

## NEW EVIDENCE ON GNOSTICISM

## The Jung Codex

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THE first two or three centuries of the Christian era witnessed a luxuriant outcrop of sects which we nowadays group together under the label 'gnostic'. But 'gnosticism', as the name of a religious movement, is a modern invention. True, some of these sects did like to style themselves 'gnostic'; but the Greek word *gnosis* only means 'knowledge', and that is a thing to which not only heretical sects laid claim. On the contrary, from the very beginning of the Christian Church's history, it was part and parcel of God's manifold gifts to his faithful, of which the Christian community believed itself to be the privileged recipient. St Paul himself writes to the Corinthians about the diversity of gifts and ministries in the believing community, under the One Lord: 'But to each one', he writes, 'is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the profit of all: to one it is given to speak the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of *gnosis*, of knowledge, according to the same Spirit', and so forth. And yet he, too, knew of 'profane babblings and paradoxes of the falsely so-called *gnosis*', and he warns his disciple Timothy against their seduction. This self-styled *gnosis* is, in his eyes, the parody of the God-given knowledge enjoyed by the faithful.

From St Paul onwards, *gnosis* has retained this two-faced character. On the one hand, for a Christian Father like Irenaeus, the 'gnostic' could become almost synonymous with the 'heretic'; on the other, the no less orthodox Clement of Alexandria could write of the 'true gnostic' as the ideal of the Christian theologian, the model of the man to whom is vouchsafed a Spirit-given insight into the mystery which penetrates deeper than that of his fellows with a more easy-going faith. And this ambiguity is not merely a matter of using words in two different ways. The bewildering variety of second- and third-century sects which we have in mind when we speak of 'gnosticism' display this same ambiguity in their own make-up. Were these people the forerunners of the Christian theologian, men who claimed a deeper insight into the common faith than their fellow-believers? Or

were they men who took their stand on the knowledge of which they claimed to be the exclusive possessors; to take a stand, in other words, over against the faithful Ecclesia?

The opposition cuts as deep as that; and yet, until very recently, these questions were not easy to answer with any confidence, and in fact a good many different answers have been given. At one extreme, scholars like Harnack have sought to express the contrast between Christian orthodoxy and gnostic heresy by seeing Gnosticism as the *acute* hellenization of Christianity, and Orthodoxy as its *gradual* hellenization. On this view, the heretical nature of Gnosticism consisted simply in its premature, over-precipitate attempt to do what Christianity had sooner or later to get round to doing: to assimilate Greek philosophy and its thought-forms into Christian thinking. Others, at the opposite extreme, have seen in these sects the revival of various near-Eastern cults, frequently drawing on quite a mixture of religions, and often with a thin veneer of Christian colouring spread over their surface.

The weight of scholarship has been divided between these two types of answer. Now we cannot read the early Christian Fathers without appreciating the serious menace they saw in the teaching of these sects to the original purity of the Gospel. Whether we share their beliefs or not, we may sense the urgent need they felt to combat something which they considered to be foreign to its message, and incompatible with remaining faithful to the Gospel witness. But then their accounts of their opponents' beliefs may not have been always free from bias, and they can certainly not have escaped being coloured by the pre-occupations of polemical writing. And apart from a small handful of fragments and some later documents, these accounts have been our only source of knowledge about gnosticism. The question has remained elusive and baffling.

Now we are in a different position altogether. In 1946 some Egyptian peasants came across a collection of thirteen volumes, containing some forty-six treatises, written on papyrus in Coptic, though bearing evident signs of being translated from Greek originals. These writings have turned out to be the library of a gnostic sect. So far not much of this wealth of material has been available for study; but one volume—and it may well be the most important of this great find—has found its way to

Europe, and has been acquired for the Jung Institute in Zurich. Hence its name—the ‘Jung Codex’—christened after the man who has devoted so much effort to uncover the forces in the human *psyche* which find such strange outlets as in gnostic speculation. This is the volume which forms the subject of the studies by three Continental scholars recently published.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this papyrus-find. It would be too much to claim that it gives us a clear-cut picture; but at least we are now able to go behind the accounts of opponents for our information, and, what is more important, the information falls into a pattern of a kind. I suspect that the pattern will be found to confirm what men like Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian have had to tell us. Its detail is still blurred, but it enables us to say with confidence much that has been controversial, and to gain direct access to minds whose products we had previously known only at second-hand, or in fragments.

‘A world-religion has just been discovered’—these are the words in which Professor Quispel of Utrecht, one of the contributors to this volume, greeted the discovery. It is a staggering claim. Let us see what it implies: ‘a world-religion’, not a Christian heresy. We may consider an example to see what this means. Among these writings there are two which together illustrate something that is profoundly characteristic of the whole religious movement. One of them, a ‘Letter to Eugnostos’, is a frankly pagan document, containing no allusion to Christian beliefs and no trace of Christian influence. Now another work, a so-called ‘Wisdom of Jesus Christ’, is a replica of this. The only way in which it differs from the pagan work is in that it displays the content of the secret revelation which it communicates, in dialogue form, as imparted by the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalen. What we have to do with here is something much larger than a mere deviation from Christian orthodoxy: it is a distinct religious movement, one that is receptive enough to absorb the trappings of Christian belief and practice into its texture. In the example to which I have just referred, this assimilation, to be sure, is not very far-reaching, and it remains on the periphery of the esoteric doctrine taught to the gnostic initiate. But this is not always so. Sometimes, as, for instance, in the person of Valentine, one of the outstanding figures of the movement, there is a debt to

1 *The Jung Codex*. Edited by F. L. Cross. (Mowbrays, 1952.)

Christianity which is no mere superficial borrowing, but goes very deep indeed.

Valentine left Egypt and established himself at Rome sometime about the year 140. Coming from Alexandria, he had a unique chance to bring with him from this melting pot of the Hellenistic world the accumulated heritage of Pagan, Jewish and Christian religion, as well as of Greek philosophic reflection. The synthesis he created out of all these ingredients was something highly original and of great power. At any rate, we know that even his most resolute opponents were not shy of paying tribute to his intellectual eminence among his contemporaries; and indeed, he was only narrowly defeated in a papal election on his arrival in Rome. Apart from this, there is next to nothing we know of his life, but a fair amount of evidence from which scholars have reconstructed his teaching. One of the documents contained in the Jung Codex is entitled 'The Gospel of Truth'. Now we know that this is the title of an apocryphal work which many sects of the second century used to substantiate their claim to a secret revelation entrusted to them. It may well have come from Valentine's own pen—at any rate it is the product of his circle and perhaps very close to him in time. This is a passage freely translated from this work:

When once the Light appears, the creature knows that the tear which had held it in its grip is but nothing. So men knew not the Father, him whom they could not see. Being without knowledge, they were left subject to fear and anguish, perplexed, groping, or divided and torn apart; many vain illusions and empty fictions haunted them, as sleepers are wont to be tormented in a nightmare . . . until the moment when having gone through all this they awaken. Then they see none of the haunting shapes, having passed through all that, and the dreams dissolve. In like manner those who have cast their ignorance far from themselves, wake as from a dream without meaning. . . . Gnosis of the Father is now their only light. Each one had behaved in this fashion, as it were asleep, while in a state of ignorance; and in returning, as if awakening, to themselves. And it is good for a man to return to himself and to awaken. . . .

I quote this passage because it strikes the key-note of much gnostic writing. It expresses that mood of being strange to the

world of matter and history, of space and time, which is so deeply ingrained in all gnostic thinking. To the gnostic this world of men is a realm of darkness; but his *gnosis* reassures him that he does not belong to it: his rightful home, it tells him, is in another world, and his initiation into the esoteric teaching is both the means and the guarantee of his ultimate re-admittance to it. In his state of exile he is an outpost, and a temporary outpost, of the divine world of light in a world of darkness. Many things may have combined to loosen the links that bound him to the world of his fellows: the ordered cosmos of the classical Greek temper of thought had become a dwelling-place of demons, and the cult of the Olympians held little comfort for the individual's sense of loneliness and frustration in a crumbling society. What he demanded of the saving knowledge offered by Gnostic teachers was that it should meet his need for liberation and to show him a way to the possibility of finding a wholeness lying beyond his conflicts.

And this is exactly what *gnosis* offered him: a knowledge which was to be a return to himself, and a home-coming. The theme running through all the gnostic myths and all the hymns sung in gnostic rituals was to remind the initiate that his deliverance lay in remembering his origins, and to discern the divine reality hidden in the darkness of his own self. The defenders of orthodoxy have delighted in recounting the beliefs of the various sects in all their tangled variety, to dwell on their extravagant and far-fetched mythologies. But there is one theme they embroider in their several, bizarre ways: it is the theme of our human condition, the origin of the privileged elect cast into a strange world, and their final release and return to their spiritual home.

The myth later associated with Valentine—rightly or not—begins by telling us of a divinity which transcends all knowledge and comprehension, known only to its first and most immediate emanation: 'In the invisible and ineffable heights there was the perfect Aeon, called Depth, before all things. Incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and unbegotten, he dwelt in quiet solitude throughout endless ages. With him was his consort, Silence. And Depth decided to send forth the origin of all things, and deposited this emanation, as it were a seed, in the womb of Silence. Receiving this seed and becoming pregnant, she then

gave birth to Mind, who was both like and equal to him who had produced him, and who alone could comprehend the greatness of the Father. Together with him emanated his consort, Truth.' The myth goes on to recount the generation of further pairs of emanations or Aeons: each pair owes both its fertility and its wholeness and perfection to its bi-polar, male-female nature. The thirty Aeons together composed the totality of the divine world or Pleroma, all perfect and complete in itself.

The myth proceeds to picture the primal sin, a fault within this world of perfection, as an undue striving, a passion to know the unfathomable Father: 'Sophia, the youngest and last of the Aeons rushed forth', we are told, with a craving to comprehend his greatness. Saved by a restraining power, the Limit, from annihilation in the depths of the unsearchable, she is exiled from the self-contained wholeness of the divine world and banished outside the Pleroma. 'Once expelled into this emptiness devoid of *gnosis*', the myth continues, 'she brought forth an offspring, Jesus, in remembrance of the higher world, but with a certain shadow. But he, being masculine, severed the shadow from himself and returned to the world of spirit. . . . But Sophia, left outside alone, fell into passion of every kind: sorrow she suffered, because she was devoid of understanding; fear, lest life should desert her as her light had already left her; and in addition, she was in perplexity—and, at the root of all, in ignorance.'

This is how the myth describes the fall from wholeness. The result of the primal sin is an estrangement from self, a dereliction in pain, anguish and loss of *gnosis*, of insight. This is a kind of 'prologue in heaven', the archetypal image of the human drama played out on a divine stage. But the myth goes on to account for the origin of the human counterpart which is a reflection of this primordial drama. The estrangement in the perfect, spiritual or divine world, which it calls the Pleroma, is the origin of the world of matter and of time. A new emanation, called the Saviour, is sent forth from the Pleroma to heal Sophia's sufferings. 'He separated them from her, placed them apart, and condensed them by transforming the incorporeal suffering into as yet unorganized matter.' Out of these constituents, the Demiurge, Sophia's creature, who is identified with the God of the Old Testament, separates the world of matter and of men. This is under his dominion; but into it, as into a receptacle, Sophia injects the

seed of spiritual substance, unknown to the Demiurge and transcending his dominion. This spiritual seed is the stuff of which the gnostic elect claim to be made. In virtue of it they belong, with their mother Sophia, to a higher world of spirit; in virtue of it they possess the inborn knowledge of this divine world; and in virtue of it, too, they are assured of their final re-admission to their rightful home at the great marriage-feast at the consummation of the world-process.

Such are the bare bones of a myth which, even in the potted form in which it has come down to us, cannot be denied a certain pathos and poignancy. Some have seen in it philosophy dressed up in the guise of myth. And certainly, at any rate in the later phases of its development, it is little more than a wild interplay of thinly personified abstractions. But at bottom, whatever its debt to late Hellenistic philosophy and to Christianity—and this is not the place to assess either—this kind of thinking takes us into realms far both from philosophy and from Christian theology: it is thinking which is concerned to explore an inner vision and to express a tragic sense of life in the figures of the imagination. Valentine himself, as we are told in an ancient account, sought to express the content of a vision in a 'tragic myth' which was handed down in the sect he founded. He was first and foremost a poet who sang of the vision granted him, and of the world bathed in its light. This is where the power and the originality of Valentinian gnosis lies: it expresses in the language of myth, and enacts in ritual, an intensely personal vision in which the initiate confronts the archetypal images. This is the knowledge in which the gnostic found his salvation. In re-enacting the experience which the myth seeks to express, the gnostic discovered his own truest, inmost reality seen now as no longer belonging to the common herd and their world. His privileged vision of the inner world of man was at once his vision of his real, ultimate home. He has gained this saving knowledge through exploring the recesses of his own soul, the shadow which lies hidden from the sight of the ordinary run of men; but in turning his back on the light of the ordinary man, that light becomes his shadow, and the luminous world of phantasy his only reality.

It is a curious inversion, one that has found many different expressions at various times. In that perplexed age of transition from late antiquity to the Christian era, gnosticism is one of the

concrete forms in which we can study men's submersion in the shadows of their own inner selves. 'What were we? What have we become? Where do we come from, and where is it we have been cast? Whither are we hastening? How are we redeemed?'—such are the questions, as one of Valentine's disciples lists them for us, to which the gnostic seeks the answers. And the saving revelation which claims to provide them is, at bottom, knowledge of being already saved: for it tells him of his real home, and of his inevitable return to it. He need only disown the world to which he is now a stranger, and to endure the nostalgia of his exile, in the assurance of his return home.

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### EDITH STEIN

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NO form of biography is more difficult to write than the life of a man or woman credited with sanctity. If the account is to be uniformly honest, the impression of transcendent goodness must inevitably be marred: the smallest fault is enough to invalidate the claim to perfection. If the picture is deliberately edifying, the impression conveyed is too remote to command admiration, still less affection. The conventional Lives of the Saints possess an advantage over modern essays in hagiography in that they are concerned with persons sufficiently long dead for their faults to have sunk into oblivion. If the subject happens to be near-contemporary, however, certain imperfections are bound to loom large. 'God protect us from living saints', wrote an ancient ecclesiastic. In the first biography of Edith Stein to appear in English,<sup>1</sup> the author makes a genuine attempt at objectivity. She does not minimize a certain stiffness of character in her subject, while admitting that this gradually mellowed; and there is much criticism of her theological views. If the book suffers from one major fault, it lies in its refusal to allow us sufficient opportunity of judging the woman for ourselves. For every little fact we are given a disproportionate amount of comment. And this liberal comment, however fair in

1 *The Scholar and the Cross*. By Hilda C. Graef. (Longmans, 18s.)