

Gnosis versus Theology

by: Douglas Lockhart

*The Church long ago misidentified the locus of human freedom.
Because of this error, the whole of Western civilization is crashing
against a brick wall: Father Sylvan*

David Needleman: *Lost Christianity*¹

The Emotional Vortex

Christianity lost contact with its original vision before the end of the 1st century. This is not to say that its original vision was in itself original, just that it had in its grasp a life-transforming process that it eventually mislaid. So when I came across Jacob Needleman's book *Lost Christianity*, and read the insightful and sometimes caustic remarks of Father Sylvan (see my essay 'The Enigmatic Father Sylvan'), I suspected I was on the right track. And not just because Needleman's evidence reflected my own, or because Father Sylvan's take on things seemed to support my contention that Christianity's life-force was moribund, but because the evidence stacking up for such an opinion could be detected throughout Christianity's long and tortuous history. What I had not realized, however, was that this lost process of Christianity's was tied to what many considered to be its most boring aspect: its continual harping on about moral behavior. The idea of being "good" seemed to have overpowered Christianity to such an extent that its whole character had become one of frowning disapproval. But buried deep within that judgmental attitude lay the kernel of something transformative: the realization that our greatest enemy was our wayward emotions. Father Sylvan sums up this situation with precision: "Do not make a religion of your better moments. That way lies the corruption of our teaching."²

The teaching Father Sylvan is referring to concerns the *real nature of man*;³ if a teaching does not reflect this real nature, then it is fundamentally useless in spite of being helpful in a social context. The mercy and compassion of a teaching do not reflect the heart of religion, Sylvan tells us; it is "the conditions under which it brings them" that are important.⁴ The language of real Christianity is not for our emotions; it is for our hearts and our minds in the sense meant by St Paul when he says, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of the mind."⁵ It is the mind that has to be renewed, and that is not accomplished through moral strictures, or through

doctrines dutifully believed, but through the shock of waking up to our constantly submerged mental state and to our emotional dishonesty. The crux of the matter lies not in whether we believe in Christianity's doctrinal propositions, but in our capacity to unhitch ourselves from our deeply conditioned and reactive minds. *That* was the message of early Christianity, and it is a message scrambled beyond recognition as it developed into a highly organized religion with power and authority.

This teaching was linked to previous expressions of the same discovery; it was not in itself original. Paul's "new mind" had nothing whatever to do with Jesus as an historical figure, it had to do with the fact that he embodied a special kind of mind that could be experienced by others. The "Christ" mind was not *Jesus'* mind *in* others; it was a form of mind that could be developed in others when they came to understand what he had come to understand. In this sense "Christ" was not Jesus' surname, or a description of something that Christians could put on like a jacket; it was a psychophysical process. To "put on Christ" was not to be "possessed" *by* Jesus; it was about finding the means to generate his special kind of consciousness within ourselves. Paul the theological wizard takes the Greek word for "Messiah" (*Christos*) and transforms it, step by step, into a process that radically alters an individual's perception of self, other and world. Hence his disinterest in Jesus' earthly existence; he was more interested in Jesus' form of consciousness.

This could be why Christianity was considered to be of universal significance; the discovery at Christianity's core was not that it had a better grocery list of beliefs than anyone else, but that it had a teaching that applied directly to the human condition. Hence the curious disciplining aspect of Jesus' own teachings; he was heightening the awareness of his disciples through a moment-by-moment recognition that they were asleep on their feet ("could you not watch one hour?"), that they did not know what they were doing most of the time ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"), and that he, in that moment of time, was their only hope of ever finding out what their problem really was. He was asking them to wake up *inside* their reactions and catch sight of themselves as they faced the onslaught of daily life – hence his curious over-the-top moral directives. It was not enough to merely do the right thing as far as the law was concerned; it was a matter of *fully occupying the space in which they moved and had their being*. That was what mattered, and it mattered because it heralded the presence of a real person capable of making real decisions.

Christianity could be said to have been left with a husk of its previous intelligence concerning the self's deeper capacities, an appreciation of things internal all but eradicated by the Church's later attempts to purge the monasteries of Gnostic ideas and standardise the faith's doctrines. Some very strange ideas had surfaced in the name of Christianity, the deep intelligence (*gnosis*) of which early Christianity had

been composed falling under the same shadow as Gnosticism's understanding of human perception. Classifying everything that did not conform to the Church's standardised version of truth as heretical, anything even vaguely suggestive of an alternative spiritual system was rejected.

By the end of the 4th century the Roman church was the central organizing influence in Christendom, its consolidated authority and literalist interpretations of Scripture carrying it away from an understanding of its own *gnosis*, those aware of the faith's deeper teachings in as much danger of reprisal as those who had only a distorted or limited version of that teaching. Father Sylvan unravels this complicated situation for us when he says, "'Gnosticism' is not a heresy of the Church, but a 'heresy' of gnosis."⁶ In saying this he shows himself to have had a coherent historical sense of what was going on beneath the surface of Gnosticism and Christianity.

The Mysterious Race of Perfected Men

The initiates of Gnosticism were not all the muddle-headed idiots Church investigators made them out to be; many were skilled scientists of the mind armed with what is now recognised as an exact spiritual vocabulary. The Church's reaction to these groups was to be expected – much of the imagery and symbolism was so obscure as to be utterly unintelligible – but there is little excuse for that kind of reaction today. Recent research by Gnostic scholars such as Elaine Pagels and Simone Petrement have shown those groups to have been highly sophisticated in their approach, Jean Doresse's 1958 study of the Egyptian Gnostics (the Naassene, the Peratae, the Sethians and the Ophites) showing these "Jewish-oriented" Christian groups to have been basically the same heresy under different names. Why so? Because the connecting point for all of them was Jesus' brother James, leader of the Jerusalem-based Nazarenes.⁷ There was, Doresse believed, an underlying continuity of thought allied to Jesus that, although difficult to interpret due to complexity of image and symbol, was nevertheless coherent at base in relation to particular groups.⁸ The basic code used by these groups had been broken by the Church Fathers, but they had not understood the significance of what they read. And for very good reason, these particular groups had resorted to subterfuge in the face of a growing persecution.

Doresse gives us the basic code being used, and it had to do with the human senses, and nothing to do with theological constructions built around Jesus' life and behaviour. The underlying scheme of these interrelated groups had to do with the human brain, with the inner landscape of consciousness and with sense-perceptions. The brain was "Eden", the membranes enveloping the brain the "heavens", and the head "paradise". The Church Father Epiphanius confirms these findings in connection with the Ophites. In the same allegorical manner he

observes that there is a river with branches flowing out of Eden (the brain), these branches having to do with the human senses. The eye is the river Phison, the ear is the river Geon, the breath is the river Tigris. Doresse's footnotes reveal that "the land of bondage" (Egypt) equalled the *evil of matter*; so when a spiritual master "left Egypt", it meant that he had died. A vision in the heavens (high up in the head) of a coiled serpent was equally not a reference to evil, but to energy. When in their teachings these groups spoke of Christ "mastering the serpent", they did not mean that he had mastered evil, but that he had, as in the yogic tradition of India, brought the serpent *as energy* under control.⁹ This tells us that Christianity's original *gnosis* was not in itself unique, but concerned with a consciousness-transforming process belonging to the body. The question being debated today, however, is whether these Gnostic groups were in any real sense Christian, or actually independent of Christianity in spite of their Christian gloss.

Some scholars stress the independence factor; others vindicate heresy hunters like Irenaeus by appearing to prove that the Gnostics were all heretical Christians. The truth, however, may be a little more complex. There is good reason to think that no precise source for many of the Gnostic groups ever existed, but that those of suspected Jewish origin originated in the early Ebionite sect, a group related to the Jerusalem Church of the Apostles through Jesus' brother James. This form of Gnosticism was categorized as a low Christological formation by the Church Fathers because it rejected the idea of Jesus being divine. This view later became the basis for the Arian heresy, which was Christian in origin, and it resulted in Roman Christianity being almost displaced as the ruling faction.

Not all of the Gnostic texts were of the same calibre; many of the texts did descend to the level of gibberish, a point noted by Simone Petrement as indicative of late Gnosticism. In her opinion early Gnosticism carried the greater coherence, late Gnosticism becoming progressively incoherent. In her references to the Naassenes and the Ophites, she sums up these Jewish-oriented groups as understanding the term "Gnostic" to actually mean *Christian*, and that suggests they were reading the word *gnosis* in the same sense as Irenaeus did when he described heretics as "Gnostics falsely so-called,"¹⁰ so making Christians Gnostic by definition. Petrement's summation is that the Gnostic heretics probably used the term "Gnostic" in all innocence, and that this usage did not mean that they saw themselves as a sect within Christianity, but as carrying the original meaning of Christianity.

The Sheep and the Goats

Christian heretics of the early centuries are not talked of much from the pulpit; they are presumed away under the guise of deviants who do not require explanation. There was, it is believed, a single community of believers called

"Christians" in the beginning and the heretics were those who invented grotesque notions about Christ and had to be banished from that community. It is that simple. There was a single doctrine of Jesus as the Christ of God, and in unbroken succession we are recipients of that doctrine because the Church has kept its eye steadily on the central truth of Jesus' divinity and mission. You either accept or reject the fact of Jesus' divine mission, and on the basis of your decision end up in heaven or hell. End of story. End result of two thousand years of faithfulness to a set of ideas considered to be divinely revealed. That is the Christian argument, and it is unacceptable. Serious scholars reject the idea of this having been the regulating will of God at work. There never had been a simple community with one set of beliefs; there had been dozens of Christian communities, those deemed heretical being those who lost out in the power struggle with Rome. As the Nag Hammadi scrolls demonstrated, early Christianity had been highly creative in its approach to Jesus and his status.

It was not until the 4th century that this regulating will of God got under way, and it did so at the hands of Bishop Athanasius. In his 39th Festal Letter Athanasius let it be known that only certain books were to be considered inspired, and therefore canonical. From that moment the lines of demarcation were drawn, the books not on the list marked down as apocryphal, or heretical, and proclaimed anathema. The scene was set for conflict, those who considered themselves good Christians on Monday reduced to being heretics on Tuesday. The dividing line was in place; the sheep and the goats were about to be separated – with a vengeance. And all because Athanasius was “influenced by the need and advantage of the Church,” a statement of simple fact laden with dire implications for the future of Christianity.

Those in possession of the banned writings (termed "gospels" by those who had them) were under instruction to destroy them. It was either own up to holding a view of Jesus at variance with that of this powerful faction, or suffer the consequences. Athanasius knew what this meant; he had experienced the same threat himself eleven years earlier and been forced to hide in Upper Egypt as a result of a doctrinal shift in Rome. Ideas about Jesus and his status had been fluid up until this point, but from that moment everything changed. It was no longer a matter of sensibly debating this approach over that approach; it was now a matter of being declared already dead (cut off from salvation) by the ruling faction if you persisted in your use of writings considered subversive. In *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, G.R.S. Mead sums up the situation when he says that the Scriptures eventually turned into a “literary fetish deprived of reason.”¹¹ The textual God of the Church's first fundamentalists had appeared, and he was about to stamp his disapproval on everyone and everything out of alignment with *his* faction's fancies.

Mead describes Christianity's origins as being imbibed with our mothers' milk,

and of it being an integral part of the consciousness of the Western world. Interwoven with our earliest memories, the sheer solemnity of Christian doctrine had found its way into our heart and minds; that is, it affected us deeply without our realizing it. Even if consciously unconcerned with its ideas and beliefs, we were still strongly influenced by those ideas and beliefs at the unconscious level, and at the social level. For some, this resulted in an unquestioning attitude towards Christianity, a curious inability to shrug off the idea that somehow Christianity was correct in all of its pronouncements in spite of much evidence to the contrary. For others, it was a nagging doubt about their rejection of Christianity. This suggested that anyone born within the confines of Christendom had a struggle on their hands if they wished to shake off the claim that today's Christianity had been in the mind of God before the world came into existence. Christianity is something we have grown used to; it has become part of us at the cultural level and is backed by the "stupendous power of inertia which force of custom carries."¹² Hence deathbed conversions and the sudden leap that some people make from unbelief to belief. We have been psychologically programmed and have to wake up to this disturbing fact.

The Lowest Common Denominator

In the first three centuries of the Christian era, Christian communities tried to develop their ideas through direct experience of God and self, some believing Christianity to be a system of knowledge that could be translated into a world philosophy. The soul could be known in the same way as the body; real Christianity was an exact science of the soul that could be made satisfying to even the most exacting intellect. Given the title "first-born of Satan", these communities were forced underground, the result being an ever-deepening resentment that spread its tentacles in all directions.

Having received the name "Gnostic" because of their insistence that *gnosis* (knowledge) was integral to spiritual wisdom, these explorers of inner reality reached conclusions about Jesus, God, self and world that the Church felt compelled to reject. And they were eventually in a position to make their version of things stick, for by the 4th century previously victimized Christian bishops were in control of Rome's legal arm, any group considered heretical defined as criminal and persecuted. The narrow orthodoxy of the Church became the ruling norm, Christian teaching reduced to what Stephan Hoeller has described as the lowest common denominator. Because of good fortune (Constantine's beneficence), Rome's leading faction was able to dictate both the content and direction of the faith. The faith was now Roman, and would soon be Catholic, that is, universally accepted because of power-politics. Accused by the Roman Church of having created doctrines in alignment with the thinking of Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Orpheus and Heraclitus, the Gnostic communities were deemed corrupt and

dismissed as a universal danger in spite of their writing not referencing these philosophers at any time.¹³

Working to accommodate its rapidly growing flock by further simplifying its already simplified message of the “Christ”, the Roman Church consolidated its position and inadvertently reduced the "faith" to a pale reflection of what it had once been. Retreating from view, *gnosis*-oriented Christians adapted as best they could and formed secret congregations nurturing, in Mead’s words “a hidden life of great activity.”¹⁴ Private libraries of banned books were legion, schools or workshops formed where a veritable science of the sacred was developed. The Church was appalled - *gnosis*-oriented Christians seemed to be in every thicket, their teachings dangerous and distant from orthodoxy. And nowhere more so than in Egypt, at Alexandria, where the greatest public library in the pagan world was housed. Being the principal source of information on past religious systems, this marvel of the ancient world was destroyed by fire, Christians being the probable culprits.

The Rule of Faith

In her seminal text *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels pries open the Gnostic world and confronts us with a mentality quite other than the one generally thought to have existed. Revealing what she terms “the other side of the coin”, she draws our attention to the fact that not only did orthodox Christianity denounce the Gnostics, the Gnostics also denounced the orthodox as “unknowingly empty, not knowing who they are, like dumb animals.”¹⁵ Accusing orthodox Christians of having built an “imitation church”, these Gnostics voice the opinion that the Church at Rome had enslaved its flock through fear and forced it to obey earthly representatives – proving, if nothing else, that they had once belonged to the Christian fold. Rome's ruling faction is referred to as a "blind" community because it speak of things about which it knows nothing. This is the Church's principal failing; out of its arrogance has sprung doctrines that cannot be questioned. Oppressing their flock by such means, the hierarchy of this Church is described as slandering the truth and preaching a false Christ. Pagels captures the essence of the problem when she tells us that by the end of the 2nd century orthodoxy had established objective criteria for church membership. She writes: “Whoever confessed the Creed, accepted the ritual of baptism, participated in worship, and obeyed the clergy was accepted as a fellow Christian.”¹⁶ The heart of the Christian faith had been swapped for unquestioning obedience.

This interpretation of the Church's development and temperament is hotly disputed by some scholars, but not by all; others have blown the lid off this particular pot, attempts to put that lid back on again failing as new information on the Jewish-oriented Gnostics surface. Aware of what had happened to Christianity's own

gnosis, communities linked to James' Jerusalem-based Nazarenes set up qualitative criteria and looked for evidence of spiritual maturity in those claiming to be Christian. In contrast to this, the ruling faction's bishops did away with qualitative criteria and attempted to unify the scattered churches through further standardizations of doctrine. It was no longer what you experienced in your depths that mattered; all that mattered was what you believed in your mind. If you belonged to an orthodox church and were foolish enough to hold a cult meal or baptize someone without the bishop being present, then you had not only separated yourself from the legitimate Church, you had also separated yourself from God.¹⁷

The "gospels" of the Gnostics were banned, and along with the suppression of these gospels went the suppression of those who understood their message. Full of symbols and veiled language concerning interior processes, these gospels were either hidden by initiates so that their insights might survive, or destroyed by those who found those insights incomprehensible and threatening. Classified as apostate, and therefore worse than pagans, the Gnostic Christians were described as evil seducers and hounded from pillar to post because they claimed themselves able to discriminate between what was true and what was false. They did not need to be told what to believe, they said. They did not require the advice of waterless canals (the bishops); neither did they need doctrines that bound the mind to fixed paths of thought. Their Christianity was founded not on beliefs but on relationship, their behavior not on the dictates of authority figures but on the presence of God in their midst. The rule of faith had displaced conscience and made the arbitrary notions of men sacrosanct.

Archetypal Energies

It was the educated Christians who divorced themselves from the Roman Church and set up their own communities. Tertullian complained that it was the cream of his membership who deserted the ship of faith for the ship of understanding. And the word "understanding" should not be interpreted as referring to a desire for knowledge in the intellectual sense – that is a false accusation made against the *gnosis*-oriented Christians by their bishops. *Gnosis* was not hard knowledge, it was insight into the things of the spirit. The human mind was backgrounded by archetypal energies, they believed, and the release of those energies automatically cleared perception of its dependence on external forms.

This carries us back to the fact that Jesus was himself a nonconformist in religious terms. No surprise then that those who took his basic teachings seriously were also nonconformists, that they could stand neither the restrictions nor the claustrophobia of religious narrow-mindedness. And that is how the Church ended up, as a narrow-minded and rather pompous institution. It has modernized its

image, but only because it has had no option – the world streaked away from it and its foolishness became self-evident. The Apostle Paul may have considered the cleverness of the world foolishness, and the foolishness of Christian belief a mark of intelligence, but if he had lived for a few hundred years he would have rapidly changed his mind. For in spite of evidence in the Epistles of Paul to the contrary, I do not think he believed what the Roman Church ended up believing; in fact I think he would have been astonished by Catholic doctrine as it eventually turned out. Paul has been blamed over and over again for writing the Roman Church a blank check, but a careful comparison of the Epistles suggests doctrinal skullduggery right from square one. There is more than one Paul in the Epistles, and we would do well to study his opposed profiles.

Balance

Moral law strictly adhered to was the outcome of minds struggling to get back to God by a self-conscious route. Jesus rejected this self-conscious route and, as a result deeply angered and infuriated the upholders of Jewish religious orthodoxy. Like Jesus, the Gnostic Christians believed that each person carried a different set of needs, different levels of comprehension, and different qualities of maturity. To feed everyone on the same diet was to ignore true need and further distort an already distorted self in need of help. Forcing everything into opposition and demanding *this* choice over *that* undermined our ability to act with freedom and love – particularly when we set up *one* of those choices as an unquestionable truth.

Elaine Pagels is at pains to point out that ethical questions are just as real and as important to these Gnostic Christians as they were to their consensus-loving brothers and sisters; the difference between them was that the Gnostic Christians had realized how fear disables one's ability to make helpful ethical choices. In his *gnosis*, Philip says, "Do not fear the flesh, nor love it. If you fear it, it will gain mastery over you; if you love it, it will devour and paralyze you."¹⁸ *That* is the dilemma facing all of us: how to balance ourselves between our fears and our loves, our revulsions and our desires, our projections and what actually exists. To live with the constant restriction of fear is to be mastered by life; to live without any kind of restriction is to be overcome by one's appetites. Push the moral question too far and we end up killing people for their own good; refuse to properly recognize the moral question and we end up doing exactly the same thing. And so we come full circle and are confronted with the problem of how to control our unruly emotions. What to do, what to do?

Pagels identifies the Kingdom of God as a state of transformed consciousness, a state of "self discovery",¹⁹ not some future event we have to wait for. The Kingdom's appearance has to do with a balancing of psychological forces; it is a form of "seeing" that the Gospel of Thomas describes in these carefully chosen

words:

When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same ... then you will enter the kingdom.²⁰

Recognizing the significance of events is the key that saves us from the dictates of a submerged conscious mind. Or, as the Gospel of Thomas renders it: “Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you.”²¹ Such statements may seem obscure, but they are quite straightforward if you interpret them in Father Sylvan's terms. It is a matter of balancing oneself between *self as the one who sees*, with *what is seen by the self*. This is not some mystic state of consciousness; it is a basic perceptual act in which the awake mind sustains its state of being awake through conscious effort – our being *present to ourselves as we perceive either internal or external reality*. The Gnostic teacher Silvanus captures the essence of this when he says: “end the sleep which weighs heavy upon you.”²² We are mostly submerged, engaged in conscious activity and have to wake up to this basic psychological fact. And not just occasionally; this waking up has to become an ongoing discipline to be effective. Pagels sums up:

Such Gnostics acknowledged that pursuing *gnosis* engages each person in a solitary, difficult process, as one struggles against internal resistance. They characterize this resistance to *gnosis* as the desire to sleep or to be drunk – that is, to remain unconscious.²³

That helps consolidate the picture I'm trying to build of the submerged self and its problems. We are mostly engaged in conscious interaction with self, other or world, and as a consequence are unconscious while conscious – a flagrant contradiction in psychological terms now recognized and understood by some psychologists and philosophers, but perhaps not yet fully appreciated as to its deeper significance.

References and Notes:

1) Sylvan, Father, *Lost Christianity* by Jacob Needleman, Element Books, Wiltshire, England 1990, p 139.

2) Ibid, p 211.

3) Ibid, p 209.

4) Ibid.

5) Romans 12: 2

- 6) Sylvan, Father, *Lost Christianity* by Jacob Needleman (as above) p 195.
- 7) Doresse, Jean, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, An introduction to the Gnostic Coptic manuscript discovered at Chenoboskion, 1960. p 48.
- 8) Ibid, p 36.
- 9) Ibid, p 50.
- 10) Petrement, Simone, *A Separate God*, translated by Carol Harrison for Harper SanFrancisco, 1990, p 356.
- 11) Mead, G.R.S., *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, University Books, New York 1960, p 14.
- 12) Ibid, p 29.
- 13) Doresse, Jean, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, (as above), p 263.
- 14) Mead, G.R.S., *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, (as above), p 96.
- 15) Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Press, New York 1981, p 123.
- 16) Ibid, p 126.
- 17) Ibid, p 127.
- 18) Pagels, Elaine, *The Origin of Satan*, p 172.
- 19) Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (as above) pp 154-155.
- 20) Thomas, Gospel of, 37.20-35, in NHL, 119.
- 21) Ibid, 33.11-13, in NHL, 118.
- 22) Silvanus, Teachings of, 88.24-92.12, in NHL 349-350.
- 23) Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (as above), p 152.