

Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern

By Jay Kinney

Every dog has its day, so they say, and it looks like Gnosticism, an ancient approach to spiritual experience, may be having its day, once again. Of course, despite the best efforts of the early Catholic Church, Gnosticism never really disappeared, but its reappearance over the centuries has been fleeting and sporadic. Why, as we march into a new millennium, is this hidden stream of quasi-Christian mysticism triggering a fresh interest among both spiritual seekers and readers of popular novels?

Dan Brown's mega-bestseller, **The Da Vinci Code**, surely shares part of the credit. This publishing phenomenon, which sold over 6 million copies, took a simmering interest in the Knights Templar, the Divine Feminine, alleged secret societies such as the Priory of Sion, the Holy Grail, and the question of the historical Jesus, and stirred these ingredients together with a generous dollop of Gnosticism.

The result was a blockbuster thriller that unexpectedly caught the popular imagination. Despite the fact that at least two other previous thrillers, **The Da Vinci Legacy** by Lewis Perdue (1983), and **Kingdom Come** (2000) by Jim Houghan, had overlapped much of the same territory, lightning struck Brown's novel and sparked innumerable dinner-table discussions of heretofore-arcane topics such as Mary Magdalene's real relationship to Jesus.

But the success of **The Da Vinci Code** is just the culminating phase of a gradual public awareness of Gnostic matters that extends back at least a century to the great Occult Revival of the late 19th century. At that time, Gnosticism slowly re-emerged from the shadows, nudged by the French occultist Eliphas Lévi, and propelled along by Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, French neo-gnostics such as Papus and Jean Bricaud, and researchers such as G.R.S. Mead (whose pioneering discussion of the Gnostics, **Fragments of a Faith Forgotten**, was for many decades one of the few sourcebooks on the subject for general readers).

However, it was the discovery of a cache of ancient Gnostic scriptures at Nag Hammadi in the Egyptian desert in 1945 that really set off the modern phase of the Gnostic revival. Although their translation into English was not complete until the late 1970s, early access to some of the writings inspired the great psychologist Carl Jung to draw parallels between the ancient Gnostics and modern depth psychology. The publication in 1977 of the *Nag Hammadi Library* translations, followed in 1978 by religious scholar Elaine Pagels' best-selling exposition, **The Gnostic Gospels**, guaranteed that Gnosticism would not go away anytime soon. But before we take a further look at the burgeoning phenomenon of modern Gnosticism, a review of the ancient Gnostic teachings is in order.

Gnosis and the Church

Though scholars argue there were Gnostic teachings that predated the early Christian era, what is most commonly thought of as Gnosticism consisted of numerous Christian sects that thrived in the immediate centuries after the ministry of Jesus. These sects, often gathered around

charismatic mystics, certainly thought of themselves as Christian, and it was only their emphasis on *gnosis*, or divine knowledge, that later earned them the sweeping label of Gnostic.

As Christianity spread outside the confines of a specifically Jewish faith, it was perhaps inevitable that some gentile Christians would reinterpret their conception of God to distinguish Him from the tribal “G-d of Israel” Whose Covenant with His people seemed anchored to their particular identity as Jews. Christian aspirations to a universal faith, applicable to anyone with ears to hear, led many Gnostics to posit that God the Father, of whom Jesus spoke, must be a different God altogether: a hitherto Unknown God Who existed far above the earthly realm and was free of ethnic contracts or favouritism. Christ functioned as the messenger from this remote and impartial God, and some Gnostic scriptures downgraded the Jealous God of the Old Testament to the role of Demiurge, a lesser creator-god who brought a flawed Creation into existence and mistakenly ruled it with a heavy hand as if he were the True God.¹

Thus, in the Gnostic view, salvation from this diminished material realm of suffering and injustice depended less on one’s mere beliefs or on the following of religious laws that the Demiurge put in place, than on the individual’s inner experience of gnosis – a divine knowledge of the cosmic order and one’s true identity. The Gnostic scriptures alluded to Christ’s secret teachings, which would aid the Gnostic to embrace gnosis, and armed with this knowledge, to escape the illusory realm of the Demiurge at the time of death.

There are any number of reasons why Gnosticism was bound to come into conflict with that portion of the Church which was consolidating into an institutional monolith. Gnosis, by its very nature, was an individual experience that eluded systematisation. While the Gnostics had priests and even bishops, their leadership derived from their mystical bonafides, not from a bureaucratic position of authority. Furthermore, the canonical Gospels portrayed Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the Messiah promised to the Hebrews. The Gnostics’ break with what they considered the Demiurge was at cross purposes with this historical reading and undermined the working mythos of the institutional Church.

In another example of scriptural reversal, some Gnostic versions of the Creation story of Adam and Eve portrayed the Serpent as Liberator, offering the apple as a means to knowledge unfairly denied to humankind by the despotic Demiurge. There was obviously no way to accept this counter-version and the traditional version at the same time.

Divine Feminine

The most common Gnostic revision of the Creation story spoke of Sophia (Wisdom), an extension of the True God, venturing forth from the Pleroma (the fullness of the ineffable divine realm), producing an aborted spiritual being, Ialdabaoth (the Demiurge), who in turn created the flawed material world. Sophia, seeing sparks of the divine entrapped in matter, descended to try and free them and was herself entrapped. It took the efforts of the Christ (pre-existing in the Pleroma) to extricate her and return her, past the Archons presiding over intermediate planes, to her rightful place beside Him: a tale symbolic of the plight of the soul enmeshed in illusion.

Finally, the indications in Gnostic scriptures, such as the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary, that Mary Magdalene was closer to Jesus than the other disciples and received secret teachings denied to them, undercut both St. Paul’s misogynist version of Christianity and the Catholic Church’s claim to legitimacy based on St. Peter’s supposed selection as the “rock” on which the Church would be built. The prominent role given to the Divine Feminine via the Gnostic veneration of the Magdalene and Sophia was partly recuperated by the Roman Church through the significance it later afforded the Virgin Mary, but this status was subsumed within the overall supremacy of a Church run by celibate males.

Whatever Gnosticism’s virtues as an effective path to gnosis and to unconditioned consciousness, it was simply too idiosyncratic and contrarian to make the grade as a stabilising component of Roman power. Its subversive counter-myths stood little chance of being integrated into a social order based on top-down power relations emanating from Rome

and Constantinople. The prevailing Church absorbed those elements of the Gnostic worldview that best served its own ends and scuttled the rest, consigning the Gnostics to the oblivion of heresy and their scriptures to the bonfires of proscribed texts.

Of course attempts to obliterate ideas or spiritual currents that remain attractive to some are never wholly successful. Pockets of Gnostic alienation persisted among the Eastern European Bogomils, and eventually influenced the Cathars of Languedoc (southern France). The scourge of the Inquisition originated as a response to the growing influence of the Cathars, whose 12th century challenge to the Catholic Church could no longer be tolerated. The Albigensian Crusade in the 13th century effectively wiped out the Cathars.² Subsequent Gnostic impulses and teachings survived as heavily-cloaked myths and symbol systems within marginal esoteric currents of the West.

It was only once the religious and social hegemony of the Church was diminished by the succeeding blows of the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, and the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment, that there was sufficient elbow room for Gnosticism to re-emerge into the light of day.

Yet, the question remains why Gnosticism should prove of special interest to increasing numbers today. Are there particular characteristics of today's society that resonate with the Gnostic worldview? One answer is provided if we consider the popularity of "The Matrix" movies and the influential ideas of science fiction author Philip K. Dick.

The Illusion of Daily Life

Central to both the Matrix and to Dick is the creeping perception that things are not as they seem: our perception of reality, both individual and collective, is an artificial construct masking the unnerving truth. In ripping away the façade of normality, we come face to face with our true dilemma – we live in a maze of illusions and self-delusions from which we must extricate ourselves. This is, of course, a fundamentally Gnostic worldview.

The ancient Gnostics were aware that material existence is, at its root, a beguiling and temporary illusion. (Hindus called this "Maya.") Modern physics has confirmed this at the sub-molecular level, where one can see that apparently solid objects are, in fact, composed of moving bits of energy that are neither wholly particle nor wave. The closer one looks, the less there is to see. The vast emptiness of outer space is mirrored by the vast emptiness within matter itself.

Esoteric traditions around the world teach that consciousness can exist independent of the body, and that the ability to deliver our consciousness from its addiction to sensory input and compulsive thought patterns can lead to an experience of divine consciousness (gnosis). The message of the Christ of the Gnostics was not that he considered himself the unique and only Son of God, but that each person has the potential to expand their consciousness across the vast emptiness to the level of godhood or Self-realisation.

If the illusoriness of daily life was self-evident in the relatively simple world of two millennia ago, it is becoming even more so, for those with the eyes to see, in the present world of cybernetic virtual realities, Hollywood dream-worlds, instant messaging, corporate branding campaigns, and information warfare. The ancient Gnostics were resigned to the fact that the majority of humans were fatally caught in the illusion, and for this they were called elitists. Similarly, modern Gnostics perceive that most people around them are inextricably locked into a delusory existence in which their potential consciousness is siphoned off in exchange for corporate profit and material survival. This, too, is a minority perception, but it is steadily growing.

The Gnostic rush many of us felt upon first seeing the Wachowski Brothers' "The Matrix" was the heady sensation that somehow a deprogramming meme had made it through the corporate maze of AOL-Time-Warner, and that the dream factory itself had been tricked into promulgating a flash of gnosis. Millions responded and suddenly there was much more money on the table. All

too predictably, the second and third Matrix films smothered the first film's spark of insight under tons of ever more dazzling special effects, violence, and pretentious symbolism. The still small voice of the wake-up call embedded in film one was drowned out by the din of its own success. The series' degeneration was an uncanny recapitulation of the suppression of ancient Gnosticism by the early Church. In the end, the Matrix – like the Church before it – emerged triumphant.

Of course, it is a bit of a leap from perceiving daily life as delusory to embracing an ancient cosmology that specifies a false god, a True God, a malevolent pantheon of Archons, and a *hierosgamos* (divine marriage) of Christ and Sophia. Unless one is in the market for a ready-made dramatic cast of spiritual entities to believe in, the Gnostic myths best serve as metaphors for one's dilemma – and, in fact, that may have been the role they played for the early Gnostics, as well.

There are two ways to view the Gnostic myths as potent metaphors: one inner and one outer. The inner way is to see the Gnostic cosmology as a visionary description of the hurdles one must leap in meditation. In trying to ascend to a contemplative state of pure consciousness, one must move beyond the incessant activity of the mind (the Demiurge), and past one's fears and compulsions (the Archons), before one can arrive at a consciousness beyond time and space (the Pleroma). The successful achievement of this gnosis while still "in the body" prepares one for the similar passage that one's consciousness must take after death.

An outer reading of the Gnostic cosmology, on the other hand, might consider the Demiurge to be anyone's flawed and limited image of God, which must be seen through and surpassed on the way to true spiritual insight. The Archons would be the many social laws, institutions, and corporate entities that hamstring one's existence. On this level, a kind of external gnosis would be one's realisation of the ultimate inability of these earthly captors to imprison our higher self. In this reading, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection serve as metaphors for our own daily immolation and extrication. In this instance, a Gnostic motto might be: "Don't let the bastards get you down!"

Wandering Bishops

Reading **The Da Vinci Code** or **The Gnostic Gospels** or watching "The Matrix" are all very well, but such books and movies do not by themselves constitute a Gnostic revival. Revivals or movements require actual social vehicles to engage and embody people's interests. One place this is happening – albeit on a small scale – is in the low-profile milieu of small independent Gnostic churches. An examination of this phenomenon leads us to the quirky turf of "wandering bishops" – a curious subculture of purported Catholic, Orthodox, and Gnostic bishops who usually (and painstakingly) trace their lines of apostolic succession back to (wait for it) St. Peter or one of the other apostles. This requires some explaining.

The mainstream Roman Catholic Church hangs its legitimacy on unbroken lines of consecration from bishop to bishop, extending all the way back to St. Peter. Only bishops (or higher clergy) can ordain priests or consecrate other bishops – a form of organisational quality-control, as well as a narrow conduit for the divine grace that is said to be conveyed in the sacrament of ordination. Since an ordination or a consecration makes the recipient "a priest *forever* unto the order of Melchizedek," a priest or bishop who later turns heretic, or otherwise runs afoul of the Church's hierarchy, retains legitimate Orders – even if forbidden to celebrate Mass or excommunicated from the Church.

Employing a liberal interpretation of this curious rule, schismatic churches such as the Jansenist Dutch Church, which broke with Rome in 1723, could claim legitimate apostolic succession despite their status outside the Roman Church's umbrella. Taking this logic one step further, some bishops consecrated by bishops of the Dutch Church (later the Old Catholic Church, following an alignment with other "national" churches in 1889) claimed the right to start their own churches and pass on the line of "valid" consecration. For instance, Bishop James Ingall Wedgwood was consecrated a bishop in the Old Catholic Church in 1916 and within two years had founded the Liberal Catholic Church, which became a kind of esoteric house church

for the Theosophical Society.³

One of the most influential of these independent bishops was Joseph René Vilatte, an Old Catholic missionary in Wisconsin, who sought and received consecration as bishop from the Syrian Jacobite Church in 1892 in Ceylon and subsequently consecrated several other bishops in North America and France who consecrated numerous other bishops in turn.

Needless to say, notions of doctrinal fidelity or consistency – which were understandably a key concern of Rome – were lost in the shuffle, with the result that independent bishops, who were often “more Catholic than the Pope,” sometimes shared the same apostolic lines as esoterically inclined bishops with Gnostic leanings. Over time, this led to a new generation of Gnostic bishops who could now claim apostolic succession. Exactly *why* apostolic succession would matter to latter-day Gnostics is something of a mystery, particularly since whatever legitimacy the original Gnostics claimed derived from gnosis itself, not from institutional standing. One suspects that even heretics desire approval, and in the absence of Gnostic lines of succession, most latter-day Gnostic bishops are quite happy to gain succession from St. Peter, illicit though it may be – especially if it tweaks the nose of the Vatican.⁴

One Gnostic “Patriarch” in France, Jules Doinel (Tau Valentin II), sidestepped the issue altogether by receiving “a double spiritual consecration; the first by Jesus in person, the second during a spiritualist séance by two Bogomile bishops.”⁵ Doinel, who founded the Universal Gnostic Church, went on to consecrate the noted French occultists Papus and Sédir, thus empowering further Gnostic lines, some of which have continued to the present. Another Gnostic group of French origin, the elusive Holy Order of Miriam of Magdala, has cited traditions of a female apostolic line extending back to Mary Magdalene, but has attached no importance to providing verification of such traditions. The spurious Priory of Sion, celebrated in **The Da Vinci Code** and hyped in **Holy Blood, Holy Grail** – and likely of no earlier origin than 1956 – avoided ecclesiastical trappings altogether, preferring to concoct a lineage based on the supposed bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene which the Priory claimed to guard.⁶

Perhaps representative of the Gnostic branch of bishops in the English-speaking world was one Richard Duc de Palatine, an Australian originally named Ronald Powell, who was initially ordained in the Liberal Catholic Church and, in 1953, consecrated a bishop by Mar Georgius I (Hugh George de Willmott Newman), Patriarch of Glastonbury, one of the most fecund independent bishops. Palatine then founded his own Pre-Nicene Gnostic Catholic Church. Palatine, whose penchant for organising esoteric orders was second to none, also founded the Order of the Pleroma, the Brotherhood of the Pleroma, the Disciplina Arcani, and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light. These appear to have led a largely mail-order existence.⁷ Palatine’s episcopal concerns were intermingled with esoteric, magical, and even Freemasonic preoccupations, but in spite of this – or perhaps due to it – some serious modern Gnostics became associated with him. The most notable is Bishop Stephan Hoeller, arguably the foremost proponent of a contemporary Gnosticism.

Hoeller was consecrated by Palatine in 1967 and for a number of years worked within the fold of his Church and other groups. His Los Angeles-based Ecclesia Gnostica (Church of Gnosis) grew out of his work with the Pre-Nicene Church, and Hoeller has been an indefatigable author and synthesizer, drawing upon ancient Gnostic sources, Jungian psychology, and esoteric Christian concepts, in an effort to construct a modern Gnostic presence.

Secret Teachings of Jesus

As a diligent search of the Web will show, there are an ever increasing number of fledgling Gnostic churches, most of them situated in, or derived from, the “wandering bishop” milieu. Many of them consist of little more than a bishop and a local congregation, if that. This is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. After all, the ancient Gnostic sects amounted to the same thing: scattered groups with little uniformity between them. But it also presents the would-be seeker of gnosis with a certain dilemma: Can gnosis be taught? And if it can, who is qualified to teach it?

The ancient Gnostics claimed to be guardians of the secret teachings of Jesus, teachings that were lost when Gnosticism was defeated. Formal issues of apostolic succession aside, no modern Gnostics can claim to perpetuate those teachings in unaltered form, because the chains of transmission have been lost. Even the scriptures that have been recovered – as fascinating as they may be – retain an opaque quality, because the original interpretive keys are absent.

Thus, any modern Gnostic group or teacher must be carefully evaluated, based on subtle qualities that evidence real spiritual depth and understanding. Impressive lists of titles, degrees, and credentials mean little if there is no indication of a voice that speaks from the experience of gnosis. While it may be too much to expect that any given Gnostic teacher is going to be the embodiment of divine illumination, one still has the right to expect that those who talk the talk can walk the walk.

Divine knowledge may be gained in a variety of ways – after all, it was not the exclusive possession of the Gnostics, any more than the True God is the possession of any single religion. If teachers of real attainment choose to use the metaphors of ancient Gnosticism to encourage self-discovery, then the Gnostic revival may fulfill its promise. But if the rekindled interest in Gnosticism is going to amount to anything besides a few books and movies and an unsatisfied hunger for enlightenment, we need to see a growing indication of the true discovery of inner godhood, not a fruitless scramble to decipher a few fragments of someone else's gnosis.

Footnotes:

1. Some scholars have suggested that this reframing of G-d was first done by Jewish intellectuals who were themselves dissatisfied with the Torah's portrayal of the deity. Thus early Christian Gnosticism may have been influenced by, or may have been an extension of, a Jewish Gnosticism intent on reinterpreting the Jewish religious traditions. See: Birger A. Pearson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature," in **Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity**, edited by Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), pp. 15-35.
2. Yuri Stoyanov, **The Hidden Tradition in Europe** (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1994).
3. The premiere exposition of this milieu is Peter F. Anson's **Bishops at Large** (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), which is both droll and exhaustively detailed. It is, sadly, long out of print. A more recent (and apologetic) discussion of the phenomenon can be found in Lewis Keizer's **The Wandering Bishops: Apostles of a New Spirituality** (2000), available in PDF format at: www.hometemple.org/WanBishWeb%20Complete.pdf.
4. The Vatican, for its part, seems to have nothing encouraging to say about independent bishops. One of the more common claims of Vatican recognition for the sacraments and orders of the Liberal Catholic Church, for instance – a supposed positive ruling by the Roman Congregation of Rites – has been exposed as a hoax. (See: "Rome and Liberal Catholic Orders," by Rev. L. K. Langley at: www.lcc.cc/tlc/lxvi1/rome.htm) The Vatican's stance appears to be that so-called valid orders are worthless without the Church's recognition.
5. Anson, p. 307.
6. See: Robert Richardson, "The Priory of Sion Hoax," *GNOSIS Magazine* #51, pp. 49-55, (www.gnosismagazine.com). Reprinted in *New Dawn* No. 61 (July-August 2000).
7. Anson, pp. 492-495, and J. Gordon Melton, **The Encyclopedia of American Religions**, Second Edition (Detroit, Mich: Gale Research, 1987), pp. 612, 618.

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