



Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy From the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code
By Richard Smoley

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A while ago I went to my local library to pick up a couple of books on the changes in American spirituality from that associated with institutionalism and a sense of rootedness in place to that of a personal quest orientation. As I was leaving, the library display of books caught my eye. It was a collection of books associated with *The Da Vinci Code*, but a book on Gnosticism engaged my curiosity. I ended up checking out Richard Smoley's *Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy From the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code* in order to explore it further. Smoley is the editor of *Gnosis* magazine, and co-author of or author of several books on esotericism and “inner Christianity.”

Smoley writes in popular fashion and provides an overview of the history and varieties of Gnostic thought. He looks not only at ancient forms of Gnosticism but also traces it to more recent times in what he calls the “Gnostic Revival.” This chapter, along with *Gnosis and Modernity*, and *The Future of Gnosis*, represent some of the more interesting treatments as he traces neo-Gnostic elements in various facets of American culture, including pop culture as exemplified by *The Matrix* trilogy of films and *The Da Vinci Code*.

It should come as no surprise to either orthodox Christians or those supportive of various forms of neo-Gnosticism that I disagreed with portions of his book, particularly his discussion of the canonical Gospels and his claim that none of them were written by eyewitnesses. His perspective on the written sources for Jesus’s life go further in that he speculates that the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* might indeed be dated earlier than the second century due to its alleged resemblances to the hypothetical Q document, and therefore it might be the first gospel and represent some of the earliest expressions of the faith of the early Christian communities. A book review is not the place to rehash these debates, but suffice it to say a good case can be made from conservative scholarship that runs counter to Smoley's claims. Hopefully orthodox and “inner Christians” can continue to not only debate but also to discuss our differing views in these areas.

Evangelical Christians will be especially troubled by those segments of the book where

Smoley describes the Evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ as little more than a mental construct that represents a relationship with an imaginary friend. But before evangelicals get too upset they need to consider Smoley's reminder that,

“As harsh as this characterization may sound, it is in many ways milder than the accusations flung by many evangelical Christians at the spiritual experiences of others, which (insofar as they are granted any reality at all) are frequently dismissed as delusions engendered by demons.”

Despite my disagreements in the areas discussed above, orthodox Christians should take note of several items in this book worthy of further reflection for those interested in engaging Western post-Christendom and the influence of neo-Gnosticism. For example, Smoley touches on the shortcomings of Christian clergy that reveals problems in the education and contemporary cultural awareness of Christian clergy. He writes

“A modern priest or minister might be well schooled in the theology of Bultmann, Tillich, and Karl Barth and may be intimately familiar with the question of the Q document and its strata of composition, and yet find himself at a total loss when a parishioner has seen an angel.”

Here Smoley touches on Western Christendom's tendencies toward emphasis on the rational elements of faith, on doctrine, and on the history of Christianity in the West, but its frequent inability to address the experiential elements, specifically within the contexts of the shift away from preferences for an institutionalized form of faith and toward a spirituality of quest with the increasing influence of esoteric spiritualities. Such insights demonstrate that it is time for our seminaries and other Christian educational institutions to broaden their theological educational focus in light of changing cultural circumstances in order to address our shortcomings. It appears that we need to prepare less for educating chaplains in Christendom culture and instead prepare missional apostolic types for cultural engagement as well as pastoral care in post-Christendom.

Smoley also provides suggestions as to why there seems to be an increasing interest in neo-Gnosticism, often more readily accepted than the institutionally and modernity connected with Christendom. He notes that the reasons are multiple and complex, but he states that one of the reasons seems to be perceived shortcomings and a loss of vitality in Christianity. He uses the illustration of an egg with the yoke and white sucked out of the inside leaving only the shell. While it still looks good on the outside, the inner vitality is gone and the remaining shell is fragile. Christians might well ask themselves whether the interest of growing numbers of Westerners in forms of neo-Gnosticism might be due at least in part to our failures to live out and put forward a robust form of the spiritual pathway of Jesus?

Finally, Smoley concludes the book with a discussion of faith, reason, and gnosis (inner knowledge). He interacts with the insights of Wouter Hanegraaff, a noted scholar of esotericism in the West. Hanegraaff states that Western civilization is rooted in the “three major impulses” of reason, faith, and gnosis:

“Reason holds that 'truth - if attainable at all - can only be discovered by making use of the human rational faculties, whether or not in combination with the senses.' Faith, by contrast, says that reason in itself does not provide us with ultimate answers, which can only come from a transcendental realm and are encapsulated in dogmas, creeds, and scriptures. Gnosis teaches us that 'truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation. . . . This 'inner knowing' cannot be transmitted by discursive language (that would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of faith . . . because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience.”

Hanegraaf states that the scientific enterprise has valued reason, while institutional Christianity has valued faith, although these are not mutually exclusive categories, and that as an institutional category Christianity has valued faith within an epistemological framework that also places great value on reason. Hanegraff notes that gnosis has been much less valued. While I disagree with the characterization of gnosis in relation to faith and knowledge in the quote above, opting instead for forms of inner experience that provide one but not the only means to truth, and which can to some extent be described and transmitted by discursive language, thus removing the gnosis-rationality dichotomy, I am sympathetic to the notion that Western Christianity has many times not valued inner experience, or a form of gnosis properly construed if you will, as much as it should. Or at the very least it has had difficulties maintaining a balance these various impulses of which Hanegraff speaks. Might it be possible for missional and culturally engaged Christians to rethink and rework the relationship between reason, faith and a form of Christian gnosis? Perhaps if we can it will bring us closer to recapturing a more biblical form of faith, and put some of the substance and vitality back into the shell of Christianity.

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