

You may have heard many sermons about creation and discussed the stories that various cultures around the world have told to explain how the world, its flora and fauna, humans, and the rest of the universe came into being. You may have wrestled with the spectrum of interpretations that can be taken from our biblical creation story, from the strictly literal to the purely figurative. In doing so, you would have felt the competition between faith and knowledge in the area of “cosmonogy” – the study of the accounts of the origin of the universe. That tension pulls at you because on the one hand you want to be faithful to your belief that the Bible is the inerrant or infallible Word of God, while on the other hand you want to apply your knowledge of science and its evidence.

But instead of discussing creationism vs. evolution, I will describe a spiritual movement called Gnosticism, which began before the time of Christ and competed with Christianity vigorously during the time of the early Church and continues in some forms even in the present day. Gnosticism presents alternative “theogonies” – accounts of the origin and genealogy of the gods – which contradict the New Testament’s model of the Trinity. Gnosticism shares the concept of “one true invisible universal God”, but identifies additional gods based on attributes of the Father, Son or Holy Spirit as well as various biblical characters. The objective in Gnosticism is to obtain a mystical knowledge and insight into god and self to achieve a kind of salvation, or state of “rest” during your lifetime, so that no afterlife is necessary.

Gnosticism is not a single religion, but a whole class of beliefs that include some of the mystical fringes of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Gnostics also studied the texts of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Persians, and Plato – believing that they all disclosed truths to be celebrated for their wisdom. The term gnostic is derived from the common Greek word gnosis, “knowledge”. But for Gnostic religions, this is not simply “book learning”; it means a personal mystical experience, a knowledge of the whole timeline of the world, past present and future, and a knowledge of the self – where we have come from, who we are, where we are going – and of the soul’s journey. Gnosticism can be defined as a “the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated.”

The combination of overlapping sources and conflicting conclusions drove the “heresiologists” (people who study unorthodox or contradictory teachings). Some of their literature about heresy has given us insight into Gnostic thought, from critics such as Irenaeus of Lyon, Hippolytus of Rome, Epiphanius of Salamis, Plotinos of Lykopolis, and Saint Augustine (a former Gnostic). But a major source of Gnostic text was found in 1945 by an Egyptian farmer near Nag Hammadi: about 50 texts of 4<sup>th</sup>-Century Coptic translations of 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>-Century Greek compositions. Now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, it includes the works of Sethians, Valentinians, Syrians and others.

So little literature survived because the Christian church viewed Gnosticism as a dangerous rival. In 391 AD, Christians under the Byzantine emperor Theodosios I destroyed the temple complex of Sarapeum in Alexandria, including its 700,000 scrolls. Ghenghis Kahn’s horsemen stormed over the Gnostics in Chinese Turkestan. Pope

Innocent II's Albigensian crusade in 1209 into southern France was followed by the Inquisition, so that the gnostic Cathars in Provence were all but wiped out by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century under Pope Benedict XII. What was so provocative about the gnostic teachings that Christians felt compelled to destroy this class of beliefs? I suggest that the fear came from the way gnostics re-interpreted Judeo-Christian sources in an attempt to supercede the Christian message.

An early Gnostic work is the Book of Baruch, a work by somebody named Justin which incorporates Hebrew and Greco-Roman traditions. In it, the heavenly father god Elohim marries Edem, the early mother goddess, to produce 24 angelic children, who in turn create humankind and paradise. Elohim breathes spirit into Adam, and Edem breathes soul. Baruch ("the blessed") is the good tree of life and the chief paternal angel, and Naas ("the serpent") is the evil tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and chief maternal angel. Elohim ascends to be with "the Good" an abstract deity in the highest part of heaven, while Edem is left below. Edem's angel Naas infects the spirit of humanity, while Elohim's angel Baruch sends Moses, Herakles (the Greek god of strength), Jesus, and Priapos (the Greek god of fertility) to redeem mankind's souls. If that sounds like a theological "mash up", some of the later Gnostic systems are even more complicated!

The first major category of Gnostic thought is Sethian – referring to themselves as the unshakable race of perfect humankind, intellectually descended from Seth, the child of Adam and Eve. The book of Genesis hints that Seth marked a new beginning for humanity after Cain killed Abel. In the Secret Book of John (supposedly authored by John the son of Zebedee), the invisible father of all is called the One, while the divine mother is called Barbelo. Wisdom is named Sophia, and her child, Yaldabaoth, is the creator god. In a bizarre fusion, Yaldabaoth and Eve produce Yahweh and Elohim – two names that we know from Old Testament writings as names of God.

The next major category of Gnostic thought is Valentinian, based on the writings of Valentinus from Alexandria who was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Christian who absorbed Sethian and Greek philosophy. He divided human beings into three groups: hylics (material people of flesh and blood who are unbelievers), psychics (ordinary Christians with soul), and pneumatics (truly spiritual people; Valentinian Gnostics). The Gospel of Truth considers the fruit of the knowledge of the father to be the dawn rather than the fall, and considers the cross on which Christ was crucified to be the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Letter to Flora by Ptolemy, a disciple of Valentinus, describes the Old Testament Law as coming from the "demiurge" – a middle deity that is below the god of all but is not the "adversary" (devil) either. In this model, the Savior is an image of the greater god rather than of the jealous Jewish god Yahweh.

A third category of Gnostic thought is Syrian, especially works attributed to Judas Thomas, the twin brother of Jesus according to Syrian tradition. In the Gospel of John (yes, our 4<sup>th</sup> gospel), Thomas is described as the "doubting Thomas" for his agnostic challenge. The Book of Thomas claims to be the hidden sayings that the savior spoke to Judas Thomas, as edited by Mathaias (who might be the replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot but his identity is unclear). The Book of Thomas is probably from the first part of

the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, after the Gospel of Thomas but before the Acts of Thomas. The Acts of Thomas includes a supplementary poem called The Song of the Pearl, in which gnosis is a garment that quivers, pulsing with knowledge. The Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas are considered part of New Testament “apocrypha” (that is, esoteric or questionable works excluded from the biblical canon).

A fourth category of Gnostic thought is “Hermetica”, named after Hermes Trismegistos, or Hermes the thrice-greatest: a Greek variation of the Egyptian god Thoth. In writings attributed to a mysterious Egyptian sage who lived not long after the time of Moses, “Hermes Trismegistus is a patron of alchemists; his province is thought, inventive, artful and curious; his metal is quicksilver; his clients, orators, thieves and poets.” In a work entitled Poimandres, that name is used for the highest form of God, being both male and female, who speaks to the author about a vision of involving the emanation of first the demiurge as a creator-god, second the Word of God, and third the human in his likeness. The demi-urge and Word of God then worked together to make the rest of the natural world, and when they were done the god-head split the male and female sides of humans and animals. In the struggle between light & life / dark & death, the soul can ascend through seven zones to become divine. In each zone it casts something aside: the body in the 1<sup>st</sup>, machinations of evil in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the guile of lust in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, domineering arrogance in the 4<sup>th</sup>, unholy daring and rashness in the 5<sup>th</sup>, striving for wealth by evil means in the 6<sup>th</sup>, and malicious lies in the 7<sup>th</sup>. In the eighth sphere the soul joins with the others who have arrived earlier in singing hymns to the father-god.

A fifth category of Gnostic thought is Mandaeanism, a gnostic movement from southern Iraq and Iran since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century who write in an eastern dialect of Aramaic. They portray Adam and Eve as having heavenly prototypes: Adakas (hidden Adam), and Anana dNhora (cloud of light). A savior figure, Manda dHayye (knowledge of life) teaches the earthly Adam and Eve about their true home in the world of light and the ritual means of returning there. Mandaeans are therefore named “knowers” or “gnostics” after this bringer of knowledge. When the Portuguese encountered the Mandaeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, they interpreted the weekly baptismal practice and use of the teachings of John the Baptist as evidence of a long-lost Christian group, whom they called “Christiani di San Giovanni” (the Christians of John). Later relationships however, revealed the group’s portrayal of Jesus as a false messiah, their demonizing of Moses, and their ritual sacrifice of a dove in a cult hut.

A sixth category of Gnostic thought is Manichaeism, named after the Iranian prophet Mani from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, who at the age of 24 began a public ministry with his father and two followers. He claimed to be the messenger of light and proclaimed a universal religion using his own canon of seven works. Mani’s movement spread throughout Persia while protected by the Emperor Shapur I, but the successors to the throne had him imprisoned until he died. Manuscripts found in Algeria, Egypt and China describe an extremely complicated theology and how an individual can succeed in the struggle to free good light particles from evil dark matter only through the teachings of Mani and the guidance of the Manichaean church. Two classes of people are identified: the elect, who must adhere to strict vegetarian and sexual abstinence rules, and the auditors, who served

the elect and only had to meet lesser requirements in exchange for a chance to have their light particles freed when their bodies decompose into the soil and become part of the vegetables that future elect will eat!

A seventh category of Gnostic thought could be called “Other” since there are a variety of texts that do not fall neatly into the other categories but share some aspects. Iranian Zoroastrianism was a pre-Christian form of dualism, with its good and evil spirits contending until wisdom wins and the soul ascends to the realm of light.

The Gospel of Mary claims to be written by Mary Magdala, describing a conversation with Jesus in which he says that “all natures, all formed things, all creatures exist in and with one another and will be resolved into their own roots.” Later, the disciple Andrew (Simon’s brother) says, “I do not believe that the savior said this. These teachings are full of strange ideas.” In the Naassene Sermon, Jesus apparently asks the father to send him to earth to disclose the forms of the gods and teach human souls the secrets of the holy way, whose name is gnosis.

A compilation of sacred texts called the *Gnostic Bible* defines 5 traits of Gnostic religions, which I will compare to our evangelical Christian interpretation:

<b>Gnosticism</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
1. they give a primary place to gnosis, unmediated mystical knowledge, as the way to salvation and life.	1. we give a primary place to faith, the unmediated acceptance of the gift of forgiveness through repentance that God has provided, initially through the prophets and fulfilled through Jesus, as the way to salvation and life.
2. they personify various manifestations of the divine as separate characters, such as Wisdom and Forethought, separate from the “father of all”.	2. we worship one true God, recognizing only three distinct characters: the transcendent “Father”, the incarnate “Son” and the spiritual “Holy Ghost”.
3. they present creation stories which distinguish the transcendent divine spirit from the creator of the world (dualism) in order to explain how God could allow sin to come into the world.	3. our creation story does not distinguish between the transcendent divine spirit and the creator of the world; our God allowed sin to come into the world so that we could choose to accept or reject his love.
4. they use a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions to find truths, including Jewish, Greek and others.	4. we primarily look to the books of the Old and New Testaments find truths, testing our personal experiences and the teachings of

<b>Gnosticism</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
	others against the concepts in the Bible to remain faithful to the foundations of our belief.
5. they claim a vision of an enlightened life that transcends the mundane world and attains the divine.	5. we claim a vision of an enlightened life that gives meaning to the mundane world by seeking to love God and our neighbours continuously, in anticipation of an afterlife of rest and reward.

Today in the church calendar is Transfiguration Sunday. Mark 9 verses 2 to 9, printed in your bulletin, describe how Jesus' garments glowed white as he appeared with Elijah & Moses to Peter, James and John, and God spoke from dark cloud saying, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" That demonstration by God was meant to provide another catalyst for faith, a symbol that the father god of all is not limited to a high place in heaven, but that his plan for the redemption of humanity is being carried out and requires a response on our part.

The Corinthian Christians championed wisdom, and possibly even the Gospel of Thomas. To correct that, Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 (as printed in your bulletin), "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ... knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you."

I'm glad that last week's sermon on church unity included Ephesians 4:4-6 which says, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Would you rather try on your own to obtain enough knowledge of God to find peace for your soul, or would you rather put your faith in Jesus, whose claim to be the Son of God was supported by his acts and teachings as documented by multiple authors, and even most gnostics believe was sent by God to help the spiritually sightless see the light of the most High? I'll give you some secret knowledge right now: read John 9 again – it contains both a story of faith healing and a warning about the consequences of claiming to have knowledge of God but not acting on it.

**PGIMF Sermon Feb. 26, 2006 by Kevin Hiebert**

*Christianity & Gnosticism: the competition between faith & knowledge*

---

Table for bulletin:

<i>Characteristic ...</i>	<b>Gnosticism</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
<b>Primary focus</b>		
<b>Deities</b>		
<b>Transcendent God</b>		
<b>Forethought/Wisdom</b>		
<b>The Creator</b>		
<b>The Savior</b>		
<b>Satan</b>		
<b>Nature of Humans</b>		
<b>Sacred texts</b>		
<b>Salvation</b>		
<b>Adam and Eve</b>		

Answer keys:

<i>Characteristic ...</i>	<b>Gnosticism</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
<b>Primary focus</b>	Knowledge	Faith
<b>Deities</b>	Many (including ours)	3-in-1 (Trinity)
<b>Transcendent God</b>	Always invisible in the highest level of heaven.	God (a.k.a. God the Father). Sometimes reveals himself to prophets and people through miraculous signs.
<b>Forethought/Wisdom</b>	Named gods: Sophia	Attributes of God
<b>The Creator</b>	The demiurge: at best incompetent or at worst malevolent	God (a.k.a. God the Father). Fully good and just, but allowing people the freedom to rebel.
<b>The Savior</b>	Reveal/awaken knowledge of self to experience bliss of oneness with the divine.	Jesus of Nazareth; full human (born of Mary) and full God (the Son of God, and the Christ and the Messiah). Be a sacrifice for sin and be resurrected to life as a model to encourage emulation in repentance and obedience.
<b>Satan</b>	Various definitions, not an important force since evil is inherent in all matter.	Fallen angel, adversary of God allowed temporary power over the earth while it is full of sin.
<b>Nature of Humans</b>	3 components: material (earthly), temporal (soul), and eternal (spirit)	2 components: body (material), soul (eternal)
<b>Sacred texts</b>	Many (including ours)	Old & New Testaments
<b>Salvation</b>	Knowledge attainment leads to peaceful rest in this life	Faithfulness will be rewarded in heaven
<b>Adam and Eve</b>	The earthly forms of humanity as Adam and Eve have heavenly counterparts. Sexual procreation causes a cycle of the entrapment of souls made of good light spiritual particles in evil dark physical matter which require mystical knowledge for each individual to redeem and free.	Adam was created by God the Father using the breath of life, and Eve was formed from Adam's rib; Eve's disobedience was adopted by Adam and their offspring have required redemption through faith in God ever since, which is made ever clearer through the call of Jesus Christ.

## **Transfiguration Sunday (*Last Sunday After Epiphany*)**

### *Unifying Theme:*

Going into the light, coming out of the light; The presence of God, the source of the light.

<u>Scripture</u>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Hymns</b>
<a href="#">2 Kings 2:1-12</a>	Elijah separates the waters of the Jordan to cross on dry land; is taken up by a whirlwind to heaven in front of Elisha after the two are separate by a fiery chariot and horses	358: <a href="#">Dear Lord and Father of Mankind</a> 452: <a href="#">My Faith Looks Up to Thee</a>
<a href="#">Psalm 50:1-6</a>	The presence of God Almighty	621: <a href="#">Be Present at Our Table, Lord</a> 700: <a href="#">Abide with Me</a>
<a href="#">Mark 9:2-9</a>	With Peter, James and John looking on, Jesus' garments glowed white and appeared with Elijah & Moses; God speaks from dark cloud saying, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!"	203: <a href="#">Hail to the Lord's Anointed</a> 258: <a href="#">O Wondrous Sight! O Vision Fair</a>
<a href="#">2 Corinthians 4:3-6</a>	Light shines at God's direction	539: <a href="#">O Spirit of the Living God</a> 651: <a href="#">Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire</a>

From HymnSite.com

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6,13-14**

<sup>3</sup>And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup>The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup>For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. .... <sup>13</sup>It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, <sup>14</sup>because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.

**Mark 9:2-9**

<sup>2</sup>After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup>His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup>(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

<sup>7</sup>Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

<sup>8</sup>Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.