

# Theology Corner: Gnosticism & Quakers

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An interesting recent development for Quaker religious education has been the increased scholarship on Gnosticism, an early form of Christianity. Friends have been fascinated by the similarity of Friends' beliefs to those of the Gnostics which stated that one found salvation not through works, or faith, but through knowledge or insight of oneself. Since Gnostic beliefs are similar to those of Quakers, the study of Gnosticism is a ripe area of religious education to help young people understand the relationship of Quakerism to other forms of Christianity, to better understand the uniqueness of the message of George Fox and other early Quakers, to provide insight into early Christian history, to deepen their own spiritual understanding and to provide fresh language to supplement the customary phraseology of Quakers.

Gnosticism is the term used by scholars to describe a diverse group of early Christians whose beliefs shared several key features. Gnostics believed that salvation came from *gnosis* or knowledge of oneself. Through spiritual self-discovery, one came to know God.

“These so-called Gnostics...did not share a single ideology or belong to a specific group; not all, in fact, were Christians...Many Gnostic Christians were members of Christian congregations, including both lay people and members of the clergy who wanted no more than to supplement the teaching and worship common to all followers with deeper insights derived from their own spiritual experience. Many Gnostics also followed certain spiritual teachers who promised to initiate them into deeper mysteries of the faith.” *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, by Elaine Pagels

The Gnostics believed that the psyche bears within itself the potential for liberation. As Jesus said “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.” *The Gospel of Thomas* 70. Likewise, Gnostics believed that the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus spoke was not a place or an event, but a relationship with God through a transformed consciousness: “The Kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father.” *The Gospel of Thomas*, 3. The Gnostics felt that those who understood this *gnosis*, became Christ themselves and understood the secrets of the universe. Thus, this central feature of Gnostic Christianity is identical in all but the language to George Fox's Doctrine of the Inner Light, under which Fox said that within each of us is the Inner Light, or (as he also called it) that of God, the inward Teacher, or the Inward Christ.

Gnosticism existed during the first two centuries, but was suppressed by orthodox Christianity, with which was a rival belief system. The ways that it differed from orthodoxy are similar to the ways Quakerism differs from the Christianities of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions. For example, while orthodox Christians saw a separation between God and man, Gnostics, similar to the Quakers, saw the self and god as identical. In addition, the Gnostics, rather than seeing Christ's resurrection as a historical event to be taken literally, saw the story of the resurrection as symbolic, speaks to the possibility of encountering the risen Christ in the present. This is similar to the ideas of Fox, who saw the resurrection as meaning that Christ was now present among all people. Third, orthodox Christians insisted on a hierarchical system of church government consisting of a clergy of bishops, priests and deacons. This system continues today in the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions. The Gnostics denied such authority of the clergy. The Gnostics' insubordination was seen as very dangerous to the proto-orthodox fathers who were trying to preserve Christianity in the face of brutal persecution by the Romans. In the same way, Quakers' embraced the democratic idea that everyone is a member of the clergy. In Fox's time, such insubordination to the religious authorities was also seen as very dangerous and was brutally repressed by the English Church.

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A fourth similarity is the Gnostic and Quaker emphasis on personal experience. Fox taught that it is our actual experience, not what we are told by clergy or scripture that leads to divine understanding: "You will say Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say?" In the same way the "Gnostics could not accept on faith what others said, except as a provisional measure, until one found one's own path." *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 145.

While this is just a brief introduction to Gnosticism, I hope that it is sufficient to invite further exploration by First Day School teachers, both of adults and children. I can see many possible topics one could explore in our religious education using the recent scholarship about Gnosticism.

*Jesus' Ministry and the New Testament:* It is useful to help us understand who Jesus was and what he had to say. By reading the Gospels of Thomas and Mary and comparing them with Jesus' ministry in the canonic gospels, one can see the breadth of his message, including his secret teachings as well as his teachings to the public. There was a fierce rivalry between the author of John and the author of Thomas, and a study of that rivalry and how it plays out in the two gospels elucidates the meaning of both and can also help explain why some books were included in the New Testament and why others were excluded.

*The Nicean Creed:* The Nicean Creed is a statement of belief that most Christians follow. It began in 325 AD at the Council of Nicea. The Council was arranged by Emperor Constantine to get some unity of faith in the Christian Church by having a standardized creed. The study of the struggle between Gnostics and Orthodox Christianity can clarify why a fixed creed was so important to the Orthodox and why it was contrary to Gnostic beliefs, and by extension, to Quaker theology.

*Christian and Quaker History:* We can better understand the history of Christianity, and how the diversity of ideas in early Christianity, and how the early Christians sought to deal with intense persecution. Similarly, during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century England, there was an explosion of radical sects and great experimentation. Out of this grew Quakerism. The history of early Christianity, including the place of the Gnostics, can help illustrate the great diversity and turmoil in the time of the early Quakers, and how the early Quakers sought to deal with the persecution of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

*Church Structure:* The epistemology of Orthodox Christianity and Gnostics are very different, and these differences parallel the differences in Church Structure. Gnostics, being inwardly oriented, did not have a structure, while the Orthodox, had a hierarchical structure which reflected its dictated set of ideas. The differences in ancient ecclesiology can explain those differences today between mainstream Christianity and Quakerism. Likewise, it could lead to further study of Quaker structure with yearly, quarterly and monthly meetings to see why Quakerism withstood the stress of repression better than the Gnostics.

*Gender Equality:* The study of these early Christians and their ideas about the gender of God, Jesus' relationship to Mary Magdalene and the role of women, can also help highlight the revolutionary spirit of Quakerism, with its equality for women, long before other Christian religions gave women a role.

Books to Use:

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books 1989)

*The Complete Gospel: Annotated Scholars Versions*, Robert J. Miller, ed. (1994: Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press)

Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003)