

7. Churton, Tobias, *The Gnostics* (Barnes & Noble Books 1987)

Just like Couliano's book (see item # 9), Churton's maintains that Gnosticism was a second-century and largely Christian phenomenon. He would basically disagree with the very specific and strong statement about what is or is not Gnostic propounded by Couliano (and others), however, and allows for some writers and believers who are more mildly dualistic to also be Gnostic.

Churton's big divider between Gnostic and non-Gnostic is the idea of being an alien visitor here, and not an integral part of nature that belonged here. He takes this classification scheme from the foremost authority on Gnosticism, Hans Jonas. I had and read Jonas' book *The Gnostic Religion* (1958) a long time ago, but couldn't find it to include in this list. But Churton does us the favor of including an interview with Jonas in this book. Before the interesting exchange in the interview, however, he cites Jonas' book for this definition of a Gnostic belief (Churton's page 36):

It is the first time in history that the radical ontological [of the nature of essence] difference of man and nature has been discovered and the powerfully moving experience of it given in teachings strange and suggestive. This rift between man and nature was never to close again, and protesting his hidden but essential *otherness* became in many variations an abiding theme in the quest for truth concerning man.

Churton follows this with a statement made in 1986 on this same topic, in an interview at his home with Jonas. Here Jonas is saying about Gnosis that it . . . :

is one of the great alternatives in looking at the whole

scheme of things and our place in it and, well, do we belong? Or are we aliens? – And if aliens, where do we come from? Where would home be? What would home be? The very fact that they [the Gnostics] probably were the first who saw the theme of the stranger in the world. That makes them, the Gnostics, a world historical event. That theme never disappeared again. It can then re-emerge again and again and if we speak of alienation nowadays, there we are. It has become a perennial theme.

The definition of Gnosticism as alienation is discussed more in the interview, giving basically the Gnostic stamp to a number of ancient (Hermetism, Gnosis, Catharism) and modern (nihilism) movements, all then becoming subjects in this book. The reason this book is such an easy read is that Churton was writing the background book to organize materials from which to write a television series on the subject of Gnosticism.

Using the Jonas-Churton classification scheme, Wordsworth, who celebrated the cosmic origin of the human soul in his poetry, was a Gnostic. Paul becomes more of a Gnostic than he did in the Couliano (see item # 9) definition of Gnosticism, which should make Freke and Gandy happy. And Mormons are blatantly Gnostic since they believe, and celebrate in a striking hymn called "O My Father" that we are "a stranger here" who came from and is hungering for a return to our eternal home, where we are part of a Divine family, with a Father and a Mother.

I really liked Churton's book when I read it some years ago and was pleased to see all my little note sheets still stuck between its pages. Unfortunately it says nothing about first century Christianity. It basically starts in the second and does a very nice job explaining the teachings of the major

players. Then it has a very large section on the Cathars, which is the reason I bought the book in the first place many years ago. Finally, it has a nice section on Bruno and his marrying the hermetic philosophy and Christianity (see White, item # 38).

So, it won't help us much on the current topic. But, that's no reason to not share with you just a few things I found fascinating in this very well-written book, a book for laymen like me, not scholars.

Here is an item Churton takes from the Hermetic philosophy. It stuck in my notes because, in view of the idea that Mormonism is a Gnostic religion, it compares so well with the well-known Mormon couplet:

As Man is, God once was;
As God is, Man may become.

Here is the same idea Churton finds in the Hermetic Philosophy (second to fourth centuries) in a book called *Libellus*, on Churton's page 44):

We must not shrink then from saying that a man on earth is a mortal god, and that god in heaven is an immortal man.

Similar ideas are cited on other pages from other sources, and the whole book is very interesting but treats Gnosticism as a branch of religion growing off the tree of Christianity starting in the second century.