Heresies & Schisms in the Early Church

Written by Robert Jones

robertcjones@mindspring.com

Albigensian worshippers on the banks of the Rhone (Engraving from Wylie)

This material may be reprinted free of charge for use by non-profit church groups, as long as the author and copyright information is retained.

Copyright 2001 by Robert C. Jones

robertcjones@mindspring.com

Taken from: http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/heresy/

"Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House."

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Introduction

Definitions

Heresy Quiz

Gnosticism

Origins and Influences

New Testament refutations and references

Gnostic Sources

Heresies and Schisms in the First Five Centuries

Simon Magus

Valentinian Gnosticism

Marcion

Response of the Church to 2nd Century Gnosticism

Montanist Heresy

Origen: On the Borderline

Manichaeism

Donatists

Arianism

Pelagianism

Nestorianism

Conclusion

Sources

Introduction

> "For as they are heretics, they cannot be true Christians, because it is not from Christ that they get that which they pursue of their own mere choice, and from the pursuit incur and admit the name of heretics. Thus, not being Christians, they have acquired no right to the Christian Scriptures; and it may be very fairly said to them, "Who are you? When and whence did you come? As you are none of mine, what have you to do with that which is mine? Indeed, Marcion, by what right do you hew my wood? By whose permission, Valentinus, are you diverting the streams of my fountain?" (Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*")

In this course we will attempt to look at some of the primary heresies and schisms of the first five centuries of the Christian Church, starting with New Testament references, and continuing through to the battles of St. Augustine against the Pelagians. Along the way, we'll examine the Gnostics (against whom much of the Apostles Creed was written), the followers of Arius (against whom much of the Nicene Creed was written), the Donatists, and others.

Why bother to study heresies and schisms that, purportedly died out 1500-1800 years ago? Because strains of, say, Gnosticism have reappeared in modern religious systems such as the "New Age" movement, which sometimes claims to be compatible with Christianity. A good example of the modern echoing the ancient might be seen by comparing the following quote from *Star Trek V* (spoken in a dialogue between Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy after the enterprise has failed to find "God" in the "center" of the Universe), and a quote from 3rd century heretic Monoimus:

Star Trek V: **Dr. McCoy**: "Is God really out there?"

> **Captain Kirk**: "Maybe he's not out there, Bones. Maybe he's here – [in] the human heart"

Monoimus: "...seek for Him from (out of) thyself, and learn...My God (is) my mind, my understanding, my soul, my body...if you accurately investigate these (points), you will discover (God) Himself, unity and plurality, in thyself, according to that title, and that He finds the outlet (for Deity) to be from thyself." (*The Refutation of All Heresies*, Chapter 8, Hippolytus, Translated By The Rev. J. H. Macmahon, M.A)

Most heresies in the first five centuries centered around differing opinions on exactly who Christ was, what manner of being he was, and what the relationship was between Christ and God the Father.

Definitions

Before we embark on this journey, we should consider a few definitions. The term heresy (as it is used today) means:

"An opinion or doctrine not in line with the accepted teaching of the church; the opposite of orthodoxy" (Holman Bible Dictionary)

The term comes from the Greek *hairesis*, which can mean "the act of choosing", but was also occasionally used in the Bible to mean sect or party. The term is used in various ways in the New Testament, as the chart below indicates:

Reference	Usage
Acts 5:17, 15:5, 26:5	Party or sect
Acts 24:14, 28:22	Used by Jews to describe groups that had left the mainstream of Judaism
1 Cor 11:19, Gal 5:20, Titus 3:10	Used by Paul to describe those that caused dissension
2 Pet 2:1	Used by Peter to describe False Prophets

The Gnostics were a prominent example of early "Christians" whose views on doctrine were radically different than those of the established church.

Another term that will prove useful in this discussion is **schism**, or an "ecclesiastical cleavage". Schismatics didn't necessarily disagree with Church doctrine, but rather disagreed with Church Law or practice. Novatian and the Donatists probably originally fit into this category. A later example of a schism in the established church was the Protestant Reformation – however, the Inquisition also viewed the early Reformers as heretics.

Heresy Quiz

The quizzes in my courses are traditional T/F, and usually number 10-15 questions. Here, we present only one multiple-choice quiz question. There is only one correct answer, in terms of the accepted doctrines in the Christian Church. All other answers reflect the views of various early heresies:

Pick the statement below that best describes the being of Christ:

- Christ was a divine spirit, not a physical man
- Christ was a man that had a divine spirit dwelling within him
- Christ was a great prophet, but not divine
- Christ was divine, but on a lower level than the Father
- Christ was fully God and fully Man; of one substance with the Father

Gnosticism

The primary form of Christian heresy in the very Early Church was Gnosticism. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. Gnosticism was vigorously refuted by Paul, John and Peter in the New Testament, as well as by many of the Early Church Fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Justyn Martyr. General characteristics of Gnosticism include:

- They believed in salvation through *gnosis*, or knowledge, not through faith. They often believed that Christ was a revealer of the hidden knowledge necessary for salvation.
- Gnostics believed in a body of secret instructions given to the apostles by Christ, and would point to New Testament verses such as Mark 4:33-34 or 1 Cor 2: 6-7 as indicators of the existence of such a body of knowledge.
- Some Gnostics viewed Christ as a great prophet, but not as being divine
- Many Gnostics believed in **Dualism**, or the view that there are two Gods of equal power in the Universe - one evil (who created the world and all material things), and one good (who created all spiritual and heavenly things). The "evil" God was often associated with the Old Testament God. The battle between the good god and the evil god was often expressed in terms of the battle of the Kingdom of Light vs. Kingdom of Darkness.
- Some Gnostics believed that the soul (created by the "good god") was lured (by the "evil god") into the transitory physical body. Hence, the goal of humankind is to escape from the evil physical body and return to the godhead, or become one with the "good god". As a result, some Gnostics believed that one's soul could go through multiple iterations in an impure physical body (reincarnation).
- The Gnostics believed that there was revealed truth to be found in many religions
- Since the "evil" god created everything worldly or material, the Gnostics believed that all material things are evil. Two practices came out of this view. One was an extreme form of **asceticism** – denial of the flesh – and the other was **antinomianism**. Antinomianism basically states that, since the body is inherently evil, but the soul is pure, it doesn't matter what you do with your body (sort of the "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" view of 1900 years ago).
- Some Gnostics believed that there were different spiritual levels of human beings. Those on the highest level were guaranteed salvation; those on the lowest level were denied salvation, and everyone in between had to fight for salvation.
- Some Gnostics believed in **Docetism** (from Gr. *dokesis*, or semblance), which viewed that Christ was a pure spirit, not a flesh and blood human being. This view comes out of the dualist viewpoint that matter is created from the "evil" god, thus a manifestation of the "good" god could never exist in a carnal, fleshly form. (1 John 4:1-4, 2 John 7 may be refutations).

Origins and Influences

By modern standards, Gnosticism seems so different from Christianity as to be a different religion. As it turns out, Gnosticism was a blend of Christianity with other Middle Eastern philosophies and religions, such as Zoroastrianism and Neo-Platonism. We examine several of the influences here.

Misuse of Paul and John's writings

Many of the early Gnostics used parts of the Apostle Paul's writings as justification for their beliefs. It should be noted that Paul himself vigorously refuted these misinterpretations of his theology. Some examples include:

- Col 2:20-23, which is probably a refutation of asceticism, was used by Gnostics as a justification of antinomianism, the aforementioned "sex, drugs, and rock & roll" view
- Some Gnostics said that Paul's embrace of predestination (Rom 8:29-30) was a validation of the Gnostic view of multiple levels of believers (or levels of spirituality)

Early Gnostics also misused the writings of John the Apostle (who also vigorously refuted the misuse). Some examples include:

- John's statement "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32) was viewed by some Gnostics as validation of the "salvation through gnosis" viewpoint
- Because John uses the imagery of light vs. darkness (John 1:1-14), the Gnostics tried to find a dualist tone to the passages
- The Gnostics tried to find validation for their view of a body of secret knowledge passed on by Christ to the apostles in John 20:30 and John 21:25

Irenaeus (c. 180 A.D.) makes reference to the Gnostic misuse of John in his *Against Heresies*:

"Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus [a 2nd century Gnostic], making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel..." (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 11)

Neo-Platonism

> "I am sorry from my heart that Plato has been the caterer to all these heretics."
> (Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul)*

A sort of "neo-Platonism" was extant in the Mediterranean in 1st century A.D. One proponent was Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who believed:

- God is indefinable, and has no contact with carnal (material) substance
- One Supreme force (*logos*) created the material world ("Word" of God or "Reason" of God)
- Humans strive for freedom from prison of the body
- Reincarnation is possible for those not released at death

Essenes ("Pious Ones")

The Essenes, described by Josephus as being one of the three Jewish religious sects or parties extant around the time of Christ, may have been the group that wrote all or part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls tend to describe earthly life as a battle between good and evil (characterized as the Sons of Light/Sons of Darkness). The scrolls also refer to two spirits governing man (truth and error). Note that the Dead Sea Scrolls group solidly believed in the God of Moses, and were in no way dualistic. However, later Gnostics could have interpreted their language as being dualist. Two examples follow:

"At the beginning of the undertaking of the sons of light, they shall start against the lot of the sons of darkness, the army of Belial...so that wickedness shall be laid low without any remnant; and there shall be no survivor of the sons of darkness." (*War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, Burrows, p. 390)

[God] "created man to have dominion over the world and made for him two spirits, that he might walk by them until the appointed time of his visitation; they are the spirits of truth and of error. In the abode of light are the origins of truth, and from the source of darkness are the origins of error. In the hand of the prince of lights is dominion over all sons of righteousness; in the way of light they walk. And in the hand of the angel of darkness is all dominion over the sons of error; and in the ways of darkness they walk. And by the angel of darkness is the straying of all the sons of righteousness...but the God of Israel and his angel of truth have helped all the sons of light." (*Manual of Discipline*, Burrows, p. 374)

Zoroastrianism

Various Middle Eastern mystery religions also probably had a big impact on Gnosticism. One was Zoroastrianism, founded by Persian Prophet Zoroaster (630? - 553? BC). In this religion, a battle between light (Ormazd) and darkness (Ahriman) features prominently. Zoroaster believed that new great prophets appear at 1,000 year intervals.

New Testament refutations and references

Gnosticism was already in existence as the books of the New Testament were being written. Thus, we would expect to see some references and refutations of Gnosticism in the New Testament.

One possible early reference can be found in Acts 8:9-24, with the story of Simon the Magician. Simon is the sorcery that tries to buy the power of the Holy Spirit – and is denounced by Peter:

[9]Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, [10]and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." [11]They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. [12]But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. [13]Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

[18]When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money [19]and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." [20]Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! [21]You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. [22]Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. [23]For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

[24]Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."" (Acts 8: 9-12, 18-24, NIV)

The New Testament writers, including Paul, John, Peter and Jude, repudiated Gnostic thought in their writings. Some examples are below. It should be noted that in a few cases, there might be other groups that are being refuted, also.

Heresy Refuted	Denouncer	References
Gnosticism?	Paul	2 Cor 11:4
Judaizers; Gnosticism?	Paul	Gal 1:6-9;2:4-6
Gnosticism (Asceticism)	Paul	Col 2:21-23
Gnosticism (Antinomianism)	Peter	2 Pet 2:1-22
Gnosticism (Docetism)	John	1 John 4:1-5

Gnosticism (Docetism)	John	2 John 1:7-11
Gnosticism (Antinomianism)	Jude	Jude 1:4-19
Nicolatians (see Acts 6:5) (Antinomianism?)	John (Jesus)	Rev 2:2,6

Gnostic Sources

Considering most Gnostic sects had disappeared by the 4th century, we actually have quite of bit of information about their views from two sources – the Early Church Fathers (who opposed them), and their own writings. Regarding the latter, very few ancient texts of the Gnostics had survived the centuries, until an astounding discovery was made in the Nile Valley in 1945. A library of 47 Gnostic books were discovered near a town called Nag Hammadi. While the library contained no source materials (the books were Coptic translations of Greek texts, probably from around 400 A.D.), it remains today by far the most complete collection of Gnostic texts.

Among the more well-known parts of the Nag Hammadi library are Apocalypses of Adam, James, Paul & Peter (the latter not to be confused with the 2nd century Revelation of Peter referred to in the Muratori Canon), as well as Gospels such as the Dialogue of the Savior, the Gospel of Truth, and the infamous Gospel of Thomas.

Before we look at some examples of these Gnostic texts, we should point out strongly that these texts were known and rejected by the Early Church Fathers, and should not be considered as indicative of mainstream Christian thought in the Early Church. Irenaeus (c. 180 A.D.) commented on the invalidity of these "alternative" Gospels, mentioning specifically the Gospel of Truth:

"But those who are from Valentinus [a second century Gnostic], being, on the other hand, altogether reckless, while they put forth their own compositions, boast that they possess more Gospels than there really are. Indeed, they have arrived at such a pitch of audacity, as to entitle their comparatively recent writing "the Gospel of Truth," though it agrees in nothing with the Gospels of the Apostles, so that they have really no Gospel which is not full of blasphemy. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 11)

Church Historian Eusebius in 325 A.D. had a list of Accepted, Rejected, and "Impious and Absurd" books in existence at the time of his writing. Note that the Gospel of Thomas makes the latter list:

"...we have felt compelled to give this catalogue in order that we might be able to know both these works and those that are cited by the heretics under the name of the apostles, including, for instance, such books as the **Gospels** of Peter, **of Thomas,** of Matthias, or of any others besides them, and the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles, which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy of

mention in his writings. And further, the character of the style is at variance with apostolic usage, and both the thoughts and the purpose of the things that are related in them are so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy that they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics. **Wherefore they are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but are all of them to be cast aside as absurd and impious.**" (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 25)

St. Augustine, writing around 400 A.D. commented on a spurious group of Gospels maintained by the Manichaeans:

"In the apocryphal books of the Manichaeans there is a collection of fables, published by some unknown authors under the name of the apostles. The books would no doubt have been sanctioned by the Church at the time of their publication, if holy and learned men then in life, and competent to determine the matter, had thought the contents to be true." (St. Augustine, *Reply To Faustus the Manichaean*, translated by Rev. Richard Stothert, M.A.)

Below are excerpts from several of the Nag Hammadi books, with the Gnostic view highlighted to the right.

Gospel of Thomas (Robert J. Miller translation)	
Excerpt	**Heresy**
"And he said, 'Whosoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.'" (1:1)	Salvation through knowledge
"Jesus said, '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.'" (2:1-4)	Salvation through knowledge and self-discovery
"Rather, the Father's imperial rule is within you...When you know yourselves, then you will be known." (3:3-4)	Salvation through knowledge and self-discovery
"Jesus said, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you.'" (70:1)	Salvation through knowledge and self-discovery

Apocalypse of Peter (Translated by James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard)

http://home.online.no/~noetic/nagham/apopet.html	
Excerpt	**Heresy**
"When he had said those things, I saw him seemingly being seized by them. And I said "What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?" The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me."	Docetism

Secret Book of James (Robert J. Miller translation)	
Excerpt	**Heresy**
"Since you asked me to send you a secret book which was revealed to Peter and me by the Lord...[I have written] it in Hebraic letters and have sent it to you." (1:2)	Secret body of knowledge passed down to the apostles
"He said, 'Truly, I say to you, no one ever will enter heaven's domain if I bid him, but rather because you yourselves are full.'" (2:6)	Salvation through knowledge and self-discovery
"So it is possible for you, too, to receive for yourselves heaven's domain: unless you receive it through knowledge, you will not be able to discover it.'" (6:18)	Salvation through knowledge

Gospel of Mary (Robert J. Miller translation)	
Excerpt	**Heresy**
"The Savior replied, 'Every nature,	Escape from the

every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other. They will dissolve again into their own proper root.'" (2:2)	evil physical body and return to the godhead
"Acquire my peace within yourselves!...For the seed of humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it." (4:2-6)	Salvation through knowledge and self-discovery

Heresies and Schisms in the First Five Centuries

We will now examine some of the specific heresies in the first five centuries since Christ, and also examine the response of the Early Church Fathers. Ironically, much of Christian doctrine in the Early Church was developed to refute early heresies.

Founder	Dates	Name of Movement	Type of Heresy
Simon Magus	1st century		Gnostic
Valentinus	2nd century		Gnostic
Marcion	c. 85-c. 160 A.D.		Gnostic
Montanus	c. 156 A.D.		Schismatic
Mani	216 - 276 A.D.	Manichaeism	Gnostic
Donatus	c. 314 A.D.		Schismatic
Arius	c. 250 - 336 A.D.	Arianism	Schismatic
Pelagius	died 418? A.D.	Pelagianism	Schismatic
Nestorius	died 440? A.D.	Nestorianism	

Simon Magus

Several of the Early Church Fathers, including Iranaeus, Hippolytus, and Justin Martyr believed that Christian Gnosticism started with Simon Magus (see Acts 8:9-24). The quote below is from Iranaeus' *Against Heresy*:

"Simon the Samaritan was that magician of whom Luke, the disciple and follower of the apostles, [spoke]...Such was his procedure in the reign of Claudius Caesar, by whom also

he is said to have been honored with a statue, on account of his magical power. This man, then, was glorified by many as if he were a God; and he taught that it was himself who appeared among the Jews as the Son...Now this Simon of Samaria, from whom all sorts of heresies derive their origin..." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Chapter 23)

Valentinian Gnosticism

> "...Valentinus, who adapted the principles of the heresy called "Gnostic" to the peculiar character of his own school..." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 11)

One of the most influential of the early "Christian" Gnostics was Valentinus (c. 137), who established schools in Egypt, Cyprus and Rome. His teachings were later spread by his student Ptolamaeus. According to Tertullian, Valentinus was denied the sought-after post of Bishop, and then turned against the established church:

"Valentinus had expected to become a bishop, because he was an able man both in genius and eloquence. Being indignant, however, that another obtained the dignity...he broke with the church of the true faith. Just like those (restless) spirits which, when roused by ambition, are usually inflamed with the desire of revenge, he applied himself with all his might to exterminate the truth; and finding the clue of a certain old opinion, he marked out a path for himself with the subtlety of a serpent.

Ptolemaeus afterwards entered on the same path"... (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians*)

It would be difficult to describe the complicated theology of Valentinus in a short space, so we will suffice to describe some of the main characteristics of his Gnostic views:

- The physical Universe was created on account of an error of Sophia ("Wisdom"). The Creator-God (the Old Testament God) created the evil material world.
- The Eternal Being produced emanations in the universe; as the distance between the emanations and the Eternal Being increased, knowledge of him lessened (this was to explain why evil could exist in the cosmos)
    - The aim of Gnostics was to escape the bodily prison, and return to the Eternal Being ("The redemption of the inner spiritual man")
- Christ the redeemer shows the way back to the Eternal Being (through gnosis)
- Jesus was pure spirit (Docetism). If matter is impure, God could not become incarnate.
- Valentinus believed that redemption is pre-ordained, and that only those towards the top of a hierarchy of mankind/cosmos would be redeemed:
    - Pneumatics - the Gnostic initiates; the elect
    - Psyche - ordinary church members, with no gnosis
    - Choics - the majority of people with no hope of salvation

Marcion

"Marcion expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the Scriptures as suited his own subject-matter." (Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*")

Marcion (c. 85 - c. 160 A.D.) was a Gnostic ship owner, who believed that there were two Gods in the universe (dualism) - the God depicted in the Old Testament, and the God represented by Jesus in the New Testament. He believed that the God of Goodness took pity on man and sent his Son to rescue him from the evil god. He believed also that Jesus was a spirit (docetism) and did not appear in the flesh. As such, he rejected the infancy narratives about Jesus, as well as the crucifixion and resurrection. On this topic, Tertullian wrote:

"...it was that Marcion actually chose to believe that He was a phantom, denying to Him the reality of a perfect body. Now, not even to His apostles was His nature ever a matter of deception. He was truly both seen and heard upon the mount; true and real was the draught of that wine at the marriage of (Cana in) Galilee; true and real also was the touch of the then believing Thomas... (Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*)

To accommodate these (and other) Gnostic beliefs, Marcion created a list of books that he considered authoritative. These included a condensed version of the Gospel of Luke (lacking the Nativity and Resurrection scenes), and 10 of Paul's letters.

While the gnostic theology of Marcion was roundly condemned by the Early Church Fathers (such as Tertullian above), his list was the first known attempt at defining a New Testament canon, and it prodded the Early Church Fathers to give greater consideration to those books that should be considered authoritative.

Marcion was excommunicated in 144 A.D., and his sect died out by the end of the 3rd century. According to Tertullian, Marcion attempted to reconcile himself to the church before his death:

"Afterwards, it is true, Marcion professed repentance, and agreed to the conditions granted to him — that he should receive reconciliation if he restored to the church all the others whom he had been training for perdition: he was prevented, however, by death". (Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*)

Response of the Church to 2nd Century Gnosticism

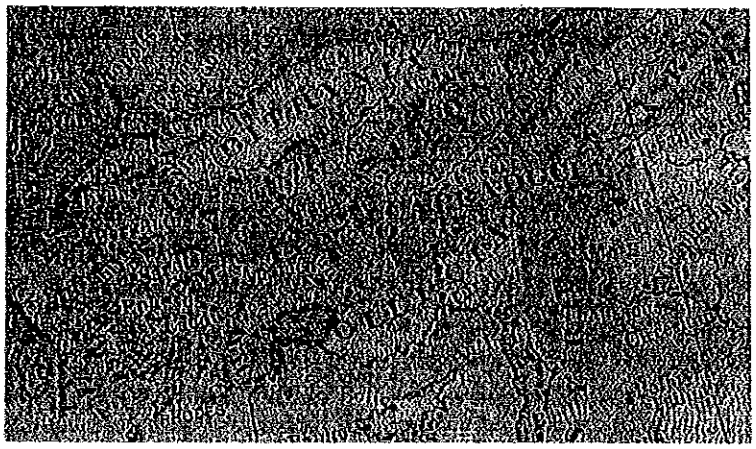
The response of the established church to early "Christian" Gnosticism was to solidify a creed, or basic statement of beliefs, that was in marked contrast to Gnostic beliefs. The resulting *Apostles Creed* came out of the 2nd century church, starting out as a baptismal liturgy, and eventually became the standard statement of Christian belief. In the chart below, notice the Gnostic ideas that are refuted by the Creed:

Apostles Creed	Gnostic Idea Refuted
I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth	ONE God, not two; God made material as well as heavenly things
Born of the virgin Mary	Jesus was NOT just a spirit
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried	Christ was a real person, who existed in historical time
I believe...in the resurrection of the body	Material things are not innately evil (see also Gen 1:31)

Also, in the aforementioned books written against heresy by Early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justyn Martyr, etc., other key points were made that rejected heresy, such as:

- There was no hidden teaching in Christianity, or else the Apostles would have passed it on to their successors in the churches (Irenaeus himself was in a direct line of succession from John the Apostle, through St. Polycarp)
  - The New Testament and Apostolic Tradition constitutes the faith of Christianity (Luther and Calvin would later disagree with the latter)

Montanist Heresy



Ancient map, showing location of Phrygia (in what is now Turkey) (Barnes Brief History Series, Barnes, c. 1903)

Around c. 156 A.D., a self-styled prophet named Montanus started to attract followers in Phrygia, Asia Minor. Montanus wasn't a heretic in the sense of the Gnostics, but he did

preach a doctrine that conceivably could have been threatening to the established church. Among the characteristics of Montanism:

- Like the followers of Peter Waldo and St. Francis in the Middle Ages, Montanus wanted a return to simpler church, as well as a more ascetic focus for believers (fasting, celibacy, separation from the world)
- Like the later Protestant Reformers, he questioned the authority of church hierarchy, and believed that the Word of God was the only true authority, revealed through the prophets
- He fostered a very charismatic environment, and believed that the Holy Spirit spoke directly through him, and his followers

So what was the problem, as far as the established church was concerned? The main issue seemed to be about the fact that the Montanists believed that they were receiving Divine Revelation, like the Old Testament prophets. Some of the bishops of the time (such as Serapion, bishop of Antioch) were concerned that such prophesizing might be viewed on the same level as Holy Scripture – and could interfere with people's understanding of the core message of the Scriptures.

Around c. 190 A.D., Monatanus was excommunicated, but his movement (which included Tertullian at one point) forced the established church to examine the role of the Holy Spirit in the contemporary church. In time, the response of church was that revelation ended with the Apostolic Age. Those with the gift of prophesy after the Apostolic Age were simply explaining the already existing Word of God – not adding to it.

The sect had pretty much died out by end of 4th century, although there is some evidence that it still existed in small pockets as late as the 8th century.

Origen: On the Borderline

Origen (185? - 254? A.D.), an Early Church Father, was Presbyter of Alexandria. And yet some of his theological views (influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy) were condemned by Church councils (400, 543 A.D.). Among his views:

- Jesus is divine, but subordinate to the Father (John 14:28). (This view would later be mirrored by Arius in the 4th century, and lead to the creation of the Nicene Creed as a counter measure.) Because of this view, he thought that prayer should only be offered to the Father.
- Every human soul has existed eternally – and bodily existence is a result of pre-bodily sin
- All souls would ultimately be saved

Manichaeism

Manichaeism was one of the most influential Gnostic movements of the first several centuries A.D., and it survived well into the Middle Ages in one form or another. Its Persian founder Mani (216? - 276 A.D.) created a religion that was a curious blend of Gnosticism, Christianity, and the teachings of Persian Magi. Among the characteristics of Manichaeism:

- All religions are equally valid
- Dualist - two cosmic kingdoms, which included a Kingdom of Light (the Primal God) and the Kingdom of Darkness (Satan)
  - Accepted as prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Paul, Mani
  - Docetic - Christ was "a divine being clothed in the semblance of man"
  - Had five grades or levels of believers (similar to the three of Valentius)
- Believed in cycles of life (reincarnation)
  - Preached strict asceticism

The most famous convert to Manichaeism was St. Augustine, who repudiated Manichaeism in 384 A.D., and later stated:

"THROUGH the assisting mercy of God, the snares of the Manichaeans having been broken to pieces and left behind, having been restored at length to the bosom of the Catholic Church, I am disposed now at least to consider and to deplore my recent wretchedness. For there were many things that I ought to have done to prevent the seeds of the most true religion wholesomely implanted in me from boyhood, from being banished from my mind, having been uprooted by the error and fraud of false and deceitful men." (St. Augustin, *On Two Souls, Against the Manichaeans*, translated by Albert H. Newman, D.D., Ll.D.)

There is some evidence that Manichaeism thought survived well into the Middle Ages, where it ran afoul of the Inquisition in the 13th century. The target of the Inquisition was a group of people known as *Cathars* (also known as the Albigensians), which comes from the Greek word *katharoi*, meaning pure.

The Cathars

Cathars burning (Engraving from Wylie)

Like their Gnostic forebears, the Cathars were *dualists* – they believed that there were two creator Gods – a pure God that created the heavens and things spiritual, and an Evil God that created all things physical and temporal. They generally associated the Evil God with the God of the Old Testament.

They were also *docetists* – they believed that Jesus was a spirit, not a flesh and blood human being. Thus, they rejected the doctrine of the death of Jesus on the cross, and His subsequent resurrection. They also seem to have adopted the views of the 4th century Presbyter of Alexandria Arius (see upcoming section) that stated that Jesus, while an exalted being, is not on the same level as the Father. The Cathars seem to have believed in reincarnation, as they viewed that the souls of men are trapped in evil physical bodies, and are released only after multiple iterations.

The Cathars were considered such a threat to the established church in the Middle Ages that both a Crusade and the Papal Inquisition were launched against them. The Albigensian Crusade (so named, because the French city of Albi was a Cathar stronghold) was launched against the Cathars in Southern France in 1209 by Pope Innocent III. The Crusade lasted for 20 years, and was marked by astonishing violence, the most famous example being on July 22, 1209, when the city of Beziers was sacked, with over 20,000 men, women and children killed by crusaders. Those Cathars that survived the Crusade were wiped out in the Papal Inquisition that followed in 1227, capped by the burning of 215 Cathar leaders at the Castle of Montsegur in 1244. The Cathars were, for all intents and purposes, extinct by the beginning of the 14th century.

Donatists

The roots of the Donatist schism date back to the 3rd century. In c. 250 A.D., Roman Emperor Decius ordered the persecution of Christians. As a result of this persecution, the Bishop of Rome Fabianus was murdered, and Church Father Origen was jailed. Many Christians (including some priests and bishops) committed apostasy – denying Christ to save themselves from persecution. After the persecutions ebbed in 251 A.D., the question was asked "Should priests that committed apostasy be allowed back into the church?"

Roman churchman Novatian (c. 200–258 A.D.) argued against admitting those that committed apostasy back into the church. After losing the election to fill the vacant position of Bishop of Rome in 251 A.D., Novatian and his followers split away from the Catholic Church. Among their views:

- Priests who had apostatized in the face of Roman persecution should not be allowed to dispense the sacraments
- Sacraments administered by the unworthy were invalid
- A holy church could not contain unholy members

By 254 A.D., however, when it was clear that Novatian was not receiving support from outside his circle of followers, many of the followers of Novatian had fled, or desired

(re)entry into the Catholic Church. This led the established church to have to confront the issue of whether those that had been baptized by Novatianists could be accepted into the Catholic Church without being rebaptized.

A great debate was waged between Bishop (254-56 A.D.) Stephen of Rome and Cyprian of Carthage (c. 195–258 A.D.), who argued that baptisms given by schismatics were not real baptisms at all. Stephen, whose view ultimately prevailed noted that baptism belongs to Christ, not the church, and the standing of the baptizer is not the relevant issue.

A similar situation arose in the early fourth century. Emperor Diocletian had ordered the persecution of Christians throughout the empire (303 – 306 A.D.), and many Christians (including some bishops and priests) had committed apostasy. After Constantine came into power, the question of the mid-third century remained – what to do about those that had committed apostasy? The situation boiled over at Carthage in 311 A.D. when an archdeacon named Caecilianus was ordained by a bishop that was suspected of having committed apostasy during the Diocletian persecution. In retaliation, the Donatists set up a rival Bishop of Carthage (Majorinus in 311 A.D.; Donatus in 315 A.D.).

In time, the Donatists became a schismatic sect, claiming that they were the only true Christians. The Donatists refused to accept baptisms performed in the Catholic Church, claiming they were invalid. The Donatists also insisted that a baptism performed by an "impure" priest was not valid.

While Donatism was condemned at the Council of Arles in 314 A.D., it continued to flourish. Beginning in 393 A.D., St. Augustine, the great theologian of the early Catholic Church, turned his skills of eloquence and logic against the Donatists. Augustine argued (like Bishop Stephen before him) that baptism is of Christ, not of the baptizer. Therefore, "reformed" Donatists that wished to return to the Mother Church did not need to be rebaptized. Among Augustine's many statements on the topic:

"It is true that Christ's baptism is holy; and although it may exist among heretics or schismatics, yet it does not belong to the heresy or schism; and therefore even those who come from thence to the Catholic Church herself ought not to be baptized afresh." (*The Seven Books Of Augustin, Bishop Of Hippo, On Baptism, Against The Donatists*, p. 780)

The Donatists were banished by emperor Honorius in 412 A.D., and completely disappeared by end of 7th century.

Arianism

The great theological debates of the 2nd century centered on exactly who Christ was, and what manner of being he was. In the early 4th century, the debate switched to what the relationship was between Christ and God the Father. Some church officials, such as a presbyter in Alexandria named Arius (c. 250 - 336 A.D.) argued that Jesus was divine, but on a lower level then the Father. Arius started with this premise:

"One God, alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone unbegun, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign."

From this starting point, Arius ended up with the view that Christ was an intermediary distinct from the Father (or that there was a difference of substance (*homoiousia*), or essential being between the Father and the Son.)

On the other side of the issue was Athanasius, (c. 296-373 A.D.), later Bishop of Alexandria, who argued that the Word (John 1:1-18) became man - the Word did not come *into* a man. Thus, Christ is fully God and fully man.

High Noon occurred in 325 A.D. when Constantine, emperor of the Roman Empire ordered that the debate be settled once and for all. A great church council was ordered, and it took place at Nicea (in Bithynia). Arius lost the debate, and the view of Athanasius became the view of the church. The doctrine of *homoousios* was affirmed – that Christ was of one (or the same) substance with the Father. Out of the Council came the Nicene Creed – one of the two Creeds recognized by almost all of Christianity today. The original version (it was expanded in 381 A.D.) stated:

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things both visible and invisible; and in one **Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God**, Only begotten of the Father, that is to say, **of the substance of the Father**, God of God and Light of Light, **very God of very God**, begotten, not made, **being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things on earth**; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, went up into the heavens, and is to come again to judge both the quick and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost." (emphasis added)

Arianism was perhaps the greatest threat to the Early Church out of all the schisms and heresies. By some estimates, almost half of all Christians were Arians at its peak in the 4th century. Although condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., it didn't die out completely until the 8th century. However, there are still groups today (such as the Unitarians) who, like Arius, reject Trinitarianism.

Pelagianism

Two more heresies/schisms would appear in the post-Nicene period – not everything was settled at the Council of Nicea. One of these heresies was promulgated by a monk named Pelagius.

Pelagius (c. 354 A.D. - after 418) was a British Monk who was horrified by the seeming lack of piety and purity practiced by Christians in Rome c. 380 A.D. He felt that the laxness of Roman Christians grew partly from the prevailing doctrine of Grace, which stated that humans on their own are incapable of purity, and can only be saved by God's grace.

Pelagius and his followers (one student named Coelestius was especially influential) denied predestination, original sin, and the doctrine of Grace, maintaining the humans are not tainted by the sin of Adam and Eve, and that babies are born pure. As a result, humans have the free will to choose to live sinless lives. (In his somewhat confused theology, though, Pelagius still maintained that babies needed to be baptized.)

The main opponent to Pelagianism was St. Augustine of Hippo (who also combated the Donatists). Augustine wrote at least thirteen works and letters against Pelagius, and firmly entrenched in Catholic theology the doctrines of:

- Salvation through Grace
- Original Sin
- The necessity of baptism for salvation
- The damnation of unbaptized infants

Among Augustine's writings about Pelagius:

"A NECESSITY arose which compelled me to write against the new heresy of Pelagius. Our previous opposition to it was confined to sermons and conversations, as occasion suggested, and according to our respective abilities and duties; but it had not yet assumed the shape of a controversy in writing. Certain questions were then submitted to me [by our brethren] at Carthage, to which I was to send them back answers in writings: I accordingly wrote first of all three books, under the title, "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins," in which I mainly discussed the baptism of infants because of original sin, and the grace of God by which we are justified, that is, made righteous; but [I remarked] no man in this life can so keep the commandments which prescribe holiness of life, as to be beyond the necessity of using this prayer for his sins: "Forgive us our trespasses." It is in direct opposition to these principles that they have devised their new heresy." (St. Augustine, *A Treatise On the Merits and Forgiveness Of Sins and On the Baptism Of Infants*)

Pelagius was excommunicated in 418 A.D. Pelagianism was declared heretical at Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.).

Nestorianism

The final schism/heresy that we'll examine in this study is Nestorianism. It was founded by two men - Theodoren (d. 428 A.D.; Bishop of Mopsuesta, 392 A.D.) and its namesake Nestorius (d. 440? A.D.; Patriarch of Constantinople, 428 A.D.). Among the arguments of Nestorianism:

- There were two separate natures in Christ. Christ was a "Man who became God" rather than "God who became Man". As such, Jesus of Nazareth and the Word were united.
- Therefore, Mary was not the "Mother of God"
- Tended to view Christ as a prophet and teacher, inspired by an indwelling logos
- Christ was the first "perfect man"

These viewpoints were declared heretical at Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) and Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). The latter created a Creed which stated:

"We confess one and the same our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of rational soul and body."

Nestorius himself was exiled to the Egyptian desert in 435 A.D., and Nestorianism diminished in popularity in the 5th century. However, there are still Nestorian churches in Iran and Iraq. And many Kurdistan Nestorians moved to San Francisco after World War I.

Conclusion

As alluded to in the Introduction of this course, the sharp-eyed reader may have noticed the remarkable similarity between some of the heresies described herein, and the New Age movement of modern times. Belief in reincarnation, the body as a prison, salvation through personal discovery and knowledge, and Christ as a "man who became God" are all facets of the New Age movement. In the United States, we have freedom of religion, and the New Age movement is free to worship as they please. However, these views are *not* Christian. The acid test for Christianity remains today what it was 1700 years ago – if you can't state the Apostles and Nicene Creeds with full agreement, you are not (by definition) a Christian. May the Creeds be repeated every Sunday in every Christian church, to remind us of our core beliefs as Christians.

Sources

Title	Author	Publisher	Date
Art Explosion 600,000		Nova Dev.	1999
Barnes Brief History Series		Barnes	c. 1903
Early Christian Heresies	Joan O'Grady	Barnes & Noble	1985
The History of Protestantism	J.A. Wylie	Ages Software	1997
Holman Bible Dictionary for Windows		Parsons Technology	1994
Holy Bible - New International Version		Zondervan Publishing House	1973
Massacre at Montsegur	Zoe Oldenbourg	Dorset	1959
Religious Stained Glass		Corel	1993
The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1	Edited by A. Roberts and J Donaldson	Ages Software	2000
The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3	Edited by A. Roberts and J Donaldson	Ages Software	2000
The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5	Edited by A. Roberts and J Donaldson	Ages Software	2000
The Christian Fathers	Maurice Wiles	Oxford University Press	1982
The Complete Gospels	Robert J. Miller, Editor	Polebridge Press	1992
The Dead Sea Scrolls	Millar Burrows	The Viking Press	1961
The Early Church	Henry Chadwick	Dorset Press	1967
The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back	Peter Jones	P&R Publishing	1992
The Nicene and	Philip Schaff,	Ages	2000

Title	Author	Publisher	Date
Post-Nicene Fathers First Series, Volume 4	editor	Software	
The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series, Volume 5	Philip Schaff, editor	Ages Software	2000
The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series, Volume 11	Philip Schaff, editor	Ages Software	2000
The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series, Volume 1	Philip Schaff, editor	Ages Software	2000

Black and white engravings of the Cathars from "The History of Protestantism" by J.A. Wylie and "Acts and Monuments" by John Foxe (Ages Software, 1997)