

Gnosticism

Gnosticism (after *gnôsis*, the Greek word for “knowledge” or “insight”) is the name given to a loosely organized religious and philosophical movement that flourished in the first and second centuries CE. The exact origin(s) of this school of thought cannot be traced, although it is possible to locate influences or sources as far back as the second and first centuries BCE, such as the early treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Jewish Apocalyptic writings, and especially [Platonic](#) philosophy and the Hebrew Scriptures themselves.

In spite of the diverse nature of the various Gnostic sects and teachers, certain fundamental elements serve to bind these groups together under the loose heading of “Gnosticism” or “Gnosis.” Chief among these elements is a certain manner of “anti-cosmic world rejection” that has often been mistaken for mere [dualism](#). According to the Gnostics, this world, the material cosmos, is the result of a primordial error on the part of a supra-cosmic, supremely divine being, usually called *Sophia* (Wisdom) or simply the *Logos*. This being is described as the final emanation of a divine hierarchy, called the *Plêrôma* or “Fullness,” at the head of which resides the supreme God, the One beyond Being. The error of Sophia, which is usually identified as a reckless desire to know the transcendent God, leads to the hypostatization of her desire in the form of a semi-divine and essentially ignorant creature known as the *Demiurge* (Greek: *dêmiourgos*, “craftsman”), or Ialdabaoth, who is responsible for the formation of the material cosmos. This act of craftsmanship is actually an imitation of the realm of the Pleroma, but the Demiurge is ignorant of this, and hubristically declares himself the only existing God. At this point, the Gnostic revisionary critique of the Hebrew Scriptures begins, as well as the general rejection of this world as a product of error and ignorance, and the positing of a higher world, to which the human soul will eventually return. However, when all is said and done, one finds that the error of Sophia and the begetting of the inferior cosmos are occurrences that follow a certain law of necessity, and that the so-called “dualism” of the divine and the earthly is really a reflection and expression of the defining tension that constitutes the being of humanity—the human being.

DOCETISM: the doctrine, important in Gnosticism, that Christ's body was not human but either a phantasm or of real but celestial substance, and that therefore his sufferings were only apparent.

ANTINOMIANISM: (Greek *anti*, “against”; *nomos*, “law”), [doctrine](#) according to which Christians are freed by grace from the necessity of obeying the [Mosaic Law](#). The antinomians rejected the very notion of obedience as legalistic; to them the good life flowed from the inner working of the [Holy Spirit](#). In this circumstance they appealed not only to [Martin Luther](#) but also to Paul and Augustine.

The ideas of antinomianism had been present in the early church, and some Gnostic heretics believed that freedom from law meant freedom for license. The doctrine of antinomianism, however, grew out of the Protestant controversies on the law and the gospel and was first attributed to Luther’s collaborator, [Johann Agricola](#). It also appeared in the Reformed branch of [Protestantism](#). The left-wing [Anabaptists](#) were accused of antinomianism, both for theological reasons and also because they opposed the cooperation of [church and state](#), which was considered necessary for law and order. For similar reasons, in the 17th century, Separatists, Familists, Ranters, and Independents in England were called antinomians by the established churches. In [New England](#), [Anne Hutchinson](#) was accused of the doctrine when she said that the churches were preaching “the [covenant](#) of works.” The Evangelical movement at the end of the 18th century produced its own antinomians who claimed an inner experience and a “new life,” which they considered the true source of good works.