

26. Ludemann Gerd, and Martina Janssen, *Suppressed Prayers: Gnostic Spirituality in Early Christianity* (Trinity Press International 1998)

The title of this book is an obvious attempt to play on the same historical theme that Freke and Gandy are playing on: there was a Christian spiritual tradition that was suppressed by the winners in this fight, the historical Christianity we live with today. Page 11 makes this very clear:

Early Christianity did not develop along a single track. Alongside the catholic church of the second century, from which the New Testament canon ultimately derives, there were Christian groups whose literature has only been preserved in scraps, because of the planned obliteration of it by catholic bishops. These groups include the Gnostics, who were branded heretics, suppressed and exterminated along with their followers.

After this inflammatory statement the book has a good discussion of the Gnostic phenomenon of late antiquity and its many variations. The adaptation of the new Christian tradition is described as another episode in the wide syncretism of Gnosticism, which came in Jewish, Egyptian, Iranian and philosophical flavors and which actively sought insights from whatever was available from the world's philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions (p. 12). Insights into what? The questions being answered by Gnosticism were taken from a Gnostic source as being (p. 11):

'Who were we? What have we become? Where were we? Into what have we been thrown? Whither are we hastening? From what are we saved? What is birth? What is rebirth?'

I cite this formula here because it gives me a chuckle, knowing from my experience as a person proselyting for my one-time Mormon faith that we seek to answer for people the question all person have: "Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?" It is essentially the same formula. But the answers are different in some significant respects.

Let's get back to this book, which says on page 14:

The religious creativity of the Gnostics clashed with the rigid dogmatism of the representatives of the catholic church. The 'orthodox Christians' saw their pure doctrine of salvation by Christ endangered by the Gnostic views, above all by the fact that for the Gnostics the creator god was a faulty 'copy' of the true, unknown Father. The Gnostic disputing of Christ's suffering also led to bitter reactions on the 'church' side. Thus the reports of the church fathers Irenaeus of Lyons (end of the second century) or Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-403) are full of polemic against the Gnostics.

But what was the Gnostics' attitude to the Christianity of the catholic church? We know of no suppression of church Christians by Gnostic Christians. For the Gnostics, the doctrine and practice of the church Christians was quite compatible with their own convictions; however, for them the religion of the church Christians represented a 'lower stage' by comparison with Gnostic knowledge. Whereas the church Christian remained at this lower stage of knowledge, the Gnostic sought higher knowledge. That can be illustrated from the Gnostic understanding of baptism: for the Gnostics baptism was an important sacrament, but true salvation was achieved completely only by the sacrament of apolytrosis (salvation). This ritual of salvation is either a sacrament of the bridal

chamber, a sacrament of dying, or a holy baptism which surpasses the baptism with water practiced by the catholic church.

I believe this sets a more accurate historical stage than the first paragraph quoted. It was in the second and later centuries that the anti-Gnostic activities of the church came into their own in reaction to the Gnostic attacks on their theology, their sacraments, their concept of salvation, and their authority. Just because there is no record of Gnostic suppression of catholic authority or belief, there is a huge literary base showing they were overtly and covertly attacking the authority and teachings of the church with words. But it was the Christians who resorted to officially condoned violence to get rid of them. But this did not happen until Theodosius was Roman Emperor, as pointed out in Jenkin's book cited above and others as well. So the extermination of those who chose to believe differently than the orthodox church prescribed did not begin until the latter part of the third century.

Did the Gnostics claim to be the original Christians? In a way, yes. They claimed to have the secret teachings that Christ left behind with only his most advanced and trusted followers during the forty-day ministry following his resurrection. These teachings included the rites and ceremonies alluded to in the quote from Ludemann and Janssen above. The Gospel of Mary discussed in item # 25 is also a reflection of that post-resurrection teaching.

The rest of the book is a nice collection of highlights from Gnostic literary sources. The items cited are mostly source that reflected Christian Gnosticism, but to illustrate the fact that there were other Gnostic traditions that had much in common with the Christianized version, Mandeian, Hermetist, Manichean and Neoplatonic Gnostic works are also cited (p.

14). It is a nice collection that gives a very good insight into the breadth of Gnostic thought. That breadth of thought also shows many contradictions, which is important, Gnosticism was never a monolithic movement creating a single alternative church to orthodoxy. It was a movement with charismatic leader-philosophers who formed largely autonomous movements and wrote tractates to convince readers of their having the key to the knowledge that saves.