

Topic Page: [Gnosticism](#)

Definition: **Gnosticism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Religious movement, embracing numerous sects, based on *gnosis* (Gk. 'knowledge'). This was occult knowledge that released the spiritual part of human beings from the evil bondage of the material world. Gnosticism became widespread by the 2nd century ad.

Summary Article: **Gnosticism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(nŏs'tĩsĩzƏm), dualistic religious and philosophical movement of the late Hellenistic and early Christian eras. The term designates a wide assortment of sects, numerous by the 2d cent. A.D.; they all promised salvation through an occult knowledge that they claimed was revealed to them alone. Scholars trace these salvation religions back to such diverse sources as Jewish mysticism, Hellenistic mystery cults, Iranian religious dualism (see Zoroastrianism), and Babylonian and Egyptian mythology. The definition of *gnosis* [knowledge] as concern with the Eternal was already present in earlier Greek philosophy, although its connection with the later Gnostic movement is distant at best. Christian ideas were quickly incorporated into these syncretistic systems, and by the 2d cent. the largest of them, organized by Valentinus and Basilides, were a significant rival to Christianity. Much of early Christian doctrine was formulated in reaction to this movement.

Until the discovery at Nag Hammadi in Egypt of key Manichaean (1930) and Coptic Gnostic (c.1945) papyri, knowledge of Gnosticism depended on Christian sources, notably St. Irenaeus, St. Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria. Among principal Gnostic writings are the Valentinian documents *Pistis-Sophia* and the *Gospel of Truth* (perhaps by Valentinus himself). Important too is the literature of the Mandaeans in modern Iraq, who are the only Gnostic sect extant. Gnostic elements are found in the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Odes of Solomon*, and other wisdom literature of the pseudepigrapha.

Some Gnostics taught that the world is ruled by evil archons, among them the deity of the Old Testament, who hold captive the spirit of humanity. The heavenly pleroma was the center of the divine life, and Jesus was interpreted as an intermediary eternal being, or aeon, sent from the pleroma to restore the lost knowledge of humanity's divine origin. Gnostics held secret formulas, which they believed would free them at death from the evil archons and restore them to their heavenly abode. See Valentinus for typical Gnostic teaching on the pleroma.

Gnosticism held that human beings consist of flesh, soul, and spirit (the divine spark), and that humanity is divided into classes representing each of these elements. The purely corporeal (hylic) lacked spirit and could never be saved; the Gnostics proper (pneumatic) bore knowingly the divine spark and their salvation was certain; and those, like the Christians, who stood in between (psychic), might attain a lesser salvation through faith. Such a doctrine may have inspired extreme asceticism (as in the Valentinian school) or extreme licentiousness (as in the sect of Caprocrates and the Ophites). The influence of Gnosticism on the later development of the Jewish kabbalah and heterodox Islamic sects such as the Ismailis is much debated.

See Jonas, H. , *Gnostic Religion* (rev. ed. 1964);

Haardt, R. , *Gnosis: Character and Testimony* (1971);

Pagels, E. H. , *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979);

Meyer, M. W. , *The Secret Teachings of Jesus* (1984);

Layton, B. , *The Gnostic Scriptures* (1987);

J. M. Robinson; R. Smith, *The Nag Hammadi Library* (1988);

Klimkeit, H.-J. , tr., *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (1993).

APA



Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Gnosticism. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/gnosticism>



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018

APA

Gnosticism. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/gnosticism>

Chicago

"Gnosticism." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University. 8th ed. Columbia University Press, 2018. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/gnosticism>

Harvard

Gnosticism. (2018). In P. Lagasse & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia*. (8th ed.). [Online]. New York: Columbia University Press. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/gnosticism> [Accessed 15 October 2019].

MLA

"Gnosticism." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 8th edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/gnosticism>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2019.