

Gnosticism, Mysticism and Unity

So, what is Gnosticism? What did the earliest Christians believe? There are some indications that re-incarnation and vegetarianism were elements of their belief and perhaps there are many Christians today who would be very happy if that was the case! But Gnosticism does go much further – it propounds the idea that it is possible to achieve Unity with God in this life, and thereby cease the round of re-incarnation that the soul otherwise and, usually unwittingly, experiences.

While some Christians may try to discredit Gnosticism by suggesting that it is teaching that Salvation is found by acquiring certain esoteric knowledge of the intellectual kind, this is far from the truth. The Greeks distinguished clearly between different kinds of knowledge, between the rational and the intuitive, between learning about something and learning by experience of something. Gnosis involves immersing the self experientially in the subject so that the knowledge gained becomes part of one's being. By gaining knowledge in the Gnostic sense, the individual knower is transformed. To know God in the Gnostic sense is to have a direct and living experience of God. It is not all an intellectual process, bypassing as it does, mere opinions, beliefs and the acquisition of information.

Gnosis is closely related in meaning to the Sanskrit word *Jnana* and is probably derived from it. The term was used by Greek Hermetic mystics to describe interior, illuminative insight. (Peter Phipps, '*Greater Than You Know*', 1997)

The "Greek Hermetic mystics" are mentioned here. It is reasonable to believe that at least Pythagoras had substantial contact with the Hindus (Brahmins) as well as the Egyptians – other parties that knew of the Gnostic way. The 'Hermetic' appellation relates to teachings encapsulated in the *Hermetica* – writings perhaps extracted from original sources attributable to Hermes, he being the same person as Enoch in the Old Testament, and Thoth of the Egyptians. Traces of the *Hermetica* can be found in the teachings of the Essenes and in Zoroastrian writings, and were certainly known by Muslim Sufis such as al-Kindi and Suhrawardi.

Gnosticism is not bound by any one religion. Elaine Pagels, in her book '*The Gnostic Gospels*', suggests:

Does not such teaching - the identity of the divine and human, the concern with illusion and enlightenment, the founder who is presented not as Lord, but as spiritual guide sound more Eastern than Western? Some scholars have suggested that if the names were changed, the "living Buddha" appropriately could say what the *Gospel of Thomas* attributes to the living Jesus. Could Hindu or Buddhist tradition have influenced gnosticism?

The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, suggests that it had. He points out that "Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (that is, Christians who knew and used such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*) in South India." Trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East were opening up at the time when gnosticism flourished (A.D. 80-200); for generations, Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria. We note, too, that Hippolytus, who was a Greek speaking Christian in Rome (c. 225), knows of the Indian Brahmins--and includes their tradition among the sources of heresy:

There is . . . among the Indians a heresy of those who philosophize among the Brahmins, who live a self-sufficient life, abstaining from (eating) living creatures and all cooked food . . . They say that God is light, not like the light one sees, nor like the sun nor fire, but to them God is discourse, not that which finds expression in articulate sounds, but that of knowledge (gnosis) through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise.

Could the title of the *Gospel of Thomas* -- named for the disciple who, tradition tells us, went to India -- suggest the influence of Indian tradition?



The Sufi call is to "Awaken!" The wakefulness called for is to detach one's real self from this (material) world – the *maya* (illusion) spoken of by the Hindus! We have to remember what we are really on the earth to do.

What we observe is not reality itself, but reality as conditioned by the human mind and senses and the various instruments which it uses to extend the senses. [That is,] what we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning ... Consciousness and physical reality (or empirical reality) should be considered as complementary aspects of reality. (Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 1982)

Traditionally, 'The Way' is for those who are responsible for themselves. In its entirety, it is said it should not be entered into without firstly putting in order all worldly affairs¹. It does not mean (it is not necessary) that one should become a monk or a nun, but 'The Way' involves sincerity, duty, responsibility and depletion of ego. 'Ego' is the element I have the most difficulty with – particularly as an Aries personality! However, if I wish to lose the anger and irritability I sometimes, perhaps often, feel, then it is essential for 'ego' to be worked on! Yes, 'work' is called for, but the reward and resulting happiness is said to be great! The application of love and enthusiasm² helps in this objective! As observed by Freke and Gandy in *Jesus and The Goddess*:

Gnosticism is not about avoiding the fact of suffering and retreating into wishful thinking. It is expressing our natural compassion by doing all we can to ameliorate the terrible suffering we encounter ... It is understanding that everything is arising from and returning to the Good. It is trusting that ultimately ... good will come from bad, and choosing to play an active part in that process.

Essentially, the 'active part' relates to choosing kindness and forgiveness rather than enmity towards others; recognising that even one's enemies have a story to tell and a right to live at peace; to try to see all others as One with Ourselves. Also the recognition that the spiritual way is one of adventure. Freke and Gandy continue:

...it is clear that Christianity was not always the safe, pre-packaged, off-the-shelf religion it has become. The Christian Way was once travelled by philosophical adventurers who proclaimed life to be an opportunity for self-discovery, for spiritual creativity, for living our own myths. Christianity ... began as a movement of mystical enthusiasts with a beautiful vision of the meaning and mystery of life.

Here we see a reference to Gnosticism being equated to Mysticism. The two terms are often inter-changed, and, indeed, it is hard to see the difference since both words and practices involve a movement towards direct union with God. Karen Armstrong, in her book *A History of God* (1993), says:

... 'mysticism' is frequently associated with cranks, charlatans or indulgent hippies. Since the West has never been very enthusiastic about mysticism, even during its heyday in other parts of the world, there is little understanding of the intelligence and discipline that is essential to this type of spirituality.

Yet there are signs that the tide may be turning. Since the 1960s, Western people have been discovering the benefits of certain types of Yoga and religions such as Buddhism, which have the advantage of being uncontaminated by an inadequate theism, have enjoyed a great flowering in Europe and the United States. The work of the late American scholar Joseph Campbell on mythology has enjoyed a recent vogue. The current enthusiasm for psychoanalysis in the West can be seen as a desire for some kind of mysticism, for we shall find arresting similarities between the two disciplines. Mythology has often been an attempt to explain the inner world of the psyche and both Freud and Jung turned instinctively to ancient myths, such as the Greek story of Oedipus, to explain their new science. It may be that people in the West are feeling the need for an alternative to a purely scientific view of the world.

¹ "Follow God, but first of all tie up your camel!" – Prophet Mohammed.

² en-'theo'-siasm, meaning to be filled with Godly desire.

Mystical religion is more immediate and tends to be more help in time of trouble than a predominantly cerebral faith. The disciplines of mysticism help the adept to return to the One, the primordial beginning, and to cultivate a constant sense of presence. ...

Theological writer Madeleine Guillemin sums it all up as follows:

We think of the various religions of the world as very different, but they all foster devotion to God, and there is only One God. This is something that struck me very forcibly when I first started to study the writings of the various religions. All speak of God as eternal, as existing before all time, and as suffering no modification or alteration. All say that He is omnipresent, that there is no place where He is not. All see Him as being all knowing (omniscient), and of having no limitations to His power (omnipotent). ' Creator of all that is' is an epithet bestowed on God by all religions that have ever been. And all, ultimately, acknowledge that God is unknowable, except that He can be experienced through love.

So, how can anyone speak of "my God" as being different from "your God," when all define Him in the same terms? One is drawn to the inevitable conclusion that each and every one has been given a perception of the same Being - that which just is. Not only do all religions describe this ' Unknowable Being' from which all has sprung, in the same words, but all mystics - to whatever religious background they belong, in whatever age or country - have all experienced God in the same way. That experience has been one of all-pervading Love and intense bliss. In those moments, their spirit was one with the Universal Spirit whom we call God.

Mystics are those great souls whose telephone line to God really works. They burn with love for Him, and are blessed by being given an experience of oneness with the Divine. When they speak of God, it is from first-hand experience, so they transcend the boundaries of the various religions from which they have sprung. It is admittedly correct to say that, whereas the Vedic philosophy teaches that God is the Self of all living beings, Christianity sees Him as eternally separate from His Creation, yet it is not all Christian mystics that have subscribed to that view. St. John of the Cross, for instance, wrote "It should be known that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Ghost, is hidden by His essence and His presence in the innermost being of the soul. " ("The Spiritual Canticle" Commentary on the first stanza, No.6)

Then there was St. Augustine, who wrote in his ' Confessions,"Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I found Thee! For behold Thou wert within me, and I outside; and I sought Thee outside, and in my loving fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou wert within me and I was not with Thee" (BK 10:27) The more one reads the mystics of all faiths and climes, the more it becomes apparent that there is tremendous similarity in their experiences.

So, from whence do the differences spring? The primary impetus for each religion has always been some divine revelation - an experience of Divinity. This may have been an Avatar (Incarnation of God) or some chosen prophet or messiah whom God has sent to set mankind back onto the right path. These are major events that occur only from time to time. In each case, the impact on people' s spiritual understanding is enormous, and it is treasured in memory for many centuries. But those memories are mostly kept alive and vibrant through rituals. Moreover, the sayings of the original founder become interpreted by lesser men and fossilised in dogma.

All of this, of course, happens within the context of some specific cultural background, and at a certain time in history. The way in which the original divine message is presented, therefore, becomes clothed in the ways of thinking of the people in which that message took root. The rituals that surround the worship were adapted from practices that were familiar at that time, and in that place. Naturally, also, each religion places emphasis on the recorded life of its founder. There is nothing wrong in any of this, but, as I see it, these are merely external trappings that are meant to help us towards the goal. That goal is the same for all: it is union with God.

None of all this precludes someone from rising to the heights of spirituality and, thereby, having a direct, mystical experience of God. But nor do any of these religious practices automatically ensure that one will reach those heights. Religions are excellent paths by which God can be reached, but they are the ways only, not the destination. The destination is an experience of God, nothing less. For that to happen, we need to transcend our lower natures, to put a rein on our uncontrolled emotions, and begin to weed out some of the negativity with which we are

burdened. In other words, it is transformation that is required, and a determination to become transformed is what spirituality is really all about.

If human nature did not have a strong spiritual side to its make-up, none of the great religions of the world would ever have arisen. Yet I see spirituality as the motive force, and religion merely the casing through which that force can function in society. If you are thirsty, you can choose water, fruit juice, etc., which will be handed to you in either a cup or a glass. The needed refreshment cannot be handed out without a 'container'. Similarly, I see our spiritual nature as the thirst that longs for a drink, the experience of God as the refreshing liquid we yearn to receive, and religion as the glass or the cup by which it can be handed out. The cups may look different, but their usefulness lies in their content, not the cup.

It is not, however, only Gnostics (or Mystics) that have found *some* form of 'spirituality' or 'self-improvement' in their lives. Others will indeed make the point that what may be regarded as 'spiritual' will vary from person to person. I can only agree to this proposition. There is no intention here to force an idea or the notion that any *one* religion or method is right, but a suggestion that life is a kind of adventure and that life could be much improved (perhaps) if lived to the fullest possible limit along an established and fruitful road, whichever route is chosen.

At a time when much of modern science seems to have influenced the moral perspective of the 'Western World', with (apparently) a corresponding reduction in the following of conventional Christianity, I suspect there are many people who are doing their best to cope with life on an experiential basis. I hesitatingly started out on the experiential route at the age of 18 or 19 out of the frustration of not finding answers that were acceptable to me, and which route I decided upon after some soul-searching at an early age. Since I found that persons of the like and stature of Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Carl Jung - and other great names - have followed similar paths, I feel more in awe of them than I did before. They succeeded in their pursuits by objective and experiential discovery of the spiritual kind, in combination with the material.

Many in the West have now become accustomed to living without adherence to a specific religion or a spiritual path, yet still retain a genuine faith in 'goodness' in some form. Sri Sathya Sai Baba has made the following statement of hope and inspiration to us in these days of doubt:

**If there is righteousness in the heart there will be beauty in the character.
If there is beauty in the character there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home there will be order in the nation.
When there is order in the nation there will be peace in the world.**