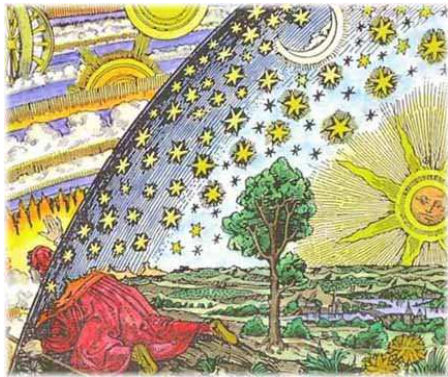


Gnostics

A reverent attitude toward the stars was not universal in the Hellenistic era. Stoic views of the world were turned upside down by the Gnostics. Gnosticism in one sense of the term covers certain variant forms of Christianity. E. R. Dodds says, "some modern scholars apply the term to any system which preaches a way of escape from the world by means of a special enlightenment not available to all, and not dependent on reason." Dodds calls St. Paul a Gnostic in this latter sense, citing Corinthians 1:2.14-15, and he observes that the *Hermetica*, the liturgy of the Mithraists and the obscure Chaldean Oracles have been called "pagan



gnosis" (*Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety, Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, 1968. Tamshyn Barton remarks that it is the Gnostics who seem to spark off the first direct attacks on astrology.

Hippolytus of Rome (martyred 235 A.D.) attacked the Gnostics with particular emphasis on their astrology in his *Refutation of All Heresies*.

Simon Magus, Simon the Magician, a self-styled messiah and rival of Jesus, is often counted as a Gnostic. He was the traditional founder of a group known as Simonians in the 1st century A.D. He seems to be the Simon who appears in the New Testament. In the book of *Acts* (8:9-24) one reads "But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great." (Revised Standard Version).

Simon professed conversion to Christianity, but when he saw the apostles Peter and John lay hands on people of Samaria so they could receive the Holy Spirit, he offered them money for this power. Peter stingingly rebuked him, telling Simon that his heart was not right before God, and that he was in the bond of iniquity. The contrast is between the truly religious, who strive to be without sin and submit to God's will, and magicians, who strive for power over men, nature and even the gods themselves. Simon sometimes used the nickname Faustus, "the favored one". In *The Gnostic Religion* (1958), Hans Jonas says: "This in connection with his permanent cognomen "the Magician", and the fact that he was accompanied by a Helena whom he claimed to be the reborn Helen of Troy shows this is one of the sources of the Faust legend of the early Renaissance."

Gnosticism, in one of its major ancient forms, is a kind of extreme cosmic pessimism which splits the world into a divine part completely unknowable by man, and a physical part, including man, which is totally separated from the divine, and was created not by the unknown God, but by an inferior spirit, a demiurge, a perversion of the divine, whose main traits are domination and power. Gnostic beliefs were considered blasphemous by classical Greeks, and by early Christians.

For many Greeks, gnosticism ran counter to conceptions of the divinity of the cosmos, the ordered, animated and intelligent world, in which man, though not perfect, could aspire to the greater perfection of the stars. This perfection is a harmony, a fitting together of the parts of the world into a unified whole, which according to mathematicians in the tradition of Pythagoras (c. 500 B.C.) produced a "music of the spheres", inaudible to humans, but within the range of human reason and therefore audible within, like music remembered. Christians could not accept the doctrine of the creation of world by an inferior spirit, nor the severance of God from the government of the physical world and man.

Gnostics opposed the deification of the chief heavenly bodies. Views of astrology among Stoics identified the cosmic with the divine. Such views were rejected by Gnostics. Astrological beliefs of Stoics required a passive subjection to a rigid necessity. The aim of a majority of Stoics was to maintain a neutral attitude toward good and evil, and to submit to what must be. Gnostics looked at the world from outside of it, and experience of the cosmos for them changed from a worshipful to a terrifying one.

"We can imagine", Jonas says, "with what feelings gnostic men must have looked up to the starry sky. How evil its brilliance must have looked to them, how alarming its vastness and the rigid immutability of its courses, how cruel its muteness! The music of the spheres was no longer heard, and the admiration for the perfect spherical form gave place to the terror of so much perfection directed at the enslavement of man . . . Here we can discern the profound connection which exists between the discovery of the self, the despiritualizing of the world, and the positing of the transcendental God."

In *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (1923-1958, v. 1) Lynn Thorndike reports on a sect known as the Mandaean, which derived from or had sources in common with the Gnostics. This sect may still exist, or at least it did in the late 19th century. Their adherents represented the planets as evil beings, and Jesus Christ as a false prophet and magician produced by the planet Mercury. They had great affection for numerology. Thorndike says: "A peculiarity of Mandaean astronomy and astrology is that the heavenly bodies are all believed to rotate about the polar star. Madaeans always face it when praying; their sanctuaries are built so that persons entering it face it; and even the dying man is placed so that his feet point and eyes gaze in its direction." (In the northern hemisphere, it does look as if heavenly bodies rotate around the pole star.)

The views of the Gnostics are compared by Jonas to those of our recent past in which people declare, with Nietzsche, that God is dead. Gnostics declare that the God of the cosmos is dead. Still, Gnostics believed they could achieve a kind of freedom by coming to know the fix we are in, hence their name, from *gnosis*, knowledge. Gnosticism resembles nihilism of a Nietzschean kind, being based on a view of nature in which there is no reference to ends or purpose, in which values and meanings can no longer be found, but must be willed by us, when we can. This at least makes our wills free. Dreadful freedom, the existentialists called it. An estrangement of Man and Nature can arise from believing that nature, like the Gnostic God, is indifferent to man. There are versions of Gnosticism in our own time, as well as versions of Stoicism.