

## Herman Melville's "Lost Gnostic Poem" and the Late Nineteenth Century Discovery of Gnosticism

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**Herman Melville's "Lost Gnostic Poem"  
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In his last book, *Timoleon*, published in 1891, Herman Melville included what purported to be "Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the Twelfth Century." Apart from any literary merits, this cryptic work is richly informative of understandings of Gnosticism in this era. At the time of its publication, Gnosticism (broadly defined) was attracting wide and enthusiastic interest in educated circles, and this was reaching a general audience through popular publications and newspapers. In this era – roughly the years between 1880 and 1920 – Gnosticism enjoyed a popular vogue very popular to what we find in strictly modern times, in the aftermath of works like *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels, and of successive "rediscovered gospels," like those attributed to Mary and Judas. Then as now, much of the appeal of Gnosticism was based on its subversive views of gender roles and sexual identities.

*Melville's World*

Here is the (brief) full text of Melville's poem:

*Found a family, build a state,*

*The pledged event is still the same:*

*Matter in end will never abate*

*His ancient brutal claim. ...*

*Indolence is heaven's ally here,*

*And energy the child of hell:*

*The Good Man pouring from his pitcher clear*

*But brims the poisoned well.*

As I will demonstrate, people in the later nineteenth century actually knew a good deal about Gnosticism from Patristic sources, and from more recent documentary finds from Egypt and elsewhere. Plenty of books on the subject were appearing, as well as original texts and translations. Yet there really is not much in Melville's poem that is particularly Gnostic in any historical sense. He expresses the general view that the world is under the weight of dark material forces that prevent the

success of good or the forces of Light. It is a deeply pessimistic work. I am not sure, though, why he cites it as Gnostic. “Dualist” would be a much better description.<sup>1</sup>

The title of the poem is also curious and off-putting for a modern reader: “of the twelfth century”? All the Patristic sources concerning Gnosticism were focused on the first three or so centuries of the Christian era. Now, there were medieval Dualist movements in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries like the Bogomils and Albigensians, and many writers (including myself) have suggested possible continuities from ancient Gnosticism. I have even spoken of a Dualist/Gnostic continuum. In that sense, you could even imagine an Albigensian poem of the twelfth century, say, being described as Gnostic in a very broad sense. Why does Melville think this?

Today, standard interpretations of the Albigensians tend to play down the Dualist angle, and stress instead the role of this and like groups as protest movements within mainstream Catholic Christianity. But views were very different in the nineteenth century, when “Gnostic” sources were commonly cited, and Melville assuredly knew them. In 1848-49, Protestant theologian and historian Charles Schmidt published his substantial *Histoire et doctrine de la secte des Cathares ou Albigeois*. This was discussed at length in the *North American Review*, which Melville certainly could have read.<sup>2</sup> The anonymous reviewer notes that

*The origin of the Cathari has been the subject of much controversy; by some, they have been regarded as the immediate descendants of the early Manicheans; others have maintained that they derived their doctrines from some Gnostic sect, or from the Priscillianists and the Paulicians or Bogomiles. Mr. Schmidt ascribes to them a Graeco-Slavonic origin. According to him, their doctrines originated in Bulgaria at the beginning of the tenth century.*

That Gnostic interpretation held by cryptic “others” was widespread and easily available. It was argued by Americo Palfrey Marras, who in 1865 published *The Secret Fraternities of the Middle Ages*, and who drew Gnostic/Dualist analogies and continuities on virtually every page. *Secret Fraternities* sold very well. In *The Anatomy of Negation* (1889), American philosopher Edgar Saltus wrote that “The Albigenses, who came from a village in Languedoc, at a time [Jules] Michelet has noted, when Languedoc was a Babel, professed a mixture of Gnosticism and Manicheism.”

#### *Esoteric Roots*

But I also draw attention to other thinkers who in Melville’s latter years made the Gnostics almost a global obsession, and who specifically found Gnostic origins for the medieval heretics. One was the very influential Charles William King, who in 1864 published what became a standard book on *The Gnostics and their Remains: Ancient and Medieval*, which, apart from summarizing the familiar patristic texts from Irenaeus and Epiphanius, also described the large corpus of available Gnostic gems and amulets. As his subtitle suggests, King wrote extensively on possible Gnostic survivals into the Middle Ages and later, and remarked of ancient Gaul that “It is more than probable that such doctrines lurked unnoticed amongst the native Gallo-Romans, during the times of the Arian Gothic

<sup>1</sup> (For “Gnostic” approaches in Melville and his contemporaries, see Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *North American Review* April 1850, 443-473

kings, and did no more than revive into the flourishing Manicheism of the Albigenses in the twelfth century.”

King was influential in his own right, but he also became a key source for Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder (in 1875) of the Theosophical movement, of whom I shall have much more to say shortly. In her *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky wrote that “The votaries of the ancient worship were persecuted and put to death on charges of witchcraft. The Albigenses, descendants of the Gnostics, and the Waldenses, precursors of the Protestants, were hunted and massacred under like accusations.” Blavatsky’s ideas created a sensation, and that revived interest in the Gnostic and esoteric. That very word “esoteric” gained a mass audience from works like A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). Reflecting the new excitement, King’s *Gnostics and Their Remains* went into a second edition in 1887. Blavatsky herself died in 1891, the same year that *Timoleon* appeared.

Melville was an omnivorous reader, although I do not know if he had read either King or Blavatsky. Even if he had not, he could certainly have met Theosophical devotees: the movement was very vogueish in the US in the 1880s. Melville’s personal interest in the esoteric is suggested by the dedication of *Timoleon* to the great American occult/Symbolist painter, Elihu Vedder. Like the Theosophists too, and like Vedder, the later Melville had a strong interest in Buddhism. In fact, that same *Timoleon* volume also included Melville’s short poem, “Buddha.” Like the Theosophists (and again, like Vedder), Melville was also fascinated by ancient Egypt, its secret Wisdom and its Pyramids. *Timoleon* includes Melville’s poem “The Great Pyramid.”

The point is that at least some writers were explicitly claiming that Gnostic-Dualist continuity, which was just in the atmosphere in the mid-late nineteenth century. And that, presumably, is where Melville acquired his seemingly daring historical identification of Gnostics with Dualists/Albigensians. To read Melville’s poem, then, we need to realize that he meant Albigensians and Dualists, and not what we would normally call Gnostics. And in that approach, he was reflecting a standard view of an age that knew and cared a great deal about Gnosticism, and its historical continuities. The years of 1890-1891 were crucial in launching a global vogue. This resulted in an effervescent enthusiasm for Gnostic topics and buzzwords

### *No Religion Higher Than Truth*

Focused on the Theosophical Society, esoteric interests flourished in this era, and that movement played a crucial role in popularizing Gnosticism. Esoteric thinkers viewed Gnosticism as an alternative and more authentic version of the ancient Christian tradition, and as such they could draw on it to support progressive and feminist activism, including closer ties with Buddhism. Access to a supposedly superior tradition allowed Theosophists and other progressives to challenge orthodox Christian understandings of these issues.

To state what is now a very orthodox scholarly opinion, Theosophy was a critically important part of Western elite culture in the years I am describing here, whether we are investigating Western literature, visual art, music, film, design, architecture, educational theory, psychology, or generally

“culture.” The movement influenced a great many popular writers, directly or obliquely: some even argue that *The Wizard of Oz* is a Theosophical parable.<sup>3</sup>

The key founder was Madam Blavatsky, a Russian occultist who claimed to have traveled widely around the world in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1875, she co-founded the Theosophical Society, and published such influential writings as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Theosophy was a synthesis of the esoteric and occult ideas of the previous two centuries, including claims to supernatural powers. Also influential was Spiritualism, and its ideas of mediumship, and so was New Thought. These ideas were now merged with core themes of Hinduism and Buddhism, including the multiplicity of worlds and the very ancient (multi-billion year) history of consciousness. Reincarnation was a fundamental principle. While Theosophy grew from older esoteric roots, much of its appeal derived from its seeming congruence with the science of the day, particularly notions of evolution. Theosophists told of the rise and fall of successive races, and also depicted the progress of the human soul through successive lives. At the summit of spiritual evolution were divine redeemers, avatars, or Christs. Following Buddhist notions of the bodhisattva, Theosophy taught the existence of great spiritual teachers who had achieved godlike status, and these Ascended Masters transmitted their wisdom to initiates in each age. Blavatsky herself claimed to transmit the wisdom of such Masters.

Blavatsky also claimed to have discovered secret Asian scriptures revealing ancient truths. She taught the existence of the Akashic records, a compilation of all events and realities that had ever occurred, that were preserved in an etheric plane, and which could be accessed by mystical intuition, and presented as revered scriptures. Few modern scholars accept the authenticity of such works, which Blavatsky compiled from existing writings about South Asian religion and lost continents. Theosophy taught that ancient civilizations had gained vast knowledge and wisdom, which had been ruined and dispersed in successive catastrophes. However, modern inquirers could reconstruct this knowledge by diligent study of ancient texts, primitive mythologies, and archaeological research. Historical religions, including Christianity, contained the misunderstood fossils of these glorious ancient truths.

To summarize, the Theosophical Society declared its goals thus:

1. *To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.*
2. *To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science.*

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<sup>3</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Johns Hopkins, 2003); Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (State University of New York Press, 1994); K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed* (State University of New York Press, 1994); June O. Leavitt, *The Mystical Life of Franz Kafka* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Glenn Alexander Magee, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ken Monteith, *Yeats and Theosophy* (Routledge 2008); Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (Abbeville Press, 1986); Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (Schocken Books, 1995); Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

3. *To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.*

The group's motto was: *There is No Religion Higher Than Truth.*

Although its ideas were very influential, the Theosophical movement itself tended to splinter and fragment, and there were many offshoots and imitators. One of the most powerful was Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, which attained amazing influence in Continental Europe in the 1910s and 1920s. Theosophy was a prime source for later US movements like Mighty I AM, and the Church Universal and Triumphant. If the package of ideas I describe here sounds familiar, it is because virtually every part of it was eventually adopted by the New Age movement.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Blavatsky and the Gnostics*

As noted earlier, King's *Remains* rediscovered the Gnostics for the English-speaking world, and Blavatsky massively popularized his work. If you had read King, you were intimately familiar with such ancient thinkers as Valentinus and Basilides, and Blavatsky spread the word still further. You could in fact write a substantial biography of Basilides (say) as a cultural hero in Western progressive and esoteric circles from the 1860s onward.

such enthusiasm emerges strongly in the vast *Isis Unveiled*. Blavatsky believed that the earliest Christians were mystical Essenes and Gnostics, and that the ignorant clods of the Great Church had systematically suppressed their truths and secret doctrines, which at many points echoed Buddhism and Hinduism. The Theosophical Christ had a vast amount in common with the Jesus of the Gnostics, the (non-material) heaven-sent Redeemer dispatched to liberate the forces of light from their prison of matter.

Here are a few typical samples from *Isis Unveiled*:

*When we take in consideration that the Gnostics, or early Christians, were but the followers of the old Essenes under a new name, this fact is nothing to be wondered at. ...*

*If we now stop to consider another of the fundamental dogmas of Christianity, the doctrine of atonement, we may trace it as easily back to heathendom. This corner-stone of a Church which had believed herself built on a firm rock for long centuries, is now excavated by science and proved to come from the Gnostics....*

*The Logos, or word of the Gospel according to John, was a Gnostic personification. ...*

*It is needless to state that the **Gospel according to John** was not written by John but by a Platonist or a Gnostic belonging to the Neo-platonic school....*

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<sup>4</sup> One key scholar in this area was Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. See for instance Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Clare Goodrick-Clarke, *G. R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005). He was also general editor of an important series on Western Esoteric Masters. This included Richard Seddon's *Rudolf Steiner* (North Atlantic Books, 2004). Goodricke-Clarke himself edited the volume in that series on *Helena Blavatsky* (North Atlantic Books, 2004).

*Clement describes Basilides, the Gnostic, as “a philosopher devoted to the contemplation of divine things.” This very appropriate expression may be applied to many of the founders of the more important sects which later were all engulfed in one — that stupendous compound of unintelligible dogmas enforced by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others, which is now termed Christianity. If these must be called heresies, then early Christianity itself must be included in the number. Basilides and Valentinus preceded Irenaeus and Tertullian; and the two latter Fathers had less facts than the two former Gnostics to show that their heresy was plausible. Neither divine right nor truth brought about the triumph of their Christianity; fate alone was propitious.*

In her view, the church Fathers of the Council of Nicea who finalized the Biblical canon were “a set of fools.”

### *Alternative Christian Scriptures*

Theosophy absorbed and channeled many vogueish interests of the era, and among those was the passionate enthusiasm for alternative scriptures of all kinds, in an age when many early texts were being rediscovered after long centuries. (I do stress that everything I say here concerns the English-speaking world. The German world in particular was still more advanced and daring in its scholarly conclusions).

Many of these rediscovered works were broadly Gnostic, or were at least so regarded by many commentators. In 1930, Edgar Goodspeed listed the texts that had come to light just since the 1870s: “the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Revelation of Peter*, the *Apology of Aristides*, the *Acts of Paul*, the *Sayings of Jesus*, the *Odes of Solomon*, and the *Epistle of the Apostles* – all from the second century.” (The “Sayings of Jesus” referred to here actually constitutes a substantial portion of the Gospel of Thomas). Such texts, and a great many others, were easily available in translation, and could easily be bought by clergy or educated lay people. The fact that so many appeared in popular editions indicates an avid thirst for knowledge of these alternative Christianities and their writings.

Even at the start of the twentieth century, it was feasible to possess a whole library of Gnostic texts. A substantial literature was available to any English-speaking reader with the means to purchase them. Publishers knew that a reliable market for religious literature existed among clergy and theological students, and the number of popular editions indicates the wide general market for such works. One reliable source for the new discoveries was the British SPCK, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, which in the 1920s published cheap translations of Hippolytus, *Pistis Sophia*, the Didache, and others.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the more significant books from this era included Charles William King, *The Gnostics And Their Remains* (London: Bell and Dalby, 1864); W. Wright, *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament* (London 1865); W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871); Alexander Walker, trans., *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 16 (Edinburgh 1873); J. Rendel Harris, *The Newly-Recovered Gospel of St. Peter* (New York: James Pott and Co., 1893); B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *Sayings of Our Lord from an Early Greek Papyrus* (Egypt Exploration Fund; 1897); Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. *New*

Just how mainstream such discoveries became is suggested by the work of the once-celebrated Presbyterian divine and Princeton academic Henry Van Dyke. A friend of Woodrow Wilson, he was famous and influential in his time, especially within his denomination, and he was a popular poet. His Christmas short story *The Other Wise Man* has often been reprinted. But as early as 1900, Van Dyke was publishing poems using what he could not then have known to be the Gospel of Thomas, and quoting from that text. This was more than a generation before the finding of the complete version of that gospel in the 1940s. In 1900, Van Dyke published his *The Toiling of Felix: A Legend On A New Saying Of Jesus*, which is almost a hymn to the alternative gospels. Its pantheistic refrain is

*Nevermore thou needest seek me; I am with thee everywhere;*

*Raise the stone, and thou shall find me; cleave the wood, and I am there.*

Van Dyke's popularity helped disseminate knowledge of the Oxyrhynchus fragment – of the Gospel of Thomas – which already before the First World War was very widely known in the US among quite ordinary readers.

#### *Mead and Theosophy*

The Theosophical movement – and individual Theosophists like Mead himself – drew powerfully on these new scriptural insights, and in the process they inspired, directed, and mobilized the esoteric quest for Jesus that still flourishes today. Theosophists furnished all the essential maps and guides to anyone interested in following that path. Without acknowledging Theosophy, we can never understand the history of the popular interest in the gospels, in Gnosticism, or in alternative Christianities.

The *Pistis Sophia* was singularly influential. Coptic scholar M. G. Schwartz published a Latin translation in Germany in 1851, claiming it as a Valentinian work, and the text rapidly gained notice in Britain. As King noted in his *Remains*, this was the “sole survivor of the once numerous family of Gnostic Gospels; but fortunately the most important of them all for our purpose, and the very one for whose escape (in its Coptic disguise) the archaeologist ought to feel most grateful to the ignorance of the destroyers.” The breakthrough translation by the Theosophist G. R. S. Mead appeared in 1890-1891, in the magazine *Lucifer*, and his free standing book version followed in 1896. Mead was consciously publicizing such texts as hidden gospels: he described *Pistis Sophia* as a Gnostic gospel, and the text was commonly recognized as “a sort of Gospel coming from some early Gnostic sect.” Once translated and made easily available in popular editions, the *Pistis Sophia* had a general cultural impact quite comparable to the later Gnostic discoveries as they were popularized from the 1970s onward. A translation of the *Pistis Sophia* appeared from the mainstream house of Macmillan.<sup>6</sup>

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*Sayings of Jesus and a Fragment of a Lost Gospel From Oxyrhynchus* (London: H. Frowde 1904); J. Rendel Harris, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge University Press, 1909).

<sup>6</sup> G. R. S. Mead, ed., *Pistis Sophia* (1896)



In 1900, King's pioneering *Remains* was superseded by G. R. S. Mead's mammoth and much-reprinted *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten... A contribution to the study of Christian origins based on the most recently recovered materials*. The subtitle indicates the already common idea that the heretical texts might shed much light on the earliest days of the faith. The *Fragments* included extensive translations from the Gnostic writings themselves, including the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Books of the Savior* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Mead went on to publish the eleven volume *Echoes from the Gnosis* (1906-1908), a comprehensive edition of every Gnostic writing then known, while *The Gnostic John the Baptizer* (1924) translated the psalms of the Mandaean sect.

Mead himself was a key figure in Theosophy, having originally been converted by his reading of A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. He became Blavatsky's private secretary in 1889, and his editions of the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Echoes from the Gnosis* were first published by the Theosophical Publishing House.<sup>7</sup> In turn, those Theosophical works spawned a whole genre of pseudo-gospels that purported to describe the lost years of Jesus's life, and explained how he had studied with Buddhists and other masters of Asian religion. Another popularization from the same era was Francis Legge's *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity* (1915). Legge already regards the apocryphal Gospels as a very familiar source, referring for instance to the dialogue between Jesus and Salome from the Gospel of the Egyptians as "the well-known saying of Jesus," and allotting a substantial chapter to the *Pistis Sophia*.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Esoteric Inheritance*

As ancient texts were rediscovered in vast numbers over the following decades, so esoteric advocates took them up enthusiastically. Although he was no Theosophist, occultist Aleister Crowley led a whole neo-Gnostic revival at the end of the nineteenth century, and he recommended the *Pistis Sophia* to his disciples as "an admirable introduction." In 1913, Crowley's *Liber XV* designed a mass or liturgy for his Gnostic Catholic Church. The canon of commemorated saints included Basilides, Valentinus, Bardesanes, and the others "that transmitted the light of the Gnosis to us, their successors and their heirs."<sup>9</sup> As we will see, figures like Valentinus and Basilides now enjoyed a vogue as rediscovered spiritual pioneers.

Following the Gnostics of old with remarkable fidelity, Blavatsky and her contemporaries interpreted Christ's death and resurrection as a symbolic and psychological reality, that reflected transformations within the soul of the believer. In this vision, "Christ" was not a historical personage, but a title given to any true initiate. As Theosophist Anna Kingsford declared in the 1880s, "Religion is not historical and in nowise depends upon past events . . . . The Scriptures are

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<sup>7</sup> G. R. S. Mead, *Echoes from the Gnosis* (London: Theosophical Pub. Society, 1906-1908); G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostic John the Baptizer* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1924)

<sup>8</sup> G. R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1900); Francis Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity* 2 vols (1915)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gclvx.org/Liber-XV.htm>

addressed to the soul, and make no appeal to the outer senses.”<sup>10</sup> Annie Besant constructed her whole system of “Esoteric Christianity” on these Gnostic foundations. As she observed,

*The command to “preach the gospel to every creature” – though admittedly by doubtful authenticity – has been interpreted as forbidding the teaching of Gnosis to a few, and has apparently erased the less popular saying of the same Great Teacher “Give not that is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine.”*

Besant, by the way, was an extremely important figure of the age. Apart from her key role in Theosophy, she was internationally prominent in socialist, feminist and labor issues, and in anti-imperialist movements, with a special passion for Indian and Irish independence.<sup>11</sup>

### *Feminists, Suffragettes, and Gnostics*

Theosophical works had a special appeal to feminist thinkers, who found validation for ideas about the Divine Feminine, and women’s suppressed role in early Christianity. Reading Gnostic texts like *Pistis Sophia*, women of the 1890s – as in later eras - were struck to find the very prominent role assigned to women disciples as the authentic hearers and transmitters of Jesus’s teachings. Many of the leading occult thinkers were women, including Blavatsky, Besant, and Kingsford.

Feminist Bible criticism dates from the 1890s, with the appearance of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *Woman’s Bible* (1895). While it did not seek to revise the scriptural text, the *Woman’s Bible* offered a thorough-going feminist commentary that pointed out the inconsistencies in Scripture, and stressed the egalitarian nature of Jesus’ teachings.<sup>12</sup> Other Victorian women, however, took more extreme positions than Stanton, feeling that Christianity was too closely related to patriarchy to be worth saving in anything like its present form. This was the message of Matilda Joslyn Gage’s *Woman, Church and State* (1893), which argued that ancient society was obviously matriarchal in nature.<sup>13</sup>

Gage was also an early adherent of the Theosophical Society, an association that she described as the “crown blessing” of her life. She stressed the lost feminine aspects of Christianity, which had been preserved by the Gnostics and other heretics:

*The androgynous theory of primal man found many supporters, the separation into two beings having been brought about by sensual desire. .... One of the most revered ancient Scriptures, **The Gospel According to the Hebrews**, which was in use as late as the second century of the Christian era, taught the equality of the feminine in the Godhead; also that daughters should inherit with sons. Thirty-three fragments of this Gospel have recently been discovered. The fact remains undeniable that at the advent of Christ, a recognition of the feminine element in the divinity had not entirely died out from general belief, the earliest and lost books*

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Pert, *Red Cactus: The Life of Anna Kingsford* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Books and Writers, 2007)

<sup>11</sup> Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity* (New York: J. Lane, 1902)

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Northeastern University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church And State*, Second Edition, (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1893).

*of the New Testament teaching this doctrine, the whole confirmed by the account of the birth and baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the feminine creative force, playing the most important part. It was however but a short period before the church through Canons and Decrees, as well as apostolic and private teaching, denied the femininity of the Divine equally with the divinity of the feminine. There is however abundant proof that even under but partial recognition of the feminine principle as entering in the divinity, woman was officially recognized in the early services of the church, being ordained to the ministry, officiating as deacons, administering the act of baptism, dispensing the sacrament, interpreting doctrines and founding sects which received their names.<sup>14</sup>*

With so many documents about Christian origins now readily accessible, the materials were present for a radical feminist revision of early Christian history.

### *Frances Swiney and the Divine Feminine*

Just how thoroughgoing such an endeavor could be was indicated by Frances Swiney's important book *The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics* (1909), which is virtually forgotten today. Many of Swiney's views were eccentric, even for the age, and among other things she believed that sexual desire was just not natural: perhaps it was a by-product of patriarchy? She is regarded as a prophet of asexuality. She looked forward to the "gradual extinction of the distinctive male organism, and the assimilation of the male to the female." That view obviously resonates with some Gnostic texts, not to mention the Gospel of Thomas.

But in her historical accounts of early Christianity, Swiney makes some ground-breaking comments. Though she writes from an occult or Theosophical perspective, Swiney has much in common with modern scholars like Elaine Pagels or Karen King, who attempt to restore the lost voices of the women of early Christianity. For Swiney, the Gnostics found their chief supporters among the emancipated women of the Roman Empire, "early pioneers of the liberation movement of their sex, dialectical daughters questioning the truth and authority of received opinions, earnest intellectual women."<sup>15</sup> She saw Gnostics as the direct predecessors of the suffragette women of her own day.

Without the benefit of the Nag Hammadi texts, Swiney uses the *Pistis Sophia* to provide a strikingly full portrait of the Gnostic world-view. She saw the Gnostic faith as a far more spiritual and egalitarian doctrine than the crude beliefs of the orthodox church. Gnostics taught reincarnation; they believed "that the real human is male-female, devoid of differentiated sexuality; the duality of manifestation now existing being a transitory phase of existence"; while the notion of Christ's vicarious sacrifice for sins was a "monstrous doctrine" invented by the orthodox. "Though Gnosticism long predated Christianity, the Gnostics were the first Christians; they accepted Christ in the full realization of the word; his life, not his death, was the key-note of their doctrine and their practice." Their beliefs were expressed in gospels which, she believed, were accepted and regarded as canonical decades before a like veneration was extended to orthodox texts like the letters of Paul. The surviving Gnostic fragments, "the few mutilated relics that remain of these writings, [are] the

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<sup>14</sup> Gage, *Woman, Church And State*, 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> Frances Swiney, *The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics* (London: Yellon, Williams, 1909); idem, *The Cosmic Procession, Or, The Feminine Principle In Evolution* (London: E. Bell, 1906); idem, *The Awakening of Women, or, Woman's Part In Evolution* 2nd ed (London: W. Reeves, 1908).

most valuable evidence of what primitive Christianity really was, and what was the contemporary opinion of Christ and his teaching.”<sup>16</sup>

These noble Gnostic thinkers, “the guardians of the most sacred truths of existence,” were subjected to orthodox persecutions that collectively represent “the bloodiest and the blackest records that history can show us”: these acts were inflicted by “the uninformed, narrow-minded fathers of the primitive church.” Worse than merely obscurantist, the Christian reaction specifically represented male persecution of women: “The Gnostics kept true to the original pristine faith in the Femininity of the Holy Spirit. A truth universally suppressed in the fourth century AD by the male priesthood of the Christian Church.” Male priests had systematically doctored the surviving texts: “It is very suggestive of a sinister motive that in most of the erasures and where pages are missing in these Gnostic writings, the subject treated is in the context is some hidden mystery, the interpretation of which was unacceptable to the masculine mind and to bigoted orthodoxy.” The iniquitous exclusion of women from the faith and its scriptures was the direct cause of “the persecution, degradation and maltreatment of womanhood” through the succeeding centuries.<sup>17</sup>

In 1916, Theosophy’s historian W. J. Colville quoted both Swiney and Kingsford in his account of “The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics – The Divine Feminine.” As he remarked, “No more fascinating doctrine than that of Gnosticism can possibly engage our interest, and especially now that the position properly assignable to Woman is one of the burning issues of the times.”<sup>18</sup>

For these thinkers, ancient Gnostic texts and alternative gospels provided vital rhetorical weapons in struggles with conservative religious and political thinkers. In an age when canonical texts carried such weight, it was very useful to claim to rely on even earlier and more primitive documents, and ones allegedly closer to the thought of Jesus himself, and his faithful followers.

### *Into the War Years*

To illustrate the overwhelming appeal of Theosophist and Gnostic ideas and themes in this era, I will focus on three works that appeared in a short period, in 1916-17.

#### *i. George Moore*

In 1916, Irish novelist published *The Brook Kerith*, which became an enormous and long-running best-seller. In multiple ways, the book popularized the ideas that had long been associated with Theosophy, including the survival of secret traditions beneath the veneer of Christian orthodoxy, and the Essene role in Jesus’s mission.

The book tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, both before and after the crucifixion, which Jesus survives. Indeed, his most important character growth occurs after his supposed death, as he realizes

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<sup>16</sup> Swiney, *The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics*, 3-4 (Gnostics as first Christians); 9 (mutilated relics)

<sup>17</sup> Swiney, *The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics* 5 (persecutions); 15 (femininity of the Holy Spirit); 37n (“It is very suggestive of a sinister motive...); 40 (“persecution, degradation and maltreatment of womanhood”).

<sup>18</sup> W. J. Colville, *Ancient Mysteries and Modern Revelations* (Chicago: Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1916), 336

with horror the hatred and drive for power which had motivated much of his mission. Moore portrays Jesus and his followers as deeply interested in the intellectual movements of the ancient world, including the ideas of Heraclitus and the Greek philosophers, and the rich melange of ideas to be found in Alexandria. Much of the novel involves the Essenes and their “cenoby” (monastery) of Kerith, in which Jesus both begins his mission, and spends his latter days. That of course was written long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Moore argues that Christianity was founded on fundamental mistakes, both about the resurrection of Jesus, and his original goals. In his retirement at the cenoby, Jesus is visited by a sinister and power-hungry Paul, who informs him about the directions in which his new religion is leading, and presents the incomprehensible new doctrine of “the death and resurrection from the dead of the Lord Jesus Christ, raised from the dead by his Father.” An Aramaic-speaking Jesus has to ask the meaning of the unfamiliar term “Christ,” only to be informed that it is a newly-coined Greek word.

Discovering the imposture that has occurred in his name, Jesus must be dissuaded from going to Jerusalem to state and prove that he was not raised from the dead by any supernatural means: “the lie has spread... and will run all over the world even as a single mustard seed.” Ultimately, he joins the itinerant Indian monks who have been evangelizing the Judean countryside – presumably Buddhists – and he will travel with them back to their homeland.

*The monks from India will meet him in the valley, and if they speak to him they will soon gather from him that he divined much of their philosophy while watching his flock, and finding him to be of their mind they may ask him to return to India with them and he will preach there.*

Already, back in 1916, those were the themes of a best-selling religious novel.

## **ii. Carl Gustav Jung**

Jung was critical of Theosophy, which he felt diverted people from authentic inner quests. But he was deeply interested in Gnostic myth and lore, especially the thought of Valentinus, and he admired G. R. S. Mead. As Stephan Hoeller notes,

*C. G. Jung made a special journey to London in the last period of Mead's life to thank him for his pioneering work of translating and commenting on the Gnostic-Hermetic body of writings. What Jung valued in Mead was not only his outstanding scholarship and elegant use of the English language, but first and foremost his affinity toward the experience of Gnosis. Mead wrote about the ancient books of wisdom from the inside, as it were. Precisely because of his association with Blavatsky and her circle he justly felt himself as a spiritual relative of the seekers and finders of Gnosis long ago and far away.<sup>19</sup>*

When Jung approached the world's ongoing crises in 1916, he drew on a Gnostic leader much beloved of Theosophists and esoteric thinkers, namely the second century Egyptian heresiarch Basilides.

Living in Zurich during the war years, Jung spent his time in self-examination, while his theories of the collective unconscious led him to explore occult and mystical teachings from different cultures

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted at <http://gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/biography.htm>

through history. In 1916, Jung wrote the mind-stretching *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, reputedly as the consequence of an outbreak of psychic phenomena in his household, a kind of poltergeist invasion. The sermons are presented in cryptic words attributed to Basilides, who preaches to the legions of flocking ghosts, ghosts that were so numerous in Europe in the year of Verdun. Basilides-Jung tells his hearers that they have misunderstood the fundamental nature of reality, and especially the absolute reality of the pleroma, the divine fullness, which contains within itself all opposites, and which is at once everything and nothing, black and white. But although ultimate reality may contain and reconcile all opposites, mere humans cannot and do not, and they err fatally when they do not realize this fact. When humans strive for the good and beautiful, they cannot fail to attain the evil and ugly, which are necessary components of full reality. Misunderstanding this, they wrongly accept external realities as if they represent absolute truth and fall into the trap of accepting worldly ideologies, succumbing to savage fanaticism.<sup>20</sup>

Put into worldly terms, those Europeans who in 1914 launched a crusade for righteousness, peace, and justice were unconsciously grasping for evil, violence, and injustice, and by 1916 that paradox looked like a solid piece of political analysis. Rather than basing themselves in external realities, wise people should look within, to integrate competing forces and passions and reject the dualism of good and evil—or as we might say, of the Allies and the Central Powers. Truth was found not in dualities, but in one reality that stood above both God and the devil, and incorporated both.

The ideas are powerful, and grow directly from Jung's life work. But in 1916, the prophet he chose to enunciate them was the Gnostic Basilides.

### *iii. Gustav Holst*

The First World War years witnessed a wonderful flowering of music in Great Britain, much of which had a religious content. (We think of Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius, and Ralph Vaughan Williams). One of the greatest composers of the time was Gustav Holst, who between 1914 and 1916 composed *The Planets*. In 1917, he followed that with a splendid piece for choir and orchestra, *The Hymn of Jesus*, which was publicly performed in 1920, after the war's end. The *Hymn* was widely heard and praised in Britain and North America.

But anyone at the 1920 premiere expecting standard Christian piety would have been taken aback by the scriptural texts that Holst had set. Holst in fact took his text from the apocryphal Acts of John, composed in the late second century AD, and long regarded as unacceptably heretical. In the nineteenth century, however, manuscript discoveries permitted a reconstruction of most of the text. In the section used by Holst (94-96), John gives a surprising account of the Last Supper that features a kind of liturgical ring-dance. ("He bade us therefore make as it were a ring, holding one another's hands, and himself standing in the midst he said: Answer Amen unto me." That element has long entranced modern readers. When Elaine Pagels published her *Gnostic Gospels* in 1979, this was one of the passages most quoted in reviews.

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<sup>20</sup> Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1982); and the sermons can be found at [www.gnosis.org/library/7Sermons.htm](http://www.gnosis.org/library/7Sermons.htm) .

Holst was an erudite man, who had earlier set to music his own translations from Sanskrit, and the version of the Greek here is very faithful. But his use of the Acts of John is mainly due to Theosophy. A leading scholar of the work was – again - G. R. S. Mead who thought the Hymn “marvelous and beautiful,” And whose influence contributed to Holst’s use of the work. The result was that almost a century ago, a strictly mainstream, celebrated, English composer produced and staged a work containing evocative Gnostic hymns, and liturgical dance.

When we encounter Herman Melville’s poem today, it might seem like an amazing recondite piece, suggesting very arcane interests indeed. In the context of the time, though, the subject matter was amazingly close to the mainstream.