

GNOSTICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The Nag-Hammadi Discoveries¹

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IT was in 1945 or 1946 that a group of Egyptian peasants, digging on the site of an early Christian cemetery near the village of Nag-Hammadi, unearthed an urn containing thirteen manuscripts. The contents of this urn have subsequently proved to be of epoch-making importance for the study of the New Testament and of early Church history.

In those early stages a few leaves of the papyrus were unfortunately burned. But the collection as we have it today comprises between eight hundred and one thousand papyrus leaves, most of them in remarkably good condition. On examination these have proved to constitute a library of forty-nine treatises written in Coptic about the fourth century A.D., and in several different dialects. It is clear that so fine a library must be attributed to the work of many different copyists, whose work extends over a period of more than a century. This in turn suggests that a religious community flourished at Nag-Hammadi some time in the course of the fourth century, and from the contents of the manuscripts it is obvious that its members must have been adherents of the dangerous and widespread heresy which extends, in manifold terms, from the second to the

¹ The text of a paper read at the Aquinas Centre, London, on November 10, 1960. This article is offered not as an original contribution on the subject, which the author is not qualified to make, but as a synthesis of the conclusions drawn in certain of the more important recent publications. Notable among these is *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (Hollis and Carter, 1960; 42s.), by J. Doresse. This is the most complete and authoritative account so far available in English of the discoveries and their significance by the scholar who was the first to recognize that significance, and who has since shown himself to be a world authority on the nature, origins, history and influence of Gnostic literature in general, and of the Nag-Hammadi manuscripts in particular. *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings* (S.C.M. Press, 1960; 7s. 6d.), by W. C. van Unnik, is in many ways the ideal short introduction for the uninitiated. It gives a clear account of the discovery, of the nature and significance of Gnosticism, and a brief description of four of the most important treatises, and it provides a useful bibliography. In *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1959; 31s. 6d.) R. M. Grant tackles with courage and authority the vexed question of the relationship between Gnosticism and early Christianity. The signal merit of his approach is that he takes due cognizance of the various forms of Jewish apocalyptic as possible alternatives to Gnosticism proper, in assessing pre-Christian influences on certain areas of New Testament thought. Perhaps he slightly underestimates the importance of the idealization of wisdom in pre-Gnostic Judaism, as a common influence on both Gnosticism and the New Testament.

eighth centuries A.D., and which is nowadays known as Gnosticism.

The manuscripts found their way to Cairo in three separate lots. One of them, now entitled the 'Jung Codex', was illegally smuggled out of Egypt by a Belgian antiquarian, bought in America, and given to Dr Jung as an eightieth birthday present. This has already been studied and published.² The publication of the rest, which remained in Egypt, has been greatly delayed, firstly by the intervention of several major political upheavals in Egypt, and secondly by a protracted legal action brought against the Egyptian government by a private individual who had been enterprising and discerning enough to secure a large part of the hoard, and who considered herself entitled to greater recompense than the government was prepared to allow her. This action ended only in 1956. All the manuscripts (unless, as is always possible, some are being illegally concealed) are now in the Coptic Museum at Cairo, except for the Jung Codex; and the Jung Institute at Zurich has undertaken that this too will eventually rejoin its fellows there. A definitive publication of the remainder is therefore awaited in the near future. Meanwhile several individual treatises have been published in advance, notably the *Apocryphon of John* (known also from an independent Coptic manuscript discovered at the end of the last century and only published in 1955),³ The *Gospel of Truth*, the most important element in the Jung Codex, and finally that collection of sayings purporting to come from our Lord which has so captured the public imagination, the *Gospel according to Thomas*.

What is the general character of this literature? The feature which immediately strikes one is the bewildering variety and confusion of the ideas and systems expounded in it. Mythical elements and mysterious but meaningless jargon, odd fragments of philosophy and phrases from the Scriptures are jumbled together in defiance of all logic, and with constant mutual borrowings between the various elements. All this is characteristic of Gnostic writings in general, and the Nag-Hammadi writings are no exception. A second striking characteristic is pseudonymity. As a rule Gnostic writings are attributed to Zoroaster, Zostrian and Messos, the heroes of Iranian religion, to Adam, Seth and Shem of the Old Testament, and to various of the apostles of the New. In fact, from a close examination of the contents themselves, it is possible to make some estimation of their date, and in one case at least, that of the *Gospel of Truth*, to make a plausible guess at the true authorship. In this

² cf. *The Jung Codex*, 1955, London. F. L. Cross, ed. and tr.

³ C. Schmidt and W. Till: *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502, Berlin, 1955.

task the student of Gnosticism is enormously helped by the long accounts of the heresy in several of its forms left by the great 'heresiologists' among the early Fathers, principally Irenaeus (c. 180), Hyppolytus (c. 230) and Epiphanius (c. 375). Several of the works which have emerged from the Nag-Hammadi urn are referred to by these Fathers. The fact that Irenaeus, for example, attacks the *Gospel of Truth*, proves that this treatise must be dated before A.D. 180, and carries it back almost to the period of Valentinus, the founder of the particular form of Gnosticism which this work represents. From the nature of its contents it has been seriously argued that Valentinus himself, or an immediate disciple, could be the author.

In general it has been shown that almost all the works here written in fourth-century Coptic are translations of much earlier Greek originals, several of which must be dated in the second century A.D., with isolated elements and sayings perhaps deriving from a still earlier period in the Church's history.

The Importance of the Nag-Hammadi Discoveries for the Study of Christianity

The importance of these discoveries can, I think, be stated under four main headings:

(1) *The study of Gnosticism itself.* A religious movement as widespread and influential as this one was from the second to the eighth centuries, and which claimed to interpret the Scriptures more authentically and in the light of an higher revelation than that of the Church herself, cannot have failed to affect the development of Christian tradition profoundly. Firstly, by raising up enemies for the Church to fight against, it determined her preoccupations at an early and vital stage, and so affected the whole course of the development of doctrine. Secondly, it may well have influenced the language and thought-forms in which that doctrine was expressed. This is a matter for objective investigation. Certainly it will enable us to understand the Church's early traditions far better if we know more about the direction from which the attacks against her came, and about the enemies against whom she had to defend her sacred heritage of truth. The Gnostics were among the chief of those enemies probably from New Testament times onwards. One of the earliest of the Gnostic founders was a certain Simon, a native of Syria, whom the Fathers identify with that sorcerer Simon Magus, whom we read of in Acts viii. St Paul had almost certainly some form of Gnosticism to contend with at Colossae, and perhaps also, though this is less certain, at Corinth. His own language and thought seems to have been influenced by Gnosticism, notably in the Captivity

Epistles. Probable references to early forms of Gnosticism occur elsewhere in the New Testament, and from the earliest Fathers onwards the heresy is treated of more and more explicitly.

For our knowledge of the Gnostic movement, however, we have hitherto had to rely on three inadequate sources: the first is the accounts of the heresiologists already referred to. In the nature of things, these could hardly be unprejudiced witnesses. In any case they are describing Gnosticism, essentially a secret and esoteric movement, from without, and there was hitherto no means of checking or supplementing their accounts. Secondly there are extant a few authentic works, many of them representative of a rather decadent form of Gnosticism,⁴ such as the *Pistis-Sophia*, the *Great Treatise according to the Mystery*, the anonymous *Codex Brucei*, and the *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae*, this last published only in 1955. The so-called Hermetic writings are far more extensive, but hardly representative of Gnosticism in the true sense. Thirdly, we had the traditions of the Mandaeans, that strange sect which claims descent from John the Baptist, but which is undoubtedly an odd survival of Gnosticism. Their beliefs have been most diligently investigated by Lady Drower.⁵ Great use of their tenets has been made by a certain German school of New Testament scholars, who invoke them to postulate a strong Gnostic influence on the thought of St John and St Paul. Evidence from such sources is, however, suspect, for the reason that it has been exposed for so long to so many extraneous influences, including Christian ones.

Now at last we have an abundance of literary material translated by and used in a practising Gnostic community. The documents are sufficiently varied in type and content to provide a complete picture of Gnostic literary output. They include cosmogonies, apocalypses, epistles, secret traditions, dialogues, theological treatises, commentaries on Scripture, sacramental rubrics and prayers. Several referred to or quoted by the early Fathers are now revealed for the first time. Moreover they are representative of several different types of Gnosticism: the Sethian, Valentinian, Barbelo-Gnostic, Naassene, and also Hermetic forms are represented.

From this material it should be possible to reconstruct a fairly comprehensive history of Gnosticism from the second century onwards, to some extent to infer what its earlier origins must have been, and to assess its influence on the development of Christian thought.

⁴ cf. R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁵ E. S. Drower: *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, Oxford, 1937, *Water into Wine*, Oxford, 1956, *The Canonical Prayer Book of the Mandaeans*, Leiden, 1959.

(2) *Textual Criticism of the New Testament.* Critics have for some time been dissatisfied with the over-dependence of our existing Greek New Testament text on fourth-century manuscripts, especially the Codex Vaticanus, and have been trying to find sources representative of earlier and independent manuscript traditions. New Testament quotations in the early Fathers, and especially in the various versions of Tatian's *Diatessaron* (a harmonized conflation, composed about A.D. 170, of the complete text of all four canonical gospels into one consecutive narrative), have for some time been explored and sifted for evidence of this kind. The Nag-Hammadi manuscripts, with their innumerable quotations from the New Testament, constitute an immense and invaluable addition to the material from which such evidence can be deduced. Already they have yielded a number of remarkable parallels to certain variant readings in the *Diatessaron*, which are representative of the so-called 'Western' tradition. In that sense the Nag-Hammadi discoveries seem likely to accentuate the current trend in textual criticism in the direction of this 'Western' tradition.

(3) *Alleged Gnostic Influences on the New Testament.* For many years prior to this discovery a fairly heated debate has been conducted among New Testament scholars as to the relationship between Gnosticism and the New Testament. Does the Gnostic movement stem from a religious system, whether Hellenistic, Jewish or pagan in origin, or perhaps a mixture of all three, which preceded Christianity historically, and exercised a more or less profound influence on its development in general, and on the writings of John and Paul in particular? Alternatively, is Gnosticism the effect rather than a co-operating cause of Christianity, an early and violent form of heresy emerging from the Christian movement as a separate system, capable of absorbing and adapting to its own use those pagan and Jewish elements which we find present in it from the first? The fact that no Gnostic document ante-dates our canonical New Testament or any part of it supports the latter of these two views. The fact that, in the earliest of these Gnostic records, Gnosticism seems already to have reached a developed stage and to presuppose a fairly long previous history, favours the former theory. The debate has been not the less vigorously conducted for the fact that the evidence hitherto available was quite inadequate to support the conclusions reached. Bultmann⁶ and his followers, for example, contend that St John's presentation of our Lord's incarnation and ministry has been expressed in terms of an alleged Gnostic 'saviour-myth', in which an 'heavenly Man', the image of the ultimate and highest

⁶ cf. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*. Eng. tr., pp. 15, 41-50.

principle of light, descends to release the divine sparks of light imprisoned in men's bodies on earth, by re-awakening them to knowledge (gnosis) of their true origins and destiny. In reconstructing this alleged 'saviour-myth', Bultmann and Jonas,⁷ his principal authority on this point, rely far too heavily on late Mandaeen traditions which offer a very unsafe guide as to what Gnosticism would have meant at the time when St John's gospel was written. They neglect, to an extent which is quite disastrous to their theory, the alternative possibilities provided by Jewish apocalyptic in its various forms, and their interpretations are strongly influenced by their own existentialist presuppositions. Here too the Nag-Hammadi manuscripts unexpectedly supply exactly the sort of evidence which was so badly needed.

(4) *Extra-Canonical Christian Tradition.* It has long been recognized that prior to the formation of our New Testament a whole range of floating compilations and tradition-groups of the words and deeds of our Lord, and of early Christian teachings, would have been in circulation throughout the primitive Church. Only a relatively small selection of these would have been preserved in our canonical Scriptures. There is therefore a reasonable possibility that some of the others may have survived in the oldest documents of these early heretical movements. St Jerome himself committed himself to the view that there might be some gold in this mud.⁸ By paring away the later heretical accretions in such documents, one may eventually arrive at an original nucleus of authentic traditions, reaching back independently to that part of our Lord's teaching which was not recorded in the canonical Scriptures. It has been suggested that some of the 'sayings' in the *Gospel according to Thomas*⁹ may represent such an authentic extra-canonical tradition. So far the possibility seems rather slender, but there is no intrinsic reason whatever for excluding it. Extra-canonical sayings of this kind, however, even if

⁷ H. Jonas: *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist* I-II, Göttingen, 1934, 1954.

⁸ cf. Doresse, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

⁹ In his *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (Mowbray, 21s.) Dr R. McL. Wilson reduces the possibilities of interdependence to three: 'Direct borrowing from our (Synoptic) Gospels, independent access to oral tradition, or the use of a document similar to but distinct from our Gospels, in other words an apocryphal Gospel even older than Thomas itself' (p. 144). He is inclined to favour the second and third of these possibilities for the earliest stage in the writing of 'Thomas', while the direct influence of our Synoptic Gospels (especially Luke) upon it has to be reckoned with at a slightly later stage in its growth. As a balanced survey of the contemporary discussion this book is to be recommended. Dr Wilson appears to allow for less Johannine influence than do Drs R. M. Grant and D. N. Freeman in their excellent and penetrating study, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus according to the Gospel of Thomas* (Fontana Books, Collins, 2s. 6d.), and this is one factor which leads him to postulate a greater influence of extra-canonical tradition on the earliest stages of 'Thomas'.

their authenticity could be satisfactorily established, are most unlikely to add appreciably to our knowledge of our Lord's teaching as preserved in the New Testament.

It must be emphasized at this point that the process of evaluation has barely commenced, and it would be wrong and foolish of me to suggest more than tentative indications of what the answers to these questions may eventually be. The first question of all must necessarily be: 'What is Gnosticism?' By the very fact of adding so enormously to our knowledge of the subject, the Nag-Hammadi discoveries have made this question, already a notoriously difficult one, rather more than less complicated to answer.

The Nature and Origins of Gnosticism

The Greek word 'gnosis' means 'knowledge', and in this context stands for a certain secret knowledge, divinely imparted and not available to ordinary men, which of itself causes the recipient's salvation. Innate in man, according to the Gnostic theory, is a divine spark of heavenly light imprisoned in the matter of the body by the malignant powers who govern the earth, with the result that earthly man is now sunk in degraded oblivion, forgetful of his celestial origins. But the merciful, all-highest creator, himself the essence of light, sends down his own image as a saviour, to re-awaken man to the saving and secret knowledge of his own celestial nature. In the classic formulation this saving knowledge is intended to answer the questions: 'Who we were, what we have become; where we were, whereunto we are cast; whither we are hastening, from what we are delivered; what generation is and what regeneration is' (based on Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta e Theodoto*, lxxviii, 2). The Gnostic is exhorted to seek within himself for the answer to these questions, and in this sense Gnosticism has been well characterized as a 'passionate subjectivity' which counts the world well lost for the sake of self-discovery.¹⁰ The secret enlightenment which constitutes the answer to these questions is formulated in a myth, varying greatly according to the various forms of Gnosticism but retaining certain essential characteristics. Let us consider the representative elements of this Gnostic myth, as exemplified in the Nag-Hammadi documents. We may commence with one bearing the title '*The Paraphrase of Shem*'. Shem is miraculously raised through innumerable intermediate heavens or 'aeons' to the supreme heaven, to receive from one Derdekea, the great mother, a secret revelation concerning the origins of the universe. In the beginning there were three principles, light, darkness, and intermediate spirit.

¹⁰ cf. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

As a result of an act of jealous pride on the part of darkness, light and spirit became immersed in it. Thenceforward light and spirit are constantly trying to disengage themselves, to recover their forces, while darkness, knowing that without them it would be 'solitary, lustreless and weak', uses all its intelligence or 'thought' to retain them in itself. From this initial intermingling of the three powers is derived the long and incredibly complicated cosmogony of the world. It consists in the emanation or generation of successive systems of aeons, bearing mysterious names, some of them derived from Jewish or Christian tradition, such as Gamaliel or Gabriel, others the names of virtues, such as Grace, Sensibility, Comprehension and Reflection, and others still bearing Hebrew-sounding names, invented by the Gnostics themselves for the sake of sounding mysterious and impressive. It should be explained that 'aeon' in Gnostic terminology means an entity which is half-abstract, half-concrete, semi-personal, semi-impersonal, fragments of duration hypostatized and personified as figures in the mythological drama. The one thing we must not expect of Gnosticism is logical consistency.¹¹ The immense system of aeons interposed between the first creator God and our world is fundamental to the Gnostic system. And at this stage in the cosmogony, not only does the world as we know it not exist, its subordinate 'demiurge' or 'creator' has not yet even been begotten.

When he is begotten, it is almost always in some degraded way. In another Nag-Hammadi treatise, he is born of the 'terror' of Pistis (divine wisdom) and the jealousy of chaos. He is named by his mother Yaldabaoth (a corruption of Yahweh El Sabaoth,¹² the Hebrew title of God in the Old Testament), and is usually monstrous in shape, with the head of a lion and the body of a serpent. (This element is almost certainly borrowed from Mithraism.) Yaldabaoth is endowed with a limited creative power, enabling him to rule over the lower universe, including heaven, earth and hell. But he is ignorant of the gods higher than himself, or of the existence of higher aeons, until at a certain point he boastfully exclaims 'I am God and there is no other than I'. (Notice the blasphemous employment of a consecrated Old Testament phrase here.) To this, some higher divinity, often his own mother, Pistis-Sophia, replies: 'You are mistaken, Samuel (Blind god!). Man exists, and so does the Son of Man!' The voice from heaven is usually followed by the image of a celestial man or of Pistis-Sophia or of some other divinity, reflected in the

¹¹ cf. H. C. Puech: 'La Gnose et le Temps', *Eranos Jahrbuch* xx, 1952, pp. 110-111.

¹² cf. R. M. Grant: 'Notes on Gnosis', *Vigiliae Christianae*, xi, 1957, pp. 145-151.

waters of chaos below. Inspired by this celestial image, Yaldabaoth and the powers associated with him exclaim: 'Let us create man to the image and likeness of God!' Thereupon they fashion Adam, who is, however, at this point bereft of the power of movement. (In other variants he is said to wriggle like a worm on the chaos waters.) Moved with compassion, the all-highest creator god breathes into him some of the divine light-spirit of his own mother, Wisdom. (There are numerous ways of explaining the presence of the divine light in man, but this one, taken from the *Apocryphon of John*, is a typical example.) The evil powers of the lower world, with Yaldabaoth at their head, are now roused to furious jealousy because they see that what they have made is now '... wiser than themselves and come into the light'. Thereupon they draw him down into the world of matter, where he is imprisoned in the body as in a grave. Yaldabaoth therefore places him in the Paradise of the material world, in which is planted the tree of knowledge. Yaldabaoth forbids him and his companion Eve, now associated with him, to eat of its fruit, lest he should thereby realize his own origin and destiny and escape from Yaldabaoth's clutches. But at the instigation of the serpent Adam disobeys this commandment, and Yaldabaoth curses him and expels both Adam and Eve from Paradise. Subsequently, to counteract the effects of the divine knowledge he has achieved, Yaldabaoth instills a sort of second soul or 'counter-soul' of evil into him, and implants the procreative instinct in him, so that he begets Seth. But his plans are foiled when Seth achieves the knowledge necessary to raise him from the vileness of the grave. Thus the Spirit works towards Man's salvation. In another variant of the myth, Sabaoth, Yaldabaoth's son, sends up a hymn of praise to the heavenly voice which rebukes his father for asserting that he is the only god, and is saved as a reward for his piety, and accorded a throne in heaven, where the Christ sits at his right hand.

There are innumerable variants of this myth, but the conflated and greatly simplified account which I have given here will, I think, serve to illustrate the basic tenets of Gnosticism, and also the way in which they are presented. We may complete it with an excerpt from a Gnostic hymn quoted by M. Doresse at the beginning of his great work on Gnosticism and Nag-Hammadi: 'See, Father', said Jesus, 'how pursued by evil (the soul) is wandering far from thy spirit over the earth. She tries to flee from hateful chaos; she knows not how to emerge from it. To that end, Father, send me! I will descend, bearing the seals; I will pass through all the aeons; I will unveil every mystery; I will denounce the appearances of the gods, and under the name of Gnosis, I will transmit the secrets of the holy

way.' (Hymn of the Soul, attributed to the Naassene Gnostics in *Philosophoumena* v. 10, 2.)¹³

Now let us notice the essential characteristics of Gnosticism as they appear in this myth.¹⁴

(1) The all-highest first creator is not the god of this world. He is an infinitely remote principle of light, and in between him and our universe are interposed an infinite number of 'aeons', emanating from one another in an hierarchical system, and usually in groups of four, seven, and thirty. As the outcome of some disturbance among the aeons, this inferior world is created from the elements of watery chaos and darkness.

(2) This lower world is controlled by an inferior god, generally identified with the God of the Old Testament, sometimes even with Satan, and often also endowed with the appearance and attributes of Ahriman, the power of evil and darkness in the religion of Zoroaster. This god is stupid, arrogant and jealous, and constantly seeks to retain man in his power by preventing his enlightenment. The moment of recognition when a voice from heaven tells him of the existence of divinities higher than he is, is a constant and highly significant feature.

(3) The true and essential being of man is a spark of celestial light from the upper regions. By some mischance this is immersed in matter, and so bound down to the inferior world and subjected to its powers. But man is alien to this world, and it is his destiny to obtain release from it through knowledge of his heavenly origins.

(4) Through knowledge of himself and of his separation from the true God man is set free. This takes place in two ways. Either a saviour descends from heaven to enlighten him, that is to awaken this divine knowledge in him, or else a chosen leader is assumed into heaven and there given the secret knowledge, so that he can return and enlighten his fellows. Men are divided in some Gnostic systems into the 'spiritual' (*pneumatikoi*, the Gnostics themselves, who have been enlightened), the psychic (*psychikoi*, capable of enlightenment, usually non-Gnostic Christians) and the material (*hylikoi*, those destined to perdition).

How did this strange system originate? No more difficult or complicated question exists in the whole history of religion. We shall be fairly safe, however, in commencing with the development of Jewish apocalyptic from the fifth century B.C. onwards. Briefly, apocalypse is a revelation of the divine plan for the world, seen from a celestial viewpoint. The apocalypticist is miraculously assumed into heaven by

¹³ Dorese, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

¹⁴ Summarized by van Unnik, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

divine favour, and allowed to see the heavenly powers that rule the world in their glory. He is also accorded what we might term an 'angel's eye view' of the whole course of the world's history now nearing its predestined consummation. From this perspective he sees all the events of history, including the dismaying ones such as the seeming success of persecutors and idolators, as elements in the divine plan. The age to which he himself belongs is the final one. A new age is about to be inaugurated by a cosmic judgment in which the wicked are to be finally crushed, and a new and paradisaical world is to be created. Now from the fifth century onwards this apocalyptic element in Judaism was enormously developed, particularly in circles more open to foreign influence. These tended to borrow from non-Jewish sources, especially those of Babylon and Iran, mythological accounts of the heavenly world which they were attempting to describe. The mutual borrowings between Iran and Judaism after the return from the exile appear to have been surprisingly extensive. Another element in Judaism, closely connected with the first, was the idealization and personification of divine wisdom, a process which we already encounter in the later strata of the book of Proverbs, and still more in Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Gnosticism then seems to derive from the more 'mythological' forms of these religious speculations, already charged with elements from the religion of Iran. A further direct influence from Iran may be inferred during the second century A.D., when Zoroastrianism became an official state religion. This accounts for certain Gnostic pseudepigrapha being placed under the patronage of Zoroaster, Zozimos, etc. Other elements derive from Greek mythology, and in certain forms of Gnosticism, elements of Middle- and Neo-Platonist philosophy are predominant. But these probably belong to a slightly later stage in its total development. More remotely, it seems probable that Egyptian and even Indian elements may have played their part. From the second century onwards this amalgam was intermingled with Christian belief: sometimes Christian heretics took over elements of 'Iranianized' Judaism into their system; less often, perhaps, it was the Jews, or Hellenists, or just possibly Zoroastrians, who adopted elements of Christianity.¹⁵ From this mixture, in brief, the five or six main forms of Gnosticism known to us probably took their rise. Three basic points, however, distinguish Gnosticism both from true Judaism and from Christianity sharply and radically. The first is what P. Daniélou calls its 'ontological dualism', that is the

¹⁵ This appears to be approximately the view of R. M. McL. Wilson: 'Some Recent Studies in Gnosticism', *New Testament Studies*, 6/1, 1959, pp. 34-35.

assertion of a second uncreated first principle, the power of evil and darkness, as rival of the first creator-God. The second is the cosmic 'saviour-myth' of the heavenly man of light, which is fundamentally different from the Christian doctrine of 'the Word made flesh'. The third is the idea, which lies at the roots of the Gnostic concept of salvation, of the hidden identity between saviour and saved, through the divine light which is *innate* in the latter. We might add that in the case of Christianity the saving message is addressed to all without distinction, while it is of the essence of Gnosticism that it should be esoteric and addressed to the chosen few.

Possible Influences of Gnosticism on the New Testament

In the light of what we have so far seen let us briefly examine the New Testament writings which, it has been alleged, are deeply subject to Gnostic influence, those namely of John and Paul.

The statement in I John i, 5 that 'God is light, there is no darkness in him at all', and in John i, 5 that 'the Light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not comprehend it', are examples of seemingly Gnostic modes of expression in the Johannine literature. On the other hand, no Gnostic would have said of the 'saviour', 'he came unto his own and his own received him not' because, within the terms of the Gnostic system, this could only mean the light rejecting the light. What has been described as St John's pre-occupation with 'the whence and the whither' has often been invoked as an example of his Gnostic tendencies.¹⁶ 'You do not know whence it (the wind) comes and whither it goes; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit' (iii, 8). 'I know whence I come and whither I go, but you know not whence I come and whither I go' (viii, 14; cf. also viii, 23, ix, 29, xvii, 16, etc.). These are particular examples. More generally, we may notice that such key ideas of St John's Gospel as faith, judgment, eternal life, knowledge, light and life, Holy Spirit, spirit of truth, etc., are expressed in terms far more reminiscent of the forms of Judaism reflected, for example, in the Qumran writings,¹⁷ than of Gnosticism proper. Again, the modified *ethical* dualism in which the created powers of darkness, with Satan at their head, are defeated by the 'angel of light', our Lord himself, is far more suggestive of these marginal forms of Judaism than of the Gnostic *ontological* dualism. We find these characteristics again and again at Qumran, and the particular brand of Judaism prevalent at Qumran can only be one of many similar types, on any of which

¹⁶ cf. G. Wetter: 'Eine gnostische Formel im 4. Evangelium', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, xvii, 1917, pp. 49-63.

¹⁷ cf. F.-M. Braun, O.P.: *Jean le Théologien et son Evangile dans l'Eglise Ancienne*, Paris, 1959, p. 245.

St John could easily have drawn for the expression of his personal and inspired vision of Christ. It is in fact becoming increasingly apparent that *it is not Gnosticism, but the forms of Judaism on which Gnosticism drew, which principally influenced St John in his ideas and expressions*. Other influences, including Hellenistic ones, are by no means excluded, but the effect of recent discoveries, including Nag-Hammadi, is to drive us back again and again to Judaism—it might under certain aspects be called pre-Gnostic Judaism—for parallels with St John's terminology. One more example of this may perhaps be given. It is the theme of the Torah as idealized wisdom, beloved of later Judaism, which St John appears to have adapted in his Prologue. Let us notice the parallels between Ecclus. xxiv and the Prologue. Wisdom existed before the creation of the world: the Word was in the beginning. Wisdom co-operated in the creation: 'all things were made by him'. Wisdom radiated as light which led to life: the Word was the light, the life of men. Wisdom personified 'pitched her tent' in Israel: The Word 'pitched his tent' among us. Wisdom was in the bosom of God: the Word was in the bosom of the Father. The Evangelist's intention here is clear. He is concerned to show that Christ has brought to reality what the rabbis pretended to find in the law, in a manner infinitely more wonderful than they had foreseen.

Now let us turn to St Paul. I feel there are real grounds for believing that he was at times attacking early forms of Gnosticism, and perhaps for that very reason adopting some of their thought-forms and expressions even as he attacked their heretical beliefs. Thus in II Corinthians vi, 8 he appeals to 'the Wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world unto our glory; and which none of the princes of this world (lit. 'archons of this aeon') have known'. Again we have seen that the Gnostics are hostile to the Old Testament. And though Paul's fundamental belief is that the law was the 'paidagogos' which, rightly interpreted, led men to Christ, nevertheless he does at times speak as though it were an enemy. Through the law we come to knowledge of sin (Rom. iii, 20); it is the law that produces the wrath; where there is no law, there is no transgression (Rom. iv, 15; Coloss. ii, 22). Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galat. iii, 13), etc. Of the categories into which men were classified by the Gnostics, namely material (*hylie*), psychic and spiritual, Paul uses the second and third. 'It is sown a psychic body: it is raised up a spiritual body. . . . The first man, Adam, was made a living soul (*psyche*); the last man was made a vivifying spirit. Howbeit that was not first that was spiritual, but that which is psychic; and afterwards that

which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second anthropos comes from heaven' (I Cor. xv, 44-47). Paul too makes full use of the Light-Darkness antithesis beloved of the Gnostics but also of the Qumran sectarians and no doubt of other Jewish sects. 'For ye were sometime darkness; but now ye are light in the Lord, walk as children of the light . . .' (Ephes. v, 8). And St Paul proclaims that he is revealing 'the mystery which hath been hid from the aeons but now is made manifest to his saints, to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery' (Coloss. i, 26-27). Again in II Corinthians we find a description of Satan as 'the god of this aeon, who has blinded the minds of unbelievers (iv, 4). Again he tells the Corinthians that he wants to present them as a pure virgin to Christ, but he fears that their minds may be corrupted as Eve was seduced by the serpent (II Cor. xi, 2-3). Here Paul may well be drawing on that part of the Gnostic Paradise myth in which, according to some versions, Eve is actually seduced by the serpent, and bears Cain by him. Finally we may refer to a recent commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians by the Catholic scholar, H. Schlier.¹⁸ He considers that the language, both of Colossians and of Ephesians, is strongly influenced by Gnosticism. The emphasis on salvation for all is probably intended as a deliberate counter-attack on the exclusive and esoteric nature of Jewish-Christian Gnosticizing tendencies. And when the universe is thought of as an agglomeration of endless heavens, as a series of innumerable aeons, as the habitat of inconceivable powers and principalities; when in addition Christ is presented as the first Man, and the Church as his body and limbs, then, Schlier feels, the formal influence of Gnostic thought on St Paul's language and expression is clearly evident. His fundamental ideas are probably more explicitly and more fiercely opposed to Gnosticism than those of any other New Testament writer.

The Gospel according to Thomas

The so-called *Gospel according to Thomas* is not, of course, a gospel at all in the canonical sense, much less a 'fifth gospel' as certain journalists have absurdly stated it to be. It is a collection of about one hundred and twenty alleged 'sayings' of Jesus, introduced by the formula: 'These are the words which Jesus spoke, and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote'. The fictional ascription to Thomas is inspired by a fairly strong tradition, known from other early Christian documents, to the effect that Thomas was a special intimate of our Lord. In a related apocryphal work, the *Acts of Thomas* (not found at Nag-Hammadi), Thomas is actually understood to be the twin

¹⁸ *Der Brief an die Epheser*, Düsseldorf, 1958, p. 19.

brother of our Lord, for the name Thomas means 'twin' in Aramaic, and 'Didymos' is its Greek translation. The *Gospel according to Thomas* probably originated in Syria about A.D. 170-200.

Its primary characteristic is an exclusive preoccupation with the words of Christ rather than his deeds. It consistently omits the events of his life, including the Passion narrative. It also eliminates all those references to Old Testament fulfilment which play such a prominent part in our canonical gospels. Moral teaching and teaching on sin are also absent from it. The treatise concentrates exclusively on those parts of the gospels which contain our Lord's teaching on knowledge and revelation, and these it adapts and supplements so as to overlay the whole with Gnostic meaning.

Doctrinally we may notice that in this treatise the figures of the Father and the Son are almost identified. Christ is referred to as 'the living' and 'the one not born of woman', 'the lamb', perhaps in one rather obscure saying as 'the child of seven days'. He is omniscient, invisible, omnipresent, 'in the wood and in the stone' (perhaps an obscure reference to the cross and the sepulchre). He belongs essentially to the 'world of light' above, the 'place of life', and is connected with this lower imperfect world only in a secondary and transitory sense. His disciples must follow his example by transcending the secondary distinctions characteristic of this inferior world of matter, especially the distinctions of sex. They too belong to the world of light and come from the Father. They are destined to pass from the vision of images here below, to the contemplation of the exemplars above. (Here the Platonist influence is very evident.) They can attain riches and a kingdom if they will seek and find and 'know themselves'. Knowing themselves, they must reject the world as hostile, and this rejection is to extend to their own families. They are to become as little children.

Important passages in this Coptic text have been discovered in a Greek version in one of the famous Oxyrhynchus papyri, also stemming from Egypt. This particular passage had been virtually indecipherable until the *Gospel according to St Thomas* was recognized as containing a Coptic version substantially identical with it. Comparison between the two shows that in at least one revealing instance the Gnostic author of our 'gospel' has been editing the earlier version represented by the Greek, in favour of his own presuppositions. Such discoveries are naturally invaluable for the 'paring away' process by which it is hoped to arrive at an original and authentic tradition. In general it can be said that the Greek version is less 'Gnosticized' than the Coptic, and stands nearer to the common original on which both must have drawn.

We also find passages in this 'gospel' which are referred to by Christian writers as belonging to other collections of 'sayings' current and evidently extremely influential in the very early days of the Church, but now unfortunately lost to us. Notable among these is the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Among its surviving fragments are several quite fantastic passages, as for instance one in which the archangel Michael turns into the Virgin Mary and bears Christ. But one or two of the sayings seem to reflect a more orthodox, and possibly earlier theology. Now if our 'gospel' can be shown to contain sayings of the same type, or sayings which recur independently in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, then it will be possible to establish an important link with extra-canonical traditions of our Lord's teaching which reach back to before A.D. 150. This would, of course, bring us to a point almost within the life-time of the youngest of our Lord's disciples, and here the possibility of recovering some of the lost extra-canonical teaching becomes a serious one. It is this sort of possibility which is now being explored, but it is still far too soon to say what conclusions can be drawn, when the subsequent accretions are pared away, and the nucleus of early tradition which this Gospel seems to contain finally stands revealed.

In conclusion may I take this opportunity of refuting most emphatically the false and deplorable suggestions of certain journalists, to the effect that Christians are likely to be disturbed in their beliefs either by the Nag-Hammadi discoveries or by those of Qumran. On the contrary, true Christians welcome them with the utmost joy, as precious sources of truth given by the gracious God of all truth, natural and revealed alike.

A COLLECTION FOR UNITY

Oscar Cullmann's 'Proposal for Realizing Solidarity'

HEINRICH STIRNIMANN, O.P.

IN January 1957 Professor Oscar Cullmann was invited to lecture in Zurich on the subject, 'Primitive Christendom and The Ecumenical Problem'.¹ Referring to the collection made by the early Gentile Christians for the Jewish Christians, he proposed that the separated Christians of today make a reciprocal collection at

¹ The lecture is included in *Catholics and Protestants: A Proposal for Realizing Christian Solidarity*. By Oscar Cullmann (Lutterworth Press, 4s. 6d.).

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