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Theology as a Christian Gnosis in the First Three Centuries*

Pojęcie teologii jako gnozy chrześcijańskiej
w pierwszych trzech wiekach naszej ery

ABSTRACT: During the second and third centuries A.D., challenges from various gnostic groups forced mainstream Christianity to deepen its understanding of its core message. Partially reacting to gnostic teachings, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all contributed to establishing the methods and contents of the authentic “gnosis,” i.e., the orthodox doctrine of faith, in its relationship to historical knowledge and its moral and spiritual endeavor. The importance given to the *regula fidei* as *criterium veritatis* manifests the fundamental desire to be faithful to the original experience of Jesus Christ.

KEYWORDS: Gnosis, Gnosticism, Theology, *regula fidei*, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, authentic “gnosis,” orthodox doctrine of faith, *criterium veritatis*

ABSTRAKT: W II i III wieku n.e. wyzwanie, jakim była działalność różnych grup gnostyckich, skłoniło przedstawicieli głównego nurtu chrześcijaństwa do pogłębienia rozumienia swojego najważniejszego przesłania. Po części w reakcji na nauczanie gnostyków Ireneusz z Lyonu, Klemens Aleksandryjski oraz Orygenes przyczynili się do opracowania metod i treści prawdziwej „gnozy”, czyli ortodoksyjnej doktryny wiary, w jej relacji do wiedzy historycznej, a także wysiłków moralnych i duchowych. Znaczenie nadawane *regula fidei* jako *criterium veritatis* świadczy o fundamentalnym pragnieniu pozostania wiernym pierwotnemu doświadczeniu obecności Jezusa Chrystusa.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: gnoza, gnostycyzm, teologia, *regula fidei*, Ireneusz z Lyonu, Klemens Aleksandryjski, Orygenes, prawdziwa „gnoza”, ortodoksyjna doktryna wiary, *criterium veritatis*

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The theology of the second and beginning of the third centuries was most deeply shaped by its encounter with the gnosis.”¹ With these words, Cardinal Grillmeier characterized the connection between Gnosticism, understood as a heretical movement, and the theology of the Great Church in his monumental history of Christology. However, recent scholarship, for example, that of N. Brox, which approaches the phenomenon of heretical groups from a sociological point of view, understands its variety as the original phenomenon upon which doctrinal orthodoxy would later impose itself.² Yet his interpretive hypothesis does not do justice to those sources that bear witness to the desire to know and adhere to Christ’s authentic message as an element that qualified Christian experience from its beginning. Orthodox thinkers sometimes used the terms gnosis and gnostic to define the authentic knowledge arising from the Revelation and the Christian who lived in full accord with its principles, even if they preferred other terms to indicate Christian perfection from the third century on. In this paper, we will highlight some of the stages in which the heterodox gnosis, while provoking adverse reactions from Catholics, contributed to the birth and development of Christian theology which could be considered as the true gnosis.

Given the complexity of this theme, we will first focus on some terminological and methodological issues to avoid ambiguity. Then, we will analyze some fundamental aspects of Catholic theology in response to the gnosis through the examples of Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. In conclusion, a critical position will be taken on some outcomes emerging from recent scholarship focusing on Ante-Nicene theology and an attempt will be made at assessing the actual relevance of these ancient models.

Preliminary Observations

When questioning the relationship between gnosis and theology in the first centuries of Christianity, it is first necessary to clearly define the relevant acceptance of these two terms from among their multiple meanings.

The noun “gnosis,” that is, “knowledge,” is frequently used in the Pauline letters, while the verb “to know” is employed very often in the Gospel of

¹ Cf. A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Bd. 1: *Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)*, Freiburg 1990/2004, p. 189.

² Cf. N. Brox, term: “Häresie,” [in:] *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, XIII, Lieferung 98, F.J. Dölger (bearb.), T. Klauser, E. Dassmann (hrsg.), Stuttgart 1984, coll. 248–297.

John.³ A specific reference to knowledge of the divine emerges alongside the common use of these terms, referring in Christian circles to the knowledge arising from the Revelation. It is, therefore, the result of a gift from God, an object of learning, and, at the same time, a human desire. The main content of such knowledge was made explicit through human words in the kerygma and soon after in the *regula fidei*, which became the *criterium veritatis*. Man accesses this consciousness as his own through faith. In this sense, one can say that a form of “gnosis” is contemporary to the Christian faith, because even the most immediate and straightforward forms of the *kerygma* require some form of conceptual processing. Gnosis is thus knowledge of divine mysteries.

Alongside this theological usage of the term gnosis, we also observe its emergence in sociological terms. In this context, it denotes a form of knowledge that distinguishes specific groups, which, by referencing elevated doctrines unknown to the masses while also borrowing elements of the Christian tradition, are characterized by a desire to differentiate and distance themselves from the Great Church.⁴ This refers to the phenomenon of Gnosticism that, in its various permutations, presented the greatest intellectual challenge to the Church of the first centuries. If the Christian aspires to “know” the Revelation of God ever more deeply, claims regarding the knowledge of divine things cannot always be considered as authentic *per se*. Therefore, rationally-founded judgment found its place at the origin of Christian theology as a science.

As for the concept of “theology,” leaving aside its ancient usage, which is not relevant here,⁵ we note how some contemporary scholars tend to associate theology as the science of faith with systematic theology, disregarding historical and biblical theology as though they were not truly theology. From our point of view, this approach, which emerges from an overestimation of the systematic approach to teaching theology in academic faculties, is not able to do justice to the ancient reality and fully grasp the significance of the historical and exegetical methods in the work of the Fathers. Here, we understand “theology” not only as a theoretical reflection on the dogmas of the faith, but as any approach, whether historical, exegetical, or apologetic, to “give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15).

³ Cf. R. Bultmann, term: “ginōskō, gnōsis, epiginōskō, epignōsis,” [in:] *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, G. Kittel (ed.), Grand Rapids 1964/1991, pp. 689–719.

⁴ Cf. I. Ramelli, term: “Gnosi-Gnosticismo,” [in:] *Nuovo Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane. F–O*, A. di Berardino (ed.), Genova–Milano 2007, cc. 2364–2380.

⁵ For a quick orientation on the evolution of the concept in antiquity, cf. B. Studer, term: “Teologia,” [in:] *Nuovo Dizionario...*, op. cit., cc. 5284–5286.

The scientific reconstruction of the Gnostic doctrines presents a challenging undertaking: almost all the records we possess on the Gnostics of the first centuries consist of anti-heretical literature, which understandably must be approached with critical reservations. The discoveries of the famous texts of Nag Hammadi, which brought to light some original Gnostic works for the first time, have not provided the results previously hoped for. Indeed, these texts, often presented in Coptic translation, post-date the original works by several centuries. In addition, they do not infer a sufficiently elaborate and coherent doctrine, so that it is still necessary to use the information provided by the controversialist Fathers.⁶ Although the works of the great Gnostic masters of the second and third centuries, such as Valentinus, Basilides, and others, seem lost forever, they nevertheless preceded – and inspired – the birth of Christian theology. It is worth noting that the first commentary on a text from the New Testament, the Gospel of John, was written by Heracleon,⁷ a Gnostic author.

Theology as Christian “Gnosis”

If by “gnosis,” we specifically mean the knowledge of divine things, then Christian theology is gnosis *par excellence*. In what follows, we will trace three examples of how Christian “Gnostics” reacted to heterodox gnosis and became integral aspects of the Christian theological tradition.

Irenaeus of Lyon (circa 130–202 AD)

Irenaeus of Lyon is justly considered to be one of the Fathers of Catholic theology. In his monumental work *Adversus haereses*,⁸ he described and refuted the Gnostic doctrines, in particular, that of Valentinian. Irenaeus’s fundamental contribution, beyond his specific arguments, consisted of drawing together the theological consequences of the principle of Incarnation. Gnostics doctrine denies the Incarnation, because it reduces salvation to a mere awareness of

⁶ I align myself here with the unsurpassed opinion of one of the top experts of Gnostic theology, cf. A. Orbe, *Cristología gnóstica. Introducción a la soteriología de los siglos II y III*, I, Madrid 1976, pp. XV–XVI.

⁷ Note that in this case as well, Heracleon’s text has not been transmitted directly, but only through citations contained in Origen’s commentary on John.

⁸ The complete Greek title of this work means: “On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis.”

the spiritual dimension of man, accompanied by a correlative contempt for bodily things. First of all, the true gnosis, the knowledge of divine things, is revealed in the flesh of the Son of God. The dynamics of Incarnation persist, in the transmission of the faith of the Apostles and their successors within the Church.⁹ The authenticity of such a transmission, as summarized in the *regula fidei*, can be established through historical inquiry, that is, by analyzing the correspondence between the faith of various Churches and in particular the faith of the Roman Church.¹⁰ This in turn became the standard of judgment to eliminate Gnostic doctrines that instead referred to otherwise unverifiable private revelations. In this way, Irenaeus refuted the Gnostic principle that the highest revelation is accessible only to an elite group and transmitted by secret means. Secondly, the principle of Incarnation allowed not only to refute the Gnostic cosmological and anthropological dualism but also to affirm the complete unity between the Old and New Testaments,¹¹ even if specific hermeneutical strategies had to be developed in order to provide the anthropomorphic and violent passages of the Old Testament with a Christian exegesis. The definitions of the canon of the Four Evangelists¹² and the apostolic succession are but the lasting materialization of the principle of the Incarnation.

With regards to the theological discourse, Irenaeus once and for all introduced the principle of the historicity of the Revelation and its transmission in a definitive manner. Theologians, who want to obtain an authentic gnosis, cannot overlook any element of the Christian tradition, nor refer to traditions outside of the Great Church, that is, the *Catholica*.

Clement of Alexandria (circa 150[?]-215 AD)

Clement of Alexandria was one of the first theologians to attempt to construct a systematic theology. His main achievement consisted of three works that outline a progressive approach toward an ever-heightened Christian gnosis. After his first work, the *Protrepticus*, an exhortation toward conversion, he composed the *Paedagogus*, which, as the title suggests, indicates the path to the growth of the Christian soul. The third part of the triptych, which appears to remain in draft form, is called *Stromata*, where he deals with the theme of Christian

⁹ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 10, 1-2.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, III, 3, 2-3.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 18, 1.

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, III, 11, 18.

perfection. Clement does not hesitate to identify Christian gnosis and true philosophy, the self-revealing truth,¹³ and the call “Gnostic” the perfect Christian:

The Gnostic, then, is impressed with the closest likeness, that is, with the mind of the Master; which He being possessed of, commanded and recommended to His disciples and to the prudent. Comprehending this, as He who taught wished, and receiving it in its grand sense, he teaches worthily “on the housetops” those capable of being built to a lofty height; and begins with the doing of what is spoken, in accordance with the example of life. For He enjoined what is possible. And, in truth, the kingly man and Christian ought to be ruler and leader. For we are commanded to be lords over not only the wild beasts without us, but also over the wild passions within ourselves. Through the knowledge, then, as appears, of a bad and good life is the Gnostic saved, understanding and executing “more than the scribes and Pharisees.”¹⁴

In the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, the main center of culture in the imperial era where the Gnostics sects competed with the Christian community, particularly in intellectual and aristocratic circles, Clement demonstrates how those ideals of total self-realization and aspiration for knowledge of and contact with the divine could be fulfilled in the Christian vocation to perfection. Christianity is thus both true philosophy and true gnosis, and the true Gnostic is the Christian who internalizes and fully lives according to the Gospel.¹⁵

Clement reminds theologians that the search for theological knowledge, if genuine, necessarily changes one’s life and that this capacity for change even acts as a measure to gauge the validity of such knowledge. If it’s true that the formation programme of the Christian Gnostic and, more generally, the living conditions referred to clearly reflects the elitist experience of the high class of society, it is also true that teaching and exhortation are in themselves addressed to everyone, in contrast to the Gnostics, who considered their message reserved for the select few.

¹³ Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I, 5.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, VI, 15, 115, 1–4, [in:] *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, A. Roberts, J. Donaldson (eds.), Edinburgh 1899, vol. 12 (Clement of Alexandria vol. 2), p. 371.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, VII, 10–14.

Origen (circa 185–253 AD)

In the past few years, the figure of Origen has been rediscovered. He has emerged as the primary Christian thinker of the first three centuries and as the figure who laid the foundations for an epistemologically coherent and informed theology. In the Alexandrian context of the first half of the third century, Origen desired to counter the influence of the Gnostic movements that had spread among intellectual elites and beyond, and to do so in an orthodox manner by responding to the need for a deeper, more critical and spiritually-committed faith. This desire led him to clarify how to develop a knowledge of divine things and why this should be done in the beginning of his treatise *De Principiis*. Christ revealed the truth necessary for salvation to His disciples, who then passed it on to their successors up until the present day.¹⁶ Due to his numerous travels, Origen visited many Christian communities. Equipped with close knowledge of these groups, he was able to provide a quick summary of the truths believed by all the Churches, the so-called *regula fidei*. Divine providence did not wish to reveal all and left various questions vague and uncertain so that the believer could come closer to the Word of God by endeavoring to understand such uncertainties better through study, prayer, and a life conforming to the Gospel. The result of a study conducted in this manner could not contradict the *regula fidei*.¹⁷ However, it is possible, according to the example provided by Origen, to hypothesize conflicting solutions to certain issues not defined by the *regula fidei*, provided that they remained in line with the faith of the Church. Origen's theological project was a response to the demands at the core of the Gnostic movement. In particular, he tried to address the demand for a level of knowledge and understanding that superseded a simple initial catechesis and led one increasingly closer to divine realities. At the same time, however, these needs are satisfied within the Great Church. Advancement of knowledge, if genuine, could never lead one outside of the teachings provided by the Church.¹⁸ Origen raised a gentle but constant polemic against Christians who remained too simple, were lazy, and did not express any particular desire to study the Bible. Yet he categorically refused the Gnostic division of the nature of men into somatic and pneumatic types. For principles beyond the *regula fidei*, the systematic application of allegorical readings remained within orthodox standards.

¹⁶ Cf. Origen, *De Principiis* I, praefatio *Origenis*, 2–3.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibidem*.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, 4–10.

Origen's works, his scriptural commentaries, and his various exhortations, in addition to the much-discussed *De Principiis*, provided theological and spiritual nourishment for generations of Christians with intellectual inclinations in the Oriental world. Until the writings of the great Fathers of the fourth century, Origen served as a guide for the "Gnostic" Christian who aspired to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures, of Revelation, and moral and spiritual life, even if this term was no longer used due to its proximity to the so-called false gnosis. For Origen, the study of theology constituted a type of ascetic exercise that brought one closer to God.

With Origen, Christian theology achieved its maturity as a science. It constituted an alternate response to Gnosticism, even if some aspects of Origen's thought were no longer understood according to their context and original intention over the following centuries, arousing suspicions to such an extent that they were condemned in various ways – a response that arose partly because of unrelated ecclesiastical politics.¹⁹

Concluding Observations

The three figures that we examined, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, demonstrate how the Fathers responded to the challenges arising from the Gnostic movement and definitively established the bases for the development of the *Catholica* theology, clarifying the links between faith and historical knowledge on the one hand, and ethical concepts and theological and spiritual searching on the other. The need to refer to an original principal as a criterion of judgment emerges from all three authors: the rule of faith transmitted in the Church. Contrary to claims upheld by some recent literature,²⁰ the latter does not surface as a novel idea created by Irenaeus and others to suppress a multiplicity of original doctrines, but as an evaluative principle to allow for the concurrent development of knowledge of and fidelity to Christ. In this sense, these authors serve as a perennial example for those who want to conduct theology in the Catholic tradition.

¹⁹ Cf. H. Crouzel, E. Prinzivalli, term: "Origenismo," [in:] *Nuovo Dizionario...*, op. cit., cc. 3681–3686.

²⁰ Cf. N. Brox, op. cit., coll. 248–297.

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