



Contemporary Spiritualities and Christianity: Is There an Authentic Christian Gnosis?

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Abstract

The growing non-religious spiritualities are markedly neo-Gnostic in their interest in cosmologies and their opposition to institutional religion. Gnostic cosmologies, specifically their teachings on the cosmic significance of the Cross, angelology and multiple heavens in fact all have counterparts in Irenaeus and Christian apocrypha. Clement of Alexandria asserts an authentic Christian gnosis communicated by Christ to Peter, James and John. The use of Richard Bauckham's "eyewitness" Biblical exegetical method shows that most of the Christian cosmological traditions can be credibly held as teachings of the apostles and "deepening" (Daniélou) interpretations of Scripture. Gnosticism appropriated but distorted them. The existence of an inner circle among the disciples, the patristic and liturgical traditions and the teachings of Paul indicate that for the early Church, gnosis was the Holy Spirit's gift of knowledge, God's knowledge of the cosmos. This knowledge could not be understood outside the Church. To enable application of Christian gnosis to dialogue with contemporary spirituality, renewal of Christian theology and practice in the light of the gnosis is proposed, particularly in the areas of liturgy, fundamental and natural theology and evangelisation.

Keywords

spirituality, gnosis, cosmology, patristics, liturgy

Non-religious spiritualities are enjoying remarkable growth in proportion to the decline in institutional Christianity, and as such they present a theological challenge. In this article I look at how contemporary spiritualities are connected with Christianity through the Gnostic heresy. I argue that the Gnostics were less inventive than is often supposed, and that many of their teachings are in fact distortions of early but forgotten Christian teachings. These same teachings are a place of dialogue with contemporary spiritualities, as well as

potentially valuable resources for contemporary theological and pastoral issues.

Contemporary Spiritualities: the New Gnosticism?

Essentially the descendants of the 1960s New Age movement, contemporary spiritualities are the mainstay of the “Mind, Body and Spirit” sections of bookshops. They are intrinsically “pick’n’mix” and individualistic – this is part of their appeal – but they have certain common themes. They draw on various spiritual traditions, especially Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, often in connection with practices such as yoga and T’ai Chi. Mystical traditions and esoterica of other religions appeal too – Kabbalah from Judaism, and Sufism from Islam. Christian mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart are popular (if often misread).¹

Contemporary spiritualities are also interested in Jesus himself – though a very “Alternative Jesus”. For example, Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy argue, in *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*,² that Christianity was originally a Judaized version of the mysteries of Dionysius and Osiris. Within Christianity there were two parties, the Outer, who were literalists, and had had only the “first initiation”, and the Inner, who had had the second initiation. The Outer literalists attacked the inner “Gnostics” for false initiations and false knowledge (*gnosis*). The result was a split, but the outer literalists won when the Roman Empire declared their version its official religion.

Most scholars have dismissed *The Jesus Mysteries*.³ Nevertheless, this has not stopped this and many similar books from selling well. Their common theme is that Christ – sometimes called the “Cosmic Christ” – is a state we can attain rather than an historical person and saviour. Jesus is but one example of someone who attained the Christ state. Many such titles come under the heading of Christianity with esoteric publishers such as Shambhala and Inner Traditions. Along with *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*, they seem to meet a desire, a *need* even. The Vatican’s provisional report on the New Age, *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Waters of Life* (1993), while strongly critical of the subjectivism and occult tendencies of the New Age, recognises that many of its adherents

¹ See Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: the Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (eds.) *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

² New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999.

³ E.g. N.T. Wright, “Jesus’ Self-Understanding”, in Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (eds.), *The Incarnation* (OUP, 2004), p.48.

perhaps never found their spiritual longings answered in institutional Christianity.⁴ Certainly one of the strengths of contemporary spiritualities is their strong natural/cosmic focus, which provides a motivation and metanarrative for environmental action. By comparison, Christian discourse on the environment is weaker. Pope Benedict, Patriarch Bartholomew and Bishop Richard Chartres have been vocal promoters of justice for creation, but, at least in the West, this has not yet struck much of a chord with Christians in terms of spirituality and common action. We tend to be more human-focussed in our charitable works – and our spirituality. But to the non-religious spiritual seeker, this simply reinforces the impression that Christianity is irrelevant *to the world* – and possibly even harmful.⁵

On the other hand, the cosmological speculations of Gnosticism, along with its anti-institutional individualism, are very attractive to contemporary spiritualities. While contemporary spiritualities tend to embrace the body, rather than trying to escape it, the rejection of the body social of the church is a strong Gnostic trait. With so much in common, it's reasonable to say that contemporary spiritualities are neo-Gnostic.⁶

Gnostic Cosmology: Invented or Borrowed?

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 not only gave us the Gnostics in their words, but also showed that Christian apologists such as Irenaeus were accurate in their descriptions of Gnostic teachings. Gnostic cosmology is often very complex, but its main question seems to be the Problem of Evil. The predominant Gnostic story (for example, in *On the Origin of the World*) is that the material world is the creation of a lower god, the demiurge, and human beings are created by the Rulers (*archons*). The latter live in various different heavens, which usually number seven. The Genesis creation tradition is freely drawn on and rewritten. It's hard to tell how much these Gnostic cosmogonies are meant to be parables and how much a “real” account, but what is clear is that because the archons frequently behave badly, the world they have created contains a great deal of evil. In *The Exegesis of the Soul*, the soul has fallen – like Adam and Eve – but her fall is the fall into the body. In the

⁴ *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life: a Christian Reflection on the New Age*, Provisional Report, Vatican City, 1993, 1.5.

⁵ As far back as 1967 Lynn White, in his celebrated article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” (*Science*, Vol.155/no.3767, March 10, 1967, pp.1203–1207), had actually blamed Christianity for environmental destruction because of the belief that God gave humankind “dominion” over the environment (Gen.1.26, 28).

⁶ Cf John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p.90.

Acts of John (ca.150–200), which survives apart from Nag Hammadi, Jesus is described as never leaving footprints nor blinking an eye, and sometimes seeming immaterial to the touch. The Last Supper and the Passion narrative are replaced by a hymn and a dance.⁷ The hymn mentions an Eightfold and a Twelfefold, and suggests that dance is a way to knowledge. Later, John has a vision of a cross glowing in the sky, from which comes a disembodied voice of Jesus explaining that the “cross of light” which he calls Logos, intelligence, Christ, way, Resurrection, etc., is the reality; Jesus’ bodily crucifixion is only an appearance. The cross of light, though, is “the marking off of all things and the uplifting and foundation of those things that are fixed but had been unstable and the harmony of the wisdom and indeed the wisdom of the harmony.”⁸

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* Jesus rises first then dies. His resurrection is a moment of spiritual transformation,⁹ by which in turn the Gnostic initiate will know the universe and him- or herself: “Say, then, from the heart that you are the perfect day, and in you dwells the light that does not fail... For you are the understanding that is drawn forth.”¹⁰ To this end, *The Discourse of the Eighth and the Ninth*, as its name suggests, is concerned with realms above the Seven Heavens, and offers a ritual to enable this ascent. The inhabitants of the heavens interest the Gnostics, and the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* says that Jesus appeared to the “angels as an angel.”¹¹ Contemporary spiritualities are similarly fascinated by angels.¹²

All this can be read as a form of spiritual escapism, and Elaine Pagels has argued that the main attraction of Gnosticism was the bodily cost of being a Christian.¹³ When Christians were being routinely martyred, Gnosticism offered an inner initiation and a practice closer to that of mystery religions or philosophical traditions such as Hermetism and Platonism.

So did the Gnostics just borrow their cosmological teachings from philosophy and myth? This widely accepted view is questioned by Jean Daniélou.¹⁴ While reiterating the opposition of the public teaching of the Church to the so-called “secret tradition” that Gnostics such as Basilides and Valentinus claimed to have received from the Apostles, Daniélou argues that Irenaeus (ca.130–200) and other Christian writers knew “a gnostic tradition which was orthodox”, that, they

⁷ *Acts of John* 93–96.

⁸ *Ibid.* 98.

⁹ *Gospel of Philip* 56.

¹⁰ *Gospel of Truth* 32.31–33.14.

¹¹ *Gospel of Philip* 58.

¹² See my ‘Are Angels Just a Matter of Faith?’, *New Blackfriars* 86 (2005), pp.568–583.

¹³ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979), ch.4.

¹⁴ Jean Daniélou, ‘Les Traditions Secrètes des Apôtres’, *Eranos Jahrbuch* 21 (1962), pp.199–215.

thought, came from the Apostles.¹⁵ These teachings included the cosmic symbolism of the Cross, the existence of multiple heavens and Christ's descent and ascension through them. Clement of Alexandria (ca.150–220), wrote in his *Miscellanies (Stromateis)*, that the gnosis was “the knowledge and apprehension of things present, future, and past . . . which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles.”¹⁶ In Clement's lost work *Hypotyposes* (“Outlines”), quoted by Eusebius, he says that these few were “James the righteous, John, and Peter . . . entrusted by the Lord after his resurrection with the *gnosis*. They imparted it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the Seventy, one of whom was Barnabas.”¹⁷

Clement's most intriguing passage is at the beginning of his *Miscellanies*:

Thus the Lord did not hinder from doing good while keeping the Sabbath; but allowed us to communicate of those divine mysteries, and of that holy light, to those who are able to receive them . . . But secret things (*ta aporreta*) are entrusted to speech (*logo; pisteuetai*), not to writing, as is the case with God . . . But the mysteries are delivered mystically, that what is spoken may be in the mouth of the speaker; rather not in his voice but in his understanding (*to; noeisthai*).¹⁸

Daniélou insists that Christian *gnosis* does not teach truths different from the content of “simple faith”, that is, “truths and actions accomplished by Christ”: rather, *gnosis* is a “deepening” of these.¹⁹ This corresponds to Clement's system of a two-stage initiation (which might be recognised in modern Roman Catholicism as Initiation and Mystagogy). Addressing the issue of secrecy, Daniélou argues that Paul knew the tradition and used it to combat the pretensions of “Judeo-Christian Gnostics” (cf Eph.1.21, 1 Cor.2.8), but, like all real mystics (cf 2 Cor.12.2–4), he guarded against abuses of mysticism.²⁰ As teachings corresponding to this hypothetical tradition appear in Christian apocrypha of Jewish inspiration, such as *The Ascension of Isaiah*, and a journey across the heavens is the subject of the Jewish apocryphon 1 Enoch, Daniélou suggests that Christian Gnosis issues from a specifically Jewish Christian milieu.

Margaret Barker supports Daniélou's defence of early Christian Gnosis, arguing that it belongs to Jesus' oral teaching and continued

¹⁵ Ibid. p.199. All translations of Daniélou are mine.

¹⁶ Clement, *Miscellanies* VI.7.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* II.1.

¹⁸ Clement, *Miscellanies* I.1.

¹⁹ Daniélou, p.201.

²⁰ Ibid. pp.211–213.

the tradition of the First Temple. In this light she also defends teachings from specifically Gnostic sources.²¹

Clearly the question of cosmology, Gnosticism and Christianity is not simple. So we will examine what cosmological traditions can be gleaned from early Christian sources, and their credibility. Next, we will look Christian understandings of the word *gnosis*, and what connection *gnosis* may have with cosmological traditions.

The Cosmological Teachings of Early Christianity

The Cosmic Cross: Irenaeus interprets “the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge” (Ephesians 3.18–19) as a mystical reading of the crucifixion. This is how the Logos made visible to the world the imprint that he had already made on the universe: the heavens, the things under the earth, and the four cardinal points.²² Gregory of Nyssa says that Paul knew this “from the ineffable words during his initiation in the sanctuary of Paradise”²³ – i.e. the Third Heaven experience of 2 Cor.12.2–4. This, combined with the celebrated apparition of a cross over the Mount of Olives in 351²⁴ is the probable source of much Christian art, such as the golden cross surrounded by stars in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna. References to the cosmic implications of the cross are found in liturgical hymnody: “by this stream [of Christ’s blood] earth, sea, stars and the world are washed.”²⁵ Or more recently,

O faithful Cross, you stand unmoved
While ages run their course:
Foundation of the universe,
Creation’s binding force.²⁶

And in Prudentius’ *Vexilla Regis*, “The Cross shines forth in mystic glow”.²⁷ All of these recall the Gnostic *Acts of John* cited above, without the denial of the Passion.

The *Mishnah* (ca.200 CE) forbade the asking of questions on “the four things”: what is above, what is below, what was before and

²¹ Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: the Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2003), ch.1.

²² Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (DAP) 34.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Paschal Homily II.7*.

²⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Letter to the Emperor Constantius* 4.

²⁵ Venantius Fortunatus, *Lustris Sex* (Lauds Passiontide hymn, *Antiphonarium Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum*, Rome, 1933, p.31).

²⁶ From the Stanbrook Abbey Hymnal. In *The Divine Office: the Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, vol.2, p.573* (hymn no.21).

²⁷ *New English Hymnal* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1986), no.79.

what will be after.²⁸ This ban might date from the Christian era,²⁹ but if so, it would shed an interesting light on Clement's claim of secret things taught by Christ: the Greek *aporreta* can also mean "forbidden". It would also suggest that Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish contemporary of Jesus who came from a priestly family, was referring to more than Plato's *Timaeus* when he wrote, "the everlasting *logos* of God . . . extending himself from the midst to its utmost bounds and from its extremities to the midst again. For the father who begat him constituted his word such a bond of the universe as nothing can break."³⁰ And Enoch, because he was just, was shown secret things in the heavens (1 En.1.2; 46.3; 60.10).

Angels and stars: in Revelation 1.20 the seven stars are the angels of the Seven Churches (cf also Rev.8.11). This identification of angels and stars is hinted at in Job 38.7. It is firmly in the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic, such as the apocryphal 1 Enoch, which is quoted by Jude (14) and by Irenaeus.³¹ The Enoch tradition continued for centuries in Christianity through the *Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch* (2 Enoch), and 1 Enoch is included in the Ethiopian Orthodox Bible. In 1 En.80.6 we read, "And many of the chiefs of the stars shall make errors in respect to the orders given them; they shall change their courses and functions and not appear at the seasons prescribed for them."

This suggests, first, that angels *as stars* influence the cosmos by their behaviour. This may explain the puzzling tradition of zodiacs and astrological clocks in churches (e.g Chartres, Münster and Strasbourg cathedrals). Aquinas believed that the stars could influence human behaviour, but that wise people could surmount a negative astral influence.³² He does not make the connection with angels, however. He condemns predictive astrology in line with the Judeo-Christian tradition,³³ and indeed, there is no suggestion in 1 Enoch of such a practice. Clement of Alexandria took up Philo's zodiacal interpretation of the twelve tribes of Israel on the ephod of the High Priest (Ex.28.6–12), adding the twelve apostles.³⁴

Second, because the angels/stars move in orderly fashion, they dance: the *choroi* of angels. The celestial dance is a complex tradition,

²⁸ *Mishnah ben Haggigah* 2.1.

²⁹ Though cf Deut.29.29.

³⁰ Philo, *On Planting*, 8–10; cf Plato, *Timaeus*, 36c. I have slightly amended Colson and Whitaker's translation (Loeb Classical Library, *Philo*, vol.3, 1930).

³¹ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* (AH) IV.16.2. citing 1 Enoch 13; cf 2 Enoch 4.7.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.115 art.4. On the stars and the heavens in medieval culture, see C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: an Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (CUP, 1964), ch.5.

³³ Deut.18.10; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2116.

³⁴ Clement, *Miscellanies* V.6.38, commenting on Philo, *Life of Moses* II.122f.

more implicit than explicit in early sources and beyond the scope of this article.³⁵

1 Enoch also has non-Biblical archangels, such as Uriel. The Roman Catholic tradition sticks to the three Biblical archangels (Michael, Gabriel and Raphael), while the Byzantine tradition knows seven.³⁶ Traces survive in the West, predominantly in stained glass windows and folk traditions: Uriel is mentioned in a song from the Outer Hebrides.³⁷

Finally, there is a “tradition of the presbyters” (the apostles’ disciples) quoted in the *Apostolic Tradition*, a 4th-century liturgical constitution: at midnight the whole creation, stars, trees, angels and souls of the just, stops to sing the praises of the Lord. The constitution encourages those Christians who can participate in this cosmic liturgy by rising at midnight and praying.³⁸ Clearly in the tradition of the cosmic praise of Psalms 148–150 and Revelation, it provides a cosmic dimension of the early Christian tradition of keeping vigil, which reaches its apogee in the Christmas and Easter liturgies.

The Heavens. According to Irenaeus’ *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, the earth is surrounded by seven heavens, each corresponding to one of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit (cf Is.11.2).³⁹ The Seven Heavens are also described systematically in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (late 1st century or the first half of the 2nd). In the former, a Christian apocalypse grafted on to a Jewish legend of the martyrdom of Isaiah, the prophet ascends through seven heavens until in the seventh he is transfigured and becomes like an angel. He is taught about how Christ descended through the heavens to take flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary: he disguises himself by taking the form of the angels of whichever heaven he is passing through. To enter each heaven he gives a password, except when entering the lowest heaven, nearest the earth, where he doesn’t need to because the good and bad angels are too busy fighting to notice him! At Christ’s ascension, the angels are astonished to see a human being, glorified, ascending through the heavens.⁴⁰ Irenaeus also knew the

³⁵ For a non-technical summary, see my ‘The Easter Dances of the Cathedrals’, <http://thebardschool.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/easter-dance-of-cathedrals.html>

³⁶ Uriel, Selaphiel, Jegudiel, and Barachiel are commemorated together with the other three on the Feast of the Archangel Michael and the other Bodiless Powers (8 November).

³⁷ See Esther de Waal, *God under my Roof: Celtic Songs and Blessings* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1984), p.13.

³⁸ *Apostolic Tradition* 41.

³⁹ DAP 9. Adela Yarbro Collins (*Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp.21–54) seems not to know DAP, thus missing a vital link between the Seven Heavens and early Christian theology.

⁴⁰ *Ascension of Isaiah* 7.1–9.18.

last of these traditions,⁴¹ which casts light on the enigmatic phrase in the hymn 1 Tim.3.16, “he was seen by angels”.

Shorter and tighter than 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch recounts the patriarch’s ascent through seven heavens. In the first, Enoch sees the angels which control the atmospheric elements – snow, rain etc. In the second he sees the fallen angels; in the third, paradise (like Eden) and hell for humankind, and angels worshipping God; and so on, until in the seventh heaven Enoch is anointed and, like Isaiah, becomes as an angel.⁴² The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, another early Christian work of obvious Jewish inspiration, also mentions seven heavens. In the ‘Testament of Levi’, the first heaven is sad, as it sees the misdeeds of humanity. The higher heavens contain angels who punish or intercede for humankind. In the seventh heaven is the heavenly liturgy.⁴³ The Babylonian Talmud says that the first heaven is empty; the second is the firmament and the storehouses of the snow, rain, hail and dew are in the sixth.⁴⁴ Note again, though, that the Talmud only dates in its present form from 200 CE, so we cannot say for certain that the Seven Heavens tradition pre-dates Christianity, although it might do.⁴⁵

The anti-Gnostic *Epistle of the Apostles* (pre-180 CE) includes the teaching about the descent and ascent of Christ found in *The Ascension of Isaiah*, and postulates an Eighth heaven: Jesus says to the disciples on Easter evening, “I came into being on the eighth day, which is the day of the Lord.”⁴⁶ Jesus rose on the first day of the second week, and Irenaeus says that according to the presbyters, the Eighth was Paradise and the Ninth, the City.⁴⁷ This would suggest that the Nine Orders of Angels in *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius is more than neo-Platonist speculation.

The Seven Heavens tradition supports Daniélou’s definition of the Christian gnosis as a “deepening” of the truths of simple faith. Heavens in the plural are widely attested in Scripture, beginning with Gen.1.1. Jesus speaks in fact of “the Kingdom of the Heavens (*tōn ouranōn*)” (e.g. Mt 3.2; 5.3,10), a point lost in translation. In Eph.4.10, Jesus “ascended far above all the heavens” (cf also Hebr.4.14, 7.26, 8.1). In Rev.4.3 there was a rainbow around the throne, and a rainbow of course contains *seven* colours (even if, in the apophaticism of apocalyptic, this one somehow looked like an

⁴¹ DAP 84.

⁴² 2 En.3–21. Note that some versions give three more heavens.

⁴³ *Testament of Levi* III.1–8.

⁴⁴ Talmud, *Hagigah* 12b.

⁴⁵ In 1 Enoch 60.11–12 an angel tells Enoch of the hidden content of the heavens (e.g. the chambers of the winds), and this can be read as sevenfold.

⁴⁶ *Epistle of the Apostles* 17 (Coptic).

⁴⁷ AH V.36.1–2.

emerald!). The visionary of 2 Corinthians 12 had ascended to the Third Heaven: the apocrypha tell us its contents. They differ, but this makes for interesting comparisons and connections. So 2 Enoch confirms 2 Cor.12.3 that the Third was paradise (and hell), tended by worshipping angels, which indicates the heavenly liturgy. For Irenaeus, it is the Spirit's gift of Knowledge, and for the *Ascension of Isaiah* the memory of the world is not named there. The Mishnah says that the mills of manna are there. Put these together, and you have a knowledge which is not of this world: perhaps that's why Paul's visionary heard there "unsaid words" (*arreta reta*) which it is not possible (*ouk exon*), physically or ethically or perhaps both, for a person to utter (2 Cor.12.4). This ineffable knowledge is found in heaven and in the liturgy. The mills of manna would have an additional association, for Christians, with the Eucharist.

The Seven Heavens also make sense of the Seven Angels and Spirits of God in Revelation: in the *Ascension of Isaiah* there is a different type of angel in each heaven. The seraphim, cherubim, Thrones (Col.1.16), Sovereignities, Authorities, Powers, or Dominions (Eph.1.21, cf Eph.3.10) would make seven kinds of angels; add the archangels and "ordinary" angels, and you have nine.

The Seven Heavens were known at least until Dante's *Paradiso*,⁴⁸ and remain in the colloquial expression, "s/he was in the Seventh Heaven".

The extraordinary fruitfulness of the New Earth. Irenaeus says the presbyters "who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related how they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times" that there would be extraordinary fertility, each vine having ten thousand shoots and each shoot ten thousand branches, each wheat yield ten thousand grains, and so on, and animals live in peace with human beings and with each other. Irenaeus notes that Papias, "the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, an old man", wrote this down "in his fourth book."⁴⁹ There are clear echoes here of Isaiah 11.6–9, and perhaps some midrash of Revelation 21.1 and 22.1–2.

The Status of the Traditions and Their Reliability

These cosmological traditions are a mixture. Some, such as the Cosmic Cross, are interpretations of Scripture. Others elucidate or "deepen", to use Daniélou's expression, passages of Scripture, such as the angels-stars connection and multiple heavens. We can see

⁴⁸ See Lewis, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ AH V.33.3–4; cf DAP 61.

immediately that the Gnostic seven or nine heavens have at least a counterpart in a Christian source. But are these traditions credible?

For them to be credible, they need to be traceable with reasonable certainty to the apostles themselves. I follow the approach of Richard Bauckham in his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*.⁵⁰ The Gnostics themselves appealed to a tradition of teachers, and Clement of Alexandria invokes a chain of witnesses going back to Peter, James and John.⁵¹ As we saw above, Irenaeus also invokes the authority of John for one of his teachings. Papias, quoted by Eusebius, says, “I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.”⁵² He collected the testimony of disciples of Jesus disciples’ John and Aristion, another disciple of Jesus, because he realised that first-hand witnesses were dying out.

Bauckham argues that the appeal to eyewitnesses is just as important today: a large part of our knowledge of the Holocaust relies on eyewitness testimony.⁵³ But since *all* historical sources are a mixture of fact and interpretation, the reliability or otherwise of the witness(es) is capital.⁵⁴ Eusebius did not consider Papias very intelligent,⁵⁵ the implication being that he would not have been a good judge of the testimonies. Corroborated eyewitness testimony is important in the New Testament: Matthias was chosen to replace Judas because he had had been with the others from the beginning and witnessed the risen Jesus (Acts 1.21–22). Minor differences in accounts of the Resurrection can be explained by the appeal to different witnesses: in Matthew, Mary Magdalene “and the other Mary” went to see the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning (Mt.28.1), but Luke’s witnesses are Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James (Lk.24.9). Both accounts tell us that the tomb was empty, but in Luke’s account there are two angels, in Matthew’s, only one. Such detail differences – especially as the experience must have been a shock for the witnesses – have a ring of authenticity. And Paul says that he “received” that Christ appeared to Cephas (Peter), then the twelve, then “to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep” (1 Cor.15.3–6). The fact that some were still alive meant that Paul’s hearers could check for themselves. Also, many minor characters are named by Mark, such Bartimaeus, Alexander, Rufus and Alexander. This, together with the sheer familiarity of “the other Mary” in Matthew,

⁵⁰ Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2006.

⁵¹ Clement, *Miscellanies* I.1.

⁵² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III.39.

⁵³ Bauckham, ch.18.

⁵⁴ Bauckham, p.20.

⁵⁵ Eusebius, *op.cit.*

suggests a close-knit community. Early Christianity was a religion of small, inter-connected communities in a small area. Everyone knew each other at least indirectly. As a result, *and especially in a context of primarily oral storytelling*, it would have been very difficult for individuals to invent stories: *the community would have corrected them*. By comparing the Gospels with storytelling in modern Arab villages, Bauckham shows that the community exercises informal control. A certain amount of poetic licence is fine, so Matthew could add later teachings of Jesus to Mark's miracle stories. Also, stories may well have been selected because of their relevance to the community's situation at that moment. But the storyteller has to get the basic facts right and repeat the punchline verbatim,⁵⁶ especially where these are essential to the community's self-understanding.

So when Irenaeus berates the Gnostics for splitting off, he probably sees part of the community separating from the whole as part of the truth separating from the whole. His *Against [the] Heresies* literally means "against choosings (*hairēseis*)". Outside the community the informal control of storytelling was lost. So even though the part of the truth they chose may well have come down a chain of witnesses, as the Gnostics protested, its separation from the rest of the truth would soon lead to its distortion: whereas, Irenaeus implies, his audience could check his teachings with the rest of the community.

But in that case, the Gnostic heresy was not primarily invention, but rather distortion of Christian teaching. Add to this the corroboration by Nag Hammadi of Irenaeus' portrayal of Gnostic beliefs, and he comes out as a credible witness. Therefore we have good reason to believe that the Seven Heavens formed part of the apostles' teaching, as Irenaeus taught; likewise, "the Eighth and the Ninth" which Irenaeus attributes to the apostles' disciples "the presbyters"; and the extraordinary fertility of the New Earth which he attributes to Jesus via John and Polycarp, whom Irenaeus knew personally, not just through Papias.⁵⁷ The attribution of the midnight cosmic praise to the presbyters by the *Apostolic Tradition* also deserves proper consideration, as do the traditions and interpretations/"deepenings" of Scripture in Irenaeus (such as the cosmic interpretation of the cross) and the Christian apocrypha (such as the Descent of Christ through the heavens).

The Knowledge of Jesus Christ

The cosmological content of these teachings sounds strongly like "things past, present and future", which Clement claims that Jesus

⁵⁶ Bauckham, ch.10.

⁵⁷ In view of this, Jeremias' dismissal of this tradition as "fantasy . . . run riot" appears methodologically unsustainable (Joachim Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, tr. R.H. Fuller, 2nd English edition (London: SPCK, 1964), p.34).

had handed secretly to Peter, James and John. How plausible is this? Peter, James and John were the inner circle of Apostles: they alone witnessed the Transfiguration (Mt.17.1–9, Mk.9.2–8, Lk.9.28–36) and were with Jesus in his agony (Mt.26.37; Mk.14.33). When he is alone with the Twelve and the disciples he explains the meaning of the parables (Mk.4.11, Mt.13.11). To those outside (*tois exo* for Mark, *ekeinois de* for Matthew) were given only these “things thrown in the way”. So the Twelve and the disciples are *hoi eso* – the genuinely “esoteric” who are, according to Matthew, “to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of the Heavens” (Mt.13.11). The compassion of Jesus in the Gospels as a whole precludes reading this as the spiritual elitism of the Gnostics: rather, he is acknowledging that not everyone is ready for the truth (note how Jesus frequently imposes silence on those he has healed, e.g. Mk.1.40–45). The light of faith will have to be preceded for many by the darkness of having their preconceived ideas challenged by the parables. A bit like the unsettling effect of modern art, and the ensuing work of memory.

Gnosis is often mentioned in the New Testament, usually being translated as “knowledge”. Zechariah, who had seen the angel Gabriel by the Altar of Incense, sings of “the knowledge of salvation” (Lk.1.77). Knowing that God has saved his people and/or salvific knowledge? Most striking are Jesus’ words to the lawyers: “For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and hindered those who were entering” (Lk.11.52). The key suggests that knowledge dwells in a *place*. Just before this (11.51), Jesus had spoken of Zechariah being murdered between the altar and the sanctuary. And he gave Peter the *key* to the Kingdom of the Heavens (Mt.16.19). Clement had said the heretics (from the period, this must be the Gnostics) had a false key which wouldn’t let them open the main door, but just the side door a fraction, by which they pierce a hole in the wall of the church.⁵⁸ Their knowledge was distorted because outside its proper context, the church. In the Book of Jubilees, a Jewish apocryphon which is part of the Ethiopian Orthodox canon (like 1 Enoch), Eden is the Holy of Holies (Jub.8.18). And the Tree of Knowledge was in Eden, along with the Tree of Life which was in the City (Rev.22.2), the Ninth Heaven according to the presbyters.

So for all Clement’s flair for allegory (such as to the Dionysiacs⁵⁹), his teaching on *gnosis* is solidly supported by the New Testament. Put together with the evidence of Irenaeus on the traditions of the apostles and presbyters and the Christian apocrypha, it would seem that there was indeed an authentic Christian *gnosis* of the hidden

⁵⁸ Clement, *Miscellanies* VII.17.1–2.

⁵⁹ Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen* XII.

depths of the cosmos, a gnosis associated with the liturgy and the Christian sanctuary. An early Eucharistic prayer in the *Didache* gives thanks for “the life and knowledge” made known through Jesus.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the 4th century, Eusebius, so critical of Papias, doesn’t comment on Clement saying that Jesus handing down the *gnosis* to Peter, James, and John (see above). Basil, a generation later, will juxtapose with Scripture those teachings “in mystery” (from the context, the liturgy), such as the Sign of the Cross, the blessings of the baptismal water and turning to the East to pray, “but there are few how know that we are seeking our ancient homeland, the paradise which God planted in Eden, in the East.” He explains that these traditions were handed down “silently and in mystery” in order to guard the sacred character of the mysteries and to prevent the “*gnosis* of dogma” from being scoffed at by the uninitiated.⁶¹ And the extraordinarily named *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a liturgical constitution dating from the 7th century in its surviving form, has Jesus teach the liturgy and structure of the church, beginning with an apocalypse, on Easter Sunday evening. He enjoins the bishop to teach the mysteries during the fasts “to those who have ears to hear”.⁶² Clearly there is a lot of “he who hears you, hears me” in this – the customs described are manifestly late. But the literary structure continues the tradition of associating liturgy and *gnosis*.

However, Irenaeus plays down the idea of a secret tradition – without denying it, though:

For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to “the perfect” apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves . . . which men, if they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon [to the Church], but if they should fall away, the direst calamity.⁶³

This suggests there were Christian clergy who fell away and betrayed the knowledge. More importantly, Irenaeus’ whole understanding of orthodoxy and heresy hinge on his insistence on the unity of the church, as we saw above. Once outside, you *cannot* properly understand the teaching of Christ, so what you think is a hidden mystery is in fact a distortion of the truth. In fact, Paul had already carefully qualified *gnosis*. He upholds “the utterance of knowledge” (*logos gnoseos*) as a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor.12.8) and celebrates “the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God . . . For from him

⁶⁰ *Didache* 9.

⁶¹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66.

⁶² *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Testamentum Domini)* I.22.

⁶³ AH III.3.1; cf also III.2.2. Irenaeus also mentions, and is dismissive of, the appeal to apocrypha (AH III.20.1). Clearly they were already becoming “guilty by association” with the Gnostics.

and through him and to him are *all things*”, a clear cosmological reference (Rom.11.33, 36). But a warning: “all of us possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up” (1 Cor.8.1). All knowledge, without love, is worth nothing (1 Cor.13.2). A lack of love could only split the church (cf 1 Jn.2.7–29). And if, as Irenaeus believed, Paul was writing of the cosmic dimensions of the Cross in Eph.3.18–19, it’s significant that he prays the Ephesians will “know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge” (cf also 1 Cor.2.7–8). In Acts, Peter speaks of the Jews “hanging him (Jesus) on a tree” (Acts 5.30, 10.39): this may allude not just to the curse of Deut.21.22–23, but also to the Tree of Knowledge at which the Fall happened. By the Cross, the Tree of Life is restored too – a favourite theme of hymnody.

The New Testament, the patristic tradition and the Christian apocrypha thus support a belief in an authentic Christian *gnosis* which is a gift of the Spirit, a participation by grace in God’s knowledge of the cosmos, his creation, and a deepening of what is already in Scripture. It was apocalyptic, in that it revealed the hidden depths of reality, “the knowledge and apprehension of things present, future, and past”, to use Clement’s phrase, especially the cosmic dimensions of the cross, the angels, the heavens and the new earth. There is a strong suggestion that this knowledge was transmitted through the liturgy (note the tradition of the Cosmic Cross in Latin hymnody), which guarded its apophatic dimension. Gnosticism distorted the tradition and its descendants continue to do so: so for example, Freke and Gandy are right, in *The “Jesus Mysteries”*, that there was a second initiation in the mysteries: this is evidenced by Clement, the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. But by taking it outside the Church, they fundamentally misunderstand Jesus as a mere Dionysius/Osiris.

There is a scientific objection to Christian *gnosis*, however. The tradition of the Seven (or Nine) heavens rests on a Ptolemaic, geocentric cosmology. Surely the Copernican revolution swept all that away?⁶⁴ On one level, to argue this is a category error: the content of the heavens in the apocrypha is metaphysical: like the angels that inhabit them, the heavens are invisible, non-physical levels of reality. But in fact we live daily with an authentic subjectivity which really affects our world physically: sunrise and sunset. The sun doesn’t rise or set, the earth rotates: but the natural world is affected, and its cycles governed, by the sun’s disappearance and re-appearing. Admittedly, the Ptolemaic system and the spiritualities which accompanied it until Dante must have looked suddenly old-fashioned and irrelevant amid the scientific ferment (and religio-political upheavals) of the Renaissance. So the *gnosis* was forgotten. Perhaps this was

⁶⁴ See Frederick M. Huchel, *The Cosmic Ring Dance of the Angels: an Early Christian Rite of the Temple* (The Frithurex Athenaeum, 2009), pp.134–136.

why, in the 18th century, Clement of Alexandria fell under suspicion and was removed from the canon of saints of the Latin Church⁶⁵ (but not in the East). Now, five centuries later, the rise of contemporary spiritualities and their cosmological interests are reminding us that too much was expected of science: facts do not produce values or soul-food.

Applying the Knowledge

This *ressourcement* of Christian *gnosis* is not “ready to go”. It’s only the beginning of a process. The spiritual but not religious people with whom I’ve discussed my research have responded with surprise and positive interest to teachings which touch on this cosmos in which we live. The same people seek experience rather than intellectual debate, however. Precisely because true *gnosis* was knowledge of Scripture and probably transmitted through the liturgy, as well as through the strongly cosmological imagery of palaeo-Christian art, it would be wise to start by re-reading and re-imagining our own tradition in the light of Christian *gnosis*.

The Cosmic Cross. Where many churches are experiencing difficulty in giving a convincing account of the Atonement, Irenaeus’ reading of the Cross cuts straight through all punitive and masochistic interpretations. The symbolism of growth through suffering into the wholeness of reality speaks to some schools of psychotherapy.⁶⁶

Angels. The cosmological tradition supports a rich angelology, against its reduction by some exegetes. The angels-stars connection is important for responding to the contemporary fascination with astrology, and so the insistence of the tradition on the presence of bad as well as good angels is crucial. That in turn revives the tradition of spiritual combat, cleansed of associations of fundamentalism and political extremism.

The Heavens. A “layered” view of reality. As the Heavens are also stages of spiritual ascent, following Christ, to union with the Father, they may be the origin of the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory (the heavens you didn’t get through in this life, you finish in the next). If so, this tradition is a place of ecumenical dialogue. Its early origins also prompt a re-reading of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor – accusations of “mere Christian Platonism” will no

⁶⁵ Andrew Itter, *Esoteric teachings in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p.7f.

⁶⁶ E.g. Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: the Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair* (Boston & London: Shambhala), p.141.

longer hold. Similarly the cosmic intuitions of Teilhard de Chardin, among others, can be re-read and clarified. Indeed, this process began in Vatican II with the concept of universal evolution in *Gaudium et Spes*.⁶⁷ Pope Benedict also seems to incline towards a cosmic theology: he has praised Teilhard's "great vision" of cosmic liturgy,⁶⁸ and has used apocrypha such as 2 Enoch in his preaching.⁶⁹ His theology of liturgical music – another major issue for Western Christianity – is also strongly cosmological.⁷⁰

The extraordinary fruitfulness of the earth. A teaching of hope in the face of the ecological crisis, and an incentive for Christians to engage more actively and with more theological confidence.⁷¹

The Liturgy and knowledge. We have seen how *gnosis* seems to have been associated with the Holy of Holies. This makes sense of the drama of concealment and revelation through the iconostasis in some Eastern liturgies. It also might cast light on the ongoing liturgical problems of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, and also the questions arising about worship in Evangelical circles. It's ironic that a period when theology is so focussed on liturgy should also be marked by serious intra-ecclesial disputes about liturgical style, which have weakened unity and churches' attractiveness to outsiders. Screens and altar rails have been removed, with the intention of revealing the mystery, but there is a growing sense that mystery has been lost – just when contemporary spiritualities want it. Did we really know our mystery in the first place? With "reform of the reform" and "fresh expressions of church", what might liturgy be like in the light of the cosmological *gnosis*?

Theology. Following on from this, the primacy of liturgy in Eastern theologies is more obvious. To push it one step further, could the quarrels about natural theology between Catholics and Protestants go back to the forgetting of Christian cosmology? Was grace *against* natural knowledge in fact about the Spirit's gift of *gnosis*?

Faith and science. With the firmament (visible world) the province of science, and the invisible heavens the province of mystical

⁶⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* 5.

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI, homily before Vespers, 24 July 2009, Aosta cathedral; *L'Osservatore Romano*, English online edition, 29 July 2009.

⁶⁹ Benedict XVI, Easter Vigil homily, 3 April 2010: <http://www.ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=101417>

⁷⁰ Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, tr. J. Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), pp.150–154.

⁷¹ See Margaret Barker, *Creation: a Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

theology, the heat is taken off the faith/science debate. The ascent through the seven heavens also suggests a connection between the firmament and the metaphysical heavens by transcendence.

Evangelisation. Whatever the benefits of Christian *gnosis* for the churches, is it ethical to preach what seems to have been secret, post-initiatory teachings? The ineffability of mystical teachings operates at two levels, as in the vision of 2 Cor.12: first, the intellectual, that they really are beyond words, and the best starting point is the questions asked by the spiritual seeker which show that s/he is ready. The second, the ethical, recognises that not only can mysticism be misunderstood (St. John of the Cross can look misanthropic at first sight, for example), but the cosmological tradition is *gnosis*, knowledge, and knowledge is power. On the other hand, the *disciplina arcana* of the Church at different periods has been in response to specific dangers. The prevalence of Gnosticism and magic in the ambient culture of the first years of Christianity (cf Simon Magus) meant that misunderstanding and misuse had to be avoided. But in our times, the danger is opposite. Whereas Irenaeus and Clement might have been writing for a quite restricted circle, modern publishing means everyone can access their writings. Apocrypha and Gnostic texts are freely available on the internet (even if in old translations) and are hotly debated (and misunderstood) on esoteric websites, filtering down to softer contemporary spiritualities. We need to engage. Indeed, times of global crisis are, as John saw when the heavens were opened to him, times of intensified spiritual battle. They are apocalyptic times – times of unveiling of the truth about us, and the truth about Christ. Perhaps it is time to unveil the Church's oldest, most forgotten traditions.

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