

Gnosticism from Thought to Religion

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Abstract

The origin of Gnostic thought and its evolution is a controversial topic. By critically examining Gnostic sects and analyzing the opinions of experts, this article will answer the following questions: What are the components of Gnostic thought? What are the sources of Gnostic thought? Were there any sects known as Gnostics before Christ? This research shows that most of our knowledge of Gnosticism is based on controversial Christian works and the Qumran manuscripts. According to these works, no group or sect was called Gnostic before Christ. Although some of the components of Gnostic thought, such as the originality of knowledge and the exile of the soul, date back to the pre-Christ era, and especially to Plato, some other components, such as the distinction between the Christian and Jewish gods, belief in the multiplicity of the eternal Christ, the primacy of knowledge over faith, are products of the period of the formation of Gnostic sects and their conflict with the Church Fathers in the first centuries of the common era.

Keywords: Thought, Religion, Gnosticism, Gnostic, Christianity.

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Introduction

The Greek word “*gnosis*” (knowledge) is used by Plato to refer to his *theory of forms*, but in esoteric sects, it is taken to mean knowledge of God (Wolfson 2010, 534); the message of Christ, realm of God, and salvation are among its other meanings. The issue of the origin of Gnosticism has been a controversial topic. Previously, there was no credible evidence to provide reliable information on the origin of Gnosticism, but with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Upper Egypt (1945), researchers have gained a better understanding of the foundation of the Gnostic religion and its ideas and terminology.

Scholars such as Hans Jonas, Etienne Gilson, Elaine Pagels, James Robinson, and Tony Lane believe that the term “Gnosticism” was first applied to esoteric sects by Irenaeus (130-202 CE) in the second century; Irenaeus, the bishop of the Church of Lyon, wrote a five-volume book in 180 CE entitled *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), in which he revealed the hidden aspects of the esoteric sects of his time and called them “Gnostics” for the first time (Gilson 1955, 21; Jonas 1991, 32; Pagels 1979, 20-16; 1395 Sh, 167; Robinson 1988, 9; Lane 1396 Sh, 16). Others, such as Giles Kispel and Friedlander, trace the history of this religion back to the esoteric movements of the pre-Christian era (Holroyd 1395 Sh, 100). Also, scholars like Richard Reitzenstein and Wilhelm Bousset consider the Gnostic religion to be a pre-Christian movement rooted in the religions of ancient Iran, and other scholars, such as Adolf von Harnack, consider it a Christian heresy that seeks to Greekize the teachings of Christianity. Arthur Darby Nock, like von Harnack, considers the Gnostic religion to be a kind of “unbridled Platonic profession” (Pagels 1395 Sh, 24). According to Harry Wolfson, *gnosis* means wearing the garment of Christianity on the body of polytheism; considering Gnosticism as non-Christian, he argues that it is better to

refer to Gnosticism as “Christian Gnosticism,” because “no group of people before the advent of Christian Gnosticism were called Gnostics” (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 535-37).

Problem Statement

“Gnosticism” and “Mysticism” both mean theosophy. Wherever Western scholars can use the word “mysticism,” they can also use “*gnosis*” (knowledge). Thus, in Western texts, *gnosis* does not necessarily refer to Gnostic religions. In this study, the authors intend to study the works of eminent scholars in this field, and analyze the origin and evolution of Gnosticism, and its emergence as religion.

Literature Review

Irenaeus’ book *Adversus Hearses* is an important source in the field of Gnosticism. In this work, the author criticizes the Gnostic principle of “knowledge.” Irenaeus’ defense of Christianity against Gnostic views in general led to the victory of the mainstream Christianity (Lane 1396 Sh, 20). Harry Wolfson’s *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* is another important work in this field. One separate section of this book is devoted to the Gnostic religion. The author believes that there was no such thing as Gnosticism before Christ, and thus he suggests that it is better to use the term “Christian Gnosticism.” *Gnostic Gospels* by Ellen Pagels and *Gnostic Literature* by Stuart Holroyd are two other works in this field. The former provides a clear picture of Gnostic beliefs since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, and the latter is a collection of nine articles on Gnosticism. Hans Jonas’ *The Religion of Gnosticism* is a reliable source that draws on textual materials and scholarly analysis. The book *The Roots of Christian Theology in the Gnostic and Middle Platonic School* (1390 Sh) by Mahboubeh Hadi-Na is an important work on Gnosticism in Persian. This work lists the ideologies and personalities that the author regards

as belonging to pre-Christian Gnosticism. However, with the exception of the school of Orpheus, all of them appeared around or after Jesus' time.

Theoretical Foundations

According to Wolfson, polytheistic religions emerged in Alexander's time, and took various forms in Egypt, Greece, Babylon, and Iran under the influence of other religions; some groups took a philosophical stance and others turned to Jewish thought. After the advent of Christ, some of these religions added a Christian flavor to their beliefs (Christensen 1385 Sh, 22) and at the same time introduced new ideas into Christianity. Wolfson calls this body of emerging Christianized rites Gnosticism (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 533). He mentions that no groups describing themselves as Gnostics are found in the literature of the day except in reference to those we commonly call Christian Gnostics; the term was coined by the neo-Christian pagans who combined ideas (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 533). Irenaeus, speaking of the followers of Carpocrates, says, "They call themselves Gnostics" (Irenaeus, 1.25.6), and Clement of Alexandria, referring to the followers of Prodicus, says, "They falsely claim to be Gnostic" (Clement 1986, 3:4).

The available evidence shows that no groups were called Gnostics before the advent of Christian Gnostics. It follows from the words of Irenaeus and other Church Fathers that the Gnostics called themselves Gnostics because they found themselves capable of attaining the "principle of knowledge" and considered others incapable.

Clement of Alexandria, unlike Irenaeus, does not distinguish between knowledge and faith. He uses knowledge as a tool to prove the teachings of the Bible and confront Gnostic philosophy (Clement 1986, 2:11; Schaff 2004, 230). Clement uses the term "scientific

knowledge” to explain biblical Gnosticism. In his view, “knowledge” is a kind of faith; faith is a so-called brief knowledge of intrinsic matters, and knowledge is a strong and convincing proof of what is accepted by faith (Clement 1986, 7:10). Therefore, both require and complement each other.

The influence of Gnostic thought on Eastern cultures and religions is not hidden to researchers in this field, and the influence of Iranian mysticism on the Gnostic dualism is more obvious (Rudolph 1987, 282). Sometimes, mystical schools that influenced Gnosticism are also called Gnostic; such were the two schools of Egyptian-Syrian Gnosticism and Iranian Gnosticism, which had the greatest influence on the foundations of Gnostic teachings. Egyptian-Syrian Gnosticism originated in Syria, had the Hebrew Bible as its sacred text, and was monotheistic. In this type of Gnosticism, the tendency toward Gnostic dualism was linked to the principle of divine oneness and consequently the alienation of the abandoned soul from the true homeland was explained. The Syrian-Egyptian school of Gnosticism attracted more Sufi attention than the Iranian Gnosticism, because of its monotheistic spirit. This influence is manifested in the form of the symbolic stories of Suhrawardi, the Ode of ‘Ayniyya by Avicenna, the Song of Reed by Jalal ad-Din Rumi, and the Epistles of Ikhwan al-Safa’, which speak of the exile of the soul.

Simon Mogus, who was considered by Gnostics to be the founder of the Gnostic religion (Rudolph 1987, 294), believed that pluralities and dualities lead to a single principle. While believing in monotheism, he was the first person to establish Gnostic dualistic thought by proposing a solution to Gnostic Christianity and exaggerating the dualism of the light and darkness of the Essenes. After him, his followers, under the influence of another branch of Gnosticism, brought about tangible changes in his thoughts. As a

result of these changes, the monotheistic nature of this school was weakened and took on a dualistic color (Jonas 1991, 105). However, the two schools of Gnosticism, the Iranian and Syrian schools, have common foundations in their basic concepts, such as the position of man with the two characteristics of body and soul, as well as the philosophy of creation and the exile of the soul in the world (Jonas 1991, 210- 11).

The main aspect in which Judaism influenced Gnosticism was the belief in Jehovah, the Creator of the universe. This teaching was introduced to the Gnostic religion through the Jews of Alexandria. On the other hand, the Jewish encounter with Greek culture through Philo of Alexandria provided the basis for the formation of the Jewish-Gnostic sects. The Gnostic belief in two different gods, one transcendent and the other creator, was crystallized in the works of the Alexandrian Jews, including Philo, and he was more influenced by Plato's works, especially *Timaeus*, in proposing these ideas (Segal 1977, 162). Gnostic Valentinus, influenced by Plato, called the Creator God Demiurge, which means “the divine being [Jehovah] who is an instrument in the hands of the superior powers” (Pagels 1395 Sh, 71). Therefore, the Gnostics, while being influenced by the principles of Judaism, influenced Jewish thought, which resulted in the emergence of Jewish-Gnostic schools. Written works of these sects were found in the form of scrolls in Hebrew in the Qumran region of Palestine and the Dead Sea (Pagels 1395 Sh, 28).

Ancient Greek philosophy is most influential in theology, and the Gnostics were relatively influenced by Plato in their dualism, as well as in the idea of the Logos—the Holy Spirit and the representative of the Almighty God or Demiurge. In his discussion of the creation of the world, Plato speaks of God, who is the “creator of the world” but

not *ex nihilo*; rather, his responsibility is to regulate the world. He is the creator of the Almighty God (Plato 1380 Sh, 4:1839). The fundamental issues raised in Gnostic thought in the form of the symbols of the descent of the soul over the body, the formation of the microcosm, which is interpreted as the “palace of the world” (Plato 1380 Sh, 4:1840), and the creation of organs were discussed for the first time in *Timaeous*. The effect of re-reading Plato's interpretations of the descent of the soul or the vibration of the microcosm can be seen, in addition to the Gnostic schools, in the cryptic texts of Islamic Sufism, including Suhrawardi's cryptic stories.

Discussion

Gnostic Thought and Gnostic Religion

The works of Gnostic scholars such as Hans Jonas, Etienne Gilson, Elaine Pagels, and Tony Lane suggest that the title “Gnostic religion” did not exist before the second century CE and that Irenaeus was the first Christian theologian to call esoteric sects Gnostics and wrote a book to refute their views. All Gnostic sects attributed to the pre-Christian era, except the Essenes (2 BC to 1 CE) in the Qumran region of the Dead Sea and the school of Orpheus (1 BC to 3 CE) in Greece, appeared during or after Jesus' time. Of course, esoteric sects existed centuries before Jesus and had relations with the Gnostic school of early Christianity, but they are not mentioned as adherents to Gnosticism in Gnostic sources (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 535).

According to Jean Danielou, the teachings of the Old Testament Qumran community, including the teachings of the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees, influenced the beliefs of early Christian society. He mentions two religious treatises from the second century CE, *Didache* and the *Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas*, which were used by Christians. According to him, in these treatises, there was a kind of dualism between light and darkness. This dualistic thought, far from

apostasy, was very influential in shaping Gnostic teachings. Coinciding with the rise of Christianity, a kind of dualistic thinking influenced by the Old Testament Qumran society can be seen in *The Community Rule*, in which two types of souls, the prince of light and the angel of darkness, are found (Danielou 1393 Sh, 56-55). This idea changed in Christianity, and, as a result, the prince of light was referred to as Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, because the controversial theories of the Gnostic dualistic system were put forward by Marcion of Sinope, Basilides, and Valentinus, all of whom were Christians. Of course, the idea of dualism in the minds of the Jews of the Old Testament did not extend to the realm of the division between God and His essence, but remained in the realm of the division between light and darkness, while the Gnostics went beyond and that and spoke about good and evil gods (Danielou 1393 Sh, 113).

Kurt Rudolph, Hans Jonas, and Jean Danielou consider Simon Magus the leader of the Gnostics (Rudolph 1987, 294; Jonas 1991, 103). The duality in Simon Magus' thought was limited to the belief in the opposition between light and darkness. He became acquainted with the dualism of the Essenes through his Essene master, Dositheos, and later founded the Hellenic sect. Danielou suggests that this newly founded method is the same Gnosticism that arose as a result of exaggeration in the duality of the Essenes and was influenced by the dual foundations of Iranian mysticism (Danielou 1393 Sh, 113). Therefore, it seems that one of the reasons for the Gnostic introduction of the Essene sect is the influence of the ideas of Simon Magus' Essene master on his thought.

Danielou's research on the Dead Sea Scrolls confirms the fact that the Essenes cannot be considered a Gnostic sect. Some scholars, due to certain similarities, consider the influential schools in the

emergence of Gnosticism—such as the Jewish sects, the schools of ancient Greece (Hellenic, Orpheus), the mysticism of ancient Iran—as a subset of the Gnostic religion and maintain that the history of Gnosticism dates back to the pre-Christian Era, but more reliable studies do not confirm this (Jafari 1384 Sh, 277; Rudolph 1987, 286; Pagels 1395 Sh, 20-18; Christensen 1385 Sh, 21; Wolfson 1389 Sh, 538-33). The existence of some similarities in the principles of thought seems to be the result of the relationship between the esoteric schools of pre-Christian era and Gnosticism, such as the relationship between Gnosticism and later mystical schools like Sufism and Kabbalah. For example, the issue of the descent of the soul to the earthly exile in Sufi texts, which is essentially a Gnostic idea, is rooted in such relationships. On the other hand, Illuminationist Philosophy does not seem to be a Gnostic school, even though it is influenced by Gnosticism.

In such cases, Western scholars of Gnosticism use the term “Gnostic structure,” not Gnosticism; in this way, schools such as the Greek school of Orpheus, the Essenes-Jewish school, and the Iranian-Islamic Illuminationist school are considered to have a Gnostic structure, but are not regarded as Gnostic religions. One of the reasons why some scholars consider certain esoteric schools of the pre-Christian era to be Gnostic religions is that they fail to pay attention to the historical process that led to the development of the Gnostic religion in the second century CE (Christensen 1385 Sh, 21). Hadiana, for example, considers the school of Orpheus to be one of the pre-Christian Gnostic schools, whereas it resembles only Gnosticism in the matter of the descent of the soul. Kurt Rudolph, a renowned expert on Gnosticism, explicitly denies the Gnosticism of the Orpheus school. According to Rudolph, the resemblance of the Orpheus school to Gnostic thought is merely in the belief in the descent of the soul

into the material world (Rudolph, 1987, 286). The esoteric sects of the pre-Christian era did not call their religions “Gnostic” in any of their works; they were first given this name by Irenaeus, a staunch opponent of esoteric sects (Jafari 1384 Sh, 277). According to some scholars, Zarrinkoob may have traced the history of the Gnostic religion to the pre-Christian era:

The wisdom of Gnosticism ... took on a Christian color early in AD history. Some scholars have attributed it to pre-Christian Jewish beliefs and some to the influence of Egypt or Iran.... And some have found in it works of customs and rituals attributed to the Orpheus congregation, and some others have found the reflection of certain Babylonian and Persian customs and beliefs in it. Perhaps all these elements have influenced the emergence of this Gnostic wisdom. (Zarrinkoob 1387 Sh, 22)

Zarrinkoob does not rule out the possibility of the existence of Gnosticism before the advent of Jesus, but at the same time speaks of ideas and rituals that are the sources of Gnostic thought, not Gnosticism. He does not explicitly call any pre-Christian sect or group Gnostic. On the other hand, Zarrinkoob does not mention the important discoveries of Nag Hammdadi, and we do not know anything about his knowledge about these discoveries, because, due to political reasons, research on this valuable treasure began years after its discovery (Pagels 1395 Sh, 18; 1979, 26).

The Originality of Faith or the Originality of Knowledge

According to Theodotus, the Gnostic teacher of Asia Minor (160 CE), Gnosticism shows “who we are ... where we came from and where we are going”; that is, by focusing on the philosophy of existence, Gnosticism leads man to self-knowledge and to know the truth through this knowledge (Robinson 1988, 10). Ellin Pagels argues that the originality of knowledge means that self-knowledge leads, at the

deepest level, to theology (Pagels 1979, 11-10). According to Harry Wolfson, Gnosticism was adopted by modern Christians because of the particular kind of knowledge they claimed to possess (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 535). The founder of this thought, Valentinus, while combining the old polytheistic thought with new Christian knowledge, emphasized the deep knowledge of affairs. The Gnostics considered themselves superior to the Church Fathers because of this special knowledge (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 535). Teachings of Valentinus led Irenaeus to take a stance and refute Gnostic “heresies,” and thus the Gnostic movement was referred to as a “religion” by the Church since the middle of the second century (Robinson 1988, 9). Rejecting the authority of the Creator God in the Bible, Valentinus attributed the study of Gnosticism to a deep awareness of the Almighty. In his view, knowledge of that true source will lead to a deep esoteric self-knowledge and to salvation (Pagels 1395 Sh, 66-65).

In this way, the teachings of the Gnostics found their way into the Christian community. These sects sought to turn faith into “knowledge.” Before Irenaeus, other church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Miltiades, and Theophilus, had issued statements against sects such as those of Marcion, Hermogenes, and Valentinus. But Irenaeus was the first Christian theologian to explain the teachings of these sects. He emphasized that no one can be Gnostic and Christian at the same time (Gilson 1389 Sh, 26). Because of their rejection of faith and replacing it with knowledge, Irenaeus referred to these sects as “Gnostics” (Robinson 1988, 9).

Gnosticism and Christianity

Irenaeus considered the esoteric sects of his time heretics. He considered the Valentinian thought system to be the greatest threat because of its complexity and influence on Christians. The complexity of Valentinian thought caused most Christians to be incapable of

distinguishing between heretical and orthodox teachings (Pagels 1395 Sh, 66-65). The followers of Valentinus attributed their words to the apostles in order to validate their teachings (Irenaeus vol. 3, 11.9). Irenaeus challenged this attribution; he believed that if the apostles had special teachings, they would first and foremost convey them to the churches they founded, not to the dualist Gnostics (Lane 1396 Sh, 20-19).

Valentinus considered Christians to be the worshipers of the Creator God and the bishop to be the representative of the Creator God. He believed that worshipers obeyed the Creator out of fear and were oblivious to the Almighty. This position casted doubt on the important principle of the church, “submission to the bishop as submission to God” (Lane 1396 Sh, 72).

The Gnostic emphasis on receiving a kind of secret knowledge is justified by attributing spiritual revelation to Mary Magdalene. After Jesus’ death, Mary Magdalene claimed to have seen his resurrection in spiritual revelation. Although the apostles accused her of lying, the Gnostics revered her and questioned the apostles’ orthodoxy. This revelation became a pretext for authenticating the Gnostics’ personal experiences. Based on these experiences, Pagels concludes that it is not wrong to question the authenticity of Gnostic texts, “because the Gnostics have explicitly acknowledged that Gnosticism has gained its ‘secret knowledge’ from their personal experience,” just as Valentinus claimed to have received secret teachings from Paul (Pagels 1395 Sh, 45-50, 52).

The insistence of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and other Church Fathers on the oneness of God and the opposition to the Gnostic dualism had a political reason rather than a religious one, which was consolidating the bishop’s authority (Pagels 1395 Sh, 68).

Accordingly, “One God, one bishop” became the Christian motto, and the bishop was considered God's representative on earth (Ignatius 1891, 6:1-2; 7: 1-2).

Although the Gnostic heresy was never officially condemned by the Church, it was considered an unlawful entry of foreign affairs into Christianity. Serious disagreement appeared between the Church and the Gnostics over fundamental issues, and the Church Fathers, believing in the oneness of God, rejected the Gnostic dualism. Also, by believing in one Christ, unlike the Gnostics, they did not believe in the multiplicity of the eternal Christ. According to the Church Fathers, Christ, while incarnate, was still the God who survived (Christiansen 1385 Sh, 23; Wolfson 1389 Sh, 595).

Irenaeus resolutely defends the oneness of God (Irenaeus, 4.33.3; Pagels 1395 Sh, 62). In his view, the world was created *ex nihilo* and has no cause other than God's mercy; thus, the Gnostic belief in this regard had no religious basis (Gilson 1389 Sh, 28). He states that before Valentinus, there were no Valentinians, and before Marcion, there were no Marcians, and “before the advent of the people who invented their heresies, there were no malicious people” (Irenaeus vol.3, 3.4).

The Gnostics, on the other hand, considered themselves to have special knowledge that others lacked. They divided human beings into three categories: spiritual, carnal, and earthly (Irenaeus vol.1, 7.5); they appropriated the term “spiritual,” considered Christians carnal, and regarded the Jews and infidels as “earthly.” The Gnostics also attacked philosophers; Porphyry believed that the Gnostics deceived themselves and many other people with the belief that Plato had not reached the depths of rational nature (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 536).

Gnostic Sects

Some sects are known as Gnostic religions (Hadi-Na 1390 Sh, 49). The first founders of these sect were Simon Magus (d. 65 CE) and his followers, such as Saturnilus, Carpocrates (120 CE), and Crinus (157 CE). Also, by the time of Irenaeus in the second century CE, the three schools of Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus were very active in teaching esotericism (Rudolph 1987, 310-12).

Marcion of Sinope was the first Gnostic thinker to challenge the One God of Christianity by asking the question “How does the Almighty God create the evil world?” (Jonas 1991, 136). He adds that the Old Testament god is wrathful and creates evil, but the New Testament god is the God of mercy and absolute goodness. Cerdo also speaks of two gods simultaneously with Marcion (Wolfson 1389 Sh, 552). Valentinus explains this duality in his theological treatises, such as the *Tripartite Tractate* (Hadi-Na 1390 Sh, 83). Along with dualism, ideas such as the originality of knowledge and its precedence over faith, the creation of man from the lower angels, the femininity of Christ, or the male and female gods proposed by Valentinus, were new ideas that the canonical minds of the Church Fathers could not accept. Based on Jesus’ statement that “a good tree bears good fruit” (Halroyd 1395 Sh, 279; Smith 1979, 259), Marcion doubts the attribution of evil to God. This skepticism leads him and other Gnostics to adopt dualism. However, in the eyes of Christians, the Gnostics questioned the oneness of God, which was a foundational Christian doctrine.

Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls, most scholars considered Gnosticism to have originated in the Christian community, but these scrolls indicate that some of these sects did not have

Christian origins. However, the three sects discussed by Irenaeus (those of Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus) had Christian origins. These Gnostics, under the influence of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul, praised Jesus but nevertheless introduced heresies such as dualism and creation of the world by an evil god, and this led to the reaction of the Church against them (Halroyst 1392 Sh, 112). Of course, the church's stance failed to defeat the Gnostic movement, and many Christians, even some church elders, joined it. With the emergence of Manichaeism and the consolidation of dualistic thought, dualism became a fundamental concept in Gnosticism (Danielou 1393 Sh, 111).

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection has shown that the Church Fathers formed a strong movement to oppose gnostic ideas. This is why the Gnostics hid their writings out of fear of the Christians. Also, the Gnostic elders interpreted their teachings according to the Bible in order to be safe from the attack of the Church Fathers (Christensen 1385 Sh, 22).

Before the advent of Mani, Marcion introduced the idea of Gnostic dualism. In proposing the idea of dualism, Marcion was first influenced by the ideas of Simon Magus and the Essenes, and then by Zurvanite thought. Marcion and his followers asked the question "How can a good God create a world full of evil?" and the separation of the god of good and the god of evil was their solution for this problem. This idea, as a fundamental pillar of Gnostic teachings, was established in the third century CE by Mani (216- 274 CE) (Danielou 1393 Sh, 111).

Formerly, Taqizadeh had supposed that Mani was from Mandaeen Gnostics (Taqizadeh 1335 Sh, 6), but new research, especially the publication of the Greek text Cologne Mani-Codex (CMC), has shown that Mani and his father Pātik (Pattēg) lived among the Elcesaites.

Hence, the old hypothesis of Renan and Taqizadeh was rejected despite significant commonalities between Mandaean Gnostics and Elcesaites (Shokri-Foumeshi 1383 Sh, 68).

According to Shokri-Foumeshi, one of the reasons for the ambiguity about Mani's early life is the existence of common teachings among all Gnostic schools, such as dualism and contrast between light and darkness and between the soul and body. Manichaean mysticism is, however different from all baptismal sects in the interpretation of the concept of purification, and the main reason for separating Mani from Elcesaites was Mani's different understanding of purification and his belief in the purification of the soul (Shokri-Foumeshi 1383 Sh, 68). In this way, Mani and his followers, influenced by the teachings of Marcion and inspired by the ancient Iranian mysticism, institutionalized duality in Gnostic teachings.

Mandaeans are considered non-Christian Gnostics; "*manda*" is an Aramaic word meaning knowledge (*gnosis*). Mandaeans are believed to be the follower of John the Baptist (Christensen 1385 Sh, 24-23) and appeared in the second or third century CE (Halroyd 1392 Sh, 147). Among the most important Mandaean texts is the *Ginza*, which includes mythological, symbolic, and mystical themes (Eliadeh 1373 Sh, 92).

Mandaeanism is influenced by Zurvanite thought and is dualistic. According to the Mandaean view, light, darkness, spirit, and matter are in constant conflict. In Mandaean teachings, the mission of the soul is returning to the world of light and liberating itself from the bondage of the world of matter and darkness, and "*Masiqta*" helps the soul on this path (Halroyd 1392 Sh, 150; Eliade 1373 Sh, 99). The Mandaean mascot is the same as the Logos or Christ in the

Gnostic religion and the Nous in the Manichaean religion (Corbin 1392 Sh, 60). These symbols have a similar function, which is to help the soul toward ultimate salvation and liberation from the evil of this world. Gnostics refer to Mandaeism as a subset of Gnosticism. The surviving scrolls date back to the third century CE, and it is unclear whether Mandaeism existed in the early Christian era.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from this article:

1. The founders of the Gnostic sect were Simon Magus (d. 65 CE) and his followers. Also, contemporaneous with Irenaeus, the schools of Marcion, Cerdo, Basilides, and Valentinus had many activities in the promotion of esoteric sects; the followers of Saturninus, Barbelo, and Iphigeneia, mentioned by Irenaeus, are also counted among Gnostics; and sects such as the Mandaeans and Manichaeans are also considered Gnostic religions.

2. Ideas such as dualism, the belief that the created world is the result of the apostasy of an evil god, the belief in the multiplicity of the eternal Christ, male and female gods, the originality of knowledge, and the creation of man from the lower angels were new Gnostic thoughts that the Church Fathers could not accept.

3. The available evidence shows that no group was known as “Gnostics” before the advent of Christian Gnostics. Scholars of Gnosticism maintain that the existence of common elements in the thought of esoteric schools does not necessarily mean that they were Gnostics. Such similarities can be seen between the Gnostics and later mystical schools like Kabbalah and Sufism.

4. The Gnostics, while combining ancient polytheistic elements with modern Christian thought, believed that the study of gnosis

(knowledge) depended on a deep awareness of the Omnipotent and believed that this knowledge would lead to true self-knowledge. However, the Church Fathers believed that true gnosis was found in Christianity and the teachings of the twelve apostles.

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