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Gnosticism and Modernism

By Gordon H. Clark

‘There is nothing new under the sun.’ Some scientist, laboriously investigating to keep abreast if not ahead of the times, engrossed in his experiments and living entirely in the present, might be tempted to deny the truth of the statement. But one who enjoys delving into the forgotten eras of the past, one who studies men as they were, looks contemptuously on the present and asks, “Is there anything whereof it may be said, see, this is new?” The man of the day glorifies in it. The man of books and manuscripts sighs, “the ancients have stolen all our best ideas.”

When the writer first met gnosticism and saw how it was similar to modernism, he thought he had a new idea. But further acquaintance with contemporary literature shows that not even this is new. So, following a trend of recent thought, but trying to be independent of it, this paper aims to point out, first, certain similarities between gnosticism and modernism; and, second, to show the difference between them.

The first similarity is that the varieties of each tendency (for neither term designates a definite system) agree among themselves in what they deny, and face endless division on what they affirm. It is what they oppose, rather than what they promulgate, that gives them a certain unity. Among the gnostic practically all sects agree in rejecting the Old Testament and the God of the Old Testament. But an agreement on a positive doctrine as to who this God was, they lacked. Some said he was a devil who crucified Christ; others, a well-meaning being, though very limited in both morals and intelligence. And, like the gnostics of old, the modernists unite in denial rather than affirmation. It is easy to find among their writings denials of the New Testament plan of salvation through the blood of Christ’s sacrifice. It is not so easy to find an agreement on a substitute plan. In fact, it seems to one who views modernism from without that they are so busy denying, they have no time left to affirm.

It is not the purpose of this paper to show that definite doctrines or ideas are common to both Gnosticism and modernism. It is more to show that the tendency, cause and method are the same. But there is one individual point which is so exactly copied by modernism from gnosticism that it cannot be easily passed over. Both agree that the virgin birth is impossible. Irenaeus explains Cerinthus's position, saying: "Jesus was not born of a virgin, for this seemed to him (Cerinthus) to be impossible, but was the son of Joseph and Mary, born after the manner of other men." However, this much may be said in favor of Cerinthus: he plainly taught his initiates that Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary whereas a certain young man ordained by the New York Presbytery on November 10, 1924, after affirming that Christ had a physical father, refused when asked to state who he thought that father was.

But let us not imagine that the gnostics went straight to Irenaeus and told him all their doctrines. On the contrary, they spoke freely among themselves only, and it was with great trouble that Irenaeus found out their secrets. The old method of secrecy has changed some since then. But the secrecy of the gnostics will at least suggest the ambiguities which our contemporaries use to conceal their thought. Anyone who has tried knows it is hard to get an unequivocal statement of a modernist's position. It is equally obvious that it is the easiest thing in the world to find out what a fundamentalist believes. One says, I believe in the virgin birth, and the resurrection of Christ's body. The other says, I was not there, so I will not deny it.

The second similarity between gnosticism and modernism is that both claim to represent original and true Christianity, the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus as it is put today. Paul, say the gnostics, in addition to his written works, left oral teachings, and this is gnosticism. Valentinus claimed he got his gnosis from Theudas, who received it from Paul himself. Similarly Basilides refers directly to Peter. Who, reading the claims of these men, could help thinking of recent labored attempts to show that Paul was the first modernist, and even that Jesus was, which goes gnosticism one better.

Because then "Paul is the first gnostic" and Valentinus represents true Christianity, the gnostics prefer to remain with the church and bore from within. Valentinus was so convinced that the church was the place for him that he came to Rome and tried to be made pope. The similarity, even among Protestants, is obvious. We therefore sincerely desire that all modernistic attempts to capture positions of importance to gain control of the Boards and Agencies of the church will

succeed no more than Valentinus. It is right that the General Assembly and the governing bodies of all churches should take stringent legislative and judicial measures to rebuke modernism. But a determined refusal to elect vacillating men with ambiguous creeds to any position at all may induce the modernist to seek of his own accord a more congenial field of operation.

The third similarity is that of source. Both religions arise from the same tendency. Nineteen centuries ago and today those who deny the historical facts of Christianity take their positions because their standard is one or another substitute for Biblical revelation. The gnostics reasoned out their dogmas from a special revelation of their own, or from the oral teachings of Peter and Paul. This procedure is similar to that of modernism, which reasons from a basis of "experience." Well, if the modernists' experience and feelings are anything like those of the rest of us, they must change their theology daily. It is fine to have experience. It is good to know you are saved. But if we depend on our feelings for this knowledge, our assurance cannot be very constant. On the other hand, it will be both constant and unshakable if we obtain that knowledge through some such syllogism as this: The infallible Word says that if I confess the Lord Jesus and believe God raised him from the dead, I shall be saved; I believe and have confessed; Ergo, I am saved. And even if experience does testify to salvation, how it can formulate a complete system of theology is not so evident.

But far be it from the purpose of this paper to point out all the similarities between the two religions and not notice their differences. For Gnosticism contains some truth.

We may smile contemptuously at the claims of Simon Magus. He considered himself to be the reincarnation of Christ's Holy Spirit, which escaped from Jesus when he was crucified. He claimed to be worshipped as a god, and said it was he who had spoken to Moses at the burning bush. We may regard as unworthy of consideration these long and complex genealogies of eons and the divisions of nature into the hebdomad, ogdoad, and pleroma. The average educated man, infected with the spirit of the age, may sneer at Gnosticism's angels and demons, as did one writing the life of Luther said he shared the "common superstition of his time" in believing in a personal devil. But all these are the more or less unnecessary frills that develop from a truth – a truth which Gnosticism had and which modernism has not. That gnosticism was spiritualistic and supernaturalistic, there can be no doubt. Modernism is essentially not. Both religions do away with faith, it is true. And it makes little difference whether one substitutes gnosis or the other a

vague indeterminate called “love,” faith is gone. But, on the other hand, one recognizes that this is a spiritual universe, the other is suffering from the stupor of mechanism. One says that while the material is real and does exist, it is but the shadow or reflection of the moral real spiritual. The other is on the verge of materialism, or something indistinguishably like it. And if the writer had to cease being a Christian, he would certainly choose gnosticism long before modernism, for it is the best pagan philosophy yet thought out.