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# Early Heresies

(pp. 128–134)

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ☐ What heresy is
- ☐ How Greek philosophy was predisposed to misunderstand the nature of Christ
- ☐ Why Gnosticism is heretical

## BASIC QUESTIONS

- ☐ What is heresy?
- ☐ How did the Greek philosophical notion of the *logos* and understanding of the physical world make it prone to misunderstand the Incarnation?
- ☐ What heretical beliefs do Gnostics hold?

## KEY IDEAS

- ☐ Heresy is disbelief in one or more articles of the Deposit of Faith.
- ☐ Because of its concept of the *logos* as an emanation of the Supreme Being and its understanding of the material world as an inferior version of the spiritual world, Greek philosophers had a hard time accepting God the Son could be equal in nature to God the Father or how God could have entered the inferior material world.
- ☐ The Gnostics were a heretical sect that perverted Scripture, and the Sacraments, and Christian symbolism to create a religion based on secret knowledge.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Church Fathers and Heresies

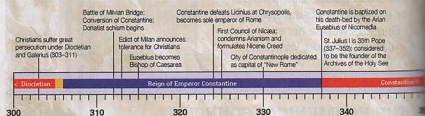
Dear young people, let us seek the truth about Christ and about his Church! But we must be constant: let us love the Truth, live in the Truth, proclaim the Truth! O Christ, show us the Truth. Be the only Truth for us!

—Bl. John Paul II, Address to Young People, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, August 19, 1989

The persecution of Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries was followed by a series of heresies that rocked the emerging Church down to her foundations. Given the gravity and widespread effect of these early heresies, it would seem that nothing less than divine intervention guided the growing Church through these trials, along her road of survival and growth. This segment from the Athanasian Creed, though it now reads in such a sober and clear manner, conceals four centuries charged with painful theological deliberations and debates.

Whoever wishes to be saved must, / above all, keep the Catholic faith. / For unless a person keeps this faith whole and entire, / he will undoubtedly be lost forever. / This is what the Catholic faith teaches: we worship one God in the Trinity / and the Trinity in unity. / We distinguish among the Persons, / but we do not divide the substance. / For the Father is the distinct Person; the Son is a distinct Person; / and the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person. / Still, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit / have one divinity, / equal glory, and coeternal majesty. (Introductory lines of the Athanasian Creed) [emphasis added]

The Athanasian Creed, often known by the name of its opening Latin words *Quicumque* ("Whoever wishes [to be saved]"), is an excellent example of what was at stake during the time of the great heresies during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Like the two other creeds, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed is a profession of Faith that the Church still strongly affirms. Though attributed to the Greek Church Father St. Athanasius of Alexandria, the authorship of this creed is not certain. It was written in the fourth or fifth century (probably 381–ca. 428) to combat heresies present at the time in both the East and the West.



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## ANTICIPATORY SET

Lead a **class discussion** using the following questions:

- ☐ Imagine you grew up in a town wherein everyone believed and acted according to the idea that animals and humans are equal in dignity. What would life be like in that town?
- ☐ Now imagine a visit to your uncle's farm where animals were not only treated as inferior but even eaten! How would you regard your uncle's beliefs and actions toward animals?
- ☐ Now imagine you were put in charge of the farm while your uncle vacationed. Given your upbringing, would you have a tendency to start treating the animals like humans? How might life for the animals change with you in charge?

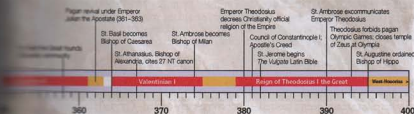
The Nicene Creed principally expresses faith in the three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Creed also affirms the divinity of God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. This creed carefully defines the equality of the three different Persons of the Trinity and their exact relationship with each other. The other remarkable aspect of the creed, which sets it apart from the Nicene and Constantinian Creeds, are the *anathemas* at the beginning and the end. (An *anathema* is a condemnation pronounced by ecclesiastical authority and at times accompanied by excommunication.) Because every word of this creed was carefully selected in order to express adequately the Christian faith, as well as to bring back into the fold those who had fallen into heresy, words such as "substance," "Person," and "nature" may often appear at first glance to have been used in the twenty-first century, members of the Church in the third and fourth centuries used a very precise theological and philosophical vocabulary, to articulate Catholic belief in the Trinity.



From almost the very beginning, Christian thinkers used the tools of philosophy to help explain Christian truths.

With the advent of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, and these heresies were not confined to a circle of academics but rather affected the entire populace. The random observer of the Church was left in confusion and arbitrary decisions; the believer sees the Holy Spirit guiding and the Church to protect, define, and promulgate the truths about the Person of Jesus Christ and the plan for the Church.

Students will explore the issues surrounding the various heresies, Ecumenical Councils, and the Church Fathers who rose to the occasion to teach, explain, and herald Catholic beliefs.



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## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ Why was the Athanasian Creed written, and with what two major areas of doctrine is it concerned?  
The Athanasian Creed was written in the fourth or fifth century to combat heresies pervasive in the Church. It deals with the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ.
- ❑ What is an *anathema*?  
It is a condemnation solemnly pronounced by Church authority. It helps believers more clearly identify erroneous doctrines.
- ❑ How did the basic doctrines of the Faith form during the fourth and fifth centuries?  
The Holy Spirit guided and directed the Church to protect, define, and promulgate the truths about the Person of Jesus Christ and God's plan for the Church.

### Participatory Set, continued

Explain to the students this is similar to what happened when the Greeks encountered the Gospel: They began to interpret it according to the way they habitually thought. Sometimes this led to changing the Gospel to the way they thought instead of changing their way of thinking to the demands of the Gospel.

Now imagine you were converted to your uncle's view that animals could be used by humans to do work, to provide hair for clothing, to provide eggs, and even to be eaten. Upon your return home, how might people react to your newfound ideas about human-animal relations?

Explain to the students this is similar to the idea of heresy. The people in your hometown would consider you had accepted wrong and dangerous ideas.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What is the Deposit of Faith?

The Deposit of Faith is the sum of all truths revealed in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition; it is entrusted to the Church and infallibly interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church. **Extension:** It is the fullness of the Faith entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and their successors, the bishops.

- ❑ What is heresy, and what are its two kinds?

Heresy is derived from the Deposit of Faith but denies or alters some part or parts of it. **Material heresy** occurs when one is ignorant about some aspect of the Faith, misunderstands it, or makes an erroneous judgment. **Formal heresy** is a free, conscious decision to deny some part of the Deposit of Faith.

- ❑ Why did the Greeks tend to look down on the material world? How might this have made it hard for them to accept the Incarnation?

Platonic philosophers viewed the material world as inferior to the world of ideas. Material entities were thought to be images of the world of ideas, with matter as an obstacle to contemplation and personal perfection. Thus, it would not make sense in their minds for God, the perfect idea, to take on imperfect matter (a body).

## PART I

# Early Heresies

What exactly is heresy? St. Thomas Aquinas defined heresy as "a species of unbelief, belonging to those who profess the Christian faith, but corrupt its dogmas" (STh II-II, 11, 1, r). Heresy must be distinguished from other forms of unbelief, namely, the unbelief of other religious traditions such as Judaism or any of the various pagan religions. Orthodox (meaning "right teaching" in Greek) Catholicism derives from the Deposit of Faith (the sum of all truths revealed in Scripture and Tradition, and entrusted to the care of the Church). Heresy, on the other hand, derives from this same source, i.e., from belief, but denies or alters some part or parts of the Deposit of Faith. One may enter into heresy in one of two ways:

**1. Material heresy.** It is possible to enter into heresy through ignorance of the truth, misunderstanding, or noncomprehension of particular aspects of the Faith, erroneous judgment, or the like. This type of heresy is not willed by the subject and thus lacks one of the necessary conditions of sin (that the action has to be freely willed). This species of heresy is merely a mistake, albeit a grave mistake that needs correction.

**2. Formal heresy.** It is also possible to freely choose, with full understanding of the teaching of the Church, to hold to tenets or doctrines that are clearly contradictory to those of the Church and even doctrines that have been condemned by the Church as false. This species of heresy, depending on all the mitigating circumstances, carries with it a degree of culpability.

The first heresies that afflicted the early Church were especially dangerous since they struck at the heart of Christianity: the figure of Christ. As mentioned above, Greek philosophy, especially Platonic and neo-Platonic thought, was welcomed by early Christian thinkers who found surprising insights and similarities to Christianity. Neo-Platonic thought discusses a Supreme Being, the One, who creates through an emanation of lesser beings, one of which is the *logos*. (*Logos* is a truly ambiguous Greek word with a multitude of meanings including, word, account, meaning, reason, argument, saying, speech, and story.) Today, as was the case during the time of the early heresies, the word *logos* is familiar to Christians since it is recorded in the opening lines of the Gospel of St. John. He uses *logos* to refer to God the Son; in Christian teaching, God the Son, the *Logos*, is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, equal to God the Father. However, in neo-Platonic thought the *logos*, albeit an elevated being, is created by and inferior to a Supreme Being, and thus is a separate being. Early heresies, connecting the *Logos* from the Gospel of St. John with the philosophical *logos* of the Greeks, often denied the true divinity of Christ. Instead, they held that he was a most exalted creature of the Father who only enjoyed by analogy the title "the Son of God." Neo-Platonic thought was so ingrained in the minds of the early eastern Christian thinkers that even someone of the stature of the illustrious third-century theologian, Origen, tended to subordinate the Divine *Logos* to the Father.

Platonic philosophies also viewed the material world as inferior to the world of ideas. Material entities were thought to be merely images of the world of ideas. Matter was viewed as an obstacle to contemplation and personal perfection. Thus, besides denying Christ's true divinity, many of the early heresies greatly deemphasized – if not completely denied – Christ's humanity.



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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Why Is Heresy a Sin?

According to St. Thomas Aquinas (STh II-II, Q. x, a. 3):

- ❑ All sin is an aversion from God. A sin, therefore, is the greater the more it separates man from God. But infidelity does this more than any other sin, for the infidel [unbeliever] is without the true knowledge of God: his false knowledge does not bring him help, for what he opines is not God: manifestly, then, the sin of unbelief [infidelitas] is the greatest sin in the whole range of perversity.





Throughout the history of Christianity, early heresies made Jesus Christ inferior to the Father. In Christian teaching, God the Son, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, a person in the Divine Nature, and therefore equal to God the Father.

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## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have each student **review** the paragraph "The first heresies..." (p. 130), and then conduct a **think/pair/share** to contrast the Christian *Logos* with the neo-Platonic *logos*.

In the Gospel of St. John, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and equal to God the Father, is identified with the *Logos*. In Greek philosophy, the *logos* is an inferior emanation of the Supreme Being.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Gnosticism

Gnostic beliefs stand in opposition to the teachings of the Church. The Gnostic perception of the material world as evil is directly contrary to the teaching that the world—though dominated since the Fall by sin—was created by a loving "God [who] saw that it was good" (Gn 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Gnostic beliefs contradict the truth that salvation is offered to all people and not a select few. The Gnostic rejection of Judaism is also contrary to the teachings of the Church.

Throughout history, many sects have taught the material world is evil. This is understandable considering the horrors that have always surrounded the human race and the struggles of life in the flesh. Students should understand human weakness and material evils are a result of sin—Original Sin and personal sins. Fallen human nature creates a struggle within each person that may lead some to conclude the physical world is evil; however, the physical world was created by God and is therefore good. Embracing the material world with propriety and restraint is essential to lead a fully Christian life.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ According to the Gnostics, what is the difference between the Divine Being and the Demiurge?

The Divine Being is the perfect, spiritual being who is remote and unknowable. The Demiurge is an emanation of the Divine Being and the creator of the inferior, visible material world. The Divine Being is the agent of goodness and the Demiurge propagates evil.

- ❑ What is the difference between the *pneumatikoi* and the *sarkikoi*?

Gnostics teach there are two kinds of people on earth. The *pneumatikoi* (spiritual) were those who understand the cosmic struggle between the material and spiritual realms. Most people are of the *sarkikoi* (material) and unaware of the struggle.

- ❑ How does one achieve salvation according to the Gnostics?

A secret knowledge regarding God and the origin and destiny of man has been given to a few, select people. This secret was a divine spark, belonging to the Divine Being, and could be found among some people. A redeemer sent from the Divine Being came to earth to release the sparks trapped in the bodies so they could return to the Divine Being. This release was possible if individuals were to understand the secret knowledge of the redeemer's teaching and practice the appropriate Gnostic rituals.

These early heresies that make Jesus Christ inferior to the Father and, at the same time, deny divinity, set the stage for the advent of the Arian heresy, which occasioned one of the worst crises the Church would ever face. In fact, a few difficult centuries of painful struggle would have to pass before the Church could put these early heresies behind her.

## GNOSTICISM

The word "Gnosticism" is derived from the Greek word *gnosis* (knowledge). The name refers to the principle tenets of this multifaceted heresy, namely, that salvation may be achieved through knowledge. There were many forms of Gnosticism (many whose origins predate Christianity) and therefore it is difficult (if not impossible) to encapsulate them into one coherent system. In the second century, Gnosticism, which had eastern origins and influences from Persia and India, surreptitiously perverted the meaning of Christianity and its symbols. Gnosticism coopted the Old and New Testaments for some of the contents of the Gnostic religions and to give some particular Gnostic teachings a certain authority.

As mentioned above, Gnosticism is a blanket term for a very broad and complex group of beliefs. Despite these complexities, it is possible to delineate some of Gnosticism's fundamental positions. Gnostic beliefs held that a secret knowledge regarding God and the origin and destiny of man had been given to a select few. Its cosmology pitted the Demiurge, the creator god of the material, visible world, against the remote and unknowable Divine Being. The Demiurge was of lesser status than the Divine Being, from whom the Demiurge had originated through a series of emanations. The Gnostics claimed that the Demiurge was the author and ruler of the created world. Being material and imperfect, the created world would naturally have an antagonistic and inferior relationship to the spiritual, perfect world of the Divine Being. Thus, the spiritual Divine Being is the agent of goodness, and the Demiurge, the author of the material world, propagates evil in the world.

A divine spark, belonging to the Divine Being, could, however, be found among some people in the created order. The redeemer, sent from the Divine Being, came in order to release the sparks trapped in their bodies so they might return to the Divine Being. This was only possible if the individuals understood the secret knowledge of the redeemer's teaching and practiced the appropriate Gnostic rituals.



A contemporary New Age medicine wheel in Arizona.

The principle involved here of finding the divine within oneself through a pagan ceremony is the essence of the New Age movement in contemporary times. As will be seen in this chapter, the Church has witnessed a staggering range of heresies and schisms in her two thousand-year history. Many of the false teachings that appeared in the Medieval period, during the Reformation, and even in the contemporary world are not new, but, rather, the reemergence of ancient heresies under fresh guises.

Gnostics divided people mainly into two classes. Those who understood this cosmic struggle between the material and the spiritual were known by the Greek word *pneumatikoi* ("spiritual"). Most of the unfortunate masses fell into the *sarkikoi* ("material" group), unaware of the cosmic struggle going on around them. Some branches of Gnosticism incorporated a third group, known as the *psychikoi*, in between these two.

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## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ According to the Gnostics, what was wrong with Judaism?

It was a false religion worshipping the evil Demiurge, mistakenly claiming the world is good.

- ❑ What might a devout Jew think of Gnosticism?

He or she would probably see Gnosticism as blasphemous.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ According to the Gnostics, who is the redeemer?

Jesus, the redeemer, was a good divine being whose mission was to bring secret knowledge to man.

- ❑ According to the Gnostics, why would it have been impossible for Christ to have taken on human nature?

Since Jesus was a divine being, he could not have had a naturally evil human nature.

new Judaism was a false religion that worshiped the wrong god, the Demiurge, who was trying to free the divine spark from its evil material confines. Judaism mistakenly viewed the material world as good.



Gnosticism rejected the Church's teaching regarding both Christ's human and divine nature. According to Gnostic thought, Jesus did not have a human nature; for a human nature, being materially bound, is naturally evil. Instead, he was a good divine being whose purpose, as the Gnostic redeemer, was to bring the secret knowledge (*gnosis*) and make it known to man. They believed that Jesus came as the representative of the supreme Divine Being. Thus, Jesus did not inhabit a human body, nor did he die on the cross. Instead, the spirit of the divine being was present in Jesus temporarily; Jesus' body was only an apparition, and his spirit left his "body" before he was put to death on Calvary. In Gnosticism's cosmological view, a divine being could never have suffered the humiliation of death, let alone death on a cross.

Prevalent prior to Christianity in pagan religions, and there is evidence of the existence of Gnostic sects. A number of early Christian thinkers and apologists combated Gnostic

## ROOTS OF GNOSTICISM

The early Christians considered Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24) the founder of Gnosticism. He claimed to have secret knowledge of the mysteries of God and to possess magical powers through his connection to Christianity. Despite the similarities between Simon Magus's beliefs and Gnostic beliefs, the origin of Gnosticism has long been a matter of controversy and is still the subject of scholarly research.

Modern scholarship has attempted to show how many of Gnostic beliefs can be found in religions that existed before the coming of Christ. Some scholars, for example, have established links between Gnosticism and the Babylonian religion that arose after the conquest of Cyrus. Other scholars have noted similarities between Gnosticism and Greek thought. Scholars have even been made to connect Gnosticism with certain schools of ancient Judaism, but this theory has not met with widespread acceptance.

The seeming appearance of Gnostic thought in many ancient religious systems owes to philosophical and religious pessimism, which is both a central feature of Gnosticism and a common perversion of intertemperate religious fervor. While the precise emergence of Gnosticism is difficult to pinpoint, magical powers, secret knowledge of the divine, and the belief that present existence is essentially evil are misconceptions that have long corrupted religious belief.



Gnostic systems combined magic and astrology with the Bible. The Hebrew name of God, IAO, fascinated sorcerers. IAO was often represented as a demon spirit with a cock's head.

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## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What was the Crucifixion according to the Gnostics? Christ's body was just an apparition; his spirit left his body before the Crucifixion.
- ❑ Why is Gnosticism basically pessimistic and Christianity basically optimistic?

*Gnostics see the world as evil with no way out for most people. Christians see creation as fundamentally good. Although sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, hope has been restored through Christ's redemption.*

## CLOSURE

Have each student **free write** for five minutes in response to the third *Basic Question* of this lesson:

- ❑ What heretical beliefs do Gnostics hold?

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- ❑ Study Questions 1–2 (p. 174)
- ❑ Practical Exercise 1 (p. 175)
- ❑ Workbook Questions 1–23
- ❑ Read "Marcionism" through "Ecumenical Councils" (pp. 134–138)

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Have each student complete the following table contrasting common beliefs of the Gnostics with Christian doctrine.

| Article of Faith                  | Gnosticism  | Christianity                                |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| What is the physical universe?    | It is an evil creation of the Demiurge.                           | It is good and created by the one God.      |
| How is one saved?                 | One must possess a secret knowledge and practice magical rituals. | One is saved through the grace of God.      |
| What is the nature of the Savior? | It is a good, created being who came to earth as a kind of ghost. | He is God, having divine and human natures. |

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Using the completed *Guided Exercise* on page 133, have each student write a **paragraph** in response to the following question:

- ❑ What are some examples of Gnostic beliefs in modern-day culture?



## The Ecumenical Councils

(pp. 134–138)

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ❑ The errors Marcionism, Manichæism, Montanism, and Docetism
- ❑ The nature and function of Ecumenical Councils

### BASIC QUESTIONS

- ❑ Which doctrines did Marcionism, Manichæism, Montanism, and Docetism deny?
- ❑ How did heresies contribute to a clearer understanding of the authentic Faith of the Apostles?

### KEY IDEAS

- ❑ *Marcionism* creates a false dualism between law and love. Marcion identified the supposedly evil, vengeful God of the Law with the Gnostic Demiurge; he identified the Supreme Being as the good God of Love. *Manichæism* is a Gnostic, dualistic religion in which there are two equal gods: one good and the other evil. It holds the world was created by Satan but secret knowledge and severe asceticism can bring salvation. *Montanism* holds the arrival of the Kingdom of God is imminent and its leaders are directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. *Docetism* claims God would never have become man and suffer such a degrading death, so someone else must have been substituted for Christ on the Cross.
- ❑ Twenty-one Ecumenical Councils have been held over the past 1700 years to define and defend the Faith and morals of Catholicism.

influences in Christianity. Chief among them were St. Irenæus, Tertullian, and St. Hippolytus. In their arguments they emphasized the goodness of the created world, the supremacy of the One God, the clear meaning of the Scriptures, and Christ's human experiences – especially his Passion and Death.

Many of the later heresies are derivatives of Gnosticism. Generally, a Gnostic religion holds the following beliefs:

1. Matter is a corruption of spirit, and thus the world is corrupt;
2. Man must seek through knowledge to overcome this fallen state and return to God; and
3. God has made this possible by sending a savior (usually held to be Jesus).

### MARCIONISM (144–400s)



Marcion recognized only St. Paul (above) as a legitimate Christian authority.

Marcion (d. ca. AD 160) founded his heretical movement very early in the life of the Church. It lingered well into the fifth century in the West and for centuries longer in the East. Marcion came from the Black Sea port of Sinope in the Roman province of Pontus (what is today Turkey), where he was most likely involved in shipping. He was the son of a bishop, and as the story goes, his father excommunicated him on the grounds of immorality. He went to Rome ca. 140. He started his own community and was formally excommunicated in 144. It was not long before his heresy grew into one of the greatest threats to orthodox belief in the second half of the second century.

Marcion adapted important ideas from Gnostic beliefs to form his own theology. From Gnosticism he took the idea of the Demiurge, whom he identified as the Jewish, revengeful God of the Old Testament. The Jewish God, the Demiurge, is the God of the Law. In opposition to this cruel God of the Law, Marcion heralded the God of Jesus Christ, the true God, sent to bring about the

demise of the Demiurge. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Love who has no connection with the Law. Jesus' teaching was taken from the true God. His Passion and Death came about through the machinations of the evil Creator God of the Old Testament. This dualism of Law and Love is the main thesis of Marcion's system.

Marcion recognized only St. Paul as a legitimate Christian authority because of his teaching regarding freedom from the Law. The Apostles, in Marcion's view, did not fully understand the mission of Jesus Christ, having been blinded by Judaism and its Creator God. Therefore, only ten of St. Paul's Epistles and a modified version of the Gospel of St. Luke (any Jewish influence was removed) were given canonical status in Marcionism. Marcion was either not aware of the Pastorals – other Epistles of the New Testament – or rejected them outright. This canon reflected Marcion's attempt to form a New Testament from Jewish influence.

Unwittingly, Marcion helped the development of the Catholic Church's canon of Sacred Scripture. Partially in reaction to Marcion's flawed and incomplete group of inspired texts, the Church gradually determined the canon: the official, inspired writings of the New Testament.

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### FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ Who were the *hearers* and the *elect*? Which was superior?  
These two groups made up the Manichæan sect. The *elect* were the authentic followers and therefore superior.
- ❑ Why did Manichæistic asceticism appeal to people?  
In reaction to the lax morals of the pagan Roman Empire, some people were attracted to strict asceticism. They wanted to outdo even the demanding moral life inspired by Christ.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ Who was the famous convert from Manichæism?  
St. Augustine was a Manichæan as a young man.
- ❑ Why is Manichæism heretical and not a different religion?  
It is heretical because it borrows heavily from the Deposit of Faith and the Scriptures, especially St. Paul.

Marion rebuffed his own church before being excommunicated in 144. He admitted people to his church, just as the Church did, but by the third century most of Marcion's followers had migrated into Manichaeism. His followers had to practice a most rigorous asceticism, abstaining from sex, drinking, and eating meat was forbidden. Many orthodox writers of the period fought against him, including St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, St. Hippolytus, Pope St. Clement I, and Origen.

Marcion was not the only person to reject Judaism and the Old Testament as incompatible with Christianity. Over the ages other groups have done the same. The Lutheran theologian Hans Eberhard von Dönnert (1851–1930) similarly proposed a canon free of Jewish influence early in the 20th century. Later, National Socialism (Nazism) in Germany proposed “German Christianity,” which cut off from its Jewish roots. Christianity cannot exist without its Jewish heritage; in 1958, Pope John Paul II singled out the Jews as “elder brothers in faith.”

## MANICHÆISM (250s–1000s)

Manichaeism was probably the most elaborate and polished branch of Gnosticism. Its founder, Mani, was born in Persia. He developed this particular brand of Gnosticism in Persia and Arabia in the third century until he was eventually condemned to death by the Persian emperor. Accounts of his death conflict—some report that he died in prison, others that he was executed, and his skin stuffed with straw and hung upon the gates of the city. Despite his death, by the fourth century Manichaeism had spread to Rome and was already deeply entrenched in North Africa.

Manichaeism continued the age-old dualist cosmology involving the conflict between darkness and light. Mani stated that Satan had managed to steal light particles and place them in the brains of humans. The goal of Manichaeism was to share the secret knowledge which liberates this light so that humans can return to their original source. Mani understood himself as just another spiritual leader in a long line of teachers that included the Jewish prophets, Jesus, and Buddha, all of whom showed the path to liberation. The ritual acts of Manichaeism also incorporated the movements of the cosmic universe: the Sun, the Moon, and stars—also points of light. The “hearers” and the “elect” comprised the two groups in the sect. The latter group was comprised of the authentic followers of Mani.

Mani borrowed heavily from the Scriptures, especially from the writings of St. Paul. Mani used the imagery of St. Paul's arguments and imagery to support his own teaching concerning the cosmic battle between darkness and light.

Manichaeism adhered to a strict form of asceticism, and it is here that one understands the appeal of Gnostic and other heretical teachings. In the Roman world of lax morals, Manichaeism required faithfulness to a demanding moral life as inspired by Jesus. Manichaeism and Christianity attempted to out-perform Christianity in terms of their moral rigor. If Christianity required fasting, Gnostic groups would require tougher and longer fasts. Manichaeism also drew on the intellectual appeal of St. Augustine, for instance, drawn by the philosophical bases of Christianity. Augustine was a fervent adherent of Manichaeism for nine years.

Manichaeism reappeared in the Medieval Albigenians of the twelfth through thirteenth centuries, who are also known by the name “Cathars.” Though unlikely to have a direct link to Manichaeism, the Albigenians used much of the same imagery and beliefs. They periodically reemerged in isolated areas for many centuries and did not completely disappear until sometime during the beginning of the second millennium.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ☐ What did Marcion think about Judaism?  
He rejected it as founded by the Gnostic evil Demiurge.
- ☐ What does it mean to call Marcionism *dualistic*?  
Manichaeism puts law and love in opposition. The Law was the work of the Demiurge, whereas love was preached by the messenger of the good God.
- ☐ How did Marcion contribute to the formation of the canon of Sacred Scripture?  
Marcion rejected the Old Testament and most of the New Testament. This prompted the Church to define which books are inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- ☐ Out of what earlier heresy did Manichaeism probably grow?  
It probably grew out of Gnosticism.
- ☐ According to the Manichees, what kind of cosmological battle is taking place?  
The universe is a battleground between Satan and God, darkness and light. Satan's material world is wholly evil; he had stolen some light particles from God and placed them in the brains of humans. Manichaeism promises a way to liberate that light through secret knowledge and rituals.

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## PARTICIPATORY SET

Have each student complete the following table about four early heresies.

| Heresy      | This Sect Believes   | The Catholic Church Teaches   |
|-------------|--|---|
| Marcionism  | The God of the Old Testament and the Jews is evil; the God of the New Testament and the Christians is good.  | There is one God of the Old and New Testaments. Jews are Christians' elder brothers in the Faith.   |
| Manichaeism | There is a cosmic battle between two gods: Satan, the creator of the evil material world, and the good creator of the spiritual world. Satan stole some of the light of the spiritual world and put it in human beings. Secret knowledge can save. | God is good; all of his creation is good. Satan is a fallen creature, not a god. God took on human nature to save all people through his life, Death, and Resurrection. |
| Montanism   | The heavenly kingdom was soon to come. They were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, not in need of Church authority.  | The Faith is handed on, safeguarded, and interpreted by the Pope and the bishops.   |
| Gnosticism  | Because matter is corrupt, Jesus could not have had a human body. Somebody else died on the Cross in his stead.  | Matter is good because God created and sustains it. Jesus Christ truly died on the Cross.   |

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have each student work with a **partner** to write one-sentence definitions of *Marcionism* and *Manichæism*.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have each student work with a **partner** to write one-sentence definitions of *Montanism* and *Docetism*.

## ADDITIONAL VOCABULARY

**Apocalyptic:** of revelation, especially concerning the end of the world.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ Who was the most famous Montanist heretic?

Tertullian was the most famous Montanist heretic.

- ❑ Why did the Montanists reject the authority of the Church?

Montanus and his two female prophets, Prisca and Maximilla, claimed their authority came from the Holy Spirit directly.

- ❑ How were the Montanists stricter than the Church?

They taught Christians who had fallen from grace could never be redeemed. They rejected the forgiveness of sins after Baptism.

## MONTANISM (156–200s)

Montanism was an apocalyptic movement founded by Montanus in Phrygia (Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey) following what he said were private revelations made to him. Montanus worked closely with two female prophets, Prisca and Maximilla. Montanus's central principle was that the new, heavenly kingdom was about to begin in Pepuza, a small town in Phrygia (the exact location of this town is lost to history); he knew this because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him. Montanism also held that Christians who had fallen from grace could never be redeemed. Because Montanus and his followers believed they were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, they rejected the authority of the Church.

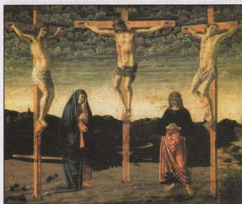
The movement also appeared in North Africa, where the most famous adherent was the Christian thinker Tertullian, who rejected Catholic Christianity after having been one of its greatest apologists for many years. In its African form, Montanism placed a high value on the ascetical life. It forbade second marriages, enacted stricter fasting disciplines than the Church, and rejected flight from persecutions.

Montanism is rightly understood as one of the first apocalyptic movements in Christianity that claimed to supersede the Church because of its direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Its expectation of the New Jerusalem on earth in Pepuza is also unique.



Montanists believed that the "New Jerusalem" foretold by St. John in Revelations would descend to earth in a hill in Pepuza, Phrygia. The Montanist prophets urged everyone to acknowledge their utterances as the new work of the Holy Spirit.

## DOCETISM (30s–100s)



Docetism, yet another Gnostic heresy, rising from the presupposition of the corrupt nature of matter, maintained that Jesus was not truly human and did not actually suffer the pain of crucifixion or death. The name of the heresy derives from the Greek word *dokesis*, meaning appearance or semblance. It often taught that someone else (e.g., Judas Iscariot, Simon of Cyrene) miraculously switched places with Christ just before the crucifixion and suffered death in Christ's place. Many of the Apologists, including St. Ignatius of Antioch, wrote at length against this belief.

Docetism held that the human form of Jesus as well as his crucifixion was an illusion.

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## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What was the central tenet of Docetism?

Jesus only appeared to be human and did not actually suffer the pain of Crucifixion and Death. Someone else, possibly Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene, miraculously switched places with Christ just before the Crucifixion.

- ❑ What is the origin of the name of the Docetist heresy?

The Greek word *dokesis* means appearance.

- ❑ How does Docetism destroy the central belief of Christianity that Jesus suffered and died for the forgiveness of our sins?

If Christ did not suffer and die for us, then our sins are not forgiven and we are not redeemed.