Jung and the Gnostic Gospels

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In 1945 an Egyptian peasant found a collection of buried ancient manuscripts, consisting of 1,153 pages of papyrus bound into 12 primitive leather-bound books (codices). They were copies made by third and fourth century scribes of works written in the Apostolic age (just before and after the death of Jesus) by people who were purportedly writing their memories of Jesus, and they contain many sayings of Jesus that are not in the generally accepted Christian canon (the Holy Bible). The original authors were Gnostic Christians ("gnostic" is the Greek word for "knowledge." The manuscripts are called the Coptic Gnostic library or the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. It was 32 years before the first English translation of some of the manuscripts was published.

In 1947, an Arab goatherd discovered a large collection of clay jars (in a cliff overlooking the Dead Sea) containing many parchment scrolls and one copper scroll. The scrolls were written by the Essenes, members of a Jewish sect who lived near the Dead Sea from about 130 BC to 70 AD. The may have taken the scrolls to Qumran when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD by the Roman army. Only about 20% of the scrolls have been published. The Dead Sea Scrolls are considered Gnostic writings.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls frightened church leaders, because they are different from (but complementary to) mainstream Judaism and Christianity, and they record many teachings of Jesus that contrast with the teachings in the New Testament. There have been many accusations that church leaders have suppressed and delayed the translation and publication of the manuscripts because they contradict some of the traditional teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. The Gnostic writings and other scriptures (which were written around the same time as the books of the New Testament) were not included in the Bible and have been called
"apocryphal" writings or "the other Bible." The word "gnostic" means "knowledge." The Gnostic writings have been said to reveal the true nature and hidden teachings of Jesus.

Carl Jung studied the fragments of the Gnostic gospels that were available then, and said that they expressed ideas and images he had already had, such as the archetypes. Although he never admitted it explicitly, it appears that Jung was a Gnostic. Believers in the teachings of the Gnostics included some Christian mystics, alchemists, magicians, and the Rosicrucians and Kabbalists. Jung said that "religious statements are psychic confessions based on unconscious, i.e. transcendental processes."

The Gnostics advocated experiencing God directly; they said that the human psyche is the container of the divine, and that "God is within you." This is considered heretical by orthodox believers because it calls into question the need for salvation by Jesus Christ. Gnosticism celebrates God as both Mother and Father, and suggests that the Resurrection is best understood symbolically. Gnostics believe that self-knowledge is the route to union with God.

Jung was not interested in the question of whether Jesus was a real historical figure, but he revered the symbolic and mythic content of religion. He believed that religious symbols arise from a common human source in the depth of the collective unconscious. He saw the psychic reality of the Christ figure as an archetype within the human soul. He considered the Christian myth a great gift to humanity, similar to the myths of Osiris, the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tse, and others. Part of one of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts was purchased by the Jung Institute in 1953 and presented to Jung on his 80th birthday. It has become known as the Jung Codex. According to an article in The Guardian newspaper in 2001, Vatican scholars have begun the task of updating the Bible by incorporating revelations contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Bibliography

