

Conflict on the Nature of the World: Gnosticism's Role in Shaping Christian Orthodoxy

After the death of Jesus Christ and the birth of the Christian church, the Christian movement began to wrestle with theological mysteries within the context of its own community and also the surrounding Roman world. The God of Christianity was transcendent, omnipotent, just, and good. In contrast, the world was fallen, broken, and full of sin. This inconsistency between the nature of God and the nature of the world sparked the question of theodicy: how can a good and just God be reconciled with an evil and unjust world? Gnosticism, a movement that arose in either the late first or early second century, attempted to answer this question. A Christian heresy, or deviant belief, Gnosticism rejected the idea of the intrinsic goodness of the world with opposition to the Jewish Creation account found in the beginning of the book of Genesis. As the early church began to outline Christian orthodoxy, Gnosticism was rejected and Christianity became a world-embracing faith. The Gospel of John, a text fundamental to Christian orthodox belief, stood in stark contrast to gnostic literature such as the Apocryphon of John and the Gospel of Thomas. Rooted in the Gospel of John's emphasis on the redemption of creation and the goodness of the world, the rejection of Gnosticism shaped Christian orthodoxy and the faith's embrace of the material world.

Gnosticism's adherence to a different story of creation created a theological split with the developing mainstream Christian orthodoxy of the time. The heretical movement answered theodicy with the answer that the omnipotent, loving Christian God did not create the world. Instead, lower gods or evil deities created a world of *chaos*, characterized by randomness and disorder, and the infinite, unknowable God was then bringing order and design to this world throughout time. This myth of creation countered the orthodox belief that God created the

universe *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing.” Instead of claiming that God created a fundamentally good world that was fractured by the brokenness of humankind, gnostics contended that the material world was to be condemned and rejected. The gnostics also offered a different soteriology. They claimed that Jesus Christ was a teacher of enlightenment who taught secret knowledge that was essential for salvation. This secret knowledge, *gnosis*, was seen as God’s gift as a way to escape the material world. In the Gospel of John, Thomas, one of Christ’s apostles, did not believe that a resurrected Christ had appeared to the other disciples. He stated that “unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20.24). The title of an ancient gnostic text, The Gospel of Thomas, highlights the gnostic association with the disciple now often referred to as “doubting Thomas.” Gnosticism rejected the belief in a physical salvation and resurrection that was central to Christian orthodoxy. The Gospel of Thomas recounts Christ as a teacher of knowledge and only contains sayings (*logia*) of Jesus, lacking crucifixion and resurrection accounts. The gospel account, rejected as heretical leading up to the formation of the Christian canon, quotes Christ in logion 56 as stating that “Whoever has come to know the world has discovered a carcass, and whoever has discovered a carcass, of that person the world is not worthy” (Patterson et al.). This association between knowing the world and discovering a dead body distinguishes the gnostic rejection of the world from the Christian embrace of materiality in the Gospel of John. Gnostics also credited John, often referred to as the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” with having written the Apocryphon of John. This second-century gnostic text, which the orthodox church rejected, was set after the crucifixion of Christ and depicts John as sad about Christ’s death. Upon seeing a light, John was told a gnostic variation of the creation account. This story portrays the serpent in Eden telling Adam and Eve to embrace

the material world. God “was [the one] who brought about that they ate” from the tree of knowledge of good and evil in order that Adam and Eve would know that the world is corrupt (Wisse). However, this narrative contradicted the Christian view of the world that triumphed over Gnosticism and is seen in the biblical canon.

The Gospel of John played an essential role in the church’s response to Gnosticism because of its consistent embrace of the physical world. Because this book is dated to the late first century and the gnostic movement is theorized to have begun at approximately the same time, it is possible that this gospel account was written with the rising heresy in mind. The book begins with a theological poem on the nature of Christ, the “Word.” This introductory “Hymn to the Word” describes Christ as the agent of creation and a part of creation. Through the incarnation, Jesus “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1.14). The notion of God dwelling in the world contradicted the gnostic rejection of the world and is central to orthodox Christian theology. The gospel account’s acceptance of the material world is further unveiled in the earthly symbols utilized throughout the telling of Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist, who spoke of the coming Messiah, proclaimed, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1.29). As his earthly ministry began, the Gospel of John records Jesus’ first miracle in chapter two, the transformation of water into wine at a wedding (2.1-11). Lastly, as the gospel narrative progresses, it records Jesus’ renowned “I am” statements, including claims that he is the Bread of Life, the True Vine, and the Good Shepherd. The identification of symbols of the earth with the divine revealed the orthodox belief in the manifestation of God’s glory and goodness in the material world. It was unfathomable to the gnostics that God would reveal Himself in the

corrupt world. The Gospel of John insisted on the goodness of the world and God's loving intention in creating and redeeming all of creation.

In addition to embracing the world created by the omnipotent God, the Gospel of John proclaims the redemption of creation through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In what is the most quoted verse in Christian Scripture, Jesus told Nicodemus that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3.16). Gnostics viewed the "world," *kosmos*, as corrupt rather than as an object worthy of God's affection. The Gospel of John's argument that God came into the world to redeem creation was antithetical to Gnosticism. John's repeated emphasis on Christ as the perfect sacrifice to redeem the *kosmos* strengthened the gospel's claim that salvation was physical and for the world. The orthodox Christian view of redemption rests upon belief in the Resurrection, a physical securing of salvation. This doctrine stood in contrast to the gnostic faith in enlightenment and acquisition of *gnosis* that Christ taught.

As Christian orthodoxy was further refined in the second, third, and fourth centuries, the rejection of Gnosticism played a central role in shaping the Christian belief in the goodness of the world. Christianity, a sacramental faith, followed the actions of Christ by placing value in sacraments or ordinances. The Christian church continued to embrace the world through the Eucharist, an act in which Christians remember the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Believers participate in the Eucharist, also called the Lord's Supper or Communion, by eating bread and drinking wine, the body and blood of Christ. The church's adoption of this symbolic act once again rejected the gnostic condemnation of the material world. An embrace of the body and blood of Jesus, physical attributes, depicted an ecclesial decision in Christianity that condemned

heretical Gnosticism. Furthermore, in the fourth century, Christian leaders dismissed the claims of Gnosticism in a formal statement of faith, known as the Nicene Creed. By 325 A.D, the time of the Council of Nicaea, the Christian church had faced three significant controversies: the Gentile question, Gnosticism, and Arianism. Each of these three controversies sharpened doctrine in the church. In an attempt to outline proper Christian belief, the orthodoxy of the church, the leaders at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. wrote the Nicene Creed. The church's struggle with Gnosticism is evident in the declaration of beliefs. In the opening line, Christians declared that they "believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The belief in God as Creator of the universe and in Christ as the redeemer of the world developed as Christian orthodoxy throughout the time of the early church. This belief was made official in the statement formulated at Nicaea, which dismissed Gnosticism as a heretical divergence from the true faith. Together, the practice of the Lord's Supper and the formation of the Nicene Creed affirmed the church's opposition to the gnostic movement in its belief in the uprightness of the world.

The rise of controversies in the early Christian church helped the body of Christ formulate orthodox doctrine. In response to Gnosticism, the Gospel of John and church leaders sought to defend the goodness of the material world with a belief in a physical redemption and God as Creator. The Gospel of John's use of earthly symbols and emphasis on God's affection for the *kosmos* laid a foundation for the development of Christian orthodoxy. This orthodoxy appeared with pronounced opposition to Gnosticism in the Eucharist and the Nicene Creed. While some gnostic texts remain available today, the large majority are not due to the triumph of orthodox Christianity over this heresy, and Gnosticism's influence fell in the third century.

Works Cited

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