

Gnosticism Reformed

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MORMONS ARE NOT THE ONLY EARNEST SEEKERS after plain and precious ideas suppressed by the early Christian church. Scholars may have found a few in recently discovered manuscripts that illuminate the beliefs of the Gnostic sects that were serious competitors to mainstream Christianity for over three centuries. But what the scholars have found is not what Mormons are after. I would not recommend searching through *The Nag Hammadi Library* for hidden treasures of knowledge.¹ The Gnostic scriptures are too much like strong drink: intoxicating but ultimately hallucinatory.

The late LDS apostle James E. Talmage took a dim view of ancient Gnosticism. He wrote that it had contributed to the great apostasy by “grafting foreign doctrines onto the true vine of the gospel” and injecting the myriad philosophical controversies of the pagan world into Christianity. He cited its boastful claims to special knowledge of God, its wild cosmological speculations, its extremes of austerity and amorality, and its “perverted view of life” that set body against spirit.²

This unflattering assessment prevailed until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi and Qumran in 1947 prompted some Mormons to start fantastic rumors that the manuscripts contained a version of Isaiah similar to Nephi’s, sacramental prayers identical to Moroni’s, and accounts of sacred secrets more dangerous than Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s. Translations eventually proved them wrong, but wild stories continue to circulate.

More sober scholars have mined the ancient literature in search of precedents for distinctive Mormon doctrines and ordinances, and they have found many. Hugh Nibley discusses early prayer circles and secret teachings.³ Eugene Seach traces evolving Jewish and Gnostic concepts of a Father-Mother-Son-Bride godhead and the holiness of sexuality.⁴

1. James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

2. James Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1909).

3. Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987).

4. Eugene Seach, *Mormonism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi Texts*

Both serious scholars and popularizers infected with "parallelomania" like to argue that the Gnostic sects were the last corrupt remnants of primitive Christianity and to interpret the eclipse or suppression of Gnosticism by a self-defined orthodoxy as the consummation of the great apostasy. Their reflexive sympathy for fellow victims of orthodox denunciations is misplaced. Gnosticism was decaying on its own. The most enduring Gnostic sects were those that taught a dour ascetic dualism antithetical to Mormonism, whereas the sects whose doctrines more accurately foreshadowed Mormonism were unworthy models in other respects.

Among non-Mormon writers, Harold Bloom sees Gnosticism as a trans-historical tendency, pervasive in American religion, characterized by a belief that the spirit is older than the world itself and by a claim of a special relationship to God.⁵ His definition fits Mormonism so well because it was tailored to emphasize the similarities between historic Gnosticism and modern religious movements. The Mormon doctrines of uncreated intelligence, literally begotten spirits, personal revelation, and progression to godhood have apparently become Bloom's criteria.⁶

Less friendly commentators define modern Gnosticism in terms of its literal meaning: a claim to special knowledge and insight. They condemn its speculative and esoteric tendencies and the arrogance implicit in rejecting centuries of tradition and consensus, however forcibly imposed.

Sterling McMurrin has formulated a typology of religions that is helpful in characterizing affinities of outlook among otherwise dissimilar sects.⁷ One may elaborate his framework to classify religions by their optimistic or pessimistic attitudes toward humanity's past, present, and future. For example, dismal Calvinism proclaimed guilt on all and damnation to most; conservative Christianity labors under an oppressive sense of original sin but points the way to salvation; liberal Christianity affirms the good in men and women but is silent on eschatology.

Gnosticism and Mormonism occupy a separate category, however. They offer grand eschatologies of exaltation along with harsh critiques of the present condition that imply no burden of guilt from original sin. Mormons analyze the problem as sectarian fragmentation due to apostasy,

(Midvale, UT: Sounds of Zion, 1980).

5. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

6. Bloom's assessment is not unflattering since he prophesies facetiously that Mormons will be eating their stored food long after 3000 A.D., the seven-thousandth and final year of earthly history by one popular reckoning.

7. Sterling McMurrin, in *And More About God* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992).

while Gnostics saw it as fragmentation of the divine nature itself. Religions that take such dim views of the present but bright views of past and future seem to have the greatest motivation and self-confidence for radical doctrinal innovation. They aim to make things whole once more.

Similarities between historic Gnosticism and Mormonism run deep, but so do differences. Both isms started with the ambition to know more and be more than mainstream religion could offer, but they arrived at opposite conclusions in the field of practical religion. Mormons may view their own religion as Truth Restored, but as an outsider I have come to view it as Gnosticism Reformed.

Similarities may appeal to intellectual curiosity, to a taste for historical patina, or to a genealogical urge to unearth philosophical ancestors, but they are fundamentally irrelevant to an appreciation of either the ancient or the modern religion. Parallelomania serves the purposes of the missionary program by furnishing "proofs" of Mormon claims about the restoration of primitive practices, but intellectual integrity requires equal attention to the differences. It is important to understand the nature of the reform effected in reversing the the ancient Gnostics' pessimistic, dualistic, and ultimately nihilistic outlook toward mortal life itself.

MYTH AND DOCTRINE

The dualistic myth common to all Gnostic sects opposed God's realm of light to the world, which was seen as a realm of darkness, created not by God, but by lower powers, variously known as the *archons*, the *aeons*, or the *demiurge*. The Father was all-good, infinite, unknowable, and remote; whereas the Creator, identified with the God of the Jews, was seen as an arbitrary, arrogant, and wrathful lawgiver.⁸

I might venture to recast this myth in Mormon terms: After Satan's plan of salvation had been rejected, he proceeded to create the world anyhow and to imprison humankind on it, making himself the unauthorized god of this world. The Gnostics might not have been amused by such fanciful slander against Satan since they preferred to blame Jehovah for all ills. They spun new interpretations of the role of the serpent in the garden of Eden and absolved Adam of any genuine transgression, and the Ophite sect made the serpent a symbol of liberation. (The same could almost be said of Mormons, who see Adam's fall as beneficent and make the serpent instrumental in bringing the plan of salvation to pass, while paradoxically continuing to blame him for the existence of evil.) A lunatic

8. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

fringe even made heroes of Cain and the Sodomites for defying the Creator.

The Gnostic concept of salvation was liberation via *gnosis*: the knowledge of whence we come, why we are here, and where we are going.⁹ The mission of Jesus Christ, the true Son, was to teach us this saving knowledge, to redeem us from bondage to the creator Jehovah, and to lead us back to the true but unknown Father. In fact, the Savior's suffering and death were mere illusions. By one account, the divine Christ cheated the Creator by abandoning the human Jesus on the cross. So much for Gnostic soteriology!

Gnostics greatly admired the apostle Paul for his rejection of Jewish law and his emphasis on justification by faith, an easier path to salvation. They expanded on his mention of the *archons* of this *aeon* (1 Cor. 2:6-8) and his trichotomy among spiritual (*pneumatic*), natural/animal (*psychic*), and carnal/clay/material men (1 Cor. 2:14, 3:1, 15:48) as they spun their esoteric interpretations of his epistle, which also foreshadowed Mormon teaching on the three kingdoms. In the ungenerous Gnostic version, spiritual men share in the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Father, but natural men remain with the nasty Creator, and carnal men just rot.

Paul did not reciprocate the admiration. His epistle chided the pneumatics, who were puffed up with knowledge, who fancied themselves perfect, and who considered everything lawful unto themselves (1 Cor. 8:1, 2:6, 10:23). As early as 50 A.D., Paul was fighting fires that he had inadvertently fueled. The later, doubtfully attributed epistle to Timothy concludes with an explicit warning against the falsely so-called *gnosis*.

These doctrines led to paradoxical extremes in moral attitudes. On the one hand, contempt for the degradation of the material world formed a basis for asceticism. On the other, contempt for the Creator and his laws and a doctrine of unconditional salvation by knowledge formed a basis for libertinism.¹⁰ Thus, the Marcionites and Manichaeans discouraged reproduction, while the Valentinians and Cainites developed a reputation for immorality at an early date. (Of the lewd Barbeloites, more later.) "Gold immersed in muck retains its luster," they said, and wallowed. In short, Gnosticism divorced the issue of salvation from that of moral effort, in clear perversion of Paul's intent.

The Gnostics did not stop at dualism. Their diverse cosmologies posited elaborate genealogies of the lower powers that separate us from God. An *aeon* was at once an eternity of time, a kingdom of space, and the *archon* who ruled it. Most of the genealogies descended from a great mother,

9. Elder LeGrand Richards addressed these questions in *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, but the Valentinians asked them first, in almost identical words quoted by Clement of Alexandria. Their answers were less satisfying.

10. Jonas, 270.

consort of the Father, and reconverged upon a foolish virgin Wisdom and her misbegotten son, the Demiurge, which means creator. An early Gnostic cult known to Paul had filled the calendar with such beings (Gal. 4:8-10). Somewhat later, the Valentinians conceived a lineage of thirty aeons male and female in conjugal pairs, naming them with philosophical terms of the corresponding grammatical gender: Forefather and Thought, Mind and Truth, Word and Life, Man and Church, etc., ending with the foolish Wisdom and her son. (Christ and his bride the Holy Spirit were mere afterthoughts, whether of Valentinus or of the Forefather, I do not know.) The Ophites started with Father and Thought, Son and Holy Spirit, adding a separate Christ, Wisdom, and seven archons. They called the creator Yaldabaoth, which means Child of the Void, and gave the remaining archons hellenized names of the despised God of the Old Testament: Iao (Jehovah), Eloaios (Elohim), Adonaios, Sabaoth, etc.

Gnosticism has been described as Platonism run wild. In creating their genealogies of aeons, the Gnostics may have been showing off, but they were not consciously inventing abstract nonsense. They were systematizing perceived realities. In Platonist metaphysics, based on the theory of ideal forms, qualities became entities, and abstractions became real.¹¹ Not all Platonists turned to irresponsible speculation, however. Early Christians were equally steeped in Platonism, and their trinitarian abstractions were amply mystifying, but their faith has passed a test of time. Systems of metaphysics come and go, but God lives.

In the strange speculations of the Gnostics, one can discern grotesque prototypes of Joseph Smith's later teachings on the Father's abode in a place of eternally burning light, a mother in heaven, and an entire lineage of gods. However, unlike the idle cosmologies of the Gnostics, the Mormon vision of a heaven filled with the perfected forms of choice things on earth furnishes a model that men and women can aspire to and live by. Like no other modern religion, Mormonism endeavors to remake earth in the

11. Plato considered the ideal forms of universal qualities as real as the entities possessing them, but modern empiricists would say that only the observable instances are real. Mormon metaphysics arguably includes elements of Platonist realism, along with the prevailing modern nominalism and a unique materialism. Descriptions of God as an exalted man and of heaven as a celestialized earth sound like ideal forms by other names, but there is a technical difference between perfected forms of particulars and ideal forms of universals. As sometime realists, Mormons believe in a transmissible priesthood distinct from its bearers. Their passionate attachment to emblems of God-Family-Country, a triad of universals, is also characteristic of realism. As nominalists, they worship the god who is their Father, and not another, for there are gods many and lords many. And as materialists, who equate matter and spirit, they give him a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's.

image of a material heaven, although cynics might say that it tends to remake heaven in the image of earth.

The Book of Abraham reads like a highly compressed Gnostic treatise in code. Its teachings on the plurality of gods echo any number of Gnostic cosmologies, its teachings on preexistent matter echo Hermogenes,¹² and its teachings on antemortal callings echo Valentinus, who maintained that "souls that possess the seed of Achamoth [Wisdom] are dearest to the Demiurge, though he knows not why, wherefore he distributes them to prophets, priests, and kings."¹³ Its geographic and literary settings echo a lovely hymn in the Acts of Thomas, in which the imprisoned apostle sings of going down into Egypt to recover a lost pearl and of reunion with his heavenly parents.¹⁴ It conspicuously uses the Hebrew word *gnolaum*,¹⁵ which is an exact translation of the Greek word *aeon*. But ironically, the Gnostics disliked Abraham and Moses for serving the hated Creator.

rites and ordinances

Let us now examine the antecedents of the temple ordinances that Joseph Smith restored on a Platonist model. Although the core of Mormon doctrine is solidly opposed to the negative outlook of Gnosticism, Joseph knowingly or unknowingly made increasing use of Gnostic symbolism over the course of his prophetic career. Just as he had warmed to Masonry, his unfolding ideas of eternal progression led him to weave the central Gnostic image of "passing the angels" into Doctrine and Covenants 132:19 and the temple endowment rite. All serious scholarship points to the roots of Mormon ritual in Masonry,¹⁶ but Masonry purports to draw on more ancient traditions. Whatever its provenance, the modern LDS temple rite follows the pattern of ancient mystery rites with remarkable fidelity, although its moral message is radically different.

12. Tertullian of Carthage, "Against Hermogenes; Against Marcion; Against the Valentinians." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). Circa 208.

13. Irenaeus of Lyons, "Against Heresies." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.7.3. Circa 180.

14. Edgar Hennecke, "The Acts of Thomas," *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963); Willis Barnstone, *The Other Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

15. Pop etymologists have noted that this idiosyncratic transliteration bears a suspicious resemblance to a combination of *gnosis* + 'olam.

16. David John Buerger, "The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Winter 1987): 33-76; Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Mission, 1987).

A full Valentinian initiation comprised five rites: baptism in water, anointing with oil, a eucharist of bread with wine and water, redemption from the archons, and the mystery of the bridal chamber.¹⁷ The first three were common to all Christian sects, but they acquired presumptuous twists in Gnostic usage.¹⁸

Anointing (chrismation) made the initiate a literal christ. Baptism washed off the material world, not sin, and multiple rebaptism was common. And among the Marcionites, the eucharist was celebrated with the water of life alone, omitting the wine that represents the Savior's blood, shed for the remission of sins.¹⁹

Such twists can be traced doctrinally to Gnostic nihilism and docetism (denials of moral law, sin, and the Savior's passion), but they also indicate arrogance. The problem of striking a balance between self-esteem and humility is always delicate, but it is doubly so for self-proclaimed spiritual elites. Despite superficial parallels in Mormon Pelagianism and oenostaurophobia (denial of original sin and distaste for sacramental wine and crosses), Mormons cannot fairly be accused of arrogance on these grounds. Mormons seem to maintain a healthy degree of humility by reminding themselves of the lifelong need for repentance. The Gnostics saw no need for it.

The rites of redemption and the bridal chamber were distinctively Gnostic. Initiates were sworn to secrecy, but general features that are sure to bring shivers of recognition to temple-going Mormons can be reconstructed.

The rite of redemption was an allegorical passage through the lower realms into the presence of God. One sect ascended seven stairs separated by gates, and other sects may have used chambers separated by veils. To thwart the archontic gatekeepers, who represented obstacles rather than benign sentinels, the initiate was obliged to recite a series of formulae with the force of passwords, numerous examples of which have been exposed by the church fathers:

To thee, Yaldabaoth, first and seventh, [who wast] born to have power and boldness, I, [who am] a word of pure intelligence, a perfect work for Son and Father, bear this [amulet] carved with a picture of [the tree of] life, and open the world-gate that thou hadst locked with thine aeon, to pass by

17. Wesley Isenberg, "The Gospel of Philip," *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

18. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987).

19. Philip Amidon, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, Selected Passages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 42.3. Circa 375.

thy power free again. May grace be with me, Father, may grace be with me.²⁰

I am a son from the Father, the Father who is preexistent, and a son who is preexistent in him. I have come to behold all things, both those which belong to myself and others, although they do not belong to others, but to Achamoth [Wisdom], who made these things for herself. For I derive from him who is preexistent, and I come again to my own place from which I went forth.²¹

I have recognized myself and gathered myself together from all sides and have not sown children to the archon but have uprooted his roots and have gathered the scattered members, and I know who thou art, for I belong to those from above.²²

Zozeze! Fall back . . . you archons of the first aeon, because I challenge you: Eaza zeozaz zozeoz!²³

The Gnostic attitude toward the gatekeepers was anything but respectful, and the formulae were totally unlike the Mormon self-blessing of body, spirit, and posterity. Gnostics cared little for the holiness of their bodies, and less for their posterity.

Gnostics were also among the first to use handshakes as sacred symbols. Although the "right hand of fellowship" is mentioned by Paul (Gal. 2:9), it only became widespread through Manichaean usage.²⁴ To the Manicheans, handshakes commemorated the tokens of greeting given to Primal Man by his heavenly parents as he departed for and returned from the war with Darkness. In the ancient world, handshakes were not customarily used for greeting but for sealing legal or religious covenants. It is hard to imagine what sort of covenants the disorderly Gnostics might have wished to make, and it seems more likely that their handshakes symbolized the helping hand of the Savior pulling man out of darkness.

The themes of the Gnostic rite were liberation from fate and recovery of lost free agency, without the accompanying responsibilities. By contrast, Mormonism proclaims that men and women are already free. Instead of needing liberation from oppressive law, they need a period of probation and repentance to learn moral discipline. Endowed Mormons earn their

20. Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 6.31. Circa 248. Ophite formula.

21. Irenaeus, 1.21. Valentinian formula.

22. Amidon, 26.13. Barbeloite formula.

23. Rudolph, 173. Unknown sect.

24. Jonas, 223.

passage through the kingdoms by making covenants to live the principles of the gospel, obedience, sacrifice, chastity, and consecration.

In accordance with their opposing themes, the modern and ancient rites used clothing in contrasting ways. Gnostics doffed the impure garments of the world to be reborn naked as they overcame the archons. They often described their bodies as the ultimate rags, and might gladly have doffed them too.²⁵ Mormons don the pure garments of the priesthood as they make their covenants, and shift their robes to mark their spiritual progress, using an ancient symbolism, also of Gnostic origin, in which left connoted carnal, and right natural or spiritual.

The mystery of the bridal chamber may have been a narcissistic travesty of temple marriage as Mormons know it. It remains unclear whether the rite demanded a vow of sexual abstinence to avoid sowing children to the archon, whether it granted a license for sexual excesses by immunizing the initiate against spiritual defilement, or whether it permitted conjugal relations in emulation of male and female aeons above. Irenaeus says that the Valentinians considered sexual relations a virtual duty.²⁶ Read in this light, the Gospel of Philip suggests they performed actual marriages for eternity in a mirrored holy-of-holies, while deprecating earthly marriage as a defilement:

Great is the mystery of marriage, for without it the world would not exist. . . . [But] its image is a defilement of the form. . . . No man shall be able to escape [defilement by unclean spirits] since they detain him if he does not receive a female power in the mirrored bridal chamber. . . . If the image and angel are united, none can venture to [defile] the man or the woman.²⁷

The bridal chamber is called the holy-of-holies because before the veil was rent, we had none other than the image of the bridal chamber above. . . . For this the veil was rent, because it is fitting for some below to go upward.

The separation [of man and woman] was the beginning of death. . . . Eve separated from Adam because she had not united with him in the bridal chamber. . . . Christ came to repair the separation and to give life to those who had died as a result. . . . Those who are united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated.²⁸

25. Jonas, 166.

26. Irenaeus, 1.6.4.

27. Isenberg, 139.

28. Ibid, 142.

[Secret begetting is superior to open creation.] If there is a hidden quality to the [earthly] marriage of defilement, how much more is the undefiled [heavenly] marriage a true mystery.²⁹

However, the rite is a mystery to scholars because other Gnostic scriptures have an unambiguously anti-sexual message. According to the Acts of Thomas, the apostle was executed for persuading a nobleman's wife to take a vow of lifelong sexual abstinence. Read in this context, his hymn hints that the initiate donned a royal robe fit for a god and wed his own reflection in a mirror, to symbolize reunion with a divine self from whom the material world had separated him: "As I now beheld the robe, it seemed suddenly to become a mirror-image of myself. I saw myself entire in it, and I saw it entire in myself. We were two in separateness and yet again one in sameness."³⁰ Tertullian says that the rite prepared the initiate, of either sex, to become the bride of a male angel.³¹ The Gnostics apparently aspired to literal androgyny in the hereafter.

However, there were some who preferred bisexuality in this life. By the fourth century, the degenerate Barbeloites were reported to engage in obscene rites meant to prevent reproduction, to spite the creator Yaldabaoth, and to draw upon the power of his mother Barbelo.³² Even the usually ascetic Marichaeans devised a rite to desecrate sexuality.

The pagan writer Celsus sneered that Gnostic initiates ("who have wretchedly learned the names of the doorkeepers by heart") memorized the passwords of redemption with numbing literalism. Similarly, Brigham Young's literalistic instruction (that "the Endowment . . . is to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, signs, and tokens pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell") tends to perpetuate a mechanical understanding of the sacred words and gestures. More than a few Mormons, undoubtedly

29. Ibid, 148.

30. Hennecke, *loc. cit.*

31. Tertullian, "Against the Valentines," chap. 32.

32. St. Epiphanius says that Barbeloites greeted one another with a lewd parody of the sacred handshake, engaged in assorted unnatural sex acts, aborted accidental conceptions, cannibalized the fetuses (nicely prepared with pepper and honey), and performed an even viler parody of the eucharist. His accusations sound as sensational as those by certain ex-saints in these latter days, but he did have first-hand information. A brazen woman, wife of the sect's chief cook, had once tried to seduce him. Many of these degenerates were masquerading as members of the mainstream church, but Epiphanius had them run out of town (Amidon, 26.1-17). St. Augustine, the reformed libertine, described a similar *excrement* among the Marichaeans, to whom he had once belonged (Barnstone, 675).

hard-boiled modernists impatient with unexplained symbolism, have complained that they were ill-prepared for their endowments and felt more baffled than inspired. There is much that they could learn by studying Gnostic symbolism with duly critical eyes.

The Platonists' dream was to get in touch with the universal realities: to enter the eternal world of ideal forms. They would have understood the Mormon dreams of circumscribing universal Truth and of rejoining the ideal Father on high.

Modern Mormons, unattuned to the Platonist viewpoint, may find it difficult to appreciate the metaphysical realities behind the symbols. They never forget that the Savior's life and death were real events, through which mortality met immortality at the center of history. The first lesson of the mysteries is that the temple is a place where the heavens meet earth and time intersects eternity.

A DIFFERENT WORLD VIEW

What else could modern Mormons learn from these ancient sectarians who made an utter hash of the gospel? A clearer understanding of their own roots, their own heterodoxy, and perhaps their own destiny. As adherents of a young but successful religion, Mormons might well ask themselves whether they are avoiding the fatal errors of the Gnostics.

Although obsessed with numerology, the Gnostics did not attempt to replicate their cosmologies in church organization, which instead resembled the primal chaos. The roles of men and women, deacons, priests, and bishops were interchangeable; and authority counted for nothing. The moral and ecclesiastical anarchy of Gnostics undoubtedly contributed to their eclipse by orthodox Christianity.³³ The elaborately organized Mormon church is in no comparable danger of decorrelation, although it may err on the side of rigidity in matters of patriarchy and authority.

The missionary urges of the Gnostics were hardly sufficient to compensate for their other vices. The snobbish Valentinians admitted only free men and virgins to their mysteries, the lascivious Barbeloites were always happy to seduce a comely new member, and the ascetic Marcionites needed converts because they did not reproduce. Most major Gnostic sects collapsed in the late fourth century under pressure from the mainstream church, by then legally established. Only a few far-flung pockets of Manichaeans, who had a well-organized missionary program and had moderated their asceticism by permitting marriage to an outer circle of believers, lingered into the middle ages.

33. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

Doctrinal and ritual similarities notwithstanding, the ancient and modern world views are antithetical. To the Gnostic, the material world separated humanity from God, creation was an unfortunate accident, earthly marriage a defilement, and life a misery. To the Mormon, matter and spirit are one, creation was a purposeful and beneficent part of a plan of salvation, the body is a temple, and life offers a fullness of joy. By strictly pragmatic standards, Mormonism has the more constructive outlook.

Are Mormons actually happier? I have never met an ancient Gnostic, but I have met a number of Mormons who seem to stagger under the burden of perfection imposed by their church, and for whom Mormonism is not the religion of joy that Joseph Smith intended. The less-than-fully-perfect can be as guilt-ridden as Catholics oppressed by original sin. The Gnostics, on the other hand, may have enjoyed pessimist chic.

If the Gnostics had an opportunity to express an opinion of Mormonism, one can well imagine that they would laugh loudly and scornfully at Mormons' legalistic obsession with keeping commandments in emulation of Jewish Halakhah. But their laughter would ring hollow, because the Gnostics, like the mocking occupants of the floating building in Lehi's dream, lacked a moral foundation.

Other Christians might fault both Gnostics and Mormons for opposing God's justice to his mercy, although in different ways. Whereas Marcion revered the good Father while reviling the strict Creator, early Mormon thought (Mosiah 2:39; Alma 42:25) places justice above mercy. Christians view them as inseparable. Whatever the theoretical merits of these positions, the practical results of emulating different divine models are that the Gnostics were mostly loose, while Mormons are often disciplinarian, and mainstream Christians ideally (but all too seldom) forgiving.

Later Mormon thought reconciles mercy with justice by promising a telestial salvation to all but total reprobates, but some prospective gods seem inclined to take a harder line with their own spirit children. The more-than-fully-perfect can be hell on the rest in any religion.

Gnostics and Mormons have also taken polar positions on justification by faith or works. In my own gentile view, the convergence of sectarian positions toward consensus on the central and indispensable role of universal grace as a guiding principle is one of the great events of the Millennium. Protestants now agree with James that faith needs to be vivified by works. Catholics now agree with Paul that human works in-and-of-themselves are petty things and have deemphasized ritual requirements. Even Mormons have stopped pummeling the defunct Calvinist strawmen of selective grace and predestination, and they have begun to admit that the reason humankind needs a savior is that human beings, even Mormons, are not perfect, at least not yet. Only the Gnostics stuck with their theory of salvation by secret knowledge to the end.

Their pride proved fatal. Gnostic initiates fancied themselves a perfect elect by virtue of their esoteric knowledge. But elitism, whether moral or esoteric, is not the stuff of which enduring universal religions are made.

I do not think that Mormon missionaries will get far in this world by emphasizing a materialist vision of a tangible heaven or by self-congratulation. The strengths of Mormonism that set it apart from Gnosticism are its optimistic views of life and human potential and its sound values to guide men and women through a disorderly world. The missionaries will have much to teach the Gnostics in the next.

HOMEWORK FOR HISTORIANS

No matter how intriguing, the details of similarities between isms many centuries apart are less significant than the reasons for their existence. We may never know with certainty whether they are due to a common source in revelation, a shared philosophical tendency, coincidence, or borrowing.

The hypothesis that the prophet Joseph Smith was aware of and reacted to Gnostic teaching presents a number of difficult questions, best left to historians: Could Joseph have been introduced to Gnostic ideas through Masonic channels³⁴ or by the learned Sidney Rigdon? Did he have Sidney comb the writings of the church fathers³⁵ for traces of the plain and precious things lost? And if so, was their joint vision of the three kingdoms or were Joseph's later teachings colored by what they learned?

His followers like to believe that Joseph arrived at his teachings independently, by revelation. His detractors prefer to believe that he arrived at them by speculation *ex nihilo*, and that he was too unlettered to do otherwise. However, it is possible that he sought his learning by study as well as by faith. While this would make him more seeker than seer, his reform and reorganization of preexistent ideas would be no less of a wonder.

If the similarities are attributed entirely to shared tendencies, they might be explained by McMurrin's typology, which classifies Gnosticism

34. Speculative doctrines formerly taught to Masons of the higher degrees were frankly Gnostic, placing Lucifer (who is not Satan) above Adonai (who is not the Father). Various legends link masons to the Templars, who were accused of propagating the neo-Manichaean Catharist heresy.

35. Although the Nag Hammadi trove came forth in this century, the classic heresiologies by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Epiphanius, and others were available to scholars in the nineteenth. Joseph Smith's explorations in patristics left a telling trace in his remark that "Chrysostom says that the Marchionites practiced baptism for their dead" (Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1972], 222).

and Mormonism as hopeful religions with liberal views of humanity but critical views of the world. However, this scheme fails to explain the very different achievements of their radical theologies. Gnosticism broke free of the grim Judeo-Christian calculus of guilt and expiation but replaced it with amoral selfishness. Mormons have done the former without losing their moral bearings, by reinterpreting the Fall, demoting hell to a simile, and replacing expiation through suffering with a constructive, forward-looking doctrine of repentance and self-improvement. They have also eradicated dualism's most baleful legacies to later Christian thought: the hard dichotomies between matter and spirit, human and divine, which devalue human physical existence. Their greatest teachers (from Alma to Talmage) have ironically found it difficult to explain atonement without reference to original sin, but they have been singularly clear in proclaiming the purpose of life.

Historians ask about the origin and evolution of religion, while would-be prophets ask about the origin and destiny of man. Only those who bear a three-fold message of integrity, charity, and hope give satisfying answers. The original Gnostics, sadly, did not.

