sup> Eugenia Smagina. “The Manichaean Cosmogonical Myth as a ‘Re-Written Bible.’” in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism*, ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 202.

<sup>33</sup> See especially Scopello, “The Apocalypse of Zostrianos.”

causality comes into play here, namely whether mystical Jews were attracted to the more esoteric Christianity of Gnosticism than its Orthodox counterpoint, or if rather the apocalyptic/mystical aspects of Judaism led into the creation of at least some of the Gnostic sects. The answer doesn't seem clear, but it also doesn't seem as if they need be mutually exclusive.

With its emphasis on the dualistic nature of reality and the eternal struggle of good and evil, Persian religions (especially Zoroastrianism) also had an impact on the development of the Gnostic milieu.<sup>34 35 36 37</sup> Some sects, like the previously mentioned Manichaeists, were Gnostic enough without placing an emphasis on Christ as a messianic deliverer of gnosis. Others, like the Mandaeans,<sup>38</sup> are widely considered Gnostic while having very little to say about Christ at all. Many of these groups are considered either proto- or pre-gnostic, or pre-Christian Gnostics.<sup>39</sup> The semantics seem to derive mainly from whether one considers the term Gnostic tied to the theology of gnosis in general or the theology of gnosis as delivered by Christ. Regardless of these discussions of labels, the influence of Persian thought is easy to see in many schools of Gnosticism. I make the claim that while this influence may possibly not be as significant in the number of groups it directly affected, it may be the most influential when one considers who it influenced. I am of course speaking of Augustine, who spent much of his philosophical youth studying as a Manichaean.

While these three influences are the most widely found and accepted it is worth noting that there are other theories as well. Some have seen Buddhist or Hindu influences within some

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<sup>34</sup> L. W. Barnard. "The Background of St. Ignatius of Antioch." *Vigiliae Christianae* 17.4 (1963): 194.

<sup>35</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley. "A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha in Mandaean Religion." *History of Religions* 22.1 (1982): 60.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Goodwin Smith. "Persian Dualism." *The American Journal of Theology* 8.3 (1904): 494.

<sup>37</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi. "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" *Church History* 48.2 (1979): 131.

<sup>38</sup> Buckley, "A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha."

<sup>39</sup> Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism," 129.

Gnostic traditions, as well as the influence of traditional Egyptian beliefs.<sup>40 41</sup> In the end, it is important to remember that Gnosticism, like many traditions (especially those that came into contact with Hellenistic philosophy), is syncretic and not of one substance.<sup>42</sup> Just as there were many distinct groups that might call themselves (or may now be thought of as) Gnostic who arose from different traditions, it is not unlikely that many of those groups held within them the tension of multiple sources and influences. Unless we see Gnosticism as the “true” inheritor of the Christian tradition, it inherently must be influenced by something that either drew it away from Catholic Christianity or that pulled a foreign philosophy towards Christianity.

### Gnostic Theology

To begin to understand Gnostic theology (and here I mean explicitly Christian Gnosticism as opposed to the outliers like Manichaeism<sup>43</sup>) and cosmology, we must understand four characters. Three of these have already been introduced; the One True God (who we’ll simply refer to as God in this section), the Demiurge, and Christ himself. The fourth is an aeon, a lesser spiritual being created by and similar to God, by the name of Sophia. Much like Eve within a Catholic narrative of Original Sin, Sophia is destined to be both a creator and a destroyer.

As mentioned above, God created numerous spiritual beings similar to aspects of Godself; the least of these was Sophia.<sup>44</sup> The reason for this creation is never quite clear, especially given the continued theme within Gnostic tales of creation unfortunately leading to

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<sup>40</sup> Dom Aelred Baker. “Pseudo-Macarius and the Gospel of Thomas.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 18.4 (1964): 215.

<sup>41</sup> See also David Fiedler’s *The Sun of God: Ancient Cosmology and Early Christian Symbolism* for a great discussion of the possible influence of Egyptian cosmological influence on Gnosticism and the Gospel of John.

<sup>42</sup> G. Quispel. “Gnosticism and the New Testament.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 19.2 (1965): 67.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting, though, that many key figures in Christian Gnosticism do appear in belief systems as explicitly non-Christian as the Mandaean. The figure of Sophia, for example, is found within Mandaeanism as the spirit Ruha. See Buckley, “A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha,” 60.

<sup>44</sup> Hodges, “Gnostic Liberation,” 360.

sinfulness. Despite the importance of Sophia (at least to the narrative if not to the angelic hierarchy itself), even within the schools of thought in which her story is present, it is rarely presented the same. Nonetheless, “it represents more clearly than any other myth the world of thought in which the Gnostic moved.”<sup>45</sup>

The fall of Sophia begins with an act of naïve hubris meant to parallel the supposed hubris of Eve.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the aeons, who must create with the help of their consort, God the Father can create by himself. In an attempt to emulate her Father, Sophia attempted to create on her own, to disastrous results. While the details are unclear (we’ll come to that in a minute) the result of this failure was the “abortion” known as Ialdabaoth.<sup>47</sup> Also known as Yaldabaoth, the Demiurge, or Jehovah, this is the lesser god who serves as the evil against which the Gnostics must strive.

The exact events surrounding Sophia’s fall and the birth of the Demiurge differ wildly by tradition and school of thought. Numerous things could have happened from here:

1. Sophia may have accidentally created the world from the watery void after a literal and figurative fall from grace – this act may have also created Ialdabaoth;
2. Sophia may have directly created Ialdabaoth who is then cast out and who then creates the material world;
3. Within this previous line of thought, Ialdabaoth may have been cast out because of his arrogance...
4. or he may have been cast out simply because he was an abomination;
5. If he was the one to create the world, and not Sophia, he may have created the world out of arrogance (leading to his casting out)...

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<sup>45</sup> Goerhing, “A Classical Influence on the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” 16.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 18.

6. or out of ignorance – cut off and cast out, the Demiurge may have believed himself to be in fact the *only* god out there,<sup>48</sup>
7. In some tales Sophia’s daughter, Zoe, is said to have breathed fiery life into the material world, herself giving it form, and then casting down the “abortion” Ialdabaoth;
8. On top of this, who exactly cast out Ialdabaoth is unknown. Was it God? The host of aeons? Was it Sophia herself, and if so, was she overcome with shame and fear of being discovered, or was she acting to protect Ialdabaoth?

Whatever the “true” events surrounding Sophia’s sin and Ialdabaoth’s birth, things becomes somewhat clearer from there. Ialdabaoth, who is described as a great serpent with the face of a lion, creates humans from the trapped spiritual essence of his fallen mother.<sup>49</sup> Even here we see some splits in the story, with some saying the essence was left over from her fall into the void, but others claiming it was Sophia herself who actually breathed the life into Adam.<sup>50</sup>

Sophia’s influence goes beyond just the creation story. For some Gnostic thinkers Sophia was said to be the voice of “Q,” the hypothetical Gospel source, and that this knowledge was passed directly from the aeon herself.<sup>51</sup> Some modern thinkers believe that the early worship and reverence of Sophia may have influenced the beginning of the cultic practice of Virgin Mary reverence.<sup>52</sup> From a Christian theological perspective, though, perhaps her most interesting (and important) role in the Gnostic narrative is her interaction with Christ. They serve as a team of sorts in freeing this world from the evil of Ialdabaoth.

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<sup>48</sup> Quispel, “The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic,” 332.

<sup>49</sup> Hodges, “Gnostic Liberation,” 360.

<sup>50</sup> Perkins, “On the Origin of the World,” 38.

<sup>51</sup> DeConick, “The Original “Gospel of Thomas,”” 175.

<sup>52</sup> Philip L. Tite. “An Exploration of Valentinian Paraenesis: Rethinking Gnostic Ethics in the *Interpretation of Knowledge*.” *Harvard Theological Review* 97.3 (2004): 279.

It is important to begin with the distinction between the person of Jesus of Nazareth (who we will just call Jesus) and Jesus the Christ (whom we will just call Christ). The first is the human being Jesus. The latter is the divine aspect – from a traditional Christian perspective, this is the Trinitarian Son. For the Gnostic this is the Third Male, the aeon Christ, who was the first born of the First Woman (the aeon that would later go on to birth Sophia).<sup>53</sup> Sophia tried to undo the harm caused by Ialdabaoth by revealing the truth to humanity, but the Demiurge influenced prophets and leaders, such as Moses and David, in order to maintain his dominance on Earth. Finally, Sophia prayed for help, and the One True God answered.

God sent Sophia the spiritual being of Christ. Then Christ, or possibly both Christ and Sophia, descended into the human Jesus. Through the person of Jesus of Nazareth they hoped to reveal gnosis. When Ialdabaoth had him crucified, either Christ (or both Christ and Sophia if she was present) departed from the human Jesus and later resurrected him, or perhaps instead only caused it to only appear as if the human Jesus had been killed.<sup>54</sup> Regardless, the physically or spiritually resurrected Jesus Christ revealed to his favored disciple(s) the truth of the secret gnosis he was sent to deliver to the select few able and willing to receive.<sup>55</sup>

To say that Christ was spiritually resurrected was in no way revolutionary; “Five hundred years before, Socrates’ disciples had claimed that their teacher’s soul was immortal.”<sup>56</sup> To claim, however, that God had the power to physically raise the dead went against all logic. Here we can see the Orthodox side continuing with the theological tradition of their Jewish ancestors, while the Gnostics sided with the common Hellenistic worldview of the day.

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<sup>53</sup> Rasimus, “Ophite Gnosticism,” 237.

<sup>54</sup> The more “mainstream” Gnostic argument seems to certainly have become that Jesus Christ only appeared to die, and that the “complete package” so to speak has taken away at the last minute. This is partly due to the great argument over whether the resurrection of Christ, and the coming resurrection of the dead, was to be a physical or spiritual resurrection. For an in-depth discussion on the debate, see Pagel, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 3-27.

<sup>55</sup> Rasimus, “Ophite Gnosticism,” 238.

<sup>56</sup> Pagel, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 4.

Despite arguments within the tradition about the nature of Christ, Jesus, and Sophia during the resurrection, nearly all the Gnostic schools seemed to agree upon the details of the crucifixion. With a fairly unified voice they claimed that Jesus did not suffer.<sup>57</sup> This point, while possibly not an immediate matter of contention between the Orthodox and Gnostic sides (the account of the Crucifixion in The Gospel of John would suggest an almost, if not completely, painless passing) became a strong theological and social justification to stand against the claims of the heretical Gnostics. The image of a Christ suffering and dying for a world he would come back to redeem, juxtaposed with a Christ who passes effortlessly into the spiritual world in an act meant to show the true meaninglessness of the physical world he left behind, perfectly encapsulates not just the differences between the Orthodox and Gnostic Christ – it perfectly encapsulates the very real world ways in which these two abstract theologies impact the way believers live their lives. And as such, it hints at why Gnostic influence is just so damaging to even the most pious of believers.

### Gnosticism since Augustine

Bishop Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential of all Christian theologians, was at one time a member of the Gnostic sect known as the Manichaeans. While he later condemned them as heretical, Gnostic tendencies can be seen within some aspects of Augustinian theology, and many scholars believe that the influence of Gnostic thought on St. Augustine may have been greater than he realized, and second only to his Catholic thought itself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Hendrik Fick, “Traces of Augustinian ‘Gnosis’ in Julianus Pomerius’ *De Vita Contemplativa*,” in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism*, ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 191.

St. Augustine's book *Confessions* is considered not only one of the most influential theological works in all of Christendom, but also one of the first autobiographical works. It was also, "partly, but to an important extent, a protreptic addressed to a Manichaean."<sup>59</sup> *Confessions* is widely seen as a paraenetic, or a text meant to "strengthen the resolve of those already" members of a group, in this case Christianity.<sup>60</sup> Here, though, it is being put for that *Confessions* was equally meant to be a protreptic, or an argument meant to convert.<sup>61</sup> St. Augustine was speaking directly to the Manichaeans, as much as to his Christian congregation; his goal was most likely equally to convert the less than committed Manichaean as it was to keep his congregation who were "constantly exposed to conversion attempts by members of the rival Manichaean community."<sup>62</sup>

The danger, though, was that St. Augustine was likely not completely rid of his Gnostic ideas. While certainly openly dismissive of them as heretical, Gnostic trends can be seen in his theology. The demonizing of sexuality, the emphasis on the errors of this world coming from the Fall, and especially from the hubris of the woman, and the conception of the material world as a lesser shadow of the spiritual world<sup>63</sup> all parallel common Gnostic theological themes. St. Augustine even distinguished between three different ways of contemplating the divine. These were bodily, spiritually, and intellectually. Among these three, it was physical or spiritual experience that was held in the highest regard; rather, "the intellectual contemplation, he says, is the most magnificent of the three."<sup>64</sup> While he may not have believed in an explicit gnosis the

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<sup>59</sup> Annemaré Kotzé. "Protreptic, Paraenetic and Augustine's *Confessions*," in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism*, ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> Seen largely in his other keystone work, *The City of God*.

<sup>64</sup> Fick, "Traces of Augustinian 'Gnosis,'" 195.

emphasis on intellectual pursuit over the spiritual and physical strongly parallels the tendencies of both his Manichaean and Neo-Platonic teachers.

Western Christians are still highly influenced by Augustinian thought today, perhaps more than any other teacher but Christ himself. And the danger here is that we may find ourselves devaluing the physical, raising up the spiritual, and in doing so creating a narrative as non-Biblical as it is neo-Gnostic.

Today, the majority of Christians place less emphasis on the bodily resurrection of the dead than on the idea of an instant trip up to a cloudy heaven. While the finer points of Judeo-Christian soteriology are not to be expected among all lay believers, this shift in emphasis also marks a shift in worldly focus. If we are focusing on the hereafter as a place separate from the world we are in, if this material world is either evil or at least a neutral level of ungodly, then the importance of working to better this world is diminished. If we are looking to the City of God as an escape from this world, and not as the idealized world we should be working to create, then social justice, environmental stewardship, and civic action lose much of their importance. A majority of Christians will continue to hold dear the importance of works – the trend we see among many churches, though, is a de-emphasis on the importance of large scale societal and environmental change. Individual works are important, but to ignore the structures of the “City of Man” that create the need for this work is not only against the Biblical message of preparing for the New Jerusalem, but stinks of the Gnostic theological desire to leave this world to wallow in its own disease and death.

St. Augustine himself realized the importance of a physical world, even if other, more Gnostic aspects of his teachings are sometimes emphasized. He, for example, knew the importance of a human and broken Christ – “He showed us to what weakness the divine aid frees

it. Further, Christ can achieve no real redemption if his flesh was not real.”<sup>65</sup> Without the Christ who suffered and died on the cross, soteriology is meaningless. God resembles more closely the Gnostic “One True” God, and our salvation is from abandoning this Earth. If Christ is viewed instead as the one who took a truly physical form because it was good, and because it is a godly creation, then soteriology has the weight of the experienced world around us. In the end, this is the key danger of Gnostic thought creeping into mainstream Christian theology. If we view this world as something to abandon, its importance is diminished to at best a state of purgatory we must endure, and at worst an evil creation to break free of. Without this Gnostic influence, though, the world becomes one worth fighting for.

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<sup>65</sup> J. Kevin Coyle, “Jesus, Mani, and Augustine,” in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism*, ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 360.

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