

## What is Gnosticism?

This was a diverse cultic heresy which plagued the early church and was particularly combated by the apostle John [1 Jn 2:22, 4:2-3] and the early fathers as perversions of Christianity. It taught a blend of mysticism and ritual by which leaders imparted a special, revealed knowledge (Greek: *'gnosis'*) to disciples whereby they escaped this evil world of the flesh to ascend gradually to the spiritual world of God. Thus disciples had their 'divine spark' fanned into a 'god-consciousness' by which they transcended material things (which were equated with evil) and lived in a spiritual world, which was the only true reality. Rituals included: hymns, repetitive chanting, drugs, meditation, ecstatic experiences and so on. Many aspects were similar to practices now found in the Charismatic Movement and New Age groups. Full enlightenment was by a continual ascent up a never-ending path, requiring constant new experiences of revelation.

It was a syncretism of Greek philosophy, Judaism, oriental mysticism and some Christian elements. It was a diverse and wide-ranging movement of ideas. There were several key sects but the central elements are:

- *Dualism* – God is transcendent, above all material things. The material world was created by a demiurge, a lesser god (the God of the OT) who opposes God. The material world is evil; spiritual things are good. Sparks of spirituality were implanted in certain people destined for salvation.
- *God sends a series of mediatorial angels ('aeons')* emanating downwards from himself to men to fan the sparks into spiritual flames by initiation into secret knowledge; this eventually leads to union with God. The highest aeon is Christ who united himself with human nature, but not in a real incarnation. [Many 'Christian' Gnostics taught that Christ never had a material body (because material things are intrinsically evil) but only seemed to be a man; he was a sort of phantom. This is called Docetism. Incredibly, even this is taught today by some Charismatic heretics!]
- *Men are saved by being initiated into the mystery* of enlightenment, passed on from an adept to an initiate. This enlightenment is a revelation of special knowledge (*gnosis*). This ancient occult idea of transmitting a spiritual experience from one man to another to increase a believer's standing with God is now axiomatic in Charismaticism.
- Many sects taught a strict asceticism, while some taught hedonism (since salvation depends on knowledge not behaviour).

**Key leaders** were: Cerinthus of Asia Minor, Valentinus of Alexandria, Tatianus of Syria and Marcion of Rome. There are a number of Gnostic writings, such as false gospels, which are now being read amongst some churches. These corrupt most Biblical doctrines and the Bible text itself.

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