

they claimed that their own group formed the essential nucleus, the "spiritual church." Rejecting such religious elitism, orthodox leaders attempted instead to construct a *universal* church. Desiring to open that church to everyone, they welcomed members from every social class, every racial or cultural origin, whether educated or illiterate—everyone, that is, who would submit to their system of organization. The bishops drew the line against those who challenged any of the three elements of this system: doctrine, ritual, and clerical hierarchy—and the gnostics challenged them all. Only by suppressing gnosticism did orthodox leaders establish that system of organization which united all believers into a single institutional structure. They allowed no other distinction between first- and second-class members than that between the clergy and the laity, nor did they tolerate any who claimed exemption from doctrinal conformity, from ritual participation, and from obedience to the discipline that priests and bishops administered. Gnostic churches, which rejected that system for more subjective forms of religious affiliation, survived, as churches, for only a few hundred years.

## CHAPTER VI

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### Gnosis: Self=Knowledge as Knowledge of God

... Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE GOSPEL OF JOHN, which contains this saying, is a remarkable book that many gnostic Christians claimed for themselves and used as a primary source for gnostic teaching.<sup>2</sup> Yet the emerging church, despite some orthodox opposition, included John within the New Testament. What makes John acceptably "orthodox"? Why did the church accept John while rejecting such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Dialogue of the Savior*? In considering this question, remember that anyone who drives through the United States is likely to see billboards proclaiming this saying from John—billboards signed by any of the local churches. Their purpose is clear: by indicating that one finds God only through Jesus, the saying, in its contemporary context, implies that one finds Jesus only through the church. Similarly, in the first centuries of this era, Christians concerned to strengthen the institutional church could find support in John.

Gnostic sources offer a different religious perspective. According to the *Dialogue of the Savior*, for example, when the disciples asked Jesus the same question ("What is the place to which we shall go?") he answered, "the place which you can reach, stand there!"<sup>8</sup> The *Gospel of Thomas* relates that when the disciples asked Jesus where they should go, he said only, "There is light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness."<sup>4</sup> Far from legitimizing any institution, both sayings direct one instead to oneself—to one's inner capacity to find one's own direction, to the "light within."

The contrast sketched above is, of course, somewhat simplistic. Followers of Valentinus themselves demonstrated—convincingly—that many sayings and stories in John could lend themselves to such interpretation. But Christians like Irenaeus apparently decided that, on balance, the gospel of John (especially, perhaps, when placed in sequence after Matthew, Mark, and Luke) could serve the needs of the emerging institution.

As the church organized politically, it could sustain within itself many contradictory ideas and practices as long as the disputed elements supported its basic institutional structure. In the third and fourth centuries, for example, hundreds of catholic Christians adopted ascetic forms of self-discipline, seeking religious insight through solitude, visions, and ecstatic experience. (The terms "monk" and "monastic" come from the Greek word *monachos*, meaning "solitary," or "single one," which the *Gospel of Thomas* frequently uses to describe the gnostic.) Rather than exclude the monastic movement, the church moved, in the fourth century, to bring the monks into line with episcopal authority. The scholar Frederik Wisse has suggested that the monks who lived at the monastery of St. Pachomius, within sight of the cliff where the texts were found, may have included the Nag Hammadi texts within their devotional library.<sup>5</sup> But in 367, when Athanasius, the powerful Archbishop of Alexandria, sent an order to purge all "apocryphal books" with "heretical" tendencies, one (or several) of the monks may have hidden the

precious manuscripts in the jar and buried it on the cliff of the Jabal al-Ṭarif, where Muḥammad 'Alī found it 1,600 years later.

Furthermore, as the church, disparate as it was internally, increasingly became a political unity between 150 and 400, its leaders tended to treat their opponents—an even more diverse range of groups—as if they, too, constituted an *opposite* political unity. When Irenaeus denounced the heretics as "gnostics,"<sup>6</sup> he referred less to any specific doctrinal agreement among them (indeed, he often castigated them for the variety of their beliefs) than to the fact that they all resisted accepting the authority of the clergy, the creed, and the New Testament canon.

What—if anything—did the various groups that Irenaeus called "gnostic" have in common? Or, to put the question another way, what do the diverse texts discovered at Nag Hammadi have in common? No simple answer could cover all the different groups that the orthodox attack, or all the different texts in the Nag Hammadi collection. But I suggest that the trouble with gnosticism, from the orthodox viewpoint, was not only that gnostics often disagreed with the majority on such specific issues as those we have explored so far—the organization of authority, the participation of women, martyrdom: the orthodox recognized that those they called "gnostics" shared a fundamental religious perspective that remained antithetical to the claims of the institutional church.

For orthodox Christians insisted that humanity needs a way beyond its own power—a divinely given way—to approach God. And this, they declared, the catholic church offered to those who would be lost without it: "Outside the church there is no salvation." Their conviction was based on the premise that God created humanity. As Irenaeus says, "In this respect God differs from humanity; God makes, but humanity is made."<sup>7</sup> One is the originating agent, the other the passive recipient; one is "truly perfect in all things,"<sup>8</sup> omnipotent, infinite, the other an imperfect and finite creature. The philosopher Justin Martyr says that when he recognized the great difference between the human mind and God, he abandoned Plato and became a

Christian philosopher. He relates that before his conversion an old man challenged his basic assumption, asking, "What affinity, then, is there between us and God? Is the soul also divine and immortal, and a part of that very regal mind?" Speaking as a disciple of Plato, Justin answered without hesitation, "Certainly."<sup>9</sup> But when the old man's further questions led him to doubt that certainty, he says he realized that the human mind could not find God within itself and needed instead to be enlightened by divine revelation—by means of the Scriptures and the faith proclaimed in the church.

But some gnostic Christians went so far as to claim that humanity created God—and so, from its own inner potential, discovered for itself the revelation of truth. This conviction may underlie the ironic comment in the *Gospel of Philip*:

... God created humanity; [but now human beings] create God. That is the way it is in the world—human beings make gods, and worship their creation. It would be appropriate for the gods to worship human beings!<sup>10</sup>

The gnostic Valentinus taught that humanity itself manifests the divine life and divine revelation. The church, he says, consists of that portion of humanity that recognizes and celebrates its divine origin.<sup>11</sup> But Valentinus did not use the term in its contemporary sense, to refer to the human race taken collectively. Instead, he and his followers thought of *Anthropos* (here translated "humanity") as the underlying nature of that collective entity, the archetype, or spiritual essence, of human being. In this sense, some of Valentinus' followers, "those . . . considered more skillful"<sup>12</sup> than the rest, agreed with the teacher Colorbasus, who said that when God revealed himself, He revealed himself in the form of *Anthropos*. Still others, Irenaeus reports, maintained that

the primal father of the whole, the primal beginning, and the primal incomprehensible, is called *Anthropos* . . . and that this is the great and abstruse mystery, namely, that the

power which is above all others, and contains all others in its embrace, is called *Anthropos*.<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, these gnostics explained, the Savior called himself "Son of Man" (that is, Son of *Anthropos*).<sup>14</sup> The Sethian gnostics, who called the creator Ialdabaoth (a name apparently derived from mystical Judaism but which here indicates his inferior status), said that for this reason, when the creator,

Ialdabaoth, becoming arrogant in spirit, boasted himself over all those who were below him, and explained, "I am father, and God, and above me there is no one," his mother, hearing him speak thus, cried out against him: "Do not lie, Ialdabaoth; for the father of all, the primal *Anthropos*, is above you; and so is *Anthropos*, the son of *Anthropos*.<sup>15</sup>

In the words of another Valentinian, since human beings created the whole language of religious expression, so, in effect, humanity created the divine world: ". . . and this [*Anthropos*] is really he who is God over all."

Many gnostics, then, would have agreed in principle with Ludwig Feuerbach, the nineteenth-century psychologist, that "theology is really anthropology" (the term derives, of course, from *anthropos*, and means "study of humanity"). For gnostics, exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly—a religious quest. Some who seek their own interior direction, like the radical gnostics, reject religious institutions as a hindrance to their progress. Others, like the Valentinians, willingly participate in them, although they regard the church more as an instrument of their own self-discovery than as the necessary "ark of salvation."

Besides defining God in opposite ways, gnostic and orthodox Christians diagnosed the human condition very differently. The orthodox followed traditional Jewish teaching that what separates humanity from God, besides the essential dissimilarity, is human sin. The New Testament term for sin, *hamartia*, comes from the sport of archery; literally, it means "missing the mark."

New Testament sources teach that we suffer distress, mental and physical, because we fail to achieve the moral goal toward which we aim: "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>16</sup> So, according to the gospel of Mark, when Jesus came to reconcile God and humanity, he announced: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."<sup>17</sup> Mark announces that Jesus alone could offer healing and forgiveness of sins; only those who receive his message in faith experience deliverance. The gospel of John expresses the desperate situation of humanity apart from the Savior:

For God sent the Son into the world . . . that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.<sup>18</sup>

Many gnostics, on the contrary, insisted that ignorance, not sin, is what involves a person in suffering. The gnostic movement shared certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques. Both gnosticism and psychotherapy value, above all, knowledge—the self-knowledge which is insight. They agree that, lacking this, a person experiences the sense of being driven by impulses he does not understand. Valentinus expressed this in a myth. He tells how the world originated when Wisdom, the Mother of all beings, brought it forth out of her own suffering. The four elements that Greek philosophers said constituted the world—earth, air, fire, and water—are concrete forms of her experiences:

Thus the earth arose from her confusion, water from her terror; air from the consolidation of her grief; while fire . . . was inherent in all these elements . . . as ignorance lay concealed in these three sufferings.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the world was born out of suffering. (The Greek word *pathos*, here translated "suffering," also connotes being the passive recipient, not the initiator, of one's experience.) Valen-

tinus or one of his followers tells a different version of the myth in the *Gospel of Truth*:

. . . Ignorance . . . brought about anguish and terror. And the anguish grew solid like a fog, so that no one was able to see. For this reason error is powerful . . .<sup>20</sup>

Most people live, then, in oblivion—or, in contemporary terms, in unconsciousness. Remaining unaware of their own selves, they have "no root."<sup>21</sup> The *Gospel of Truth* describes such existence as a nightmare. Those who live in it experience "terror and confusion and instability and doubt and division," being caught in "many illusions."<sup>22</sup> So, according to the passage scholars call the "nightmare parable," they lived

as if they were sunk in sleep and found themselves in disturbing dreams. Either (there is) a place to which they are fleeing, or, without strength, they come (from) having chased after others, or they are involved in striking blows, or they are receiving blows themselves, or they have fallen from high places, or they take off into the air though they do not even have wings. Again, sometimes (it is as) if people were murdering them, though there is no one even pursuing them, or they themselves are killing their neighbors, for they have been stained with their blood. When those who are going through all these things wake up, they see nothing, they who were in the midst of these disturbances, for they are nothing. Such is the way of those who have cast ignorance aside as sleep, leaving [its works] behind like a dream in the night. . . . This is the way everyone has acted, as though asleep at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way he has come to knowledge, as if he had awakened.<sup>23</sup>

Whoever remains ignorant, a "creature of oblivion,"<sup>24</sup> cannot experience fulfillment. Gnostics said that such a person "dwells in deficiency" (the opposite of fulfillment). For deficiency consists of ignorance:

. . . As with someone's ignorance, when he comes to have knowledge, his ignorance vanishes by itself; as the

darkness vanishes when light appears, so also the deficiency vanishes in the fulfillment.<sup>25</sup>

Self-ignorance is also a form of self-destruction. According to the *Dialogue of the Savior*, whoever does not understand the elements of the universe, and of himself, is bound for annihilation:

... If one does not [understand] how the fire came to be, he will burn in it, because he does not know his root. If one does not first understand the water, he does not know anything. ... If one does not understand how the wind that blows came to be, he will run with it. If one does not understand how the body that he wears came to be, he will perish with it. ... Whoever does not understand how he came will not understand how he will go ...<sup>26</sup>

How—or where—is one to seek self-knowledge? Many gnostics share with psychotherapy a second major premise: both agree—against orthodox Christianity—that the psyche bears *within itself* the potential for liberation or destruction. Few psychiatrists would disagree with the saying attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”<sup>27</sup>

Such insight comes gradually, through effort: “Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you.”<sup>28</sup>

Such gnostics acknowledged that pursuing *gnosis* engages each person in a solitary, difficult process, as one struggles against internal resistance. They characterized this resistance to *gnosis* as the desire to sleep or to be drunk—that is, to remain unconscious. So Jesus (who elsewhere says “I am the knowledge of the truth”)<sup>29</sup> declares that when he came into the world

I found them all drunk; I found none of them thirsty. And my soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight; for empty they came into this world, and empty they seek to leave this world. But for the moment they are drunk.<sup>30</sup>

The teacher Silvanus, whose *Teachings*<sup>31</sup> were discovered at Nag Hammadi, encourages his followers to resist unconsciousness:

... end the sleep which weighs heavy upon you. Depart from the oblivion which fills you with darkness ... Why do you pursue the darkness, though the light is available for you? ... Wisdom calls you, yet you desire foolishness. ... a foolish man ... goes the ways of the desire of every passion. He swims in the desires of life and has foundered. ... he is like a ship which the wind tosses to and fro, and like a loose horse which has no rider. For this (one) needed the rider, which is reason. ... before everything else ... know yourself ...<sup>32</sup>

The *Gospel of Thomas* also warns that self-discovery involves inner turmoil:

Jesus said, “Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over all things.”<sup>33</sup>

What is the source of the “light” discovered within? Like Freud, who professed to follow the “light of reason,” most gnostic sources agreed that “the lamp of the body is the mind”<sup>34</sup> (a saying which the *Dialogue of the Savior* attributes to Jesus). Silvanus, the teacher, says:

... Bring in your guide and your teacher. The mind is the guide, but reason is the teacher. ... Live according to your mind ... Acquire strength, for the mind is strong ... Enlighten your mind ... Light the lamp within you.<sup>35</sup>

To do this, Silvanus continues,

Knock on yourself as upon a door and walk upon yourself as on a straight road. For if you walk on the road, it is impossible for you to go astray. ... Open the door for yourself that you may know what is ... Whatever you will open for yourself, you will open.<sup>36</sup>

The *Gospel of Truth* expresses the same thought:

... If one has knowledge, he receives what is his own, and draws it to himself . . . Whoever is to have knowledge in this way knows where he comes from, and where he is going.<sup>37</sup>

The *Gospel of Truth* also expresses this in metaphor: each person must receive "his own name"—not, of course, one's ordinary name, but one's true identity. Those who are "the sons of interior knowledge"<sup>38</sup> gain the power to speak their own names. The gnostic teacher addresses them:

... Say, then, from the heart that you are the perfect day, and in you dwells the light that does not fail. . . . For you are the understanding that is drawn forth. . . . Be concerned with yourselves; do not be concerned with other things which you have rejected from yourselves.<sup>39</sup>

So, according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus ridiculed those who thought of the "Kingdom of God" in literal terms, as if it were a specific place: "If those who lead you say to you, 'Look, the Kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds will arrive there before you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,'" then, he says, the fish will arrive before you. Instead, it is a state of self-discovery:

... Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty."<sup>40</sup>

But the disciples, mistaking that "Kingdom" for a future event, persisted in their questioning:

His disciples said to him, "When will . . . the new world come?" He said to them, "What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it." . . . His disciples said to him, "When will the Kingdom come?"

(Jesus said,) "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."<sup>41</sup>

That "Kingdom," then, symbolizes a state of transformed consciousness:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom." They said to him, "Shall we, then, as children, enter the Kingdom?" Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same . . . then you will enter [the Kingdom]."<sup>42</sup>

Yet what the "living Jesus" of Thomas rejects as naïve—the idea that the Kingdom of God is an actual event expected in history—is the notion of the Kingdom that the synoptic gospels of the New Testament most often attribute to Jesus as his teaching. According to Matthew, Luke, and Mark, Jesus proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God, when captives shall gain their freedom, when the diseased shall recover, the oppressed shall be released, and harmony shall prevail over the whole world. Mark says that the disciples expected the Kingdom to come as a cataclysmic event in their own lifetime, since Jesus had said that some of them would live to see "the kingdom of God come with power."<sup>43</sup> Before his arrest, Mark says, Jesus warned that although "the end is not yet,"<sup>44</sup> they must expect it at any time. All three gospels insist that the Kingdom will come in the near future (though they also contain many passages indicating that it is here already). Luke makes Jesus say explicitly "the kingdom of God is within you."<sup>45</sup> Some gnostic Christians, extending that type of interpretation, expected human liberation to occur not through actual events in history, but through internal transformation.

For similar reasons, gnostic Christians criticized orthodox

views of Jesus that identified him as one external to the disciples, and superior to them. For, according to Mark, when the disciples came to recognize who Jesus was, they thought of him as their appointed King:

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ."<sup>46</sup>

Matthew adds to this that Jesus blessed Peter for the accuracy of his recognition, and declared immediately that the church shall be founded upon Peter, and upon his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. One of the earliest of all Christian confessions states simply, "Jesus is Lord!" But *Thomas* tells the story differently:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out."<sup>48</sup>

Here Jesus does not deny his role as Messiah or as teacher, at least in relation to Peter and Matthew. But here they—and their answers—represent an inferior level of understanding. Thomas, who recognizes that he cannot assign any specific role to Jesus, transcends, at this moment of recognition, the relation of student to master. He becomes himself like the "living Jesus," who declares, "Whoever will drink from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."<sup>49</sup>

Gnostic sources often do depict Jesus answering questions, taking the role of teacher, revealer, and spiritual master. But here, too, the gnostic model stands close to the psychotherapeutic

one. Both acknowledge the need for guidance, but only as a provisional measure. The purpose of accepting authority is to learn to outgrow it. When one becomes mature, one no longer needs any external authority. The one who formerly took the place of a disciple comes to recognize himself as Jesus' "twin brother." Who, then, is Jesus the teacher? *Thomas the Contender* identifies him simply as "the knowledge of the truth."<sup>50</sup> According to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus refused to validate the experience that the disciples must discover for themselves:

They said to him, "Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you." He said to them, "You read the face of the sky and of the earth, but you have not recognized the one who is before you, and you do not know how to read this moment."<sup>51</sup>

And when, in frustration, they asked him, "Who are you, that you should say these things to us?" Jesus, instead of answering, criticized their question: "You do not realize who I am from what I say to you."<sup>52</sup> We noted already that, according to *Thomas*, when the disciples asked Jesus to show them where he was so that they might reach that place as well, he refused, directing them instead to themselves, to discover the resources hidden within. The same theme occurs in the *Dialogue of the Savior*. As Jesus talks with his three chosen disciples, Matthew asks him to show him the "place of life," which is, he says, the "pure light." Jesus answers, "Every one [of you] who has known himself has seen it."<sup>53</sup> Here again, he deflects the question, pointing the disciple instead toward his own self-discovery. When the disciples, expecting him to reveal secrets to them, ask Jesus, "Who is the one who seeks, [and who is the one who] reveals?"<sup>54</sup> he answers that the one who seeks the truth—the disciple—is also the one who reveals it. Since Matthew persists in asking him questions, Jesus says that he does not know the answer himself, "nor have I heard about it, except from you."<sup>55</sup>

The disciple who comes to know himself can discover, then, what even Jesus cannot teach. The *Testimony of Truth* says

that the gnostic becomes a "disciple of his [own] mind,"<sup>56</sup> discovering that his own mind "is the father of the truth."<sup>57</sup> He learns what he needs to know by himself in meditative silence. Consequently, he considers himself equal to everyone, maintaining his own independence of anyone else's authority: "And he is patient with everyone; he makes himself equal to everyone, and he also separates himself from them."<sup>58</sup> Silvanus, too, regards "your mind" as "a guiding principle." Whoever follows the direction of his own mind need not accept anyone else's advice:

Have a great number of friends, but not counselors.  
 . . . But if you do acquire [a friend], do not entrust yourself to him. Entrust yourself to God alone as father and as friend.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, those gnostics who conceived of *gnosis* as a subjective, immediate experience, concerned themselves above all with the internal significance of events. Here again they diverged from orthodox tradition, which maintained that human destiny depends upon the events of "salvation history"—the history of Israel, especially the prophets' predictions of Christ and then his actual coming, his life, and his death and resurrection. All of the New Testament gospels, whatever their differences, concern themselves with Jesus as a historical person. And all of them rely on the prophets' predictions to prove the validity of the Christian message. Matthew, for example, continually repeats the refrain, "This was done to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets."<sup>60</sup> Justin, too, attempting to persuade the emperor of the truth of Christianity, points as proof toward the fulfillment of prophecy: "And this indeed you can see for yourselves, and be convinced of by fact."<sup>61</sup> But according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus dismisses as irrelevant the prophets' predictions:

His disciples said to him, "Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you." He said to them, "You have ignored the one living in your presence, and have spoken (only) of the dead."<sup>62</sup>

Such gnostic Christians saw actual events as secondary to their perceived meaning.

For this reason, this type of gnosticism shares with psychotherapy a fascination with the nonliteral significance of language, as both attempt to understand the internal quality of experience. The psychoanalyst C. C. Jung has interpreted Valentinus' creation myth as a description of the psychological processes. Valentinus tells how all things originate from "the depth," the "abyss"<sup>63</sup>—in psychoanalytic terms, from the unconscious. From that "depth" emerge Mind and Truth, and from them, in turn, the Word (Logos) and Life. And it was the word that brought humanity into being. Jung read this as a mythical account of the origin of human consciousness.

A psychoanalyst might find significance as well in the continuation of this myth, as Valentinus tells how Wisdom, youngest daughter of the primal Couple, was seized by a passion to know the Father which she interpreted as love. Her attempts to know him would have led her to self-destruction had she not encountered a power called The Limit, "a power which supports all things and preserves them,"<sup>64</sup> which freed her of emotional turmoil and restored her to her original place.

A follower of Valentinus, the author of the *Gospel of Philip*, explores the relationship of experiential truth to verbal description. He says that "truth brought names into existence in the world because it is not possible to teach it without names."<sup>65</sup> But truth must be clothed in symbols: "Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. One will not receive truth in any other way."<sup>66</sup> This gnostic teacher criticizes those who mistake religious language for a literal language, professing faith in God, in Christ, in the resurrection or the church, as if these were all "things" external to themselves. For, he explains, in ordinary speech, each word refers to a specific, external phenomenon; a person "sees the sun without being a sun, and he sees the sky and the earth and everything else, but he is not these things."<sup>67</sup> Religious language,

on the other hand, is a language of internal transformation; whoever perceives divine reality “becomes what he sees”:

. . . You saw the spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw [the Father, you] shall become Father. . . . you see yourself, and what you see you shall [become].<sup>68</sup>

Whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes “no longer a Christian, but a Christ.”<sup>69</sup>

We can see, then, that such gnosticism was more than a protest movement against orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism also included a religious perspective that implicitly opposed the development of the kind of institution that became the early catholic church. Those who expected to “become Christ” themselves were not likely to recognize the institutional structures of the church—its bishop, priest, creed, canon, or ritual—as bearing ultimate authority.

This religious perspective differentiates gnosticism not only from orthodoxy, but also, for all the similarities, from psychotherapy, for most members of the psychotherapeutic profession follow Freud in refusing to attribute real existence to the figments of imagination. They do not regard their attempt to discover what is within the psyche as equivalent to discovering the secrets of the universe. But many gnostics, like many artists, search for interior self-knowledge as the key to understanding universal truths—“who we are, where we came from, where we go.” According to the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, “whoever has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depths of all things.”<sup>70</sup>

This conviction—that whoever explores human experience simultaneously discovers divine reality—is one of the elements that marks gnosticism as a distinctly religious movement. Simon Magus, Hippolytus reports, claimed that each human being is a dwelling place, “and that in him dwells an infinite power . . . the root of the universe.”<sup>71</sup> But since that infinite power exists in

two modes, one actual, the other potential, so this infinite power “exists in a latent condition in everyone,” but “potentially, not actually.”<sup>72</sup>

How is one to realize that potential? Many of the gnostic sources cited so far contain only aphorisms directing the disciple to search for knowledge, but refraining from telling anyone how to search. Discovering that for oneself is, apparently, the first step toward self-knowledge. Thus, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the disciples ask Jesus to tell them what to do:

His disciples questioned him and said to him, “Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Shall we give alms? What diet shall we observe?” Jesus said, “Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate . . .”<sup>73</sup>

His ironic answer turns them back to themselves: who but oneself can judge when one is lying or what one hates? Such cryptic answers earned sharp criticism from Plotinus, the neo-Platonic philosopher who attacked the gnostics when their teaching was attracting some of his own students away from philosophy. Plotinus complained that the gnostics had no program for teaching: “They say only, ‘Look to God!,’ but they do not tell anyone *where* or *how* to look.”<sup>74</sup>

Yet several of the sources discovered at Nag Hammadi do describe techniques of spiritual discipline. *Zostrianos*, the longest text in the Nag Hammadi library, tells how one spiritual master attained enlightenment, implicitly setting out a program for others to follow. *Zostrianos* relates that, first, he had to remove from himself physical desires, probably by ascetic practices. Second, he had to reduce “chaos in mind,”<sup>75</sup> stilling his mind with meditation. Then, he says, “after I set myself straight, I saw the perfect child”<sup>76</sup>—a vision of the divine presence. Later, he says, “I was pondering these matters in order to understand them. . . . I did not cease seeking a place of rest worthy of my spirit . . .”<sup>77</sup> But then, becoming “deeply troubled,” discouraged with his progress, he went out into the desert, half anticipating being killed by wild animals. There, *Zostrianos* relates, he first

received a vision of "the messenger of the knowledge of the eternal Light,"<sup>78</sup> and went on to experience many other visions, which he relates in order to encourage others: "Why are you hesitating? Seek when you are sought; when you are invited, listen. . . . Look at the Light. Flee the darkness. Do not be led astray to your destruction."<sup>79</sup>

Other gnostic sources offer more specific directions. The *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* discloses an "order of tradition" that guides the ascent to higher knowledge. Written in dialogue form, the *Discourse* opens as the student reminds his spiritual master of a promise:

"[O my father], yesterday you promised me [that you would bring] my mind into [the] eighth and afterwards you would bring me into the ninth. You said that this is the order of the tradition."<sup>80</sup>

His teacher assents: "O my son, indeed this is the order. But the promise was according to human nature."<sup>81</sup> He explains that the disciple himself must bring forth the understanding he seeks: "I set forth the action for you. But the understanding dwells in you. In me, (it is) as if the power were pregnant."<sup>82</sup> The disciple is astonished; is the power, then, actually within him? The master suggests that they both must pray that the disciple may come to the higher levels, the "eighth and the ninth." Already he has progressed through the first seven levels of understanding, impelled by moral effort and dedication. But the disciple admits that, so far, he has no firsthand experience of divine knowledge: "O my father, I understand nothing but the beauty which came to me in books."<sup>83</sup>

Now that he is ready to go beyond vicarious knowledge, the two join in prayer "to the perfect, invisible God to whom one speaks in silence."<sup>84</sup> The prayer moves into a chant of sacred words and vowels: "Zoxathazo a oō ēē oōō ēēē oōōō ēēēē oōōōōōōōōōō oōōōōō uuuuuu oōōōōōōōōōōō oōō Zozazoth."<sup>85</sup> After intoning the chant, the teacher prays, "Lord . . . acknowl-

edge the spirit that is in us."<sup>86</sup> Then he enters into an ecstatic state:

" . . . I see! I see indescribable depths. How shall I tell you, O my son? . . . How [shall I describe] the universe? I [am mind and] I see another mind, the one that [moves] the soul! I see the one that moves me from pure forgetfulness. You give me power! I see myself! I want to speak! Fear restrains me. I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning. . . . I have said, O my son, that I am Mind. I have seen! Language is not able to reveal this. For the entire eighth, O my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. And I, Mind, understand."<sup>87</sup>

Watching, the disciple himself is filled with ecstasy: "I rejoice, O my father, because I see you smiling. And the universe rejoices." Seeing his teacher as himself embodying the divine, the disciple pleads with him, "Let not my soul be deprived of the great divine vision. For everything is possible for you as master of the universe." The master tells him to sing in silence, and to "ask what you want in silence":

When he had finished praising he shouted, "Father Trismegistus! What shall I say? We have received this light. And I myself see the same vision in you. I see the eighth and the souls that are in it and the angels singing a hymn to the ninth and its powers. . . . I pray to the end of the universe and the beginning of the beginning, to the object of man's quest, the immortal discovery . . . I am the instrument of thy spirit. Mind is thy plectrum. And thy counsel plucks me. I see myself! I have received power from thee. For thy love has reached us."<sup>88</sup>

The *Discourse* closes as the master instructs the student to write his experiences in a book (presumably the *Discourse* itself) to guide others who will "advance by stages, and enter into the way of immortality. . . . into the understanding of the eighth that reveals the ninth."<sup>89</sup>

Another extraordinary text, called *Allogenes*, which means "the stranger" (literally, "one from another race"), referring to the spiritually mature person who becomes a "stranger" to the world, also describes the stages of attaining *gnosis*. Here Messos, the initiate, at the first stage, learns of "the power that is within you." *Allogenes* explains to him his own process of spiritual development:

. . . [I was] very disturbed, and [I] turned to myself.  
 . . . [Having] seen the light that [surrounded] me and the good that was within me, I became divine.<sup>90</sup>

Then, *Allogenes* continues, he received a vision of a feminine power, Youel, "she who belongs to all the glories,"<sup>91</sup> who told him:

. . . "Since your instruction has become complete, and you have known the good that is within you, hear concerning the Triple Power those things that you will guard in great silence and great mystery . . ."<sup>92</sup>

That power, paradoxically, is silent, although it utters sound: zza zza zza.<sup>93</sup> This, like the chant in the *Discourse*, suggests a meditative technique that includes intoning sound.

Having first discovered "the good . . . within me," *Allogenes* advanced to the second stage—to know oneself.

[And then I] prayed that [the revelation] might occur to me. . . . I did not despair . . . I prepared myself therein, and I took counsel with myself for a hundred years. And I rejoiced exceedingly, since I was in a great light and a blessed path . . .<sup>94</sup>

Following this, *Allogenes* says, he had an experience out of the body, and saw "holy powers" that offered him specific instruction:

. . . "O Allo[g]enes, behold your blessedness . . . in silence, wherein you know yourself as you are, and, seeking yourself, ascend to the Vitality that you will see moving. And if it is impossible for you to stand, fear nothing; but

if you wish to stand, ascend to the Existence, and you will find it standing and stilling itself . . . And when you receive a revelation . . . and you become afraid in that place, withdraw back because of the energies. And when you have become perfect in that place, still yourself."<sup>95</sup>

Is this speech of the "holy powers" to be recited in some dramatic performance enacted by members of the gnostic sect for the initiate in the course of ritual instruction? The text does not say, although the candidate goes on to describe his response:

Now I was listening to these things as those present spoke them. There was a stillness of silence within me, and I heard the blessedness whereby I knew myself as (I am).<sup>96</sup>

Following the instruction, the initiate says he was filled with "revelation . . . I received power . . . I knew the One who exists in me, and the Triple Power, and the revelation of his uncontainableness."<sup>97</sup> Ecstatic with this discovery, *Allogenes* desires to go further: "I was seeking the ineffable and Unknown God."<sup>98</sup> But at this point the "powers" tell *Allogenes* to cease in his futile attempt.

Contrary to many other gnostic sources, *Allogenes* teaches that, first, one can come to know "the good that is within," and second, to know oneself and "the one who exists within," but one cannot attain knowledge of the Unknown God. Any attempt to do so, to grasp the incomprehensible, hinders "the effortlessness which is within you." Instead, the initiate must content himself to hear about God "in accordance with the capacity provided by a primary revelation."<sup>99</sup> One's own experience and knowledge, then, essential for spiritual development, provides the basis for receiving understanding about God in *negative* form. *Gnosis* involves recognizing, finally, the limits of human knowledge:

. . . (Whoever) sees (God) as he is in every respect, or would say that he is something like *gnosis*, has sinned against him . . . because he did not know God."<sup>100</sup>

The powers instructed him "not [to] seek anything more, but go . . . It is not fitting to spend more time seeking."<sup>101</sup> Allogenes says he wrote this down for "the sake of those who will be worthy."<sup>102</sup> The detailed exposition of the initiate's experience, including sections of prayers, chants, instruction, punctuated by his retreat into meditation, suggest that the text records actual techniques of initiation for attaining that self-knowledge which is knowledge of divine power within.

But much of gnostic teaching on spiritual discipline remained, on principle, unwritten. For anyone can read what is written down—even those who are not "mature." Gnostic teachers usually reserved their secret instruction, sharing it only verbally, to ensure each candidate's suitability to receive it. Such instruction required each teacher to take responsibility for highly select, individualized attention to each candidate. And it required the candidate, in turn, to devote energy and time—often years—to the process. Tertullian sarcastically compares Valentinian initiation to that of the Eleusinian mysteries, which

first beset all access to their group with tormenting conditions; and they require a long initiation before they enroll their members, even instruction for five years for their adept students, so that they may educate their opinions by this suspension of full knowledge, and, apparently, raise the value of their mysteries in proportion to the longing for them which they have created. Then follows the duty of silence . . .<sup>103</sup>

Obviously, such a program of discipline, like the higher levels of Buddhist teaching, would appeal only to a few. Although major themes of gnostic teaching, such as the discovery of the divine within, appealed to so many that they constituted a major threat to catholic doctrine, the religious perspectives and methods of gnosticism did not lend themselves to mass religion. In this respect, it was no match for the highly effective system of organization of the catholic church, which expressed a unified religious perspective based on the New Testament canon, offered

a creed requiring the initiate to confess only the simplest essentials of faith, and celebrated rituals as simple and profound as baptism and the eucharist. The same basic framework of doctrine, ritual, and organization sustains nearly all Christian churches today, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. Without these elements, one can scarcely imagine how the Christian faith could have survived and attracted so many millions of adherents all over the world, throughout twenty centuries. For ideas alone do not make a religion powerful, although it cannot succeed without them; equally important are social and political structures that identify and unite people into a common affiliation.