

Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times

Edited By Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff

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Reviewed by Geoff Gilpin

Henry Adams noted that the Western psyche has two spheres: one Greek, one Hebrew. From the Hebrews we get our religious faith and its scripture. From the Greeks we get reason and science. For most Westerners, that's enough. Faith or reason or some combination thereof are sufficient.

Not everybody, though. For some, it's not enough to understand nature and believe in nature's God. A few people insist on going beyond the appearances and the rituals to discover the highest truth they can through direct experience. There are a lot of terms for these people ("heretic" is popular), but for convenience we can call them "mystics."

There's some room for mysticism within the Church, but many mystics are free spirits who are uncomfortable with the restrictions of organized religion. Since the 1960s, people with mystical tendencies have gravitated toward Eastern spiritual techniques such as Zen. It's not necessary to go East, however. The West has a long mystical tradition that has largely remained underground to avoid the watchful eye of Church and State. The two main pillars of this tradition are Gnosticism and Hermeticism.

"Gnosticism," appropriately enough, is a slippery term that gets used in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most common meaning is a form of heretical Christianity that flourished in the second and third centuries CE. The roots of organized Gnosticism are hazy, although it's likely that the movement had non-Christian origins, perhaps as an offshoot of Iranian Zoroastrianism.

Gnosticism has two central themes. The first is an extreme dualism that divides the universe into irreconcilable spheres of good and evil. In the first essay in the current volume, "Gnosticism and Hermeticism in Antiquity," Professor Van Den Broek states that Gnosticism has "an absolutely negative view of the world and its creator." Our world and the god that created it are irremediably evil. Strong stuff; but perhaps understandable given the state of the world back then.

Fortunately, there's hope. There's another god, the True God beyond and above the evil creator. According to Van Den Broek, this God planted "a divine spark in man, his inner self, which had become enclosed within the material body as the result of a tragic event in the precosmic world, from which it can only escape to its divine origin by means of the saving Gnosis."

This Gnosis (Greek for "knowledge") is the second pillar of Gnosticism. Gnosis is direct, mystical knowledge of the divinity within. The individual seeker attains Gnosis through personal effort, not through the intermediaries of priestcraft, scripture, or sacrament.

One difficulty with discussing Gnosticism is that its two main themes appear frequently in many contexts. This universality can be a stumbling block. It's too easy to form conspiracy theories by linking up unrelated groups that have Gnostic tendencies in common. For example, a conspiracy theorist would argue that, since the Freemasons have Gnostic teachings, they're descendents of the Gnostic churches in the second century. This kind of thinking is common among pro-Gnostic occultists and anti-Gnostic conservatives.

By contrast, Hermeticism is a fairly concrete subject. In Professor Van Den Broek's words, "What do we exactly mean when we speak of Hermeticism? Formally speaking, it is easy enough, for everything ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, the ancient Egyptian sage, or to his first pupils (his son Tat or his

associate Ammon in particular) can be said to be Hermetic." The Hermetic literature is vast. It encompasses theology, mysticism, cosmology, and magic.

The Renaissance scholars who embraced Hermeticism were impressed by its antiquity. They revered Hermes Trismegistus – the “thrice-great” Hermes – as one of the holiest and wisest men of the ancient world, the equal of Moses and Plato, if not their superior.

Unfortunately, it was all a sham. In the words of the great Hermetic scholar Frances Yates, “... the return to a pure golden age of magic was based on a radical error in dating. The works which inspired the Renaissance magus, and which he believed to be of great antiquity, were really written in the second to the third centuries A.D.”

The first person to question the antiquity of the Hermetic literature was the Spanish scholar Isaac Causabon. In 1610, he proved that the Hermetic books were Greek rather than Egyptian and late rather than ancient. The specific sources remain obscure, but Professor Van Den Broek thinks that there was a “Hermetic lodge” active in Alexandria at the time. In his view, Hermeticism came out of the same spiritual and intellectual cauldron that produced Gnosticism.

After Causabon’s discovery, the Hermetic books lost their exalted status in Renaissance scholarship and faded out of the mainstream. Over the years, however, Hermes Trismegistus remained popular among spiritual seekers who valued his wisdom more than an ancient Egyptian pedigree.

The eighteen essays in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* are arranged in chronological order. They trace the two great esoteric schools from their beginnings in the Alexandria of the late Classical period to the New Age movement of our own day.

Some of the essays cover broad trends in a particular historical period. For example, Wouter J. Hanegraaff covers “Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection” and Daniel van Egmond writes about “Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” Other writers uncover the Gnostic and Hermetic influences in esoteric groups like the Cathars and the Rosicrucians. Another category of essays focuses on the esoteric interests of individuals such as William Blake and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Professor Van Den Broek’s second essay in the collection – “The Cathars: Medieval Gnostics?” – may provoke a few heated discussions in university departments of Religious and Medieval Studies. The Cathars (from Greek, “the pure ones”) were a group of religious sects that were popular in Europe in the middle ages, especially in southern France in the 12th and 13th centuries. At their peak, the Cathars were large enough to challenge Catholic hegemony in France. Pope Gregory IX created the Inquisition to suppress the Cathars. The persecution ended with a crusade that sent masses of Cathars to their graves and devastated southern France. The movement all but vanished.

As a result of Gregory’s success, there’s little historical data about the Cathars. This vacuum has produced a lot of speculation about the nature of Cathar beliefs and their relations with other heretical groups. For many scholars, the Cathars were a unique phenomenon. In Van Den Broek’s words,

“They refuse to label the Cathars as Gnostics and are eager to point out that there are no demonstrable links between Catharism and the various kinds of Gnosticism we know from the antique world.”

Professor Van Den Broek provides such a link. He examines one of the surviving Cathar scriptures, the *Interrogatio Johannis*. One unique feature of this text is that it takes speeches attributed to God in the Old Testament and places

them in the mouth of the Devil. Van Den Brook finds the Devil mouthing the same dialog in a Gnostic text from the classical period, the *Apocryphon of John*.

“... the *Interrogatio* transmits a genuine Gnostic tradition that was already in circulation in the second century. ... the Cathars... recognized in this early Gnostic tradition an excellent expression of their own ideas, and therefore, as far as their dualism is concerned, we are entitled to call the Cathars Gnostics and their religion a medieval form of Gnosticism.”

There are plenty of additional revelations sprinkled throughout *Gnosis and Hermeticism*. Uncovering them repays the effort of plodding through the dense academic writing. Although there's some introductory material, many of the essays are for an intermediate to advanced audience. Newcomers to the field might want to spend some time getting up to speed before tackling this volume. Elaine Pagels provides an excellent introduction to Gnosticism in *The Gnostic Gospels*. For an introduction to the other main current of Western esotericism, see Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.