HERETICS

The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church

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The Invention of Heresy

Ignatius

> Man by man, become a choir, that being harmonious in love, and taking up the song of God in unison, you may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ, so that he may both hear you and perceive by your works that you are indeed the members of his Son. It is profitable, therefore, that you should live in a blameless unity, so you may always enjoy communion with God.
>
> — Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians

In about 107 c.e., Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was hauled before the Roman emperor Trajan. "Who are you, wicked wretch," the furious emperor asked, "to set yourself up to transgress our commands?" Call me Theophorus, the bishop calmly replied — the God bearer who has Christ in his heart. The seventy-year-old Ignatius was in provocative form. Every last god in the Romans' pantheon was a demon, he declared, and he would never offer sacrifices to them. "There is only one God, who made heaven, earth, and sea and all that are in them; and one Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, whose kingdom I hope to enjoy." And enjoy it he soon would. Trajan ordered that Ignatius "be bound by soldiers, and carried to the great city of Rome, there to be devoured by the beasts for the gratification of the people." Ignatius, so we are told, cried out

with joy: he clasped the chains as they were fastened around him and, delighted by the prospect of martyrdom, he departed "like a distinguished ram, the leader of a goodly flock."[1]

He took a winding route from Antioch (in present-day Turkey) to Rome, journeying on foot through Macedonia and traversing the islands of the Adriatic. His days and weeks were arduous — he described the brutish imperial troops who accompanied him as vicious leopards — but he found great solace in writing letters to the scattered Christian churches that had begun to spring up over the past few decades: to the wealthy port of Ephesus, on the west coast of Anatolia, to the mineral-rich region of Magnesia, and to the churches of Tralles, Smyrna, and Philadelphia.

These letters had one resounding aim: to inspire concord and solidarity between (and within) distant Christian communities. They were saturated by pleas for unity and fierce denunciations of heterodoxy and, as Ignatius knew full well, this was the most urgent of tasks. The growth of Christianity had been spectacular or, at the very least, surprising. In short measure it had expanded its reach from the Jewish heartlands of the Middle East to gentile communities across the empire, but even at this early stage squabbles and divisions were beginning to appear. Ignatius was not best pleased with this development.

As he informed the Christians of Ephesus, it was vital "that you may be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment, and may all speak the same concerning the same thing." They must all "run together in accordance with the will of God." As for how this was to be achieved, Ignatius recommended trusting and obeying the bishops: the people who, since they were God's representatives on earth, should be looked upon "just as we would upon the Lord himself." Those who dissented were to be cast out: "No sect has any dwelling place among you." As Ignatius warned Tralles, "Use Christian nourishment only, and abstain from herbage of a different kind: I mean heresy." Heretics were those who "mix

up Jesus Christ with their own poison, like those who administer a deadly drug in sweet wine."[2]

Close to the end of his journey, Ignatius wrote one final letter to the Christians of Rome. He took special pains to dissuade them from showing "unseasonable goodwill toward me." If they were overly kind, or if they urged him to try to escape his impending death, then he might succumb to their pleas. He was fearful that the love of brotherhood would hinder his zeal toward the Lord. Far better, Ignatius advised, to treat him as "the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may become the pure bread of Jesus Christ."

And so, on the thirteenth day before the calends of January (December 20), after praying with his brethren that persecution might one day cease, Ignatius was killed in a Roman amphitheater, in the shadow of one of the pagan temples he so despised. His remains were wrapped in linen and sent back to Antioch "as an inestimable treasure left to the holy church by the grace which was in the martyr." Back in Rome, on the night following his death, some Christians reported having visions of Ignatius, "still dripping with sweat, as if he had just come from his great labor, standing by the Lord."[3]

We will never know how reliable the surviving account of Ignatius's condemnation and martyrdom is, but in many ways this doesn't matter a jot. It was an exercise in hagiography, after all, so it is the awe-inspiring, propagandist content that truly counts. That mighty image — the recently slaughtered martyr dripping with sweat, standing in paradise alongside Christ — is hard to forget. Ignatius, a solicitous bishop since his thirties, the man who snubbed his nose at a Roman emperor, the martyr who went gleefully to his death, seemed to sum up everything that was best about the very early church.

Thanks to people like Ignatius of Antioch, Christians of many different stripes would look back on the church's first centuries as a golden age. Many of them still do. It was, so the oft-told tale would have us believe, an age of simplicity, when Christ's unsullied teachings held sway, and before all the endless bickering became too rancorous, or too debilitating. There was (as Ignatius would certainly have insisted) a single, self-evident Christian message, and if false prophets sprang up, they were eagerly denounced and driven out. It was also an age before the worldly compromises with political power, before church and state became embroiled, before corruption set in. Christians were righteous victims, strangers in the world, constantly being assayed in the furnace of persecution. There was cogency, purity, and valor back then, before it all went so terribly wrong.

This has proven to be an extraordinarily resilient image but, when all is said and done, it is distorted. Hankering after a pristine Christian era has always made excellent strategic sense. Those who have done so (and they have existed in every Christian century) have been able to denounce contemporary corruption, conflict, and backsliding, and they have been able to portray themselves as the people who can finally set things back on track. Authentic Christianity has been there all along; its message simply has to be rediscovered and fulfilled. We simply have to complete the work of the apostles and brave men like Ignatius of Antioch. It is a very powerful myth, the stuff of reform and reformation, but, in many ways, a myth is all it ever was.

The period of the early church was actually one of the most befuddled and contested in Christianity's history. Almost everything was in flux and the notion of a single Christian truth had already proven itself to be chimerical. Men like Ignatius of Antioch might have yearned for a constant, regnant orthodoxy but, as Christians from Antioch to Rome to Ephesus were proving every day, it simply didn't exist. Christianity did not fall, fully formed, from the sky,

and a cohesive, affable Christian commonwealth was, and would remain, a distant prospect. Dreams of concord had to be invented, and they were hammered out on the anvil of heresy.

In the different corners of what would come to be known as Christendom — whether western Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, or North Africa — divergent Christian identities were emerging, replete with their competing theological passions. The thriving centers of early Christian thought (places like Alexandria and Ignatius's own Antioch) were always likely to be bitter rivals as much as bosom allies. There was endless competition for political and intellectual influence and there were countless bones of theological contention.

Arguments about doctrine, privileged texts, the puzzling issue of how to confront the Jewish past, and the very identity of the Son and the Father were all gathering momentum. Even the precise role of Ignatius's much-loved bishops was still unclear to a persecuted faith whose members often had to worship clandestinely and whose ecclesiological structures were still being determined. Ignatius's bold suggestion, that the bishop of Rome deserved ecclesiastical primacy, often rang hollow. Saint Peter, the rock upon whom the Christian edifice was built, had happened to die in the city, but this hardly altered the fact that much of the new faith's dynamism and intellectual energy resided in cities that lay several hundred miles to the east.

Ignatius was every bit as good a flatterer as he was a martyr, and in his letters he was sure to praise the people he was addressing: of course they would follow his advice, of course they would readily identify and expunge heresy, of course they would heed their bishops and deacons. The trouble was, many people were doing precisely the opposite and it was awfully difficult to tell the difference between orthodoxy and heresy: the stark division between Christian truth and Christian error was still *in ovo*.

Ignatius could bravely inform Trajan of his belief in "one God,

who made heaven, earth, and sea and all that are in them; and one Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God" but, for many, this didn't answer the fundamental questions of who God and Jesus Christ actually were and what relationship they enjoyed. It certainly did not provide a blueprint for what the fledgling Christian church should look like. Christians would struggle with such conundrums throughout their first centuries and the earliest stirrings of these ferocious disputes were well known to Ignatius himself.

The letters that Ignatius wrote are beautiful. They encapsulate the peril and the passion of the early church like few other documents but they also have a whiff of desperation about them. If defining Christianity was really so straightforward then Ignatius would not have been obliged to spend his final tragic weeks barking at his co-religionists to fall into line.

Many of the things Christians now take for granted — a satisfying elucidation of the Trinity, an accepted canon of scripture — lay decades, even centuries in the future. Given all this, it is hard to discern what Ignatius's talk of "running in accordance with the will of God" was supposed to mean. The existence of two groups at the heart of the early Christian enterprise makes this point particularly well.

Marcion and Gnosticism

> I have had a brush with this sect myself . . . women who believed this nonsense offered it to me . . . What is more, they tried to seduce me. I was young and this made me attractive to them . . . Outwardly [they were] very charming, but all the devil's ugliness was in their vile minds.
>
> — Epiphanius[4]

The great North African theologian Tertullian would have his own flirtations with heterodoxy (he would become enamored of the provocative Montanist movement — a phenomenon to which we'll

turn in a few pages' time). Before this descent into what many regarded as heresy, he had been something of a paragon of Christian virtue. After being converted to Christianity during his thirties he began to deploy his extraordinary rhetorical skills (unmatched in the early church for their vim and venom) in praise and defense of the new faith: exploring its spirituality, lauding its martyrs, and excoriating its heretics.

He had despised one heresiarch above all others. In one of his most bilious works Tertullian wrote some deeply unpleasant things about the Black Sea province of Pontus. "The fiercest nations inhabit it," he explained, "if indeed it can be called *habitation*, when life is passed in wagons." Such people had no fixed abodes, their life had "no germ of civilization," and they indulged "their libidinous desires without restraint." Worse still, as Tertullian's rabid rant continued, "They cut up the dead bodies of their parents with their sheep and devour them at their feasts." And yet, Tertullian concluded, "nothing in Pontus is so barbarous and sad as the fact that Marcion was born there." He was colder than its winter, more brittle than its ice, more craggy than the Caucasus Mountains. Marcion, dubbed the "firstborn of Satan" by his enemies, was perhaps the most despised heretic in the early church, and also among the most dangerous since, as Tertullian lamented, his teachings had filled the whole world. Across much of the Roman Empire, his followers, like swarms of wasps, built their heretical honeycombs in imitation of bees.[5] His alleged crime was twofold: he had renounced the entire legacy of Jewish scripture (what Christians would now refer to as the Old Testament) and he had invented a second god. He was bold, if nothing else.

A wealthy ship owner from Sinope, Marcion traveled to Rome in or around the year 140 C.E. At first, he made an excellent impression on the local Christian community, not least through his contribution of 200,000 sesterces (a very generous sum) to the church's coffers. Very quickly, however, eyebrows began to be raised

at Marcion's radical cosmological vision. Determined to cast off the Jewish heritage, Marcion suggested that the Christian God, the father of Jesus, a God of love, was an entirely different entity from the fickle, wrathful deity of the Hebrew scriptures.

Marcion was articulating (in exaggerated, sometimes unsavory form) Christianity's determination to distinguish itself from the Judaic past. Christianity was often very keen to portray itself as a radically new religious tradition: a legitimate spiritual alternative rather than just another Jewish sect. Given the subsequent, often unedifying relationship between Judaism and Christianity, we might imagine that this was easily and instantly accomplished. Not so. Christ, after all, was a Jew, as were his disciples, and his ministry was aimed almost exclusively at his fellow-religionists. He was, by all accounts, the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Jewish scripture. Had Christianity never moved beyond Palestine, the new faith's Jewish credentials would doubtless have continued to receive suitable emphasis but, with the odysseys of the apostle Paul, the Christian message spread out across the largely gentile eastern Mediterranean.

This provoked an almighty headache. How were gentile converts to behave: Were they to adopt the dietary and ritualistic habits of Judaism? Were they to undergo circumcision — the ancient ritual sign of Abraham's covenant with God?

Paul said no, and at the Council of Jerusalem in about 50 C.E. (less a council as we would now understand the term, and more an ad hoc meeting of local luminaries) a momentous decision was reached. Gentile converts to Christianity would not be required to abide by most of the tenets of Jewish ritualistic law. There was a new covenant, one that supplanted Abraham's, and Christianity was set on course to be a novel, distinctive religion. This certainly didn't please everyone within the Christian fraternity, and the first century saw the emergence of numerous groups (the so-called Ebionites being the most discussed example) who sought to sustain a conspicuously Jewish Christianity, insisting upon the continued

dominance of Mosaic law and denouncing Paul's encounters with the gentile world.

Ultimately, however, such groups garnered a great deal of criticism (some of the very first accusations of Christian heresy, in fact) and the notion of a necessary break with the Jewish past became the majority position within the fledgling church. So far, so palatable for Marcion but, by his reckoning, the rupture was still not sufficiently radical. Very few Christians were unwilling to turn their back on the whole Jewish inheritance. The Hebrew scriptures were avidly recruited as earlier signposts to the brave new Christian future, while the deeds of Jewish heroes and the musings of Jewish prophets continued to be a source of Christian inspiration. As our friend Ignatius of Antioch put it, it was time to lay aside the old, sour leaven, and be "changed into the new leaven, that is Jesus Christ" but, as Ignatius was careful to add, while the new Gospel was of a different, better caliber — "transcendent," as Ignatius put it, and "the perfection of immortality" — the Jewish prophets were not to be abandoned.[6] Christians (like the Ebionites) who clung too tenaciously to Jewish practices and theological nostrums — Ignatius called them Judaizers — were to be vilified, but in spite of their excesses it was still important for Christians to take cognizance of the Jewish legacy. This allowed the new faith to construct a millennia-old historical narrative and pedigree, one that stretched back to the time of Adam, and one in which the arrival of Christ represented the fulfillment of ancient salvific promises.

This is precisely what Marcion found so objectionable. In his scheme, Christ had nothing whatsoever to do with the Jewish days of yore, and he insisted that the Jewish scriptural canon should be thrown out in its entirety. In fact, his list of acceptable Christian texts included only a bowdlerized version of Luke's Gospel and ten of the Epistles of Paul (Marcion's great apostolic hero). Marcion had deployed extreme editorial violence (using the knife, not the pen, as Tertullian put it) in deciding which scriptures were legitimate.

Even more unsettling was Marcion's suggestion that the whole material universe was the creation of this non-Christian Old Testament god, and that all the matter within the cosmos was evil. Christians were to have as little as possible to do with this fleshly realm; they were to shun sensual pleasure and live lives of extreme asceticism. This also meant, by Marcion's calculation, that Christ (the son of the true God) could not possibly have defiled himself by assuming creaturely form. Instead, Marcion adopted the position known as Docetism, whereby Jesus had only appeared to take on a physical body: the "likeness of sinful flesh," as Romans 8:3 (one of Marcion's approved texts) helpfully put it.

Docetists (from *dokein*, a Greek word meaning "to seem") were a common sight in the early church (it is likely that they were just the sorts of heretics that got Ignatius of Antioch so riled up in his letters). Uncomfortable with the idea that a god could really assume human shape, they made the radical suggestion that Christ's incarnation had been little more than an illusion. He had no human flesh or intellect, no rational soul. Christ was a mirage. The body that was crucified had not been divine; Mary had not given birth to a god. The divine essence had simply and spectrally taken on the appearance of a man. Perhaps the clearest signal of Marcion's sympathy with this theological position was his removal of the familiar birth narrative from Luke's Gospel: for Marcion, such a sordid event as Christ's emergence from the bowels of a human being, Mary, was repugnant.

Needless to say, many corners of the Christian world found much to object to in all this (although it is important to stress that it went down rather well in others). Marcion seemed to provide powerful ammunition for those, like Tertullian, who argued that the worst heresies were the progeny of overly speculative imaginations. At a time when Christianity was trying to impress Greek speakers, there was considerable advantage in seeking out some synthesis with the fashionable tenets of Greek philosophy. Deciding how far

this dialogue ought to be taken was the cause of bitter debate within the Christian fraternity, however.

Some Christian theologians — Origen and Clement of Alexandria are perhaps the most obvious examples — were delighted to turn Christianity into a sophisticated, jargon-rich philosophical undertaking. Others were not so sure and they came up with a resonant rallying cry: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" or, as Tertullian put it, "What is there in common between the philosopher and the Christian, between the pupil of Hellas and the pupil of heaven?"[7] For many, the wayward thought of some Christians, Marcion included, was a direct result of the deleterious impact of Greek philosophical ideas. Marcion was being far too clever for his own good.

The idea of a noncorporeal Christ was especially problematic because, if Christ's sacrifice on the cross was to be of genuine benefit to mankind then, as most theologians agreed, it was paramount that he had actually suffered as a human being. In the human part of himself he had to be just like the people for whose sins he was atoning. Anything less would have represented an empty redemptive gesture. As for the notion of an earlier, competing Old Testament god, this obviously flew in the face of Christianity's monotheistic message. Unsurprisingly, Marcion was excommunicated by the church in Rome in 144 C.E. (though at least his generous donation was returned to him), but in the coming years his ideas won over large numbers of recruits.

Something approaching a rival Marcionite ecclesiastical structure grew up, which dealt a blow to Tertullian's point that heretics were always "motherless, houseless, creedless outcasts, wandering about in their own essential worthlessness."[8] On the contrary, Marcionites were very well organized, self-confident, and possessed of a creed, and they continued to thrive after Marcion's death in 160 C.E., surviving in some places until well into the third century. People continued to moan about Marcion in Crete, Cyprus, and Rome,

and across Anatolia. It has even been argued that Marcionism was among the first varieties of Christianity to firmly establish itself in some eastern towns and cities: a further challenge to any concept of an original, orthodox core at the center of the Christian tradition. "In all cases," Tertullian argued, "truth precedes its copy," but in some places it seems possible that Marcion's ideas came to prominence very early on.[9]

Marcion was one of the first thinkers to articulate an abiding theme of Christian heresy: the troublesome dualistic notion of two gods (or, at least, one true God and an imperfect demiurge who created the material universe). The idea would recur among the Bogomils of the tenth-century Balkans and among everyone's favorite medieval heretics, the Cathars. It would also inspire the Gnostics.

Marcion is routinely grouped together with leading Gnostic thinkers such as Valentinus (c. 100–c. 175) and Basilides (c. 120–c. 145), although it is vital to stress that his idiosyncratic vision lacked many of their more exotic theological concoctions. Full-fledged Gnosticism, if we accept it as a coherent heretical movement (and we'll see in a moment that this is up for debate), went to far more elaborate lengths to flesh out its mythos and populate its universe with a bewildering cast of divine and semidivine characters.

In the beginning, as one school of Gnostic thought explained, there had indeed been only one God: a being of pure spirit, unknowable, unapproachable, inhabiting an infinite realm. Ages passed in stillness and inaction, but then God's seed entered the womb of silence and a host of emanations, or spiritual forces (mind, truth, reason, prudence among them), emerged. Unfortunately, the last of these forces (Sophia, or Wisdom) turned out to be something of a cosmological disaster. She had the arrogance to emulate God's powers and to do some creating of her own. For this crime she was

cast out of the infinite realm (*pleroma*). Alone and adrift, Sophia could manage to fashion only a monster, who in turn created a demiurge. This demiurge was flawed, limited, and a decidedly unreliable workman (more an inept journeyman than a skilled master craftsman), but this did not deter him from creating mankind and the universe that we all still inhabit.

Here, the overlap with Marcion's ideas is clearly visible. This universe, just like Marcion's, was chaotic and disjointed, a place of sin, natural disasters, and disease. The entire material world — every atom of it — was corrupt and repulsive: and, crucially, it had nothing whatsoever to do with the original God of the *pleroma*.

All was not lost for mankind, however. Some human beings retained a spark of the original divine spirit, of the infinite deep. Salvation consisted of acquiring secret knowledge (gnosis) so that, at the time of death, this spark could escape the prison of the material world and, via an extraordinary journey through the stars, return to the *pleroma*. Making this possible had been Jesus Christ's great achievement. He had been sent to impart this arcane knowledge so that at least some of humanity (by most accounts a tiny minority) might be saved.

It is immediately obvious that much of this has little to do with Marcion. It is also important to realize that this tidy (slightly caricatured) account of just one variety of Gnostic cosmology collapses the diversity of Gnostic thought into a single, relatively digestible schema: it is exotic, but at least we can get the gist. The truth was far more discombobulating. Within the divergent Gnostic "schools" there were many different variations on a creation myth, many different ways of interpreting the role of Christ, and many competing casts of divine and subdivine characters. The vision of one Gnostic was likely to be different from the vision of another and, as some recent scholars have convincingly argued, this calls the whole concept of Gnosticism into question. Gnosticism, to borrow one of its most eminent historian's phrases, is a dubious category. It is a later

attempt to impose a false unity on a staggeringly wide-ranging religious phenomenon. As another historian, Karen King, puts it, "The literature defies attempts to force its theological diversity into snug categorical cubby holes."[10]

Until the middle of the twentieth century, our understanding of Gnosticism relied heavily on its enemies: the first great heresiologists of the early church. In the absence of a reliable corpus of genuine Gnostic texts, all we had to hand were the negative caricatures of what has reasonably been called a "severe and cantankerous genre."[11] Trawling through such books is an entertaining but ultimately bewildering proposition for the modern reader. Our heads inevitably spin when confronted with the bizarre compendia of sordid allegations and claims that Gnosticism represented some clumsy collision of Greek philosophy, sorcery, and astrology.

Fortunately, everything changed in 1945. In December of that year, an Egyptian peasant farmer headed into the hills near Nag Hammadi to dig for fertilizer. He discovered a clay jar containing twelve complete papyrus codices and a few leaves of a thirteenth: they contained no fewer than fifty-four authentic Gnostic-looking tracts — new sayings of Jesus Christ, alternative gospels, divergent creation myths, and a host of hymns and prayers. It was the most sensational of accidental discoveries (one that ranks alongside the unearthing of the Dead Sea Scrolls). Over the past few decades, scholars have been diligently translating and editing these texts and they reveal just how diverse Gnostic thought could be.

It still makes sense to talk of recurrent Gnostic themes — a differentiation between the true God and the creator god, a stark distinction between soul and body, the importance of attaining secret knowledge — but simplistic caricatures of Gnosticism have been sensibly abandoned.

All this recent work has also bolstered the idea that we should not dismiss Gnosticism as nothing more than a heretical offshoot from the Christian mainstream. It is better, perhaps, to think of it

as a distinct, though far from cohesive, religious phenomenon. The great Gnostic thinkers undoubtedly regarded themselves as Christians — that was what so irked their critics — but they were also part of a far broader tradition: one that drew influences from trends in Greek philosophy and various Near Eastern religious movements. Gnosticism managed to articulate a theme that transcended the narrow concerns of Christianity: what the modern philosophical lexicon might describe as a sense of alienation from the material world and a considered attempt to explain evil and suffering.

Christianity has always struggled to account for the existence of evil in a universe purportedly created by an all-powerful, loving God. It has been suggested that evil is a necessary part of creation, something that Christians need to encounter if they are to enjoy spiritual growth, or that evil is entirely the result of mankind's misuse of its God-given free will. None of these solutions ever provided fully satisfactory answers to the nagging question of why God didn't fashion a perfect universe rather than one filled with earthquakes, murderers, and cancer victims. The Gnostics posited a far more satisfying answer: evil and suffering had nothing to do with God. Someone else (the incompetent demiurge) was to blame for their existence.

The depth and sophistication of ancient Gnosticism make it all the more depressing that it has been hijacked by the half-baked theorizing of the modern New Age movement. However, so far as its role in the history of Christian heresy is concerned, it was the caricatured version of Gnosticism that mattered most at the time. Many Gnostic leaders undoubtedly regarded themselves as Christians. They would have claimed that they were simply adapting the Gospel message in a different, but entirely devout way. Moreover, and this must certainly have convinced them of their legitimacy, they won over significant numbers of followers. Even in places that now stand as bywords for Christian orthodoxy, not least the city of Rome, active Gnostic communities flourished.

Because of all this, those of more conventional Christian sensibilities saw Gnosticism as an internal problem, not as an external threat. It was a movement that seemed to jeopardize the sustainability and cohesion of the entire Christian enterprise. From the second through the fourth centuries a succession of theologians penned detailed, ferocious attacks and the campaign against Gnosticism represented the first sustained attempt to systematically define and denounce a Christian heresy. It was hardly surprising that such theologians — Hippolytus (170–c. 236), Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–c. 200), and our old friend Tertullian — were so energized. There was, from their perspective, much to object to within the Gnostic vision.

The Gnostics' demiurge could sometimes look a lot like another, albeit lesser, God, another creator, which obviously queered the monotheistic pitch. Gnosticism also threatened to turn an avowedly inclusive religious tradition into the preserve of that minuscule minority who retained a spark of divinity, thus making Christ's sacrifice on the cross (in which he had atoned for the sins of *all* humanity) into an irrelevance. For the Gnostics, Christ's purpose had been the imparting of secret knowledge: events on Mount Calvary simply lost all significance. As for God the Father, again the Gnostics boldly undermined Christian notions of an interventionist, caring creator who could be encountered, or at least communicated with, via prayer, ritual, and devotional practice. For many Gnostics, the true God was still entirely out of reach: he was most likely uninterested in the events of a world he had not created, enjoying, instead, the splendid isolation of the infinite realm. For all Gnosticism's ingenuity, it is very difficult to see how — especially in the straitened circumstances of the early church, especially within the context of a proudly monotheistic religion — such a radically different interpretation of the Christian message could have gone unanswered.

In any event, the existence of Gnosticism certainly reminds us just how pliable early Christianity could be. If people could erect

such extraordinary theological visions upon its foundations, then anything must have seemed possible. At two thousand years' distance it is very easy to conclude that Gnosticism, with its talk of two gods, its reevaluation of Christ's role, and its extravagant cosmology, was entirely aberrant. It is sobering to remember, however, that many of the earliest Christians looked at Gnosticism very differently: for them, it represented a feasible, if always slightly outlandish, Christian alternative.

Heresy was not always about migrating toward radical theological extremes. Just as often, groups and individuals seized upon a broadly acceptable aspect of Christian belief or practice and explored it in new ways. In a sense, this was even part of the Gnostic enterprise: hatred of the world, since the world was a place of persecution, pervaded the early church, and the Christian penchant for asceticism arrived very early on the theological scene. Gnostics merely pursued this notion of alienation and world-weariness to its extreme.

The perfect example of the heretical ability to investigate and expand an otherwise unexceptionable idea can be found in the movement known as Montanism—our next ancient heresy and the one that appealed to as upstanding a theologian as the Gnostic-hating Tertullian.

The Montanists

> It was about the middle of the second century of Christianity that Montanus, the Arch-Heretic, and Proto-Patriarch of all Enthusiasts, made his appearance in the world. He was a native of Phrygia, and was no sooner converted to the Christian faith, than he appeared very zealous for the honour and improvement of his new religion . . . He began (as all heretics and schismatics . . .

> generally do) with accusing and complaining of the bishops and their clergy as careless and negligent in their duties, and remiss in their discipline. He taxed them with want of zeal, and with falling from their first love; with neglecting the spirit and life of Christianity, and contenting themselves merely and only with the bare and outward letter, and form of it. In a word, he confidently charged them with being entirely void of the Spirit, and with leading mere animal and physical lives.
>
> — *Montanus Redivivus*[12]

During the mid-second century, news began to spread through the towns and villages of Phrygia (a province of western Asia Minor) of new Christian revelations. Two prophetesses, Maximilia and Priscilla (or Prisca), had abandoned their husbands and families in order to follow the religious leader Montanus — a man, according to the hostile historian Eusebius, who "in the unbounded lust for power . . . became obsessed and suddenly fell into frenzy and convulsion." In moments of spiritual possession and ecstatic frenzy they saw visions of Christ's imminent second coming, of the beginning of his thousand-year rule on earth. Or, as Eusebius put it, they had been filled with a bastard spirit, "so that they spoke madly, improperly, and strangely."[13]

In preparation for these last days Montanus and his followers began to plan for a New Jerusalem in the east (on sites that modern archaeology has only just begun to unearth) and to preach the most strident of Christianities. The faithful were to practice chastity and abstinence, to lead lives of strict asceticism (surviving on repasts of radishes, as their critics alleged). Above all they were to resist persecution with all their might, even to the point of seeking out martyrdom when occasion arose. The Montanists were responding to what they perceived as a softening of Christian values: they feared that a formerly rigorous faith was becoming complacent. Far better, they suggested, to embrace deprivation, extreme penitential discipline, and, above all, persecution: the fan that cleansed

2 James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 20.
3 "Exposition of the Christian Faith," book 1, chapter 19 (NPNF, second series, 10).
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