

Gnosticism

"Teabing located a huge book and pulled it toward him across the table. The leather bound edition was poster sized, like a huge atlas. The cover read: *The Gnostic Gospels*. ... 'The earliest Christian records.'" p. 330-331

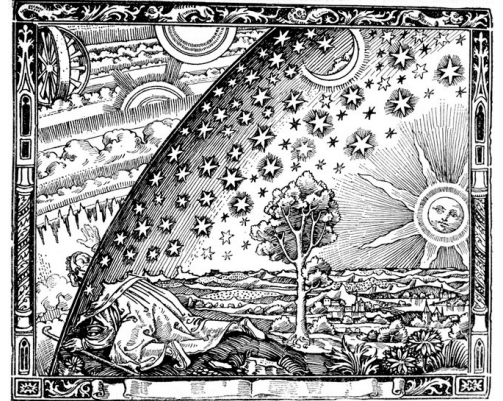
What does the Da Vinci Code say?

The truth about Jesus, can be found not in the Bible but in a group of writings called the Gnostic gospels. It is suggested that Jesus himself prescribed to the teachings of these Gnostics. pp 331-334

What are the facts?

Who were the Gnostics?

The term 'gnostic' has come to us from the Greek word *gnosis*, which has the sense of 'knowledge'. Gnostics are those who are the 'knowing ones'. The term came to be applied to a variety of second century groups (many non-Christian) and their teachers who shared a common outlook on this life and the possibility of escaping from it, even while the details of their teaching differed amongst themselves. Up until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1946, their teachings were mainly known from long quotes in the writings of their opponents, but the Nag Hammadi discoveries brought to light a gnostic library.



The Flammorian Woodcut, appearing in a book on meteorology, is often used to illustrate the Gnostics desire to understand spiritual things by leaving the material realm. (Picture from wikipedia.org)

The Gnostics had an often quite complicated view of the origin of the universe. Generally it was held that the supreme God, who is the good God, was unknowable and not responsible for creation. The gospel of Truth speaks of this one as "the incomprehensible, inconceivable one, the Father, the perfect one." This supreme god was believed to have created other divine beings (Aeons) of varying number and name. In one of these something goes wrong, leading to the creation of the material world. This world is seen as the creation of a lesser, imperfect and ignorant, even evil, divine being, often identified with the god of the Old Testament.

In this physical creation, there was implanted in some men fragments of light or spirit from the supreme being, which had as its goal reunion with the fullness (pleroma). Some held that there were three classes of men - the material, the psychic and the spiritual. The material could not be saved, the spiritual did not need to be, but the psychic, those 'in the middle' were capable of either being lost or saved. These last needed a heavenly being to come and rescue them by enlightening them as to their true nature, and to equip them with knowledge to ascend through the aeons. In Christian gnosticism this being was Christ, in non-Christian gnosticism it could be another figure such as Heracles.

With an understanding of matter as evil they did not teach that the Christ was a real man. Rather the divine spirit Saviour came upon the man Jesus, usually at his baptism, and left before his crucifixion. For Basilides (another prominent gnostic teacher) the divine emissary could do miracles but could not suffer. "*Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross, was ignorantly crucified in his place, while Jesus, taking the appearance of Simon, stood by and laughed at them and then ascended invisibly to the Father.*" (Ferguson p. 96).

The way of salvation was by illumination. It was knowledge, usually secret knowledge known only to the spiritual few, that freed one from fate and the material prison. This emphasis on secret knowledge explains why some of the gnostic writings take the form of secret revelations given by Jesus to individuals and then passed on to a select few.

Debate rages over the origin of gnosticism, whether it originates before Christianity and is essentially a non-Christian movement, or arises from within Jewish circles, or is a specifically Christian heresy. Some gnostic works show no specifically Christian features, and there are elements of gnostic belief circulating before and contemporaneously with the development of Christian belief, but as A.D. Nock writes "*Apart from the Christian movement there was a Gnostic way of thinking, but no Gnostic system of thought.*" It would appear that the coming of the Christian gospel provided the impetus for the crystallisation of the various elements of gnostic thought into coherent systems in the second century AD. Rather than representing a form of early Christianity, it is a later development of adapting some elements of the Christian story into a wider synthesis with elements from Platonic philosophy and other sources.

The difference from Christianity

In contrast to the Gnostics, Christians maintain that the Creator is the one and only supreme God. They affirm the goodness of the created order of the universe, and of the human body. They teach that Jesus was fully and truly human, while still being the Son of God, and that he provided salvation through his blood shed on the cross, a real death. They also proclaimed that He rose bodily, in the body in which He was put to death. The salvation He brought was available to all who would turn back to God and trust Him.

Conclusion:

The Gnostics were by and large ascetic, thinking that the body was material and the product of the ignorant working of the lesser god. There is no evidence that they practiced any form of 'sacred marriage' (Hieros gamos in Da Vinci Code p 409-411), nor that they taught any form of literal marriage of Jesus. In view of their reluctance to involve him in bodily passions and pain, it is extremely unlikely they believed this.

Further Reading:

The Nag Hammadi Library in English, revised edition. James M. Robinson, General Editor 1978 [HarperCollins 1990]

For more details, check out the posters on *Gnostic Gospels, the Bible and Jesus*. All page references to "*The Da Vinci Code*" are from the Corgi Books paperback.