

Gnosticism

Gnosticism was an esoteric religious movement, which flourished primarily during the second and third centuries CE, and for a time posed a major challenge to mainstream Christianity. Its adherents claimed to possess a secret knowledge of the divine realms and its inhabitants, and utilized a complex mythology to describe this system. This myth began with the One Unknowable God, then went on to tell of intermediary emanations. One of these emanations, Sophia (Wisdom), desired to know the Unknowable God, but since this desire was illegitimate, what came forth from this desire was an aborted deformity, a being that went forth and created the physical universe. This Creator (or Demiurge) in turn, used the newly created universe to enslave the divine sparks of God into human bodies, where they could only be redeemed by the grace of Gnosis.

Most Gnostics considered themselves to be Christians, yet there were many theological differences between them and the mainstream Christians. The Gnostics did not consider the God of the Old Testament to be the same God as taught by Jesus. The acceptance of the sacraments varied among Gnostic sects. Many of the Gnostic sects used special hymns, magical formulas and amulets in their practices. The Gnostics also admitted women equally into their clergy.

The word “Gnosis” essentially means knowledge. Beyond this simple definition there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to a more precise meaning. It may be safely stated however that the early Gnostics were not speaking of a mundane common knowledge, but rather an intuitive internally derived knowledge. The next logical question would naturally be what exactly was the nature of this secret knowledge. The nearest that we may come to answering this question would be to say that the Gnostics knew “from whence they came and to whither they were going.” In a sense, the art of obtaining Gnosis is within the realm of anamnesis, or a remembering of things divine, where the present is brought into intimate contact with the past, and the past with the present. Anamnesis would be the word used in Christ’s command: “Do this in remembrance of me.”