Christian Beginnings and Gnosticism
Aspects of My Religious Biography[1]

We will rediscover the inherent vitality of our traditions only if we can enter the minds of the people who formulated them and thus gain a clearer understanding of the experiences and motivations that underlie those formulations. What will that require? First, open minds; second, new sources of information about the early Christian movement – information and analyses that will shed new light on the thinking of early Christians. Then at last those of us who were raised in the normative Christian tradition will have a chance to view the birth and development of Christianity objectively and with the clarity afforded by a new perspective.

See Also: *The Earliest Christian Text: 1 Thessalonians* (Salem OR: Polebridge Press, 2013)

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1. A glance backwards at my conversion and my acquaintance with liberal theology.

As a born again Christian I anxiously waited for the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven, almost on an hourly basis. Faith in my savior who had died for my sins and risen from the dead constituted the center of my life. The Bible was a daily source of inspiration for new insights. Not only did it contain all the necessary moral codes, but best of all it revealed to me that the Lord had elected me and, through his bloody death, rescued me from eternal punishment. In my religious life the recurrent image of a hangman created in my mind the idea of a god who must threaten in order to save and who destroys in order to expand his kingdom. The saying of Jesus that I heard every Sunday during the baptismal ceremony still

[1] In this lecture presented May 11 at St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield I have freely used my essay "From Faith to Knowledge," in *The Once and Future Jesus*, Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2000, 147–59. I thank Tom Hall for his help in matters of style and content.

rings in my ear: “Everyone who believes will be saved, but one who does not believe will be damned” (Mark 16:16).

Enlightened liberal Christians who sought to ease my religious struggles told me what my theology teachers would later repeat: You cannot understand the Bible literally. Such a reading, they said, is inadequate because the biblical texts belong to a specific time and consequently cannot be simplistically transferred to another time and place.

But I discovered that this seemingly wise approach often leads to a misunderstanding of the Bible. For example, if every miracle is understood as the miracle of coming to faith, then Jesus’ concrete demand that the rich man sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor is too easily mistaken for a demand to accept Jesus’ every word.

When I asked my liberal teachers whether they expected Jesus’ return on the clouds of heaven, they replied that attempting to answer such a question would necessarily lead to misunderstanding. They still owe me an answer to that matter, and to my repeated questions about the resurrection of Jesus. All I heard was a great deal of waffling, and after more than thirty years of waiting, I don’t want to hear more nonsense claiming that the biblical promises about the resurrection and the second coming of Jesus are true, but just haven’t taken place yet.

The high-water mark of this sort of nonsense can be seen in the fact that most of these academic theologians confess the apostle’s creed every Sunday though they personally repudiated 95% of its content. Nevertheless, when I publicly stated that for these reasons I could no longer consider myself a Christian, my superiors at the University of Göttingen, in close cooperation with the Lutheran Church, called for my immediate dismissal from the faculty of theology.

To say the least, the present situation is confused and cries out for remedy. I must perforce decide whether to accept historical criticism’s total refutation of the dogmatic system[2] or somehow force myself to accept the biblical world as my present reality. In the latter I can continue to attend Sunday services with a good conscience and participate with all my heart in the prayers addressed to the risen lord.

For compelling reasons that I’m sure need not be rehearsed in detail, the latter option is not available to me. I beg leave to remind you that since Jesus’ body either decomposed or

[2] As described by Ernst Troeltsch: “The historical method, once it is applied to biblical scholarship and church history, is a leaven which transforms everything and which finally causes the form of ALL previous theological methods (!) to disintegrate (!). Give historical method your little finger and it will take your whole hand.”

was otherwise disposed of, it neither rose nor was resuscitated. Consequently, he is not someone we can speak to in prayer.

And many find the first option, since at first sight it seems to consist in nothing but denials, to be less than appealing. Still, any scholarly denial is a positive intellectual act that prepares the way for a new synthesis. Our tradition gains everything if it discards its long-accustomed veils and evasions, for only then will it rise above the sterile context of church dogmatics into the life-enhancing sphere of free and open dialectic which, while sometimes chaotic, proves at last to be shining, warm, and beautiful.

However, we will rediscover the inherent vitality of our traditions only if we can enter the minds of the people who formulated them and thus gain a clearer understanding of the experiences and motivations that underlie those formulations. What will that require? First, open minds; second, new sources of information about the early Christian movement – information and analyses that will shed new light on the thinking of early Christians. Then at last those of us who were raised in the normative Christian tradition will have a chance to view the birth and development of Christianity objectively and with the clarity afforded by a new perspective.

2. A look at the Gnostics and their reinterpretation of the resurrection, and at the apostle Paul.

As you know, a second stream of early Christianity – commonly known as Gnosticism after the Greek *gnosis,* knowledge – was vigorously suppressed by bishops and other functionaries of the official church. This movement, which reached a climax in late antiquity, was based on the belief that religious understanding is primarily self-knowledge: the human soul is of heavenly origin. The world, like all material phenomena, is radically flawed or even corrupt, since it came into being as the result of a false step by a divine power. But each of us consists of a divine soul imprisoned in a material body that causes us to be unaware of our true essence and origin. And only by the call of the Savior, whom Christian Gnostics identified with Jesus, can the soul awaken from its drunken sleep. Once instructed about its origin and its fall, it achieves salvation by becoming reunited with the *plerôma,* the fullness, the heavenly world from which it comes.

The Gnostic "catechism" runs like this:

> Who were we? Into what have we been thrown? Whither are we hastening? From what are we saved? What is birth? What is rebirth?" (*Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2).

But the Gnostic search for answers to these questions did not involve abstract intellectual exercises or theoretical systems. Rather, their unsurpassed religious creativity led them to depict the history of the human self, which in the Gnostic texts is often identified with the human soul or with a spark of light. Thus Gnosticism expressed itself in narrative myths filled with powerful imagery.

Primary Gnostic sources have been available in abundance since the spectacular discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in December of 1945.[3] They reflect both a radical departure from dogmatics and a deep sense of religious experience. Of primary importance for our present concern is that they provide new evidence of the variety of Early Christianity and offer us a broader and thus better understanding of the first Christians.

By way of example, let me sketch from the Gospel of Philip the totally different meaning assigned to the resurrection of Jesus:

> Those who say that the lord died first and then rose up are in error, for he rose up and then he died. If one does not first attain the resurrection, will he not die? (NHC II, 3. 56,15–19; *Saying 51*.)

Here the author first declares the orthodox dogma of Jesus' death and resurrection to be erroneous because it reverses the true sequence of events. The resurrection, he claims, must occur first, for whoever does not attain his own resurrection by coming to know what is unchanging will have died both a spiritual and a physical death; such a person will have missed the true goals of life: imperishability and changelessness.

Indeed, similar notions of resurrection can be found in the New Testament. Let two examples suffice. In 2 Tim 2:17–18 a pupil of Paul attacks those who claim that the resurrection has already happened. They have

> swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place.

And the writer of John (5:24) has Jesus himself avow the "Gnostic heresy":

[3] The Nag Hammadi Library. Third, completely revised edition. James M. Robinson. General Editor. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990. Gerd Lüdemann/Martina Janssen. *Bibel der Häretiker. Die gnostischen Schriften aus Nag Hammadi*. Stuttgart: Radius Verlag, 1987. Gerd Lüdemann/Martina Janssen. *Suppressed Prayers. Gnostic Spirituality in Early Christianity*. London: SCM Press, 1998.

> Those who hear my word and believe the one who sent me, have eternal life and do not come to trial. No, they have passed through death to life.

Such a statement, however, was intolerable in the orthodox Church because the majority of Christians insisted on a final day of judgment and the resurrection of the body; and therefore a later editor softened John's bold assertion of the eternal presence of the resurrection of believers by inserting 5:28, 29:

> The time is coming when all who are in their graves … will come out, those who have done good, will be raised to life and those who have done evil acts will be raised to judgment.

Most Christians sought proof of the resurrection, and found satisfaction in the several assurances that Jesus could both eat and drink after the resurrection. Apparently, mere religious experience, even if it included one's own resurrection in the present, posed a serious threat to the whole dogmatic system. How could one rule a church thus undermined? Because it depended on one's following the dictates of the church, bodily resurrection had a political dimension.

From the creed of Jesus' resurrection to Christian Gnostic faith[4]

After 2000 years of orthodox Christianity, it may seem strange to hear that Christian Gnostics were so closely related to modern scholarship's reconstruction of earliest Christianity. But it is true.

In particular, the visionary nature of Gnostic spirituality recalls the Easter enthusiasm of the first Christians, whose visions were not of the fleshly Jesus, but of the spiritual Lord.[5] In fact, one may suggest that the resurrection creed of the earliest Christians led to both Gnostic faith and orthodox belief.

Newly discovered Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi allow us to better understand that faith. Let us only recall the Gnostic understanding of resurrection cited earlier which consists of a turnaround of the sequence of death and resurrection and which repudiates orthodox dogma. Resurrection in this life produces self-knowledge, and whoever does not

[4] For the following cf. James M. Robinson. "Jesus from Easter to Valentinus." Journal of Biblical Literature 101 (1982): 5–37.

[5] See my "The Resurrection – Fifteen Years Later," RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD BIBLICAL TRADITIONS IN DIALOGUE EDITED BY GEERT VAN OYEN – TOM SHEPHERD. BETL CCIL. Peeters: Leuven: 535–58.

learn this will suffer spiritual death. One must come to see resurrection as the transition to a new way of being. In one Nag Hammadi text we read:

> Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth. Indeed it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion, rather than the resurrection which has come into being though our Lord the Savior Jesus Christ … Everything is prone to change. The world is an illusion. …
>
> (T)he resurrection … is the truth that stands firm. It is the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness. For imperishability descends upon the perishable; the light flows down upon the darkness, swallowing it up. (NHC I,4. *Letter to Rheginos* 48–49.)

The author opposes two realms to one another: the world, which is subject to eternal change, and the realm of immutability. The world is an illusion for it changes constantly and thus is unable to remain stable. The resurrection, the truth, and the new Being, however, are stable, unchanging, and eternal; and for that reason they cannot be illusions.

Many Gnostic writings regard resurrection as the person's return to his or her true self, receiving again an original essential being as it was at the beginning, reclaiming an ultimate reality. To know the real meaning of resurrection, then, one must move from the mere name to the real existence it represents. One Gnostic text says it thus:

> Names given to the worldly things are very deceptive, for they divert our thoughts from what is correct to what is incorrect. Thus one who hears the word "God" does not perceive what is real, but perceives what is unreal. So also with "the Father" and "the Son" and "the Holy Spirit" and "life" and "light" and "resurrection" and "the Church (*ekklesia*)" and all the rest – people do not perceive what is real but they perceive what is unreal, unless they have come to know what is real. The names that are heard are in the world and deceive. [NHC II,3. *Gospel of Philip*, Logion 11]

Another passage from the same writing uses the early Greek principle "like attracts like" (*similia similibus*)[6] and expresses the discovery of one's self and of truth in the following way:

> It is not possible to see anything of the things that actually exist unless one becomes like them.

[6] Cf. Carl Werner Müller. Gleiches zu Gleichem: Ein Denkprinzip frühchristlichen Denkens. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965.

This is not the way with human beings in the world: they see the sun without being a sun; and they see the heaven and the earth and all other things, without being these things.

This is keeping with the truth.

But you saw something of that place, and you became those things.

You saw the Spirit, you became spirit.

You saw Christ, you became Christ.

You saw the Father, you shall become Father.

So in this place you see everything and do not see yourself,

but in that place you do see yourself – and what you see you shall become.

(NHC II,3. *Gospel of Philip*, Logion 44).

What kind of people stand behind these and similar texts that so powerfully stress the experience of faith and describe resurrection as a return to one's origin? At various places they call themselves the immovable race.[7] Their faith, which they consider identical with knowledge, aims at a total fulfillment of life, and is shaped by the realization of their own potential. Indeed, as a consequence of its devotion to knowledge, Gnostic faith is inspired by a divine power. Compare this witness from another Gnostic text:

> My soul went slack, and I fled and was very disturbed. And I turned to myself and saw the light that surrounded me and the Good that was in me, and I became divine. (NHC XI,3. *Allogenes 52*)

Thus Gnostics are open to new experiences that they previously had tried to thwart, yet they are able to do so only because they have learned to distinguish between what is stable and what is unstable – for the latter is always deceptive. Gnostics discover this deception in all things related to creation and this world, which they see as the work of an arrogant creator god. Yet because they have learned to recognize who he really is, they have thereby have become stronger than he. By knowing their real origin they surpass the creator god.

> Therefore, if people have knowledge, they are from above. If they are called, they hear, they answer, and they turn to him who is calling them, and ascend to him. And they know in what manner they are called. Having knowledge, they do the will of the one who called them, they wish to be pleasing to him, they receive rest. … They who have knowledge in this manner know where they come from and where they are going. They know as people who, having

[7] AJ 25,23; EvÄgypt 63,3; SJC 97,9; Zostr 6,27.

> become drunk, have turned away from drunkenness, (and) having returned to themselves, have set right what are their own. (*Gospel of Truth* 22; NHC I,3)

This text impressively shows the rediscovery of the subconscious self, which is identical with the divine from above. Once again self-knowledge leads to a strengthening because, having regained a clear vision previously lost due to drunkenness, the Gnostic believer has finally awakened. On this point, note yet another Gnostic text:

> For they who have not known themselves have known nothing, but they who have known themselves have at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all. So then, you, my brother Thomas, have taken notice of what is obscure to people, that is, what they ignorantly stumble against. (NHC II,7, *Book of Thomas the Contender* 138).

To repeat, the Gnostics are called "the ones who know themselves" (ibid.). Their way of living is further described in another Gnostic scripture:

> No one knows the God of truth except solely the people who will forsake all of their things of the world, having renounced the whole place of the world. … They have set themselves up as a power; they have subdued desire in every way within themselves. … They began to keep silent within themselves until the day when they should become worthy to be received above. They reject for themselves loquacity and disputations, and they endure the whole place; and they bear up under them, and they endure all of the evil things. And they are patient with every one; they make themselves equal to every one, and they also separate themselves from them. …
>
> They bore witness to the truth [...] the power, and they went into Imperishability, the place whence they came forth, having left the world, which resembles the night, and those in it who cause the stars to revolve. This, therefore, is the true testimony: When people come to know themselves and God, who is over the truth, they will be saved, and they will crown themselves with the crown unfading. (NHC IX,3. *Testimony of Truth* 41–45).

This text might be captioned "How people become themselves and attain maturity." Yet, this process of self-discovery can be successful only if one develops an inner calm and patience. Then the process will carry on by itself. This self-discovery is rewarding, for it presents human beings an imperishable crown, illumination granting them imperishability, and access to a divine power. This gain of additional power as a consequence of self-knowledge and its ecstatic character is the topic of one of the sayings of "Jesus" in the Gospel of Thomas:

> Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all. (*Logion 2*).

As the last of these illustrative texts let me quote another saying of "Jesus" from the same gospel, one that stresses the identity of knowledge of God and of oneself.

> If your leaders say to you, "Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, the (Father's) kingdom is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty. (*Logion 3*)

These Gnostic texts derive from people who focused their thought on the powers inherent in spiritually awakened human beings; they avoid a dualism of God and human beings and employ mythic and mystic language to express processes of the inner self. Since they saw in self-knowledge the way to healing and to salvation, they rejected traditional Christian doctrines that described Jesus' death as atonement for our sins, individual judgment at the end of time, and the church as the ordained institution of salvation. Accordingly, these texts offer the insight that the religion of the future – if indeed religion has a future – must focus on human beings and the spiritual powers that devolve to them as Children of the Light.

The early Christian experience

With these comments I have made a sweeping step into the second and third generation of Christians. Now it is time to move back to the only first-generation Christian who is represented by extant documents, for in Paul as in no other we can study the dynamics of the early Christian experience. Only then will we be ready to return to the Gnostics.

When Paul turned from a persecutor to a preacher of the gospel, he joined a movement shaped by the conviction that the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven was imminent. That follows from the content of the earliest of Paul's letters, 1 Thessalonians. In this letter, written around, 40 CE, he takes it for granted that he will be among those still alive at the second coming. The unfortunate handful of Christians who had already died would be raised first to compensate for the disadvantage of premature death. After that the rapture would occur: both

the minority of raised Christians and the majority of surviving Christians, including Paul, would be lifted up to meet the Lord in the air.[8]

It is evident that sooner or later such an expectation would face serious difficulties. It is common knowledge that Jesus did not come back and that like Paul the entire first Christian generation died.

How would Paul have responded to proof of the failure of the imminent expectation? Would he have given up his belief in Jesus? If not, how would he have sought to cope with the possibly embarrassing situation of an ever-increasing number of dead Christians in his communities?

All of you will remember Paul's words in one of his letters: "to live is Christ and to die is gain."[9] A little later he says, "I desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is better by far. But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."[10] This indicates that he hoped to be united with Christ immediately after his death.

That much of a shift in thinking cries out for an explanation of how and why Paul so considerably changed his belief and his message. The reason is quite clear: If Paul had not succeeded in adjusting, he would have had to deny his faith. But clearly he wanted to retain the trust on which his message, his proclamation, his self-perception, and his salvation depended. Who would lightly discard the hope of heavenly reward?

His solution to the quandary can no doubt be explained by examining the event that made him a servant of Christ. In or near Damascus, he tells us, he had a visionary experience of Christ, and as he proclaimed and acted out the power of this Christ experience it grew in importance until its indestructibility and therefore the permanence of the new way of life could not be doubted. It is therefore no wonder that this new life, vouchsafed to Paul by Christ himself, would insure his reuniting at the moment of death with Christ. Observing what must certainly have been going on in Paul's psyche after Damascus, one can easily see and understand the dramatic impulse towards a total fulfillment of this life, and at its end promise of a new humanity united with the cosmic Christ.

3. Jesus' experience of faith and its presuppositions

The Markan version of the saying about faith moving mountains is preserved in Mark 11:23 and Q (Matt 17:20/Luke 17:6). Mark's version reads as follows.

[8] 1 Thess 4:13–17.
[9] Phil 1:21.
[10] Phil 1:23, 24.

> Amen, I say to you, Whoever says to this mountain, Lift yourself up and cast yourself into the sea" and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come true, to him it will be granted.

This saying is based on an exaggerating metaphor of the kind that Jesus loved to use elsewhere (10:25)[11]. It underlines the power of a characteristic faith.

Let me hasten to add that in all likelihood the phrase "your faith has saved you" which often appears in healing stories[12] also goes back to the historical Jesus, although its connection with the stories is secondary. At the same time it must be emphasized that in the gospel tradition Jesus is never an object of faith.

Apparently, three groups of authentic sayings of Jesus are related to faith:

- the faith that moves mountains,
- the faith that is related to prayer,
- the faith that leads to healing.

What is the nature of such understandings of faith?

It is clear, of course, that the power presupposed by these three understandings of faith is God though Jesus does not mention him when talking about faith. Yet, as a Jew of his time, Jesus' understanding of faith must have been related to his understanding to God, all the more so Jesus surely prayed only to the God who, according to the Jewish worldview of his time, resided in heaven with his angels. In addition, Jesus must have known the *Shema*, which every Jew was obliged to repeat early in the morning and before going to sleep[13]:

> Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God (*Deut 5:4*).

To this was added the divine commandment:

[11] Mark 10:25: „It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

[12] Mark 5:34; 10:52.

[13] Josephus, Antiquities, 4.212.

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.[14]

A further element of Jesus' prayer life is even more important: his understanding of the God whom he addressed as his heavenly father. This was a loving father, and Jesus' deep conviction was that the eternal, distant, all-powerful Creator is also and indeed primarily a near and approachable spiritual presence. Jesus' familiar use of "Abba" in addressing God without any qualifications suggesting transcendence (Lord or King who has created the universe) certainly points to a religious experience marked by deep intimacy.

Given this concept of God, it is noteworthy that Jesus' understanding of faith is likewise deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, and thus cannot be understood except in the context of the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew root, *aemet*.

This term signifies trust; its familiar cognate, *amen*, means "it holds" or "it is true."

A key passage in the book of Isaiah tells that in a time of political crisis the prophet tells the king Ahaz, "If you do not believe, you will not remain" (Isa 7:9b). The passage has also been translated, "If you do not trust, you will not remain entrusted" (Martin Buber); "If you do not believe, you will not abide" (RSV); "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (NRSV).

Note that both verbs, believe/trust and stand/remain, have the same linguistic root, *aemet*, but express different aspects of time (*Hiphil* and *Niphal*).

At a deeper level, I think it safe to say, we see in this understanding that both the Jewish and Christian understandings of faith are rooted in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, and are closely related to what philosophers call "Being." Faith has to do with what establishes existence by giving it subsistence. Thus the ultimate existential question is indeed "to be or not to be," since faith is the ultimate ground of our life. But that solid grounding is possible only because God ensures an established order and enables the believer to participate in his omnipotence.

After Jesus died a bloody death on the cross, the disciples did not continue Jesus' life rooted in faith. After an apparently brief period of grieving they overcame their loss by claiming that God had raised him from the dead, something that became an all-but-universal Christian doctrine and the central constituent of their faith. Despite the radical difference

[14] Deut 6:5–7.

between this faith and that of Jesus himself, it remains noteworthy that God played a key role in both. The disciples' reports and especially Paul's later proclamation led to a new kind of faith – one that was centered on a specific doctrine, that of Jesus' resurrection, despite the absurdity of such a claim to any educated first-century hearer.

But since both Jesus and his disciples affirmed that God had elected Israel to be the source of universal salvation, it was possible for early believers to enunciate the doctrine that God had elected the church and thereby rejected unbelieving Israel – and that despite the change of beneficiaries, God remained the same as did the notion of the election of a specific group of people in contrast with the *massa damnationis*.

Such proposal naturally came under attack as soon as Christianity reached the educated classes of the Roman Empire. The second century Platonic philosopher Celsus wrote an attack against Christianity in which he informed his readers that Christian missionaries take advantage of uneducated and gullible people and knowingly mislead them, requiring nothing else but faith.

> Do not ask questions; just believe. Your faith will save you. The wisdom of the world is an evil, and foolishness is a good thing.[15]

He also attacks the doctrine of election in the following parody about Jews and Christians:

> The race of Jews and Christians is similar to a cluster of bats or ants coming out of a nest, or to frogs holding council round a marsh, or to worms assembling in some filthy corner, quarrelling with one another as to which of them were the worse sinners. They say:
>
> > God shows and announces to us all things beforehand; and he has even deserted the whole world, and the motion of the heavens, and disregarded the vast earth to give attention to us alone; and he sends messengers to us alone and never stops sending them and seeking that we may be with him forever.
>
> And in his fictitious representation, he (Celsus) compares us to worms who say:
>
> > There is God first, and we are next after him in rank, since he has made us entirely like God, and all things have been put under us, earth, water, air, and stars; and all things

[15] Contra Celsum 1.9.

> exist for our benefit, and have been appointed to serve us and ordained to be subject to us.[16]

As this second-century philosopher insightfully noted, even a moderate amount of education will suffice to sweep aside most Christian doctrines, including those of Jesus. Above all, he pointed out, the idea of divine election is offensive, and has created nothing but counter claims, hostility, and aggression.

In a fictional letter to Jesus I some years ago pointed out other crucial problems:

> Perhaps you would have become pensive or even conflicted had you learned that heaven is not a place high above you, that the earth is a rather small rocky sphere circling the sun, and not the center of the whole universe.
>
> And probably you would have been very surprised to learn that we humans and the apes have common ancestors, that indeed all living beings are part of a development that began with primitive unicellular organisms.
>
> And surely you would be amazed to see that 2000 years after your death, your God had still not brought an end to the current age.
>
> And it gets worse: your God did not create the world, as you and all pious Jews of your day assumed. Rather, the universe came into being through an evolutionary process that is now understood to have begun with a cosmic explosion we call the Big Bang. The image of the creator God developed by your predecessors betrayed a far too human perspective. …"[17]

Or, as the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes cleverly observed, "If oxen could paint, their god would have the image of an ox."

All together, Jesus' concept of faith and that found in the Hebrew Bible have an appeal even for modern people: faith understood as trust rooted in the ground of being and standing firm responds to basic human necessities. Indeed, persuasive modern research has shown that very young children have a fundamental need for primary love. Thus the ancient Semitic expostulation of trust that we find reflected in both the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of Jesus still rings true to every responsible person today.

At the same time, one can have little sympathy for the theocentric context in which these ideas once stood. We live in a secular world in which God has been banished from everyday life. Most of us do pretty well without him. Anyone who repeatedly invoked God

[16] Contra Celsum 4.23 (translation based on my Jesus After 2000 Years: What He Really Said and Did, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001, 686.)
[17] Gerd Lüdemann. The Great Deception: And What Jesus Really Said and Did, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999, 5 (revised).

during a psychoanalytical session would trigger the suspicion of a religiously motivated neurosis. In addition, it is difficult to imagine a reasonable person taking seriously either of the biblical accounts of a divine, beneficent creation of this world. What kind of a world is it where all life sustains itself by devouring other forms of life? We reverently speak of "Creation," but down through the ages nature has been the scene of a continuous nightmare on a planet befouled by the blood of its inhabitants.[18]

And into this life we have been forcibly propelled, sentenced to it without being asked.

Being torn between the absurdities of this life and an attraction to a human reading of Jesus' message of faith, let me continue our journey through the faith traditions of early Christianity and return once more to the Gnostic view of these things. Among the Nag Hammadi texts we encounter the writings of a group whose members call themselves "the unwavering race." Defining themselves in such a way, they claimed to have discovered a life of permanent stability. The assertion to belong to the unwavering race goes hand in hand with a distancing from the creator of this world, the biblical God. No other text of the Hebrew Bible is so often disparaged as the self-declaration of the biblical God in Isaiah (45:5):

> I am a jealous God, and there is no other beside me.

Such a claim was, according to the members of the unwavering race, arrogant, sinful, and the product of a closed mind. In these Gnostic texts, the stability of the unwavering race is not assured by trust in the creator, but rather threatened by it. (Remember that according to the Gospel of Philip, the creator and his archons tried to divert the thought of the Gnostics from the stable to the unstable by a confusion of names.)

Instead the achievement of immovability and the restitution of stability are viewed as the result of human potential – the designed effort of the truly human being, and the mind and spirit of the Unbegotten Son of Man – rather than by one's physical being or animal passions.

The immovable race, as portrayed in myth, preexists the physical world of historical experience, and therefore human potentiality is pre-supposed in all particular worldly experiences. The members of the immovable race have come to know themselves and their true origin. They are sparks of the God "Man." In principle, their membership is open to everyone, for it transcends the human limitations of religion, culture and politics.

4. Summary and Synthesis

[18] Cf. Ernest Becker. The Denial of Death, New York, 1973, 282–83.

We have reached the end of our journey through the bizarre world of a variety of religious experiences.

(a) I started with a personal glance backwards at my conversion experience and continued by looking at how liberal theologians then and now deal with the dynamics of faith. While they were intellectually correct in their rebuttal of the Bible by historical criticism, their own theology seems to me seriously anemic.

(b) Then, in order to recover the Early Christian experience, we looked at the Gnostics and their reinterpretation of the resurrection, and then took up the apostle Paul – whose letters are crucial for any approach to early Christianity – as the only Christian of the first generation who has left sources behind.

(c) It was only after such a detour that we took a detailed look at Jesus' experience of faith and its presuppositions – the notion of a loving God and the Hebrew understanding of faith. Here we discovered a complete ontology with features – like faith understood as trust, stability, and rootedness – that can appeal to the modern person.

(d) And finally we considered the Gnostic idea of self-knowledge on the basis of belonging to the immovable race, a concept that avoids the difficulties of Jesus' belief in a God who is creator and father, a vision that preserves a human appeal and thus affords an area of stability, depth, and steadfastness.

Let me now try to offer a constructive synthesis of my own: Man does not live by the bread of historical facts and technology alone. We have to go deeper and search for the foundation of our life. We seek a ground of being on which we can stand in order to affirm ourselves in the face of the terror of life and creation.

Faith, understood as rootedness in Being, incorporates this power and is effective in every human act of courage. Faith becomes knowledge once heaven is no longer the domain of a creator God who wants to keep humans from looking beyond him. After plumbing the depths and rediscovering a foundation on which we can stand and achieve stability, we may finally raise our eyes and our hopes into the immense space of the Universe thus rediscovered. Then our life acquires a truly cosmic dimension and we finally experience a valid taste for the Infinite.

This outpouring is not intended to make me out an apophantic mystic who claims to possess secret knowledge; rather it reflects and echoes specific experiences when I felt myself in tune with the universe. Such peak experiences were possible only after a liberation from

my own dogmatic tradition which, like all other traditions must hereafter pass the test of modernity. Let me end by quoting Bertrand Russell:

> Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver with cold after the cozy indoor warmth of traditional humanizing myths, in the end the fresh air brings vigor, and the great spaces have a splendor of their own.[19]

[19] Bertrand Russell, „What I Believe," in Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects, ed., with an appendix on the "Bertrand Russell case," by Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 43.