***Gnosticism and The Way International:***

***A Comparative Analysis***

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**Introduction**

Christian ideology is expressed and taught through various denominations in modern times. Catholics and Protestants are now joined by Methodists, Episcopalians, and members of other denominations. Most of these churches center their teachings on the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, though their interpretations of it may vary. As Lorne Dawson observes, many religions that are “look-a-likes” are viewed as “relative version of truth rather than objective fact” (2006:19). Two religious movements, however, that take these truths to task include The Way International and Gnosticism. Both movements provide alternative versions of the Christian doctrine, each claiming they provide doctrine that is closer to the ‘original’ version.

**The Way International**

Founded by Victor Paul Wierwille in 1955 (Williams, 1979:23), The Way International describes itself as a “worldwide, nondenominational Biblical research, teaching, and fellowship ministry” (The Way International, 2012). Wierwille claims that God spoke to him, audibly, and offered to teach him the Word in its original first century format as long as Wierwille was willing to teach it (Williams, 1979:21). Wierwille was then inspired to create his “Power for Abundant Living” (PFAL) program, which led to the establishment of The Way, Inc. (Williams, 1979:21).

Wierwille took advantage of the Jesus Movement of the late 1960’s to obtain followers, and set up base on his family’s farm (which remained the headquarters for The Way), sustaining it with funding from his affluent older brother, Harry (Williams, 1979:24-25). He constructed his organization like a tree: The Way headquarters acted as the root, the trunk of the organization were the national regions, state headquarters were limbs; branches were formed by each city, and twigs were individual homes and school campuses with members, the leaves, populating them (Williams, 1979:32). Using PFAL as an outreach tool, Wierwille spread his movement through the twigs. This organizational structure remained as recently as 1998, based on former-members’ accounts (Tracenet.net Society, 1998).

At the beginning of the movement, PFAL courses could be purchased for $20 in 1968, but by 1979 the price quickly rose to $100 per course (Williams, 1979:36). The current price of a PFAL course is not publicized by The Way (The Way, 2012). The fee for the course was referred to as a “required minimum donation,” and one must purchase and complete the initiation/confirmation course in order to be considered a member (Williams, 1979:36). Today, The Way maintains its image as a Biblical research organization for “serious Biblical students” through its website (The Way International, 2012). No information is provided about the organization’s history or core teachings, only its means of providing research opportunities (The Way International, 2012). Followers are encouraged to attend fellowship meetings (at the Twigs), and those “who are eligible” may go on to complete *The Way of Abundance and Power*™ series (The Way International, 2012). Only those who complete this series are eligible to partake in the *Disciples of the Way™ Outreach Program* (for those who wish to actively witness the teachings to others) and *The Way Corps™ Leadership Training,* which is aimed at those who wish to be “ministers” of the teachings of The Way as leaders within the organization (The Way International, 2012).

One of the main teachings of The Way is this type of biblical literalism (Williams, 1979:47). The Way claims there are many errors in the translations of the Bible, and it provides research it claims gets “back to the God-breathed original” (The Way International, 2012). Through this research, Wierwille gives ‘evidence’ to support The Way’s denial of the Trinity (Morton and Juedes, 1980:8) and that worshipping Jesus violates the commandment against idolatry (Williams, 1979:54). Wierwille does acknowledge the Holy Spirit, but makes a very strict distinction between “Holy Spirit” and “holy spirit” (Williams, 1979:82). The upper-case use of the term is simply a synonym for God Himself, but the lower-case term refers to a gift from God bestowed upon Christians (Williams, 1979:82). The gift of holy spirit is of great importance to followers of The Way, to the point that they must physically prove that they have received it by speaking in tongues (Williams, 1979:86). This presentation is not just encouraged by The Way, it is a required part of their fellowship practice (Williams, 1979:86).

Wierwille’s focus on his ability to provide ‘correct’ translations, and, therefore, ‘correct’ teachings of the Bible support the categorization of his movement as ethical prophecy (prophecy based on doctrine), however, there are examples of exemplary prophecy (person-centered) within the organization (Dawson, 2006:28). Wierwille had been described as “loving, compassionate”, and charismatic as well as “hot-tempered, power-hungry, and autocratic” (Williams, 1979:17). He has been accused of picking and choosing those texts which support his viewpoint, blatantly ignoring passages or aspects of texts which are contradictory (Morton and Juedes, 1980:6). Despite this emphasis on the doctrinal aspects of his teachings, it appears Wierwille was very adamant about preserving the perception that he was a chosen one to teach the correct doctrine.

**Gnosticism**

Gnosticism is used to describe early movements in the church in which different subgroups provided a variety of views (Scholer, 2007:13). Despite varying views on some topics, many concepts are consistent. The goal in Gnosticism is to gain knowledge, or gnosis, which is described as an “intuitive process of knowing oneself” (Pagels, 1979). Since Gnostics believe that one can reconnect with God by attaining gnosis, it is believed that if you know yourself on the deepest level, you can know God (Pagels, 1979).

According to Gnostic writings, God inhabits an ultimate realm called the Pleroma (Scholer, 2007:14). This God is also referred to as “Father of the entirety” or the “Father of All,” and is described as being beyond description or unknowable (Brakke, 2010:53). Aside from God, lesser beings, known as “aeons” inhabit the Pleroma (Brakke, 2010:54). One of these aeons, Wisdom (also known as Sophia), is said to be responsible for the creation of another being called the Demiurge (Byrne, 2006). The Demiurge is responsible for creating the material world we live in, and is synonymous with the God of Israel (Scholer, 2007:14). Since the world was not created by the Father of All, everything material, including our bodies, is considered evil (Scholer, 2007:14). As a result of this creation, the Father of All sent down a “redeemer” to our world, Jesus Christ (Scholer, 2007:14). Through the belief that our bodies are evil, many Gnostics believe that Christ only appeared to be human, a concept known as Docetism (Scholer, 2007:14). The redeemer provided Gnostics with the knowledge of the true God. They learned they can reacquaint themselves with the Pleroma by transcending their material bodies (Berquist, 2007:106). This attainment of enlightenment, much like Hindus and Buddhists, is also subject to reincarnation as stated in *The Secret Book According to John* (Brakke, 2010:69). Those who fall victim to counterfeit spirit (cling to material world made by Demiurge) are reincarnated over and over until they reach salvation (enlightenment), while those who attain salvation but refuse it are damned (Brakke, 2010:69).

Much of what scholars know about these teachings comes from the 52 texts found in a cave near Nag Hammadi by a farmer named Muhammed Ali al-Samman (Pagels, 1979). The writings not only include secret texts, but also poems and philosophical writings about the nature of the Universe (Pagels, 1979). It is speculated that the myths contained in some of the writings originated through Jews who had turned against aspects of their religion; the aspects of Christianity that exist were added later (Brakke, 2010:84-85). Despite this apparent Jewish influence, Gnostics were identified as Christians by observers of the time (Brakke, 2010:84). No official practices of the movement are known; there is a proposal among scholars that Gnosticism resembled modern-day audience cults, where followers would gather occasionally to share ideas and produce works to reflect their common interests, but Gnosticism was not necessarily their “mode of religion” (Brakke, 2010:87).

Given the emphasis on thought, doctrine, and the personal pursuit of enlightenment, Gnosticism can be said to be rooted in ethical prophecy (Dawson, 2006:28). Gnosticism is without a specific, charismatic leader, though reference is made to important teachers such as Valentinus and Basilides who spread the ideology during their time (Scholer, 2007:13). Even for modern followers of Gnosticism, emphasis is placed on the doctrinal teachings and developing a personal spiritual journey (Angus, 2012).

Just as it did in the days of the early church, Gnosticism today is attractive to those who are questioning the teachings of their own church, who place a greater importance on a personal relationship with God than membership in a church (Angus, 2012). Most internet presence for this movement is merely informational. Newsletters are available from some (Angus, 2012), other sites simply recommend further reading, such as the English translation of the Gnostic texts, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (Byrne, 2006:A22), and others seem further claim that they have the true interpretation, such as Archie Dean Wood, known as Azrael Ondi-Ahman to his followers (True Gnostic Church, 2012). Organizations such as the Church of the Pearl mimic what early Gnostics may have experienced in that they have an (online) community to discuss ideas as well as offer tools, books, and meetings for meditation to help with one’s spiritual journey (2012). Just as there was variation in ideas amongst the early Gnostics, pursuits of attaining transcendence vary greatly, including meditation and asceticism practices. Modern day Gnosticism is truly customizable in practice due to its emphasis on creating a personal relationship with God. The idea is more important than the means.

**Comparison**

Both Gnosticism and The Way International appeal to potential members who identify themselves as Christians and are looking for an original, possibly perceived as un-manipulated, version of the Christian ideology. The religious marketplace, Dawson (2006:18) notes, is full of options, and religious seekers are more like consumers who have no constraints on which religion to subscribe to. Both movements offer alternative versions of the same knowledge base, leading converts to believe no conversion or switching was taking place (Roberts and Yamane, 2012:132-134). It is not until one reads further into the ideas presented in the writings of the “Gnostic Gospels” or notices the discrepancies in The Ways’ Biblical teachings, that one may become aware of the criticisms of the God they are familiar with. With both organizations, however, the movement’s level of uniqueness is important to a potential follower, and the greater the uniqueness, the greater potential for involvement (Dawson, 2006:37).

When applied to the Lofland-Stark model of conversion, we can see how potential followers for each movement may have been led to join. This model proposes that those who join new movements may be experiencing a sort of tension in their life; consider themselves to use religion in their problem-solving, and who consider themselves to be religious seekers (Dawson, 2006:75). Most followers of both movements already identify as Christian and are seeking a deeper experience and understanding of the Bible than what they were getting in their church, and these new perspectives on familiar material are attractive. A friend who mentions Bible study or an informational meeting on a school campus provides an encounter with a group member which may lead to an affective bond (Dawson, 2006:76). Way members, for example, were often recruited from colleges through the strategic placement of twigs near campus (Williams, 1979:32). This may have attracted students who were looking for Bible study groups away from home, or to those who were looking for a base during a period of great transition. While it does not necessarily persuade members to cut off their families, the teachings and structure of The Way facilitate more contact with members than non-members (weakened extrinsic bonds) (Williams, 1979:35; Dawson, 2006:77). Members are slowly exposed to more as they progress through the PFAL courses (Williams, 1979:38). Once they have acclimated to the program and have begun the required tithing, members are encouraged to become ambassadors through the WOW program (Word of World) which furthers The Way’s outreach program and serves as the next step up in involvement in the organization (Williams, 1979:38) which exemplifies the increasing involvement found in the model (Dawson, 2006:76-77).

This model, unfortunately, does not apply well to those who join the Gnosticism movement. Gnosticism, rather, is more aligned with what Dawson refers to as an “audience cult” (Dawson, 2006:33). These cults are usually loose in structure and those who subscribe to the ideas are typically “consumers of cultic goods” (Dawson, 2006:33). Most organizations affiliated with Gnosticism provide links to literature and meetings on their websites, such as the Church of the Pearl and the True Gnostic Church (2012; 2012).

**Controversies**

Little can be said of true controversy with regards to the modern Gnostic movement. The sensationalism provided by *The DaVinci Code* did provide scholars with some headaches as far as emphasizing fact over sensationalism. For example, when *The Gospel of Judas* came into the limelight, scholars attempted to emphasize that the scripture had not been written by Judas himself, or anyone who knew him personally, but *The New York Times* proceeded to comment that the gospel “shed new light” on the relationship between Judas and Jesus (Byrne, 2006:A21). To further the problem, National Geographic paired “re-enactments” with words from *The Gospel of Judas* in their television documentary, which gave the impression that the text was a transcript of what occurred, which is not accurate (Byrne, 2006:A21).

Controversy was not unknown to The Way International, however. After the death of Victor Paul Wierwille in 1985, the organization’s new leader, L. Craig Martindale, was cited in a $2 million dollar lawsuit by Paul and Frances Allen who made claims of sexual assault on Frances (Laney, 2000). According to Martindale, it was a consensual affair, and the case was subsequently settled out of court (Laney, 2000). This was not the only claim by ex-members as to the corruption and sexual misconduct occurring in the organization, as indicated by the website *No Way Out*, however, most of these accounts cannot be substantiated (Tracenet.net Society, 1998). Wierwille’s teachings also came under fire as former members realized the truth of the accusations that much of Wierwille’s research was plagiarized from E.W. Bullinger’s *The Giver and His Gifts* (Morton and Juedes, 1980:43).

**Conclusion**

Despite their differences, the teaching of Gnosticism and The Way International contribute to the growing versatility of religious movements that attempt to provide alternatives to the traditional bodies of worship of yesteryear. With modern society’s ideals in flux, many are seeking new ways of thinking that may not be represented in the organizations available to them. While some are willing to join movements with little resemblance to their former faith, others find a transition to a seemingly similar ideology that may fit more with their ideals. This type of easy transition is found in both NRMs, using the familiar aspects of Christianity in order to attract new members. Just how successful each is at retaining members remains to be seen.

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