

GNOSIS, GNOSTICS, AND GNOSTICISM: AN INTRODUCTION

The key to all mysteries and the source of all Illumination lies deep within the self.

From a Rosicrucian manuscript

This issue of the *Rosicrucian Digest* explores the topics of Gnosis (inner knowledge), the Gnostics (mystics who proclaimed gnosis as the path to salvation), and Gnosticism (the broad tradition beginning millennia ago and continuing through the Catharism of the Middle Ages to today).

The various groups that we call “Gnostics” today emphasized the individual coming to personal and interior experiential knowledge (gnosis) of the transcendent Divine One which is within the innermost being.

In antiquity there was no religion called Gnosticism. This is a term that scholars invented to categorize the variety of early Christian “groups.”¹

The word “gnosis” is usually translated as “knowledge.” The Greek language distinguishes rational knowledge (“He knows mathematics”) from knowledge through observation or experience (“He knows me”), which is gnosis.²

Elaine Pagels, Ph.D., one of the foremost scholars on Gnosticism writes, “As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as ‘insight,’ for *gnosis* involves an intuitive process of knowing nature and human destiny . . . to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God [the Divine]; this is the secret of gnosis.”³

Marvin Meyer, Ph.D., another of the world’s leading Gnostic scholars, writes, “To know oneself truly allowed gnostic men and

women to know god [the Divine] directly, without any need for the mediation of rabbis, priests, bishops, imams, or other religious officials.”⁴

The interior center of knowledge, with no need for an intermediary, is a familiar theme that manifests in Rosicrucian studies and practice.

Gnostics viewed the role of their savior or revealer to be to awaken people, rather than to die for their salvation or to be sacrificed for their sins. Dr. Meyer writes, “The gnostic revealer discloses knowledge that frees and awakens people, and that helps them recall who they are. When enlightened, gnostics can live a life appropriate for those who know themselves and god [the Divine]. They can return back to the beginning, when they were one with god [the Divine]. Such a life transcends what is mundane and mortal in this world and experiences the bliss of oneness with the divine.”⁵

The roots of Gnosticism extend back to the time of the Greeks, Romans, and Second Temple Jews. “Some gnostics were Jewish, others Greco-Roman, and many were Christian. There were Mandaean gnostics from Iraq and Iran; Manichaeans from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and all the way to China; Islamic gnostics in the Muslim world; and Cathars in western Europe.”⁶

It is from the Cathars (from the Greek *katharos*, or “pure”) that the Rosicrucian

Tradition of today finds its closest link to Gnosticism. The Cathars, a sect of Christian mystics whose beliefs most likely originated from the traditions of Old Europe and Manichaeism (Persian Gnosticism), lived in the Languedoc of what is now southern France and other parts of Europe beginning in the eleventh century.

These mystics allowed equal rights for women and men, encouraged understanding and dialogue between all faiths, and provided excellent education for their citizens⁷—all values highly cherished by Rosicrucians. The Cathars deeply influenced what would become the Rosicrucian Tradition in the Languedoc, especially around Toulouse.

The Cathars also performed initiations, following a period of preparation including fasting and a great desire for Perfection. Some of the earlier gnostic traditions also included initiations and other mystical

rituals. Today Rosicrucians perpetuate the Western esoteric initiatic tradition.

Gnostics sought wisdom and knowledge from varied sources. Dr. Meyer notes, “In addition to Jewish sacred literature, Christian documents, and Greco-Roman religious and philosophical texts, gnostics studied religious works from the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Buddhists. All such sacred texts disclosed truths, and all were to be celebrated for this wisdom.”⁸

Throughout history, Rosicrucians have valued and studied truths from many philosophies and traditions and have strongly advocated tolerance and humanism. The Rosicrucian teachings include lessons on some of the most important religions of the world and explore the various mystical traditions that have contributed to the Rosicrucian Tradition today.

We believe that the desire to know divine laws—that is natural, universal, and spiritual laws—will eventually supplant the need just to believe in God or the Divine. We assume, therefore, that belief will one day give way to knowledge.

—From the Rosicrucian *Positio Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (2001)

ENDNOTES

¹ Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), 155.

² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Random House, 1979), xix.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Marvin Meyer, “Gnosticism, Gnostics, and *The Gnostic Bible*,” in *The Gnostic Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone & Marvin Meyer (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 1.

⁵ Ibid, 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Julie Scott, “Clemence Isaure: The Rosicrucian Golden Isis,” *Rosicrucian Digest* Vol. 88 No. 1 (2010): 47, www.rosicrucian.org/publications/digest/digest1_2010/04_web/08_Scott/07_gmscott.pdf.

⁸ Meyer, “Gnosticism, Gnostics, *Gnostic Bible*,” in *The Gnostic Bible*, 2.

