



## **Gnosis over matter in Nigerian Christianity: The heresy of Gnosticism *abinitio***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper accesses the impact of modern Gnosticism on Christian spirituality in Nigeria. For the Gnostics, the realization of gnosis is the way to salvation of the soul from the material world. Attempt is made to enlighten our understanding of the danger this mystery religion coupled with the modern pattern of it poses to the Christian faith today. This paper recommends that Nigerian Christian believers must have the courage to affirm their Christian heritage without indulgence in esoteric or intuitive knowledge syncretism. The method of approach is based on literary sources.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The world in which the gospel emanated was deeply concerned with redemption. Philosophy satisfied the minds of intellectuals, but it had no message for the masses. State religion was cold and seemed to be more patriotic than religious in character. Nature religion could not meet the needs of rapidly developing civilization in the Roman Empire just like in the modern Nigeria. For these reasons the mystery religions were popular, one of them being Gnosticism. It claimed to reveal secret knowledge that provided reconciliation and fellowship with God. Like Satanic Church International USA, it brought also into being a religion that was a mixture of Eastern, Greek, and Christian ideas. As a result, it is described as syncretistic (from the Greek word *sunkretizein* denoting to combine or to mix). The Church rejected Gnosticism in particular consequent upon its teachings.

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The objective of the author was to regenerate pure Christian faith, teachings and practices and reject modern heretical teachings in the churches. It exposed the danger the modern Gnosticism portends on Christian spirituality in Nigeria. The strength of this paper is that it generates information that can enlarge the knowledge of Nigerian Christian believers on how to contend for their faith in the face of modern Gnosticism.

#### **Concept and framework**

The usual meaning of gnostikos (Greek adjective) in classical Greek texts is “learned” or “intellectual”, such as used in the comparison of “practical” (praktikos) and “intellectual” (gnostikos) in Plato’s dialogue between Young Socrates and the Foreigner in his, “The Statesman”. According to Livingstone (1980), Gnosticism is a complex religious movement which in its Christian form came into prominence in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

With its origins in trends of thought current in pagan circles. A central important feature of Gnosticism was attached to “gnosis”, the supposedly revealed knowledge of God and of the origin and destiny of mankind, by means of which the spiritual element in man could receive redemption.

To Popkin (1979), the only aspect of the created world that is not part of the world machine is the mind. Mind is completely unextended, and hence not in contact with the material world. Materialism, on the other hand, is the view that everything is to be accounted for in terms of material causes; and idealism, the view that the explanation must be in terms of mental causes (Popkin, 1979). For him, materialism sought to modify Cartesianism by eliminating mind and possibly God, from the basic metaphysical scheme, and attempting to explain everything in terms of material events.

#### **Christianity and Gnostic teachings**

The Gnostics were some of the earliest heretics to infiltrate the church with their poisonous doctrines arising shortly after the gospel began penetrating the Roman world near the Mediterranean Sea in the first century. The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word gnosis, meaning knowledge. Gnostics believed that there was a mysterious or secret knowledge reserved for those with true understanding, leading to the salvation of the soul. Spiritual salvation was of preeminence to them because they thought the human spirit was naturally good and was entrapped or imprisoned in the body, which was naturally evil or merely an illusion. Their aim, therefore, was to free the spirit from its embodied prison, and the only key to unlock the prison doors was the mysterious knowledge they possessed. They denied also the bodily resurrection of Jesus, an event Paul argued must have taken place or our faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15: 12-14, 16-17, 42-44).

Gnosticism was at first entirely pagan, but in time became associated with Christian teachings. Gnosticism, Marcion, and Montanism held Christ in

high esteem. The Gnostics and Marcion in effect later denied the gospel, and Montanus gave a very one-sided view of it (Boer, 2003).

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As part of its teachings evil arises out of matter. God is good. Therefore, he is far removed from all things material. How is it possible that man, who is related to the good God is also related to evil matter? Who is God? How can we know him? What is man? What is evil? Since God is good, what went wrong in the spiritual world so that its offspring (men) became evil? How can they be redeemed from the evil? Though the Gnostics were not philosophers, but these were the questions they asked. It provided a *gnosis* (knowledge) concerning the spiritual world, the disharmony that entered it, the restoration of the harmony, and the redemption of men resulting from the restored harmony. This knowledge was revelation from the spiritual world and was given to those who were able to receive it. From this secret *gnosis*, Gnosticism took its name.

Gnosticism begins with belief in a God who originally existed alone. He is variously called the Unknown Father, the Abyss, and the Unbegotten. Sometimes he is represented as having a female companion called Silence. He did not desire to remain alone and therefore produced two Aeons (divine beings) called Mind and Truth, male and female respectively. They produced two other couples, World –life and Man-church (Boer, 2003). These, together with the Unknown Father (with or without Silence), made up the Pleroma, or Fullness of the divine being.

The church rejected Gnosticism particularly as a result of its teachings such as,

- a. knowledge of and fellowship with the Supreme God is impossible
- b. The creation of the world is the work of an inferior deity
- c. The world of matter is evil
- d. The Redeemer is neither God nor man. He did not die on the cross and was not raised from the dead. He seemed to be human but was not in fact so (the heresy of Docetism, named from the Greek word *dokein* – to seem).
- e. Only some men, those who are spiritual by birth, can be saved.

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f. There is no resurrection.

According to Baur (2005), the Gnostics taught that salvation was to be found in knowledge (gnosis) and reduced Christianity to philosophical speculations, mixed with some Egyptian pagan rituals. To its great credit the Alexandrian theological school was able to quench the thirst for knowledge of the young Christians of Egypt, and avoid the pitfalls of the Gnostics without condemning outright any speculations, as the bishops usually did. Paul warned Christians in Colossae and Timothy concerning these false teachers (Col. 2; 2 Tim. 2: 14-26). The warning is introduced by a call to vigilance, lest they should be led astray. In these passages, the word philosophy is obviously linked closely with the phrase vain deceit, for the definite article precedes only the former word. Hence the phrase is descriptive of the philosophy. It is empty of vital power, for the dynamic of the gospel is absent. It is empty of hope, for it leads away from the light of God's presence into the mists of man's speculation. It is deceitful because of its attractive presentation which seduces the minds of those who are drawn away by it, and which conceals its own utter barrenness (Carson, 1982). With Paul, it would no doubt be true to say that philosophy, in the simple sense of a love of knowledge and a desire for the truth, would be quite compatible with his position.

For Paul, the gospel was rooted in revelation. God had spoken clearly and finally in Christ. His reason is applied to understand the wisdom which is revealed in Christ. Thus, Pauline theology is God-centred in contrast to any humanistic philosophy which begins with man, and which makes man's reason the measure truth. A letter of Paul to the 1 Corinthians shows this contrast between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. Hence, while Christians may see a certain negative value in speculative philosophy, he will constantly be on his guard lest he come to study revelation, not as a believer, but as a humanist.

"But if in Christ the fullness of Godhead dwells," Paul said, "then this has profound consequences for his people" (Col. 2:10-15). They are in him by a spiritual union, which means that they share his life. Hence they share his pleroma; and so are partakers of the very nature of God. This is echoed in John's similar ascertain that the word is full of grace and truth, from which he concludes that of his fullness have all we received (Carson, 1982). Again, Gentile Christians have no need of the rite of circumcision, for they have received from Christ the spiritual circumcision of which that rite was a type. The bodily circumcision of the Old Testament was the divinely given seal of membership of the covenant people. It spoke of the removal of sin, and by its association with the process of generation stressed the sin inherent in our fallen nature as the offspring of Adam. Hence positively it was the sign of acceptance with God, as Paul clearly states in Romans 4: 11, when speaking of Abraham.

These specific instructions are given to Timothy, Colossians and modern believers to guide them in their unavoidable encounters with false teachers (2 Tim. 2: 14-26; Col. 2: 8). The description of the futility and harmfulness of the false teachers is cryptic in the Greek. The first necessity is maintenance of right doctrine. It is one thing solemnly to charge others and quite another to take oneself in hand. The danger of self-neglect was certainly not confined to Timothy, for its symptoms are universal. Yet the value of self-discipline cannot be too highly estimated, for the most effective refutation of error is for the teacher to be the living embodiment of truth, with God's approval upon him. The shame that any workman feels when the incompetence or shoddiness of his work is detected is used as a figure for the Christian ministry (Guthrie, 1982).

A common characteristic of some of these groups was the teaching that the realization of Gnosis (esoteric or intuitive knowledge) is the way to salvation of the soul from the material world. They saw the material world as created through an intermediary being (demiurge) rather than directly by God. In most of the systems, this demiurge was seen as imperfect, in others as evil.

Jesus is identified by some Gnostics as an embodiment of the Supreme Being who became incarnate to bring gnosis to the earth. Among the Mandaeans, Jesus was considered a *msiha kdaba* or "false messiah" who perverted the teaching entrusted to him by John the Baptist. Still other traditions identify Mani and Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, as salvific figures.

Conversion to Islam and the Albigensian crusade (1209-1229) greatly reduced the remaining number of Gnostics throughout the Middle Ages, though a few Mandaean communities still exist. Gnostic and pseudo-gnostic ideas became influential in some of the philosophies of various esoteric mystical movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe and North America, including some that explicitly identify themselves as revivals or even continuations of earlier Gnostic groups. Gnostic teachers were attacked by the Catholic Church as depraved heretics, but men such as Basilides in Alexandria or Valentinus and Ptolemy in Italy were more ambitious intellectually than any contemporary Christian later reckoned orthodox (Edwards, 1998).

The main features of Gnosticism include,

1. The notion of a remote, supreme monadic divinity with a variety" (of names including "Pleroma" (fullness, totality) and "Bythos depth, profundity);
2. The introduction by emanation of further divine beings known as Aeons, which are nevertheless identifiable as aspects of the God from which they proceeded, the progressive emanations are often conceived metaphorically as a gradual and progressive distancing from the ultimate source, which brings about an instability in the fabric of the divine nature.
3. The introduction of a distinct creator God or demiurge, which is an illusion and a later emanation from the single monad or source. This second God is a lesser and inferior or false God. This creator god is commonly

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referred to as the demiurges ( a technical term literally denoting a public worker the Latinized form of Greek demiurges, hence “ergon or energy”, “public God or skilled worker” “false God” or “God of the masses”), used in the Platonist tradition.

### **Christianity in Nigeria and modern Gnosticism**

As a principle of abstinence, those who say that Christians should not drink and smoke at all have today strong arguments on their side. The health-hazards as well as the untold suffering brought upon families of drinkers and smokers became ever more evident (Haselbarth, 1976). Anybody who has seen how whole villages at times are drowned in alcohol and apathy, making all efforts of evangelism and development impossible, thereby wasting resources and earnings for another year, will agree that the “not at all” (p.59) attitude deserves our sympathy.

The task of liberation and nation-building has been seriously endangered in some parts of the continent by indulgence in drinking, smoking and drug addicting. Among the poor, frustrated/dejected and unemployed masses, this must be seen as a sign of fatalism and despair. Many of the mainline and independent churches teach and encourage their parishioners and priests to drink and smoke, to put men’s wears by females and women’s clothes by men in the name of modernity. That is satanic doctrine and needed to be discountenanced.

They are world laws which are in conflict with the gospel values. World necessities seem to limit the Christian freedom to act. How far can the law of agape be applied in a fallen world? Are there not areas which cannot be transformed by the gospel because they are regulated by inherent laws of their own? Does not the world of business, science, of art and of politics, even sex and family, have their own natural rules? The danger is that God is relegated to the world beyond; it may be called the “real” world (idealism), but it is nevertheless far remote from the realities of the here and now. Pious Christians often followed this line and in so doing sometimes tended to support existing powers of injustice.

Denominationalism is another aspect of heretical teaching by Nigerian Christians. Martin (1993) defines denominationalism as an act of denomination; name designation especially a general name for a class of things, a religious body comprising a number of congregations. Denomination can be defined as the religion or sect that rejects another religious denomination, the social environment, norms or virtues in which it operates or exists (Quarcoopome, 1985). It is a religious conflict society or group which has arisen in opposition to an institutionalized church (Agunwa, 2008). Denomination can also be seen in this context as exclusive religious group or sect politically motivated because of social economic and emotional reasons.

The tension among Catholics, Anglican and Protestant/Pentecostal Churches in Anambra, Imo and Enugu states of Nigeria is largely created by the difficulties inherent in alien ecclesiastical rule coupled with heretical teachings of hatred, envy, jealousy, covetousness and area of influence; the desire for areas of spiritual, political, economic and cultural influence. This, to greater extent, gives birth to denominational antagonism or rivalry. Consequently, every denomination has to guard its own “Jesus” or “God” jealously. Some tagged themselves as spiritual churches while others are mundane or spiritually dead churches. Some of the denominations claim to be “Apostolic successors” probably as descents of St. Peter while others are not. As a result, there are varieties of sacraments, doctrines, and liturgies, prohibition of mixed– marriages and the like. The difference between peoples in denominations, traditions, customs, doctrines, social conversions and consequently in habitats of thought and feeling, are so great that the surprising thing is not that they should give rise to difficulties in inter/intra–denominational relationships and understanding, but rather that these difficulties should in so many instances be overcome.

In the Acts of the Apostles these tensions lie beneath the surface, but Paul’s letter to the Galatians brings them into the open. The antagonism was between circumcision party and uncircumcision party. In the early Christian history, there were a variety of teachers each on his own theology. Such include Eusebius, Origen, Marcion, Montanus, Augustine, Tertullian, Justin, Arius, Athanasius, Martin Luther, John Calvin and among others. During this era, both wrong and right theologies were propounded especially on the person of Jesus Christ and on the question of authentic sacraments instituted by Jesus himself. Today, this is also associated with the relationships among human beings and the problem is no longer the person of Christ. This has given rise to homosexuality and other similar vices.

Divorce and remarriage are now being tolerated by most of these churches in Nigeria. Cases of such abound in civil courts and church consistories. Doubtless, every marriage has its peculiar challenges. Storms are expected to come, but determination makes the storms less frightening (Soyingbe, and Odulaja, 2012). Pastors as spiritual leaders are expected to help to preserve the sanctity of the sacred institution of marriage. This is why the recent marital tribulations of Pastor Chris Okotie are generating so many controversies following his announcement on Sunday, June 24, 2012 to end his second marriage to Stephanie Henshaw. The declaration has naturally thrown up a lot of questions on the viability of his calling as a man of God as well as its implication on the young men and women in his church. The concern is as regards its portent danger on the already shaky foundation of modern marriages. Divorce and remarriage represent a massive social marriage value breakdown in the family and community structures at large.

Prosperity gospel messages are now threatening most of the Christian value of moderation or less concern on mammon. It is the very popular and very appealing message often heard today that if you trust Christ you will have health and wealth (3 John 2; Matthew 4: 23-24, 10: 1, 12:15; Acts 19:

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11-12, 15:16; Dt. 8:11-28; 1-4). In as much as this teaching is alright, but the proponents of this theological concept may not be aware of the suffering of God's people, being poor, and Peter saying, "Silver and gold have I none !" (Acts 3:6 cf. Rm 8:18, 35-36; Jn. 15: 18-20; 16: 33; 2 Tim. 3:12, 2 Cor. 6:10). Those who trust in Christ will prosper spiritually (Eph. 1: 3). They are able to be rich in him (2 Cor. 8:9). But God never promised robust physical health and material, financial prosperity in this life for his children (Nmah, 2008).

As humanity faces terrifying problems no civilization or race or philosophy is now dominant. No political ideological has remained convincing as a panacea: not 'socialism' as defined by Marx and other authorities (the ownership, land reform or at least the control, of the means of production, distribution and exchange, with a command over wages, prices and planned developments, giving power to the state or the local community on behalf of the people), not capitalism as advocated by the apostles of the market (reliance for economic progress on private enterprise and free trade, with competition and bargaining freed from bureaucracy's interference). Instead the electorate shops in a supermarket of ideas new or old which are believed to 'work' (the 'social market')—and when one political or religious group seems to have failed to deliver the goods, it is dismissed somewhat as a channel is switched off by a bared televuew (Edwards, 1998).

While there is considerable agreement (at least in theory) about moral issues in the public domain, condemning injustice, corruption, terrorism, nepotism, ethnicity, rigging in elections, rivalry among Christians and the wreck of the environment, in the field of personal morality often the only agreement seems to be that decisions must be personal unless they are about the obvious evils such as murder or cruelty. Often the whole emphasis is on the need for the individual to make a decision between shades of grey; the pro-choice option in the debate about abortion or family planning is typical of postmodern morality, which can also include the pro-life choice against abortion.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is, it seems, in the recognition that a personal decision influenced by a community is needed before a world-view becomes possible. For many who regard themselves as Christians in this 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria and beyond the option may be made for a fairly loose attachment to historic Christianity, questioning many of its doctrines or theologies and ignoring most of its rituals. The connection may be so loose that the person who makes it may be called with justice a "post-Christian". This position will be influenced by a community other than a Christian congregation; by family, neighbours and friends, by loyalties to class or nation, or by the media. Conversations, even if casual, may convey some Christian values such as admiration for dogged helpfulness, for self-sacrificing love, for compassion or for the conquest of



bitterness by forgiveness. In the foreground there is likely to be a commitment to at least one of the moral movements just described as attempts to improve or rescue the world.

Many Christian people feel that they cannot be religious in the sense that the churches seem to require, that is, the sacrifice of their honesty about truth and the surrender of their consciences (for they do not agree that decisions made for them by others are true morality). But many of these envy those who have found it right to belong to churches or to new movements at a deep level, for they observe in them a peace and strength of mind which they would like to have for themselves. Often the furthest they can get towards the churches' religion is to feel confronted by good rather than by God and challenged to be virtuous rather than holy or they may believe in 'God' but not in a 'person' God; but they have reached a conviction that human life is a spiritual pilgrimage towards the integration of the personality and that personal integration comes through being saved from selfishness and materialism. These theories are propounded where the churches have faced formidable difficulties.

People who come from a non-Christian background such as the Gnostics and African Christians are often tempted to simply add Christianity to the religious systems from which they have come. The result is a mixture of both religions. Syncretism is the name given to this mixture of two or more religions (O' Donovan, 1996). The Israelites were guilty of this practice. The scripture says, "They worshipped the Lord but they appointed also sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines at the high places. They would, however, not give up the practice of syncretism (2 Kings 17: 40). It was because the Israelites participated in the pagan rituals that God sent them into captivity for 70 years as punishments (Jer. 25: 5-11). If a Christian participates in such syncretism like the Gnostics, he will bring the Lord's judgment upon himself just as the Israelites brought God's judgment upon themselves.

The trend towards liberal theology in many older church denominations in Africa has also produced a mentality that it does not really matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. Many who claimed to follow Christ do so without a thorough understanding of who he is and why they are following him. Perhaps they understand that Jesus died to provide forgiveness for their sins. But they do not understand that Jesus is also Lord of the universe and has all power in heaven and on earth. They do not realize that Jesus alone is more than able to meet the greatest need or crisis they may ever face. In a time of personal need they may turn back to ancestral spirits or to mystical powers.

Similar ideas are found in other religions especially Hinduism. But they contradict the basic teachings of the Bible. The Christian God is not isolated from this world. He is its creator and the material creation is good. God cares for men in the affairs of everyday life. Christian salvation is not escaping from this world, meant to be rescued in the past, present and future, but

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meeting God in it- notably in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is God become man.

In the first Church council at Jerusalem, the Church set out the practical outworking of relations between Jewish and Greek Christians. The Jews were cautioned against legalism while the Gentiles were cautioned against immorality. The opposite extreme to the Judaizers is a false Gentile Christianity, which may be called the paganizing or Gnostic heresy. It is as radical and revolutionary as the other is contracted and reactionary. Whatever their differences, however, all these three fundamental heresies (the Judaizers, Gnostics heresy and Syncretism) amount at last to a more or less distinct denial of the central truth of the gospel- the incarnation of the Son of God for the salvation of the world (Hunt, 2008). They make Christ either a mere man, or a mere superhuman phantom; they allow, at all events, no real and abiding union of the divine and human in the person of the Redeemer. This is, however, what John gives as the mark of antichrist, which existed even in his day in various forms. It plainly undermines the foundation of the church. For Christ be not God-man, neither is he mediator between God and men; Christianity sinks back into heathenism or Judaism. All turns at last on the answer to that fundamental question, "Who do people say I am?" (Mark 8:27; Matthew 16:13). The true solution of this question is the radical refutation of every error.

The Bible indicates that God used different ways to guide his people at different times in history. The word of God is the primary means by which God leads and teaches his people (Psalm 1: 1-2, 119: 105). God commands his people to completely put away the beliefs and practices of false religion (Lev. 18:3; 2 Kings 17: 38-39). For this reason, ceremonies or celebrations which include the elements of non-Christian religion must be avoided. If the issue is not clear, it would be wise to seek the advice of mature Christian elders.

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