

## The Meaning of *Gnosis* and early *Christian Gnosticism*

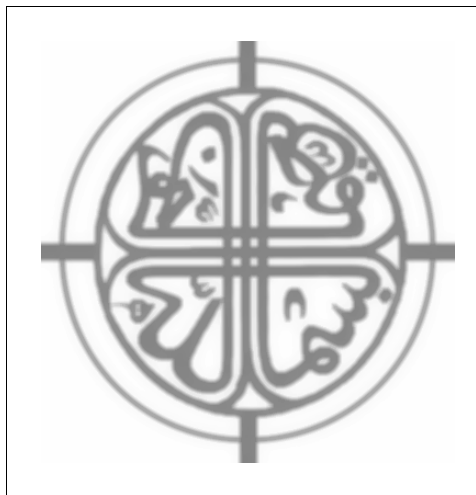
The terms *gnosis* and **Gnosticism** are related, but they are not the same. The first is the normal word for knowing (or knowledge) in the Greek language whereby an individual comes to understand anything. We get to know something through an act of cognition which allows us to understand or comprehend a subject at least conceptually. We are, therefore, no longer ignorant of it because we have been taught or examined a subject for ourselves.

Gnosticism is a term for a movement in the early centuries of Christianity in which (in part, at least) individuals asserted their special knowledge of religious experience as a kind of spiritual elite. These individuals felt in some way they were the privileged few who had the inside track on the subject of spirituality, about which the majority of individuals were “in the dark” (perhaps even willfully ignorant). Their special knowledge was only meant for (and shared by) the few, and was based upon secret knowledge concerning a particular, complex mythology of creation and its fall into evil that involved powers and energies that are hidden, but continuing to influence the world.

Individuals who knew the correct (and incorrect) relationship to these powers were called “gnostics.” This term (gnostic), however, is ambiguous because it need not refer to this special group of people who considered themselves and to be an elite few. It could also stand for anyone who comes to know anything through direct personal experience.

To distinguish this kind of gnostic from a more typical spiritual knower or seeker, we must differentiate between two types of general knowledge. The first type of knowing is the typical way we learn in school when we are introduced to a subject and taught general information about it usually through a teacher, books and lectures. For example, we can study astronomy and learn many important facts about the moon and its critical importance to life on planet earth (through tidal action) without actually going to the moon, or even visiting the seashore to witness tidal flow.

The second kind of knowledge, however, is more direct. It is what actually creates a spiritual gnostic. An astronaut who flies to



the moon and walks on its surface has direct (not indirect) knowledge of the moon. A fisherman who has to negotiate the daily tides in order to get to some favorite fishing spot, has direct experience of the tidal movements of the sea—how fast it rises or falls, and how far it moves on any particular day.

Spiritual knowledge can, of course, come in both these ways, but to distinguish between indirect knowledge gained from books or a teacher from direct knowledge gained by personal experience or practice, another term was used in early Christian teaching, *epignosis*. This term suggests that to truly know something spiritually the gnostic (or spiritual knower) must approach it directly and engage it personally. Because the second form of knowing is personal, it may therefore be said to be inner—experienced in an interior way by the perceiver. It is no longer simply a public form of knowledge. It has become direct and private. This does not mean, however, that it is only meant for the few, but only that someone who has actively experienced it can be said to have it. A true gnostic, therefore, must move from indirect knowledge which is merely objective and instrumental to direct experience which is also subjective and personal. The gnostic may have begun with the first, but has journeyed further into the second form of knowing.

In spiritual reality it is this second kind of knowing that is capable of liberating anyone from the limitations of the egoic mind to a form of conscious awareness that is self-transcendent. However useful indirect knowledge may be, it is not transformative because it tends to stay objective (only in the head). It cannot (or is slow to) move inward and change consciousness. Direct knowledge, on the other hand, because it is personal and interior is transformative,

though one must make extra effort to become conscious in this way.

There is nothing secret or elitist about this form of *gnosis* or *epignosis* (as was typically true of the old systems of Gnosticism). It is available to anyone, but not everyone avails themselves of it—just as not everyone visits the seashore to witness the tides. But anyone is free to do so, if they choose. One can say, however, that *epignosis* (direct knowledge) is in some respects “hidden” because it is located on the inside as lived experience (which can be described, but not necessarily through facts or data as is normal for indirect knowledge). It is also true that direct experience may more easily be described through a story or a narrative in which one tells of actually going to the sea (or more spectacularly, of visiting the moon if you are Neal Armstrong).

Spiritual knowledge (*epignosis*) that makes one a gnostic is, therefore, in some respects both more accessible but also less teachable because it is personal, individual, private, and interior in a way that indirect knowledge (even of spiritual subjects) can never be. Gnostic (or epignostic) knowledge, however, is available to all, and is known by the sacred traditions as the necessary, deep condition for gaining inner truth to which all are invited and to which all may aspire.

—Lynn C. Bauman  
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