

INTRODUCTION

Part I - by Richard T. Wallis

Of the two movements whose relations form the subject of the title of this book, "Neoplatonism" denotes the religiously toned synthesis of Plato's thought inaugurated in the third century A.D. by Plotinus and continuing in its pagan form down to the sixth century A.D. The school thus formed the dominant philosophical movement of the later Roman Empire, and was extremely influential on Medieval Christian and Moslem thought and mysticism, on many later European thinkers down to the present day, and on such movements as Renaissance art and Romantic poetry. For our purposes the term will be largely confined to the ancient pagan Neoplatonists, but attention will also be given to their immediate forerunners, the so-called "Middle Platonists," of whom Plutarch and Apuleius are the best known. "Gnosticism," as known until recently, comprised for the most part a number of otherworldly theological systems maintained by early Christian heretics, claiming salvation through "gnosis" (knowledge) rather than faith, and chiefly known through the criticisms of the orthodox. Outside the church, but with many affinities to Gnosticism, was Manichaeism, the dualistic religion founded by Mani in Iran in the third century A.D., while from a slightly earlier date such documents as the *Hermetica* (revelations composed in Greek and attributed to the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus) and the *Chaldean Oracles*, which some later Neoplatonists regarded as equal to Plato in importance, formed a bridge between Middle Platonism and Gnosticism. Plotinus, however, bitterly attacked the Gnostics, especially in his polemical treatise *Enneads* II. 9, on two fundamental grounds. First, Gnostics despise both the sensible world and its creator, whereas Platonists recognize its relative importance as

a divinely-produced imitation of an ideal model. Second, while Gnostics agree with Platonists on many points, owing, Plotinus charges, to borrowings from Plato, they abuse him and the other ancient philosophers and seek knowledge through divine revelation, instead of giving a reasoned account of their beliefs.

The debate between Plotinus and the Gnostics is thus of far more than academic interest; historically, it involves movements that left a permanent mark on Christian theology, and thus on Western thought as a whole, while, more generally, it raises the perennial problems of reconciling evil with divine providence and of the respective roles of reason and revelation in religion. Its study has, however, been hindered until recently by lack of original Gnostic writings, the main exceptions being a few short texts quoted by the Church Fathers and some (mostly late) works translated from Greek into Coptic, the native Egyptian language.¹ Our picture has, however, been revolutionized by the discovery in late 1945 of a Coptic Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. Scholarly and political jealousies unfortunately kept most of the library unavailable to all but a few specialists until the late 1970's, when a complete English translation was published.² Editions, with translations and explanatory notes, of all the texts in the library are also in process of publication.³

Though collected by Christians, apparently in the late fourth century A.D., the library includes translations of some texts composed at least two centuries earlier and, while containing many Christian works, shows Gnosticism as a phenomenon extending far beyond Christianity. What particularly concerns us is that several texts, both Christian and non-Christian, show strong Platonic influence; most important, the non-Christian works include two, *Zostrianos* (VIII.1) and *Allogenes* (XI.3), which on literary and doctrinal grounds are almost certainly identical with those named by Plotinus's pupil Porphyry in Chapter 16 of his biography of his master as having been used by the latter's opponents.⁴ Two further non-Christian texts, the *Three Steles of Seth* (VII.5) and *Marsanes* (X.1), bear strong doctrinal resemblances to these. Despite the regrettable fact that *Zostrianos* and *Marsanes*, originally among the longest works in the library, are now among the most mutilated, their importance for the study of Neoplatonism remains considerable. That the subject has so far received little attention has been due, first, to the rarity of scholars at home in both disciplines and, second, to the concentration by most Nag Hammadi scholars on the light thrown by the new discoveries on the origin of Gnosticism and its relation to Christianity. The most important conference on the texts to date, held at Yale early in 1978, was largely concerned with these

questions and with identifying the Gnostic sects who produced the writings.⁵ A further conference on Gnosticism and Christianity will be held at Southwest Missouri State University in March 1983; the same topic has been the focus of two recent English-language studies, Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*⁶ and PHEME PERKINS' *The Gnostic Dialogue*.⁷ The papers presented at Yale on the relation of Gnosticism to Platonism, by contrast, dealt mainly with general topics, largely because Neoplatonic scholars as yet lacked access to most of the new materials.

It was, in fact, scholars on the Gnostic side who first began to clarify the picture. Jan Zandee saw strong resemblances between Plotinus and the so-called "*Tripartite Tractate*" from Nag Hammadi, with its relatively favorable view of the cosmos' creator.⁸ Of even greater importance was the demonstration by M. Tardieu, J.M. Robinson and others⁹ that the Neoplatonic triad Being-Life-Intellect, which P. Hadot had long ago argued to be pre-Plotinian,¹⁰ was fully formulated in the *Zostrianos-Allogenes* group of texts. Birger A. Pearson has similarly shown strong Platonic influence on *Marsanes*, leading to a more optimistic world-view.¹¹

That Plotinus was right in seeing strong Platonic tendencies in Gnosticism, despite the latter's basically mythological structure, has long been recognized. The new texts, however, re-open the much more controversial question whether Neoplatonism received substantial Gnostic influence,¹² or whether resemblances like those just noted are merely parallels deriving from a common Platonic tradition. Even if the latter answer is correct, did Plotinus and his successors modify their system to eliminate Gnostic tendencies? And was the opposition between the two systems (both of which admitted considerable internal divergences) really as sharp as Plotinus claimed? Another long-debated point posed anew by the Nag Hammadi texts is whether, as Porphyry seems to state,¹³ Plotinus's opponents were Christians and, if so, whether they should be identified with followers of the second-century heretic Valentinus.¹⁴ The *Zostrianos-Allogenes* group of texts is without obvious Christian influence; furthermore, it belongs to an older Gnostic sect (or perhaps two closely related sects), the Sethians (self-proclaimed followers of Adam's son Seth) or Barbelo-Gnostics (devotees of Barbelo, goddess of Wisdom). On the other hand, the Sethian Nag Hammadi texts include both Christian and non-Christian works,¹⁵ while the library itself shows that Christians sympathetic to Gnosticism could use and revere pagan works, and confirms, what we knew already, that Gnostic sects borrowed freely from one another. Hence these questions also must remain open.

Part II - by J. Bregman

In recent decades there has been considerable interest in the study of Gnosticism, in literary as well as scholarly circles. A widespread revival of interest in mysticism, Oriental philosophy and the forms of religious experience occurred in the 1960s. The revival included spiritual options that could be described as "gnostic." For example, the psychologist C.G. Jung and novelist Hermann Hesse have been considered "modern gnostics." Universities offered more courses in Comparative Religion as scholarly work on the Gnostic problem (aided by the Nag-Hammadi discoveries) became a priority among historians of religion.

The reasons for this are perhaps not far to seek. Like Late Antiquity and the later Middle Ages, our own age is one of basic transformation and re-orientation. In such ages groups often emerge that can be generally characterized as "gnostic" in outlook. This has been well known and much discussed for some time. Today "gnosticism" seems to be a viable religious possibility both within and without contemporary Christianity; therefore some contemporary theological discussions will probably follow a pattern analogous (perhaps somewhat distantly analogous) to the ancient debates between Plotinus and the Gnostics and to other Platonic-Gnostic questions raised herein.

Serious scholarly and philosophical interest in Gnosticism has arisen in large part because of philosophers and historians such as Hans Jonas, who did much to determine the agenda and to act as guides for recent generations of students of religion and philosophy. That Jonas' work, the *Gnostic Religion*, has stood the test of time in light of recent discoveries is evidence of the profundity of his thought and insight.

The papers in this volume discuss in detail the similarities, differences and possible mutual influences between two movements of great significance for the development of Christian theology and later Western thought. Of central — but by no means exclusive — importance is the anti-Gnostic polemic composed by Plotinus, and the recently published Gnostic texts discovered, in Coptic translation, at Nag-Hammadi in Egypt. Many of these show strong Platonic influence, and some are almost certainly among the works used by Plotinus's Gnostic opponents. While volumes on the Nag Hammadi discoveries have been published or are being planned, their emphasis has been on the texts' relevance to the origin of Gnosticism and its relation to early Christianity. The present volume, the first to concentrate on Gnosticism's philosophical implications, by contrast brings together Neoplatonic scholars and experts working on the new Gnostic materials

and considers both specialized problems of historical scholarship and the relevance of the Neoplatonic-Gnostic debate to important contemporary religious issues. No book or conference so far produced or planned has taken the philosophical implications of the new Gnostic texts or their relation to the dominant philosophy of the time as its theme. Detailed discussion to date has in fact been confined to individual topics, presented in short articles or monographs. This conference volume thus attempts to meet the perceived need to bring together a body of scholars, some more versed in Gnosticism, others in Neoplatonism, to consolidate and advance the valuable discussions so far provided on these and other relevant questions. We hope that the articles herein have to some extent accomplished this important task.

The International Conference on Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, was held at the University of Oklahoma, March 18-21, 1984. At the opening ceremonies, R.T. Wallis welcomed the international group of participants and appropriately quoted John Dillon's literary characterization of Middle Platonism: "It seems fated to remain in the position of those tedious tracts of the Mid-Western United States through which one passes with all possible haste, in order to reach the excitements of one coast or the other. In Platonism likewise, one tends to move all too hastily from Plato to Plotinus . . ." He then briefly spoke about the special significance of the study of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism for our understanding of ancient Christian as well as contemporary religious and philosophical thought. Continuing the welcoming remarks in a similar spirit, Professor R. Baine Harris presented Professor Hans Jonas with a special award from the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, for his pioneering work on Gnosticism, its relation to the "spätantiker Geist," and its modern spiritual significance. A cordial reception followed in honor of Professor Jonas.

The conference began the next morning and remained consistently excellent for over three days. In addition to those who read papers at plenary sessions several papers not on the theme of the conference were read at sessions on "Neoplatonism and Nature" and "Studies in Neoplatonism." The plenary sessions were well attended and the subsequent discussions were stimulating and interesting. Often Professor Jonas, himself, would be available to discuss questions concerning the relationship of his work to recent studies in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. Also present were students and scholars residing in Argentina, Canada, England, France, India, Ireland and the United States. Some important thinkers participated vigorously in discussions formal and informal although they did not all present papers, among

them John Rist, L.G. Westerink, Kurt Rudolph and many others. Perhaps it is not too strong an assertion to say that this conference's participants actually resolved some controversial scholarly issues. One example immediately comes to mind: late in the morning of the second day, after John D. Turner presented his paper there was a lively discussion about the historicity of the Gnostic authors and "schools" listed by Porphyry in his "Life of Plotinus," ch. 16 (including Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nicotheus, Allogenes, Messus and others). R.T. Wallis interrupted and asked whether anyone present objected to considering it now an historically established fact that the Gnostic and Valentinian authors mentioned by Porphyry were the same as those whose "signed" works were found at Nag Hammadi. The group agreed: an informal plenary decision was now a "fact."

The late John N. Findlay's beautiful keynote address "My Philosophical Development: Neoplatonic and Otherwise," complemented the proceedings. In the course of his presentation Findlay described his youthful interest in "Theosophical-gnosticism" whose cosmology has many things in common with Neoplatonism, and, with some modifications, to Christian Neoplatonism and to Gnosticism. His involvement with the *Enneads* of Plotinus, at first in Creuzer's Greek text and his conviction that "the descriptions of the intelligible world that are elaborated by Plotinus in his tract on Intelligible Beauty certainly *ought* to be true: they tell us how things ought to be and appear, if the sort of value-determined cosmos, in which we can't help having some rational faith really exists at all." Several of his remarks on the theme of the conference were both humorous and seriously philosophical:

Since, however, this is a conference devoted to Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, I shall end this discourse by saying something about their influence on my thought. Gnosticism I studied rather superficially in my early twenties in South Africa and in Oxford, chiefly from a book by a man called G.R.S. Mead, and entitled *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*. It was actually quite a useful book. You will perhaps be amused to hear that I wrote a poem at Oxford in which I was supposedly tackled by the University Police, because I was walking the streets late at night with a lady whom they thought to be a disreputable street-walker. I did not in fact indulge in such street-walking, except in poems. I was asked to give my name and college, answered that in so far as I was anyone definite I was Simon Magus, and that the lady at my side was none other than Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, who had descended from her high estate among the Aeons, having desired to see a reflection of her face in the mirror of Matter and Humanity. Gnosticism and Neoplatonism meant something to me in those days, and

when I had finished with Greats I embarked on a study of Neoplatonism. . . . I may, however, end by saying that I accept the view of Plotinus and Proclus of an absolute Unity at the center of Being, which has, however, to go forth from itself as part of fully reverting to itself in a living and significant manner . . .

Findlay's remarks received a long and warm round of applause at the end of the second day of the conference.

At the close of the convention, there was a general discussion of the scholarly import of questions raised and issues resolved as well as those still open to investigation. Richard T. Wallis made some concluding remarks and thanked all of the participants for their attendance and contribution. He received a sustained standing ovation from all present. His tragic loss is perhaps even more poignant to those of us who had some idea of how much he knew and had not yet even begun to publish.

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the difficult task of completing the editing of the volume under less than ideal circumstances. Professor R. Baine Harris for his availability and helpful suggestions. Professor Kenneth Merrill for sending me all the necessary materials and making several helpful suggestions; Professor Peter Manchester whose editorial experience and willingness to help with crucial decisions have been invaluable; Professor Raoul Mortley for facilitating and checking the translations from French during his stay at the CNRS in Paris; Professor John Dillon for some timely editorial help and advice. To all of the contributors whose papers were carefully written and manageable and to Nancy Ogle and Carol Rickards for typing help; finally to Professor C. Stewart Doty, Associate Dean Raymie McKerrow and Dean Michael Gemigniani of the University of Maine for a timely financial subsidy to complete the volume. To James Breece, Jason Thompson, Stuart Marrs and George Markowsky for invaluable help with computers.

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NOTES

1. The best account of Gnosticism as known before the publication of most of the next texts was Hans Jonas' *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston 1958); the second edition, published in 1963, contains a preliminary survey of the new discoveries.
2. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, New York, 1977.
3. *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, 11 vols. projected, Leiden 1975-.

4. For *Zostrianos* see J. Sieber, "An Introduction to the Tractate *Zostrianos* from Nag Hammadi," *Novum Testamentum* 15(1973): 223-240.
5. Proceedings published as *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2 vols., Leiden 1981.
6. New York 1979.
7. New York 1980.
8. *The Terminology of Plotinus and Some Gnostic Writings, mainly the Fourth Treatise of the Jung Codex* (Istanbul 1961). (The treatise in question has now been renumbered I.5).
9. M. Tardieu, "*Les Trois Steles de Seth; un écrit Gnostique retrouvé a Nag Hammadi*," *RSPTh* 57 (1973): 545-575; James M. Robinson, "*The Three Steles of Seth and the Gnostics of Plotinus*," *Proc. of the International Conference on Gnosticism*, 1973 (Stockholm 1977): 132-142; John D. Turner, "The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment," *Novum Testamentum* 22 (1980): 324-351.
10. *Entretiens Hardt V*, "Les Sources de Plotin," Vandoeuvres-Geneva 1960, pp. 107 ff., with the ensuing discussion.
11. "The Tractate *Marsanes* and the Platonic Tradition" in B. Aland (ed.) *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, Göttingen 1978; a further article, "Gnosticism and Platonism with special reference to *Marsanes*" will appear shortly.
12. A view most strongly urged in Hans Jonas' *Gnosis and Spätantiker Geist* (2 vols. published out of 3, Göttingen 1939 and 1954).
13. Cf. H.-Ch. Puech, *Entretiens Hardt V*, "Les Sources de Plotin" (Vandoeuvres-Geneva 1960), pp. 159ff. with the ensuing discussion.
14. These views have recently been restated by J. Igal, "The Gnostics and the 'Ancient Philosophy' in Porphyry and Plotinus" in *Neoplatonism and Early Christianity; Essays in Honor of A.H. Armstrong* (London 1981) and F.G. Bazán, *Plotino y la Gnosis* (Buenos Aires 1981) and "Tres Decadas de Estudios Plotinianos," *Sapientia* 13 (1980): 292ff.
15. The best-known Christian Sethian text, the *Apocryphon of John*, is also the best-preserved of all Gnostic works, being preserved in two copies of a longer version at Nag Hammadi (NHL. II.1 and IV.1) and two of a shorter version (ibid. III.1 and in the Berlin papyrus BG 8502.2). The longer version refers to a "book of Zoroaster" (NHL.II.1.18), which may be the work of that name mentioned by Porphyry as used by Plotinus's opponents.