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## *What Is Gnosticism?*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
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"You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." Those are the dramatic words purported to have been spoken to Judas by Jesus Christ. They are words from the long lost *Gospel of Judas*, which has been making so much news lately.

Surely some amazing publicist has been making sure that The *Gospel of Judas* would appear just before the appearance of the movie version of *The Da Vinci Code*. In *The Da Vinci Code*, many readers heard mention of "long lost" gospels for the first time. They heard of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Gospel of Philip*. Other folks, having read Elaine Pagels early on, have been following the so-called "Gnostic gospels" for a long time.

What are we Christians supposed to make of all this "long lost" material?

First of all, I must say that the material is not so long lost as we might expect. Certainly, we only recently found (1970s?), and the Nag Hammadi Documents (1946), which contain the *Gospel of Thomas*. But the substance of those documents has been known generally for most of Christian history. For instance, Irenaeus of Lyons denounced the Gospel of Judas in 180 AD, when copies of the Gospel of Judas were still around.

For the sake of brevity, we can define "Gnosticism" (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge") very simply in two ways. According to one definition, "Gnosticism" was (and is) a type of creation myth. Gnostic writers speculated that the "god" who created the world must have been a different "god" from the mighty and transcendent spirit-God. Matter, according to this myth, is inherently bad; there is no way the mighty spirit-God would touch flesh and blood. The ancient heretic Marcion (140 AD) did not want the Old Testament included in Christian scripture, because he did not think the Old Testament creator god was the same as the New Testament God.

The Gospel of Judas is said to be Gnostic because Judas is characterized as the one who "sets Jesus free" from his body (see above: Judas "will sacrifice the man that clothes me.") Orthodox Christians have always disagreed with this type of Gnosticism; for Christians, God did become wholly and certainly flesh. Jesus actually lived, suffered, died, and was buried—just as we claim in the creeds.

However, there is a second way in which the term "Gnosticism" is being used. Elaine Pagels uses this second sense, in which Gnosticism refers to an even wider swath of writings which stress mystical or spiritual experience as the true knowledge of God (as opposed to more rigid and dogmatic Christianity). This sort of Gnosticism is not always antagonistic to orthodox Christianity, since Christianity certainly accepts—and even relies upon—mysticism as an experience of the living God. This more ambiguous sense of "Gnosticism" also attracts adherents because it shows that Christianity was not so monolithic in its first few centuries as we might have thought.

Though Gnostic documents are certainly interesting, Christians do not need them in order to claim that Christianity is mystical and that Christianity is diverse. In other words, we do not need to throw out our orthodox tradition in order to make some of the same claim that new Gnostics are making. Mysticism and contemplative prayer, for instance, have

informed Christian belief in almost every generation of our history. As for diversity, the very fact that the New Testament contains four different gospel accounts is a testament to Christianity's willingness to have four different perspectives on our Lord.

Our present culture suffers from an infatuation with "the new." If something is new, or long-lost, we are tempted to put it on the front page and forget everything that has come before. So it is that Gnosticism is especially appealing to all sorts of "new-age seekers" these days. So be it. I believe in seeking. But I believe even more that our historic and orthodox Christianity always contains within it the seeds of renewal and new life. We do not need to leave the old in order to experience the love and mercy of God in new ways.

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Romans 12.2).

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