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The great Roman philosopher Cicero said, "To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain always a child." We hear a lot today about the New Age Movement; it sometimes seems that you can hardly pick up a magazine without seeing an article on some New Age belief or practice, or go into any bookshop without being confronted by shelf upon shelf of New Age books. Certainly the promoters of the New Age Movement advertise their philosophy as literally the dawning of a new age, taking their cue from astrology, they have pointed out that the world is moving out of the age of Pisces, the age of the fish, the fish symbolizing Christianity, into the age of Aquarius, the new age when humanity will emerge from the dark shadows of Christianity into an era of enlightenment, peace and global brotherhood and sisterhood. You may remember the pop song of a few decades ago, "This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius." However, a little knowledge of history, especially church history, will prompt the Christian to rub his eyes and say, "Wait a minute, I have a strange feeling of *deja vu*. Haven't we been here before?" And the answer is, yes. Today's New Age Movement in both its pagan and Christian forms has an uncanny resemblance to the first great manifestation of counterfeit Christianity which the early church had to fight back in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, Gnosticism, and our purpose this afternoon is to look at Gnosticism and to see how it's being systematically reproduced in the so-called New Age Movement both outside and, indeed, inside the church.

So then, what was Gnosticism and who were the Gnostics? Basically, they were the grand alternative to orthodox Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Indeed, the most crucial task that faced the early church fathers was simply to distinguish between Christianity and Gnosticism for the benefit both of Christians and of pagans, the problem was that Gnostics claimed that they, not the church, were the true Christians. They enjoyed remarkable success in convincing thousands and tens of thousands of this fraudulent claim. Gnostic sects multiplied astronomically across the face of the Roman Empire with an astonishing variety of names: Barbelonites, Cainites, Cerinthians, Encratites, Justinians, Marcionites, Marcosians, Nicolaitanes, Ophites, Sethians, Severians, and Valentinians, to name a few.

In a moment, we'll consider some of the fundamental beliefs of the Gnostics, their core beliefs, and see how these are undergoing a remarkable modern renaissance in the New Age Movement. Before we do that, however, let's ask ourselves how we know what the

Gnostics of the early Christian era taught. We have two chief sources for that. First, we have the writings of the early church fathers, especially Irenaeus of Lyon. He was active roughly 175-95. Irenaeus' masterpiece was his "Against Heresies," a five volume work in which Irenaeus sets out to refute the Gnostic claim that Gnosticism is true Christianity. Because Irenaeus describes in some detail the Gnostic systems he's refuting, his work is a goldmine of information about Gnostic beliefs. Another important source, similar, is "The Refutation of All Heresies," by the earthly church father Hippolytus who died in 236.

Now until recently, we were totally dependent on what the early church fathers said for our knowledge of Gnosticism, however, in 1945 an Arab peasant of Nag Hammadi in Egypt discovered a large earthenware jar buried on a mountain containing an important collection of ancient Gnostic documents. These have now been translated into English and they enable us to see from the Gnostics own writings what they believed. The two modern scholars who have done most probably to popularize Gnosticism from the Nag Hammadi documents are Elaine Pagels and James Robinson. Elaine Pagels has a PhD from Harvard University and is a respected and award winning academic professor of religion at Princeton. She introduced the Gnostics to a new audience in 1979 in her highly influential book, "The Gnostic Gospels." In this book, she presents the Gnostics as the heroes, the purveyors of true enlightened Christianity and the early church fathers as the villains, narrow-minded, heresy-hunting persecutors who invented the myth of Satan to demonize their opponents. She's elaborated on this in other books such as "The Gnostic Paul" and "Adam, Eve and the Serpent." James Robinson, Director of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, is the scholar who headed up the translation of the Nag Hammadi documents into English. In his introduction to the English version of the Nag Hammadi documents, Robinson shows himself sympathetic to the Gnostics and joins with Elaine Pagels in condemning the early church fathers as narrow-minded heresy-hunters. The foremost scholarly figure who promotes this view today is Bart Ehrman, professor of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina in such books as "Lost Christianities."

Well now, let's look at the Gnostic system of belief. We'll do this under six main headings, core convictions which almost all Gnostics would have shared, and so we'll see what the Gnostics themselves taught' and then we'll go on to see how this has been reproduced in the New Age Movement; and then, thirdly, we'll see how it has filtered into the Christian church, sometimes even under the banner of Evangelicalism. So then, core convictions shared by most, if not all, Gnostics.

First of all, the divine nature of the human soul. The word "Gnostic" comes from the Greek "gnosis" which means "knowledge." At the heart of Gnosticism lay the quest for knowledge. Knowledge of what? The knowledge of God, but for the Gnostics that was really the same as the knowledge of self. Gnostics held that the human spirit is a spark of divinity encased in a body of flesh. To know God is, therefore, ultimately identical with knowing yourself as divine. For the Gnostics, our problem is that we have lost this knowledge. We're suffering from a kind of amnesia. We have forgotten our own divine nature.

The function of Jesus in the various Gnostic systems is that he restores to us the true knowledge of our divine selves, awakens us to a sense of our own divinity. Jesus is often portrayed in Gnosticism as a man upon whom a superior spiritual power called "the Christ" descended and through whom "the Christ" spoke and worked. We, ourselves, become Christs through the process of spiritual enlightenment.

In the New Age Movement, this Gnostic view of the divinity of the human self has returned in technicolor. One influential New Ager, Jeremy Tarcher, sums it up like this, "1. The world, including the human race, constitutes an expression of a higher, more comprehensive divine nature. 2. Hidden within each human being is a higher divine self which is a manifestation of the higher, more comprehensive nature. 3. His higher nature can be awakened and can become the center of the individual's everyday life. 4. This awakening is the reason for the existence of each individual life."

Now this is the commonplace of New Age thinking: we are divine, we are God, and our problem is not realizing it. New Age techniques are designed to awaken us into God-consciousness, that is to say, the consciousness of ourselves as divine. One of the leading spokeswomen of New Age spirituality, the actress Shirley MacLaine, expresses it as follows in her book, "Going Within: A Guide for Inner Transformation," "God lies within us and, therefore, we are each part of God. Since there is no separateness, we are each God-like and God is in each of us. We are literally made up of God-energy, therefore, we can create whatever we want in life because we are each co-creating with the energy of God." In her television miniseries, "Out on a Limb," MacLaine put it more bluntly standing on a seashore crying out repeatedly, "I am God! I am God!"

What about the Gnostic view of Jesus as someone who was elevated to Christ-hood by the cosmic Christ-principle dwelling within him? Well, this too has been widely reproduced in the New Age. For example, the so-called "Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ," a New Age publication says this, "Jesus was not always Christ. Jesus won his Christ-ship by a strenuous life, and in chapter 55, we have a record of the events of his Christing or receiving the degree, Christ, but in the ages yet to come, man will attain to greater heights and light still more intense will come. Anyone can become a Christ by following the same path." As New Age guru, Joseph Campbell said, "We are all manifestations of Christ-consciousness only we do not know it."

The connection with ancient Gnosticism here is sometimes made explicit. Shirley MacLaine says, "Christian Gnostics operated with New Age knowledge." Another New Ager, Theodore Roszak, affirms that the New Age is "the reclamation and renewal of gnosis." More colorfully, John Lennon of the Beatles, a pioneer of the New Age, put it like this, "The only true Christians were the Gnostics who believe in self-knowledge, i.e. becoming Christ themselves, reaching the Christ within." The New Age consciously embraces the Gnostics as spiritual blood brothers and sisters.

Now, has this New Age Gnostic view of human divinity penetrated the church? Yes, increasingly so. Here are a few examples. Sister Elaine Prevallet, a Roman Catholic nun,

says, "We cannot seek God as an object separate from our world outside our lived experience. God is experienced not so much as a separate being but God is sensed as the deepest dimension of our own being. What we find is not God but ourselves." Scott Peck, a liberal Christian New Ager says this, "We may define the goal of spiritual growth to be the attainment of Godhood by the conscious self. It is for the individual to become totally wholly God." Elizabeth Clare Prophet, American Christian theologian, says, "The God of very Gods is within you. You can make contact if you will to do so. Jesus is the open door to the individual Christ-consciousness." Stephen Verney, one-time Anglican Bishop of Repton, reports with approval the sentiments of a New Ager who became conscious of her own divinity in an experience which revealed to her, "that the trees and the grass and the rain were in me and that nature and me and everyone, including God, were all one." Martin Israel, well-known Anglican writer, in his book, "Coming in Glory: Christ's Presence in the World Today," a book steeped in New Age Gnosticism, says that the purpose of human existence is to realize God in our being.

We find a similar Gnosticism in the radical wing of the Charismatic Movement, so-called Faith Movement, led by figures like Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Morris Cerullo. They teach that Adam was created equal with God, an exact duplicate of God. In Kenneth Hagin's words, "Adam was created on terms of equality with God and he could stand in God's presence without any consciousness of inferiority." And that the Christian, again in the words of Kenneth Hagin, "is as much an incarnation of God as was Jesus of Nazareth." This Gnostic theology enables Morris Cerullo to utter somewhat bizarre, Shirley MacLaine-like statements such as telling people that when they look at him, you're not looking at Morris Cerullo, you're looking at God. We should be in no doubt that the old Gnostic and New Age view of humanity as God is making massive inroads into the professing church today.

That brings us onto our second heading, the second core conviction of Gnosticism, experience as the gateway to truth. What did the Gnostic view of the soul's divine nature entail for Gnostic spirituality? Well, fundamentally it meant that gnosis, or knowledge, was for the Gnostics inward and experience-based. Their concept of spiritual knowledge made it something intuitive, personal, private and mystical. Gnostics rejected philosophy, logic, science and faith as authentic channels of knowledge. Inner personal experience is the only true knowledge. God is not in any sense accessible to reason or rational understanding, not doctrinal teaching but a flight from the mind into pure reason-free experience is the way to God.

Gnostics distinguished sharply between mind and spirit. We must escape from the prison-house of the rational mind and explore our non-rational spirits if we are to know God and ourselves. As the Gnostic "Apocryphon of James" puts it, "Be filled with the Spirit but lacking in reason." Very blunt. In order to attain to this non-rational state of consciousness, Gnostics use chanting often of nonsense words to disengage from rationality and induce raw spiritual ecstasy. The Gnostic's second "Book of Jehu" records one of these nonsense chants, "Azara kazar, amath kratitath, yo, yo, yo, amen, amen, yeoth, yeoth, yeoth, fayoth, fayoth, fayoth(ph)."

This reason-rejecting experience-centered view of knowledge lies at the heart of New Age spirituality. The Indian New Age guru, Deepak Chopra, who has taken off in a big way in America, teaches that through meditation techniques, the soul is, "in contact with the cosmos and pure being beyond the boundaries of rational thought." And he goes on to describe how this experience liberates the soul from the prison-house of space and time into the knowledge that "you are infinite and boundless." This flight from reason, as Francis Schaeffer called it, into a non-rational mysticism of experience has become one of the hallmarks of New Age spirituality or the Gnostic renaissance.

This escape from the prison of the rational mind into the liberating knowledge of pure experience is the goal of the various spiritual methods practiced in the New Age. For example, meditation techniques, psychic exploration, psychotherapy, trance induction, dream induction, and close encounters of the spiritual guru. For a New Age Gnostic, these channels open up a pathway beyond reason to the true knowledge of God, that is to say, of one's own divine self. Deepak Chopra again describes the experience, "I experience complete stillness where I am an unbounded, unconditioned, omnipresent field of awareness that transcends space and time." Meditation takes a person to the level of spirit beyond the mind. You actually have the direct knowledge that you are not in your body and you are not in your mind, you're beyond both. Well, there, we have Gnosticism in all its purity.

Again, this particular aspect of the Gnostic renaissance is widespread even in the Evangelical community today. We have a whole army of teachers who exhort us to let go of our rational minds and experience God directly in our spirits. The antithesis between mind, bad, and spirit, good, has become a commonplace of Charismatic spirituality. As a result, the Christ of experience replaces the Christ of Scripture as the center of much modern Evangelicalism. This is portrayed very forcefully in a prophecy given by various Charismatic leaders such as Bob Jones, Wes Campbell and Rick Joyner, who all predicted a civil war in the church between the grays and the blues. They were picking up there on the American Civil War in which the soldiers of the South wore gray, and those of the North wore blue. The grays in this new spiritual civil war, they prophesied, were those who relied on the gray matter of the brain, reason and doctrine, and these were the villains. The heroes were the blues, those open to direct mystical revelation from heaven which bypasses the rational mind and mere lifeless doctrine. Jones, Campbell and Joyner may have been correct in foreseeing this civil war within the church, but I think they were wrong to identify the grays as the villains. It is, in reality, a civil war between a healthy Christian rationality and theological awareness on the one hand, and Gnostic New Agers masquerading as Evangelical Christians on the other. If we are not to drift into Gnosticism, we do have to insist that God is not accessible to us through some mindless mystical experience that bypasses the truth of Scripture or annihilates the rational mind. God is accessible through scriptural truth as grasped by Spirit-enlightened minds. Anything less than that, any downplaying of Scripture, theological truth, and robust Christian rationality in favor of undisciplined subjective experience-centered spirituality is a transition into Gnosticism.

That brings us to heading number 3, the third core conviction shared by Gnostics, new revelations. As part and parcel of their experience-based spirituality, Gnostics claimed to receive guidance and inspiration from spirit guides, exalted beings from a higher spiritual realm who revealed mysteries to the spiritually receptive. Gnostics often appealed to private revelations, visions and so forth. Irenaeus, for example, describes the vision claimed by the Gnostic Marcus the Magician, who apparently saw "the supreme Tetrad descending from the invisible unnameable places in the pleroma," to reveal to him something never before revealed to God or man, who he really was and how he came into being. The Gnostic "Apocalypse of Paul" describes Paul's alleged ascent into the different heavens culminating in the 10th heaven, together with a record of the esoteric truths Paul learned there which are not to be found in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Gnostics sometimes claimed that they were more enlightened even than the apostles. The early church fathers accused the Gnostics of using the whole occult paraphernalia of pagan magic in the pursuit of esoteric knowledge: spirit-guides, incantations, dream induction, rituals involving images of pagan gods and goddesses and erotic magic. Indeed, the great non-Christian philosopher of the third century, Plotinus, accuses the Gnostics of doing this.

How do these Gnostic beliefs and practices reappear in the New Age Movement? Well, claims to direct guidance from exalted spirit-beings, channeling, is normal and taken for granted in New Age spirituality. It took off in the 1960s with Jane Roberts, who together with her husband, came in contact with a spirit entity calling itself Seth. Seth spoke through Jane Roberts in a trance condition which led to a series of bestselling books recording the revelations of Seth. Other well-known New Age channeling books are Virginia Essene's "New Teachings for an Awakening Humanity"; Amy Brown Loomis' "Messages," which were allegedly from Jesus and the apostles; and the ultra-popular "A Course in Miracles" channeled through Helen Schucman which also claims to be from Jesus. The Jesus, however, who speaks through New Age channels is like the Gnostic Jesus, simply a mouthpiece for Gnostic wisdom far removed from orthodox Christianity. The New Age positively encourages people to experiment with channeling. There is an official school of channeling. A popular New Age channeling center is Shambhala in Glastonbury which relatively recently offered 40 minute sessions at 25£ per time to put people in touch with a spirit-guide.

Has this aspect of the Gnostic renaissance entered the church? Well, consider the claims of Evangelical, self-described Evangelical theologian, Virginia Mollenkott. She read the New Age "Course in Miracles" channeled by a spirit-entity calling itself Jesus and was profoundly touched by it. She, then, claims to have received the following heavenly message, "It is essential for you to cooperate by being one of my activist channels into the world. It is a special blessing to play your position willingly because then your heart is able to feel the tenderness of my angels and spirit-guides." There we seem to meet the new Gnosticism baptized into Christianity.

The radical wing of the Charismatic Movement is also awash with this New Age channeling. Rick Joyner, a superstar on the scene of Charismatic prophecy, has claimed to be in receipt of direct guidance by angels, the departed spirits of prophets and apostles,

and of course, Jesus himself, through visions and dreams extending over a period of two or three decades. Joyner's book contain a record of the conversations he has had with the departed spirits of Lot, Jonah, Paul, Jesus and others. Joyner claims that his revelations are on a higher level than those of the apostles. The apostles operated only at the second level of prophecy, the level of conscious illumination, whereas Joyner operates at level IV, the level of trance. In short, Joyner is a Gnostic who seems to put more faith in his private revelations than in Scripture, and claims to be more enlightened than the apostles.

What about the ancient Gnostic use of pagan magic techniques to acquire spiritual knowledge? Well, this too seems to be infiltrating into the church, even where we might least expect it. In America according to Roman Catholic journalist, Donna Steichen, many Roman Catholic nuns are committed to crystal-gazing, dream induction, tarot cards, and other New Age techniques of enlightenment, in other words, pagan magic.

So to heading number 4, the fourth common conviction of different Gnostic groups, Scripture, their attitude to Scripture. What role did Scripture play in the Gnostic scheme? One of the most outstanding features of all Gnosticism was its hatred and rejection of the Old Testament. Gnostics have no interest in history. To them, history was quite irrelevant to spiritual knowledge and, of course, the Old Testament is historical to the core, it's the unfolding drama of creation, fall and redemption within history. The only portion of the Old Testament to which Gnostics paid any attention was the first three chapters of Genesis and the only reason they paid any attention to that was to distort it, as we shall see. For Gnosticism, the God of the Old Testament was not the true God at all. He was an impostor whom they called "the Demiurge," that's a Greek word meaning "architect." This foolish and wicked being had created the physical world of matter. He is the great tyrant from whom we must seek to escape.

What about the New Testament? Well, Gnostics did have a more positive attitude here. They frequently quoted an misquoted the New Testament, especially John's Gospel, but they don't seem to have circulated or stunted it in its own right. Fundamentally, rather than take Old or New Testaments as their authority, Gnostics were more interested in producing their own scriptures such as those found in the Nag Hammadi collection. The most important of these is probably "The Gospel of Thomas," which records over 100 alleged sayings of Jesus. In these Gnostics gospels, Jesus is simply made a mouthpiece for uttering gems of Gnostic wisdom.

The Gnostic hatred of the Old Testament has certainly reappeared in New Age spirituality both without and within the church. We'll see more of this when we look at the New Age's commitment to feminism. For now, however, let's just take note of the vilification of the Old Testament that is widespread in modern Gnosticism. Take, for example, Madeleine L'Engle who dismisses Yahweh or Jehovah as "the paternalistic male chauvinist pig Old Testament God." Now it is by no means an extreme or uncommon kind of statement in New Age spirituality. The new Gnostics, like their ancestors, pay attention only to the opening chapters of Genesis, and for the same reason to rewrite the story of the fall so that Eve and the serpent become the heroes and God the villain, as we'll see.

One of the most forthright Christian forms of this Gnostic revision of Genesis 3 is found in a book entitled "From Apocalypse to Genesis," by Lutheran scholar, Ann Primavesi, published in 1991. Here the serpent is set before us as the embodiment of liberating wisdom, teaching Eve that all rules and laws that keep us in servitude even to God must be broken. This Gnostic perversion of Genesis was brought out by the Lutheran publishing house, Augsburg Fortress Publications. Somehow one cannot quite imagine Luther approving.

The New Testament often comes in for the same treatment at the hands of modern Gnostics. New Age feminist, Mary Daly, for example, rejects the New Testament doctrine of a divine person called God the Son who became a male human being. She says this is "the symbolic legitimation of the rape of all women and all matter." The New Age vision of autonomous womanhood is desecrated by the notion of an Incarnate male God. In its Christianized form, this leads to Christian women being encouraged to write out their own versions of Bible stories in which they focus on depicting women as the hero figures.

As for the modern equivalent of new Gnostic scriptures, we need only remember the many so-called revelations from spirit-entities that are now circulating in written form. Sometimes ancient Gnostic writings, like "The Gospel of Thomas," are reprinted by New Age publishers. On one occasion, "The Gospel of Thomas" was published in a single volume with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as "The Five Gospels of Jesus Christ." Again, the left wing of the Charismatic Movement has often slid into this Gnostic mode by printing and circulating records of alleged revelatory dreams and prophesies which are not infrequently given the same authority as canonical Scripture.

So to my fifth heading, the fifth core conviction of Gnostics, the worship of the goddess. In its theory of creation and redemption, Gnosticism exalted the female over the male principle. The central figure in Gnostic mythology and spirituality was a female redeemer named Sophia, the Greek word for "wisdom." The supreme God is ultimately unknowable but his first thought as his cosmic ambassador is Sophia, the mother of the universe. Her great mission is twofold: one, to expose the wickedness of the Old Testament God Yahweh. He is a stupid male god, ignorant and arrogant, fit only to be mocked; two, to lead humanity out of its bondage and bring it to spiritual truth. After death, Gnostics said, Yahweh and his angels will try to bring the soul under their power. Only by invoking Sophia will the soul escape to the Gnostic heaven. It is Sophia's final destiny to cast Yahweh into hell, in other words, her work is to bring an end to the false, tyrannical, masculine God of the Bible.

This is where the Gnostic interpretation of Genesis 1 to 3 becomes relevant. According to Gnostics, the God of Genesis is not the supreme God but "the Demiurge." He is evil and he is the enemy of Adam and Eve. He tries to keep them in ignorance by jealously forbidding them to eat from the tree of knowledge. Help, however, is at hand in the form of Sophia. She enters into the serpent who then teaches true wisdom to Eve, encouraging her to break the oppressive commands of Yahweh and eat from the tree of knowledge.

The Sophia possessed serpent thus becomes a liberator and a redeemer. Eve listens to Sophia and so becomes the hero of the story and then leads Adam into true wisdom.

This female oriented goddess-centered spirituality has returned with a vengeance, as it were, in the New Age movement. New Age spirituality is resoundingly feminine and goddess-worshipping. It rejects male images of God, especially the concept of God the Father as spiritually oppressive and destructive. God is out, the goddess is in. Gnosticism is back.

An important New Age feminist book was published in 1982 entitled "The Politics of Women's Spirituality" with chapters by leading feminist thinkers like Mary Daly and Naomi Goldenberg. A glance at some of the chapter titles of that book reveals, "Why women need the goddess. Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections. Witchcraft as Goddess Religion. The Origins of Music, Women's Goddess Worship." The whole book is a literary monument to the return of the goddess.

Nor are New Agers pursuing a secular feminist agenda in this, the phenomenon is profoundly spiritual guided by spiritual forces of which leading New Agers are often conscious. For example, through a New Age medium, a spirit-entity calling itself Lazaris channeled the following message about the glorious return of the goddess to Western civilization. "Though she never left, the goddess is returning to you and she brings a light. Yours is the great work, receiving and then bringing her light into a seemingly darkening world. She is returning to you and she brings gifts and treasures that are bountiful and without limit. As she returns, you can come to know the goddess and you can know God, you can come to know who you are."

In New Age spirituality, the feminine principle is often acknowledged in the form of Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess. Feminist thinker, K. Alexander-Berghorn says, "Today women are rediscovering Isis. The reawakening of Isis is a source of inspiration for contemporary women is exemplified by the healing ministry of Selena Fox, co-founder and high priestess of Circle Sanctuary near Madison, Wisconsin. Every month at new moon, Selena holds a spiritual healing circle centered around an Isis healing altar. Each of us can personally experience the healing presence of the goddess within us. All women are Isis and Isis is all women."

New Age feminism and witchcraft are also closely linked. A leading feminist, Miriam Starhawk is a Wiccan priestess and she asserts that "the feminist religion of the future is presently being formed in New Age witchcraft." Naomi Goldenberg, a leading Jewish feminist, became a practicing witch in order to pursue her feminist ideals.

Has this goddess-worship impacted on the church? Well, yes, indeed it has. Perhaps the most visible and notorious manifestation of Christian goddess worship took place in 1993 at the Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis. It was attended by 2,000 Christian women from mainstream American Protestant churches. In the opening session, the liturgy stated, "It is time to dream wildly about who we intend to be in the future through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia." The Gnostic

goddess Sophia was the central figure in the supposedly Christian worship of the conference. It reached its climax in a sort of alternative Lord's Supper where instead of bread and wine, milk and honey were distributed over which this blessing was pronounced, "Our Maker, Sophia, we are women in your spirit." On a similar wavelength, James Robinson, head of the translation team for the Nag Hammadi documents, proposes that we should re-imagine Jesus as the incarnation of Sophia and see him not as very God and very man, but very goddess and very man.

We perhaps do not realize how far this kind of thing has gone in the Christian world of today. Goddess-worship is fast becoming one of the major growth industries in so-called Christian theology and worship both in America and in the United Kingdom. In our own country, for example, a book was published not so long ago which claimed to offer "materials for prayer, meditation and worship drawn from women's experiences of the holy to provide ways to enrich the Christian tradition, an excellent resource for any congregation wishing to undertake the difficult task of changing the image of God in its liturgy." The book was written by recognized and established female Christian theologians. Among its prayers we find the following, "Lady, the unknown Goddess, we have prayed long enough only to Yahweh, the thunder God. Now we should pray to you again. Goddess of a thousand names and faces, Ceres, Venus, Demeter, Isis, Diana Queen of Heaven, or by whatever name you would be known."

Again, this is typical of the Gnostic renaissance in the church. Even witchcraft is being baptized into the church in the name of the goddess. Miriam Starhawk, the leading feminist witch, has many admirers among Christian women. The female theologian, Mary Elizabeth Moore of the Claremont School of Theology, stated in the Los Angeles Times for May 22, 1993, that many women found Starhawk's work compatible with, or at least adaptable to, Christian teaching. Christian witchcraft may seem a contradiction but it is one manifestation of the Gnostic renaissance within the church. Roman Catholic journalist, Donna Steichen in her book "Ungodly Rage," documents how the practice of witchcraft has spread like wildfire through the Catholic nunneries of America, not secretly but as part of female spirituality.

Harvard Divinity School, once the cradle of American Liberal theology, has been virtually transformed into a goddess-worshiping paradise for Gnostics and feminists. The Jewish commentator, Don Heder, wrote a famous essay in April, 1994 in which he described how Buddhist chanting and meditation were now more popular than Christian hymn-singing in Harvard and feminist goddess-worship had become the accepted framework through which religion, theology and the Bible were interpreted. Old-fashioned liberalism has been defeated and sidelined by Gnosticism at one of America's foremost divinity schools.

One of the most radical expressions of modern Christian Gnosticism is the Women-Church founded by Rosemary Radford Ruether in Illinois. I'm not quite sure how to pronounce her last name, it could be Rooter but there is a "th" there. The Women-Church has among other things an act of worship in which the community eats an apple, symbolically reenacting what Eve did in paradise, and as they eat, they say, "This is the

apple of consciousness-raising. Let the scales of false consciousness fall from our eyes so that we can rightly name truth and falsehood good and evil." Well, there is the Gnostic myth of Eve as redeemer, heroically breaking God's oppressive command being played out as an act of worship in an allegedly Christian congregation. The Women-Church has another ceremony for lesbians, acknowledging and affirming their lesbianism. In this ceremony, the Gnostic goddess Sophia is named and praised.

Now we may think that at least Evangelicalism has not been touched by this aspect of the Gnostic renaissance. We would be sadly mistaken. Rosemary Radford Ruether, herself, foundress of the Women-Church, teaches theology in the Garrett-Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois. Another example is Emily Culpepper, once a committed Evangelical Baptist and Fundamentalist who now as a professor at Redlands University, declares herself to be a feminist witch who finds spiritual strength in the Hindu goddess, Kali, whom she claims is incarnated in her pet cat. Other goddess-worshiping feminist theologians persist in calling themselves Evangelical. Perhaps the most significant American example is Virginia Mollenkott who describes herself as "an Evangelical lesbian feminist." She transforms Christ into a female figure, gives this feminine Christ the Gnostic name Sophia, and claims that this female savior is to give birth to a new enlightened humanity. So let us make no mistake, goddess-worship is alive and well within the church and is making inroads into Evangelicalism.

I think we'll press on. I've only got on heading left so the sixth and last of the core convictions of the Gnostics, their convictions about sexuality, we'll have touched on that slightly. The Gnostic ideal of sexuality was essentially a rejection of the distinction between male and female, a man and woman. The Gnostic "Gospel of Philip" says this, "When Eve was still in Adam, death did not come into being. When she was divided from him, death came into being." In other words, the male/female distinction is a false and destructive part of the fallen world of death. We must escape it if we are to find true life. The Gnostic "Gospel of Thomas" puts it like this, "When you make the male and female one and the same, some of the male may not be male, nor the female, female. Then you will enter the kingdom."

Gnosticism declared war on gender distinctions. The Gnostic sexual ideal was androgyny, that's a Greek word signifying an entity that is both male and female, a synthesis of the two and, thus, neither the one nor the other. How in practice did the Gnostics try to overcome the male/female distinction? Well, basically by attacking and subverting the traditional order of sexuality. Since for them the male/female distinction was destructive, they rejected the customary biblical expression of male/female relationships, that is, sexuality within marriage. This epitomized all the Gnostics believed was wrong with this fallen creation. Many Gnostics rejected sex altogether as something bestial and evil. Others took a different path and practiced a positive sexual promiscuity, including homosexuality and lesbianism, but a common motive lay behind all these Gnostic assaults on traditional sexuality, namely the rejection of the male/female polarity. For the Gnostic woman, this meant that marriage and motherhood were the supreme enemy.

Gnostics further acted out this rejection of traditional gender distinctions by practicing total male/female equality in their religious communities. It was a criticism of the Gnostics made by orthodox Christians such as the great early church theologian Tertullian, that Gnostics allowed women to teach, to dispute, to perform exorcisms, perhaps even to baptize. The Gnostics were the original feminists in that respect. In the New Age Movement, we see this Gnostic sexuality reappearing in almost every detail. The New Age is committed to feminism and sees one of its basic enemies as patriarchy, that is, the cultural idea of male headship or leadership whether that means the husband is the head of the wife, the father is the head of the family, or man is the proper ruler in society.

Sexual equality and freedom are New Age ideals. Many of the leading female New Age thinkers are lesbians, not as a matter of personal preference but as a philosophical commitment. For example, Mary Daly, perhaps the foremost New Age feminist, openly admits "everything I write is an invitation to lesbianism." This is all part of the old Gnostic ideal of androgyny. Since all normal people are biologically either male or female, the only way androgyny can be approximated and practiced is by homosexuality, men transcending their biological maleness by behaving as women; lesbianism, women transcending their biological femaleness by behaving as men; or bisexuality. This androgynous ideal of sexuality was graphically expressed by Shirely MacLaine who on one of her inward mystical voyages into herself saw "a powerful form quietly standing in the center of my inner space looking at me with total love. The figure is very tall, an androgynous being with long arms and the kindest face, saying, 'I am the real you.'"

The religious dimensions of New Age sexuality are seen particularly clearly in the writings of Jewish feminist, Naomi Goldenberg. She rejects biblical Christianity because it presents God in masculine imagery, Yahweh, God of the Old Testament, God the Father and his Incarnate Son in the New Testament. For Goldenberg, this is a projection onto heaven of the wickedness and oppression of male headship. Goldberg's lesbianism is, therefore, a deliberate anti-God, antichrist statement on her part. She says, "All feminists are making the world less and less like the one described in the Bible and are thus helping to lessen the influence of Christ and Yahweh on society." All of this is really just a modern gloss on the Gnostic rejection of Yahweh in favor of the female cosmic principle of sophia. Goddess-worship and lesbianism are intertwined in New Age spirituality.

What of the church? Well, we find a choir of professedly Christian voices joining in this rediscovery of Gnostic sexuality. Virginia Mollenkott, the Evangelical lesbian feminist, denounces patriarchy as the great enemy. To be truly free and independent as a person, Mollenkott says, a woman must liberate herself from patriarchy and be a lesbian. In 1994, the Roman Catholic, Patricia Jung, and the Lutheran, Ralph Smith, joined forces to write an ecumenical book entitled "Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge." They argue in this book that homosexuality and lesbianism are normal and that the only sin is to insist on heterosexuality. For Rosemary Radford Ruether, foundress of the Women-Church, the truest sexual ideal is androgyny, psychic wholeness, she calls it, a synthesis of male and female. The Episcopalian, Matthew Fox, famous for advocating creation spirituality, is

also a promoter of this androgyny so his book, "The Cosmic Christ," depicts on the cover a young naked Jesus of uncertain sex. Is it a man or a woman? Fox says, "In some ways, homosexuality is superior to heterosexuality. There is no better birth control." American Bishop, Jack Spong, affirms, "Feminism and homosexuality lie at the heart and soul of what the gospel is all about." The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America set up a task force on sexuality which in 1993 advocated homosexual and lesbian marriage. Mary Daly, the feminist lesbian witch, is a professor at the Roman Catholic Boston University.

Sometimes this Christianized Gnostic sexuality takes on very bizarre forms. For example, in 1985 the Roman Catholic journalist, E. Michael Jones, reported a meeting of Roman Catholic nuns in favor of the ordination of women which ended with the nuns anointing each other's naked breasts with jasmine. The movement for women's ordination could indeed be seen as part of the same general Gnostic drift, at least it shares the same Gnostic assumptions about the rejection of all male/female distinctions.

Other indications of this cult of androgyny can be seen in the way that feminism is changing the language of worship. For example, the hymnbook of the United Methodist Church in America has systematically removed all masculine references to God. He is nowhere addressed as King or Father. In some Evangelical theology colleges in America, it is no longer politically correct to refer to God as He or Father, he must be called "parent" to avoid sexism, and "she" is as appropriate as "he." One traditionally-minded professor deliberately provoked his female students by referring to the devil as "she." When they protested, he merely reassured them that he was faithfully applying their own philosophy. And so it goes on. Gnostic sexuality is clearly filtering into the church as well as the wider culture.

Now let me try to gather up a conclusion from that. As I said at the start, Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge, gnosis, and paradoxically, knowledge is what we need if we are to be alert to the new Gnostic threat to biblical beliefs and values both inside and outside the church. I think the battles is half-won if only we're well-informed about what is happening. There is no point in burying our heads in the sand and just hoping it will all go away, we need to think.

Now there are many many good books on the subject. In a sense, it would be odious to recommend particular books but let me just tell you the books I personally have found helpful on this. So I'm going to recommend two books by Peter Jones. He is the Professor of New Testament at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California. The two books I have in mind are, "The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back," and, "Spirit Wars." As for the Gnosticism that's invaded the more radical end of the Charismatic spectrum, I would particularly recommend a book by Hank Hanegraaff entitled "Christianity in Crisis." If we read, mark and inwardly digest only one of these books, I think we'll be better equipped to carry out the Apostle John's exhortation for our present day, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are of God because many false prophets have gone out into the world."