

On Faith and Knowledge
by Tau Phosphoros

In this essay, I want to examine two terms that are often heard in discussions about Gnosticism: Pistis, from the Greek, meaning "faith"; and Gnosis, also from the Greek, meaning "Knowledge." When I was ordained into the Minor Orders of the Gnostic Church over a decade ago, I remember, during my studies, participating in many discussions about Gnostic theology wherein a sharp distinction was often made between "pistic" Christianity, which seeks salvation through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and "gnostic" Christianity, which seeks salvation through the revelatory knowledge of Jesus Christ. This distinction is an accurate one, owing to the contrasting soteriological doctrines of original sin. That is, one element of Christendom views humanity as being utterly depraved due to its rebellion against God, and helpless concerning its own salvation. It is therefore only through absolute and unquestioning faith in the salvific quality of the passion that one may have hope of salvation. The "gnostic" Christian, however, views man as an essentially divine being, but ignorant of his true nature because of the slumber induced by the false god against whom he once rebelled. To the Gnostic, then, Jesus Christ came to awaken humanity to its own latent potential, whereby it may effect its own salvation. These definitions are gross over-simplifications, but nevertheless serve to show the fundamental philosophical difference between Gnosticism and non-gnostic Christianity.

Because of the clear distinction between the two theological camps mentioned above, the concepts of pistis and gnosis are routinely pitted against one another as if they are irreconcilably opposed. However, to place faith in opposition to knowledge is a false dichotomy, and leads away from the spiritual reintegration sought by Gnostics. Faith, in fact, is an integral part of the spiritual regenerative process. This process is expressed poetically in the following excerpt from The Gospel of Philip:

Faith is our earth in which we take root.
Hope is the water with which we are nourished. Love is
the air through which we grow.
Knowledge is the light by which we ripen.

In this agricultural analogy we see that faith is at the very foundation of the Christian Gnostic doctrine. But we may ask what, then, is the foundation of our faith? The answer is "knowledge." Now this may seem to be somewhat circular reasoning, since knowledge is also the end result. But it must be understood that there are various levels or degrees of knowledge. The very lowest form of knowledge is the simple accumulation of facts and data. This type of knowledge is indispensable to the productive functioning in the material world, but does little to effect spiritual transformation. The faith based upon this knowledge is the surety of the physical laws of the universe. The hope arising from this type of faith is the sort of expectation we have that the atoms of our body will not spontaneously dissipate; or that all of the air in a room will not suddenly collect in one corner, leaving a vacuum. With this basic expectation met - that the laws of nature are stable and consistently reliable - there arises a very primitive form of love. This love is not the agape that leads to the salvific gnosis; rather, it is the base desires of the physical nature: nourishment, shelter, sex, etc. This level of love also includes emotional attachments and aesthetic value judgments.

This level of functioning is seen in those many people who go about their lives seeking nothing but the fulfillment of the most basic human needs as mentioned above. These individuals are "sinners" not because they are acting with malicious intent, but because they are acting blindly; without knowledge of their true Nature - in fact, without even suspecting that there is any nature of man higher than the animal nature to which they might aspire. Because this type of individual has little control over the many factors influencing his life, and seems to be tossed about - for better or worse - by the tides of Fortune, he is referred to by our beloved 18th century mystic, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, as l'Homme du Torrent, or the Man of the Stream. This state of being is characterized by rote behaviour

and the lack of philosophical inquiry or introspection.

These lowest forms of knowledge, faith, hope, and love make possible a somewhat higher form of knowledge based upon philosophical reasoning. It is this type of knowledge upon which we may establish our faith in the existence of a God. This faith, based upon reason rather than empirical data, thus represents our first step out of the personal, material realm and toward the eternal or spiritual realm. That is why it is "our earth in which we take root." Faith is crucial to the fulfillment of liturgical life. It is from this faith that the priest derives the intent necessary to effect the transmission of the sacraments. Likewise, it is our faith in the efficacy of those sacraments that allows them to produce the desired results.

With faith in a divine and eternal realm comes the hope for our attainment of that ultimate glory. The canonical scriptures are filled with references to the hope of eternal or aeonic life. One interesting example of this is in the introduction of the Letter of Paul to Titus, which expresses this in the context of faith and knowledge:

Paul, a servant of God, apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of the elect of God and the knowledge of truth according to godliness, on the hope of aeonic life promised by the truthful God before the aeons of time.

The individual who aspires to spiritual grace corresponds to what Saint-Martin called l'Homme de Desir - the Man of Desire. This desire is not like the primitive material urges of the Man of the Stream, but a yearning of the soul for its spiritual home. When one has set oneself upon this path, she, or he, begins to develop a concern for the general upliftment of humanity. This movement away from the immediate concerns of self-preservation and gratification toward a more universal ideal is best expressed in the Greek concept of agape. The Latin, caritas, from which we get the word "charity," conveys a similar sentiment. This love, therefore, is not at all like the self-centered demands of the Man of the Stream. It is what the Buddhists call compassion; which is not an emotional outpouring, but a genuine altruism toward one's fellow brothers and sisters on the path - humanity.

This path of faith, hope, and love makes possible the bestowal of the higher knowledge, or gnosis, upon those who have spiritually matured. The first glimpses of gnosis may come through dreams, intuitive flashes, or premonitions. This phenomena often pertains to specific facts, persons, or events, and may be referred to as personal gnosis. That is, its significance is relative to the one who experiences it. But this same process of enhanced awareness is also the vehicle for divine gnosis, or knowledge of God. This divine knowledge is revealed through the intuitive faculties. Therefore, it is not subject to quantification, such as the lowest form of knowledge discussed previously; neither is it subject to logical reasoning, because it is higher than the laws governing normal logic and critical thinking.

In other words, in normal deductive reasoning, the truth of an idea or principle is dependent upon certainties which often necessitate the falsehood of some other principle. An example of a deductive argument would go something like this:

If A is true, then B is not true.
A is true. Therefore, B is not true.

or,

Either A or B is true.
A is true. Therefore B is not true.

You would never find a valid deductive argument that states:

If A is true then A is not true.

For, this would create an irreconcilable paradox. Neither could you state:

Either A is true, or A is not true. A
is true. Therefore A is not true.

In this example, the argument would be valid if we had stopped at "A is true." However, the statement that "A is not true" does not logically follow from the previous statements. But gnosis comes from a plane that is above the laws of nature which state that an idea must be either true or not true; that a thing must be of one nature but not another. In gnosis, paradoxes are reconciled; the circle squared. We are not talking here about mere probability or inductive reasoning, which states that as one thing becomes more likely, something else must become less likely. No, gnosis is a revelatory knowledge that allows all seeming contradictions to simultaneously coexist. This elevation of the consciousness above the duality of either/or is indicative of the process of reintegration into the One from which all apparent divisions extend.

With this higher level of gnostic awareness, there is the emergence of what Saint-Martin called *Le Nouvelle Homme* - the New Man. This is the same "New Man" that St. Paul, in his Letter to the Colossians (3:10-11), tells us is "being renewed in knowledge." And, "in that renewal there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision...etc.; but Christ is all and in all." The faith of the New Man is unshakable because it is founded upon a surety that can come from neither empirical data, nor philosophical reasoning. The knowledge gained from empirical study must necessarily be falsifiable; that is the scientific method. That is, no matter how well-tested a theory or law of physics may be, there must exist the possibility of discovering new evidence that could alter, or even reverse our views on the matter. Likewise, with logic and critical thinking, new ideas may be presented that are more plausible than those previously held. But true gnosis comes from the innermost depths of the human psyche, or soul, which is that elusive and vivifying pneumatic spark. Truly, as it was said in ancient times, to know oneself is to know the universe and the gods.

The hope arising from this faith is no longer mere expectation, but a certainty of one's place among the aeons and of one's role on earth in service to humanity. And love is the means by which the Great Work is accomplished. This highest form of agape is a regenerative and sanctifying grace that the high priest of the gnosis radiates toward all within his sphere of influence. This love has the ability to instantly liberate the divine spark from even the densest and basest of matter. The adept who has discovered this ultimate secret is a true Gnostic; a living Master and demiourgos. This accomplishment is identical to the creation of the fabled Philosopher's Stone of the alchemists. It is the Elixir of Life; the Fountain of Youth. This is what Saint-Martin referred to as *l'Homme-Esprit*, or Spirit-Man. Beyond this, what more can be said? We have already tried to express the inexpressible; to articulate that which is ineffable. If there are higher planes of attainment, they are known only to those who have experienced them directly, and are surely wholly incommunicable. Here, the differences between Faith, Hope, Love, and Knowledge melt away into an undifferentiated state of pneumatic luminescence.

So, when we speak of "pistic" Christians and "gnostic" Christians, let us not suppose that we, as Gnostics, are somehow above the need for faith, but let us be thankful that our faith has matured. And let us not take pride in calling ourselves "Gnostics," for that designation is on loan to us on the hope of our eventual attainment. There are not likely many living today who can wear that name deservingly. There are more people than ever, though, who are aspiring toward this worthy goal. Faith and Gnosis, therefore, are not opposing philosophic doctrines, but are each a form of salvific grace, bestowed by the Holy Spirit to aid us in our quest for spiritual perfection. If we can learn to integrate the concepts of Faith, Hope, Love, and Knowledge into our theological world-view, then we will be well on our way toward reconciling the myriad dualities struggling within each of us. We may look forward to that hour when the Law of Agape brings all seemingly contrary forces into a symphony of complementarity.