

Mysticism and the *Gospel of Thomas*

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The *Gospel of Thomas* has been a thorn in the side of biblical scholars for many years. No matter how we look at it, it just doesn't fit the conventional categories or constructs that we have built to support our reconstruction of biblical history and literature since the Enlightenment. It is problematic because it doesn't make sense to us in the interpretative framework we are familiar with from our training as biblical scholars either in divinity schools or university departments. It is "off" every so slightly. Jesus' words aren't remembered in the same way that they are recorded in the Synoptics. He talks about revealing "mysteries" to a few worthy people, rather than preaching ethics openly to crowds. He focuses on internal spirituality, turning upside down traditional apocalyptic images. He speaks favorably about singlehood, not just preferring it to marriage, but demanding it. And so forth.

Because it is "off" it is puzzling what to do with it. The easiest solution, and one of the first in the history of interpretation on the *Gospel of Thomas*, is to understand it as a deviation from canonical tradition. If it doesn't match the canonical picture which we have traditionally understood to mean "orthodox" than it must be "heretical." Who were the great heretics? The Gnostics. So it must be a Gnostic perversion of the genuine words of Jesus found in the canonical gospels.¹

This is an easy solution until we start tugging at the loose fringes around the edges: when we realize that our category "Gnosticism" is a

1 The opinion that the *Gospel of Thomas* emerged out of Naasene Gnosticism was developed by several international scholars in a variety of early publications: Grant, "Notes", 170-180; id./Freedman, *Secret Sayings*; Schoedel, "Naasene Themes", 225-234; Smyth, "Gnosticism", 189-198; Cornélis, "Quelques elements", 83-104. The origins of the *Gospel of Thomas* in the Valentinian Gnostic tradition was pioneered by three scholars: Cerfaux/Garitte, "Paraboles", 307-327; Gärtner, *Theology*. The opinion that its theology represents a generic Gnosticism was argued by many scholars: Wilson, "Coptic GThom", 273-276; Wilson, "Growth", 231-250; Bauer, "Thomas-Evangelium", 182-205; Bauer, "Synoptic Tradition", 314-317; Roques, "L'Évangile", 187-218; Roques, "Gnosticisme", 29-40; Montefiore/Turner, *Thomas*; Schrage, *Verhältnis*; Säve-Söderbergh, "Traditions", 552-562; Ménard, "L'Évangile," Fieger, *Thomasevangelium*.

modern construct;² when we realize that the theology of the *Gospel of Thomas* does not jive with any particular system of Gnosis be it Naaseene, Valentinian, Basilidian, Carpocratian, or otherwise; when we realize that the traditional markers of Gnostic ideas are not present. There is no Sophia, Demiurge, Pleroma, Error, Aeons, or Archons.³

The Wisdom and pre-Gnostic description works better in my mind,⁴ but there are still problems. The Jewish wisdom tradition is normally focused on practical advice, exoteric information that helps believers live righteously and justly in the eyes of God. Certainly there are proverbs in the *Gospel of Thomas* (general truths: GThom 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 45, 47, 67, 94; admonitions: GThom 26, 39, 92, 93), certainly there are passages where Jesus speaks in words familiar to Sophia (GThom 17, 28, 38, 77, 90, 92) but these do not make up the majority of the 114 sayings. It seems to me that the wisdom traditions in *Thomas* are being played with made subservient to the dominance of the revelation of mysteries, in much the same way as Paul appears to be doing in 1 Corinthians.

1 Cor 1:20-25. ²⁰Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Cor 2:6-13. ⁶Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." ¹⁰God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what person knows a man's thoughts except the Spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³And we impart this in words not taught by human wis-

2 Williams, *Rethinking*.

3 Higgins, "Sayings", 292-306; Grobel, "Gnostic", 367-373; Friend, *Gospel*, 13-26; Kim, "Historical Jesus", 17-30; Davies, *Wisdom*, 18-35; Layton, *Scriptures*, 359-365; Lelyveld, *Logia*; DeConick, *Seek*.

4 Köster, "GNOMAI", 114-157; Köster, "Primitive Gospels", 158-204; Davies, *Wisdom*; Kloppenborg et al., *Reader*; Köster, *Introduction*, 154-158; Patterson, *Gospel*; Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*; Arnal, "Rhetoric", 471-494.

dom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting the spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.

Paul is certainly talking here about something other than ordinary Jewish wisdom. I would suggest that he is talking about apocalyptic mysteries, revealed charismatic knowledge that had been hidden with God since time primordial (1 Cor 2:7-8). I can put it to you no better way than to say that the language of heavenly mysteries is the language of priestly knowledge, not the knowledge of the sages and royal house.

I agonized over this problem for years. Until finally I came to the realization that it isn't that the *Gospel of Thomas* is "off," rather it is our categories and reconstructions that are off. What if we didn't try to fit the *Gospel of Thomas* into any of our known categories? What if we stopped worrying about whether the Gospel was dependent on the canonical gospels or contained authentic Jesus sayings like the canonical gospels? What if we let the text be itself and listened to it as a voice of its own? What would happen, I wondered? What might it tell us about early Christianity?

Rereading the Gospel this way, I noticed several things.⁵ First, the questions that the disciples were asking Jesus really struck me. "Tell us, how will our end come about?" (GThom 18.1). "Tell us, what is the Kingdom of Heaven like?" (GThom 20.1). "Will we enter the Kingdom as babies?" (GThom 22.3). "When will you appear to us? When will we see you?" (GThom 37.1). "When will the dead rest? And when will the new world come?" (GThom 51.1). "When will the Kingdom come?" (GThom 113). These appeared to me to be very serious mitigative questions raised by this Gospel. Why would a community of Christians be asking these particular questions? What might these questions reveal about this community of Christians and the problems they were facing?

These Christians were trying to resolve the fact that their expectations about the future were not matching their present experience. They were wondering when and how God would fulfill his promises about the immediacy of the coming eschaton and new world, a problem not unfamiliar to Christians across the Mediterranean world in the mid to late first century. They were concerned that the End of the World, the establishment of the Kingdom, the final rest (or: resurrection) of the dead, and the return of Jesus had not yet happened. They were a community in the midst of a memory crisis.

⁵ The following discussion draws upon my research published in two companion volumes: DeConick, *Recovering*; ead., *Translation*.

The presence of answers to these questions, answers endorsed by the living Jesus, show that these Christians appear to have resolved their memory crisis. How? By shifting their apocalyptic expectations from the eschatological dimension to the mystical. Apocalyptic thought, the revelation of God's mysteries, among early Jews and Christians revolves around two aspects: the eschatological with its emphasis on historical time, its conclusion, and our renewal in God's presence at its end; and the mystical with its focus outside of time, on God's presence now, our immediate contact with that presence, and our immediate glorification as a result of that contact. These two aspects of apocalyptic are tense twins, oppositions of present and future. This tension is resolved in the apocalyptic literature in several ways. Sometimes the tension is resolved by understanding the eschaton to be in process, the heavens to be changing, becoming more permeable to rapture events and human invasion as God's Kingdom replaces the kingdoms of the world. In this case the eschatological concerns are dominant, while the mystical simmer in the background. For what it's worth, I think that this was Jesus' personal solution. Other times the tension is resolved by understanding the mystical experiences to be precursors, or progressive stepping stones to the eschatological, the climax and final realization of God's promises of personal and communal transfiguration whenever the Eschaton actually occurred. This position was favored by Paul and, I might add, many other early Christians, including most of the Church Fathers.

The early Jesus traditions that the Gospel of Thomas recomposes were largely apocalyptic, with its twin dimensions, although initially the eschatological appears to have dominated. "This heaven and earth will pass away and the one above it will pass away" (*GThom* 11.1). "The heavens and earth will roll up in your presence" (*GThom* 111.1). "I have cast fire upon the world. And Look! I am guarding it until it blazes" (*GThom* 10). And so on. What is so fascinating to me is that we can trace the shift in the memories of these Christians away from the eschatological, so that by the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, the mystical completely dominated. In fact, what appears to have been done is a complete collapse of the dimensions, so that the eschatological not only becomes subservient to the mystical, but is superimposed, so that the expectations and promises of the Future are realized in the Now. The End is Now. The *Gospel of John* does this too where Jesus has already descended as the Son of Man, the apocalyptic Judge, and has already rendered judgment and its consequences, life or death (*John* 1:12; 3:13; 3:17-21; 5:24; 6:62; 11:26). This

collapse of apocalyptic thought is a third way that the tension between eschatology and mysticism was resolved by the Christians.

We see this resolution in responses to the questions in the *Gospel of Thomas*. They suggest that the Kingdom had already been established on earth but no one had noticed its coming. Did not their gospel tell them that Jesus in his lifetime had taught that the Kingdom already had begun to break into the world? It was like a tiny seed that had fallen unnoticed on tilled soil and now had grown into a large plant. They concluded that the Kingdom had continued to grow since Jesus' death. Now, at the present time, just as Jesus had predicted, it had fully arrived on earth (*GThom* 20.2-4). The rest (or: resurrection) of the dead and the new world had already come (*GThom* 51.2). Since the Kingdom now was spread out among them on earth, Jesus would be revealed to them immediately and directly (*GThom* 37.2-3; 113.2-4). What is so fascinating is the traces of the thought process that these Christians have left imprinted on the gospel. Note the statement in saying 51 rationalizing and making seamless this shift. Jesus tells them that the End has already occurred but they just had not recognized it before this.

GThom 51.1-2. ¹His disciples said to him, "When will the dead rest, and when will the new world come?" ²He said to them, "What you look for has come, but you have not perceived it."

So bold was this shift that we can detect traces of it in the language itself in this passage. It is noteworthy that the difference between "rest" and "resurrection" in Greek and Coptic is only three letters: anapausis and anastasis. So it is quite possible I think that the earliest form of the question in the Gospel was "When will the resurrection from the dead take place?" It may be that these Christians understood Jesus' response – it has already happened! – in terms of the recreation of the Edenic glorified body through encratic performance, a point I will discuss shortly. But eventually the phrase shifted to "rest of the dead" to indicate the "rest" of the soul following an individual's death, which was the Greek expectation, and actually made more sensible Jesus' response, "it has already happened."

If we examine other passages in the *Gospel of Thomas*, this hermeneutical shift becomes even more evident, as does the peculiar theology developed to support the shift. The shift from eschatological to mystical is quite prominent in saying 37.

GThom 37.1-3. ¹His disciples said, "When will you appear to us? When will we see you?" ²Jesus said, "When you strip naked without shame, take your garments, put them under your feet like little children, and trample on them. ³Then [you will see] the Son of the Living One and you will not be afraid."

The question expresses concern, perhaps even disappointment that the immediate return of Jesus has not yet happened. "When will you appear to us?" "When will we see you?" Now the response is remarkable in that it is not eschatological, but mystical. If you want to see Jesus, you won't do so at the end of the worldly kingdoms, but at the end of your former self, when you remake yourself into a child who is not afraid or ashamed. This is exegetical language developed out of their understanding of the Genesis story. The reference is to Adam as a child in the garden before his fall. To remake yourself into the prelapsarian Adam, it is necessary to renounce the body. The ideal condition, if you will, for visions of Jesus is the retooled state of the individual, not the cosmos as it is in eschatological discourse.

So there has been a shift of the apocalyptic tradition in the sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas*. The emphasis moves from cosmic destruction to personal, from the catastrophic end of the world, to the internal battle with one's own demons, desires, and body. The old eschatological saying of Jesus about casting fire, sword, and war on earth, has been remade into a call for us to choose singlehood or celibacy.

GThom 16.1-4. ¹Jesus said, "Perhaps people think it is peace that I have come to cast upon the world. ²And they do not know it is division that I have come to cast upon the earth – fire, sword, war! ³For there will be five people in a house. There will be three people against two, and two against three, father against son, and son against father. ⁴And they will stand as celibate people."

An older saying (*in italics*) that evoked a warning about impending Judgment and the dissolution of families, is now (in regular type) an injunction from Jesus to abandon their families and take on the holy life of the celibate. Similarly, an old saying (*in italics*) about Jesus choosing the few faithful from among the many at Judgment, is transformed into an aphorism (in regular type) in which Jesus already counts among the elected those who have chosen the single life.

GThom 23.1-2. Jesus said, "I will select you, one from a thousand, and two from ten thousand. ²And they will stand as single people."

This life of celibacy that the Gospel honors is a life of return to the primordial past, to the Garden of Eden before sexual differentiation. The End is the Beginning (*GThom 18-19*). The female becomes the male (*GThom 114*). The old man becomes the child (*GThom 4*). They were to return to Eden and the seventh day when God rested after creating the world and Adam, to a time when Adam was still a child and had not yet fallen into sexual sin (*GThom 4*). When the end of the world did not come, the Christians of the *Gospel of Thomas* collapsed its expectations (*GThom 51*). They rediscovered Eden and achieved the body resurrected through the performance of celibacy. Eyes in place of eyes, hands

in place of hands, feet in place of feet, an image in place of an image (*GThom* 22). The old apocalyptic saying (*in italics*) about the heavens and earth rolling up in the presence of the community is re-tooled to refer to the cessation of procreation and the generation of life from God the Living One (in regular type).

GThom 111.1-3. ¹Jesus said, "The heavens and earth will roll up in your presence. ²And whoever is alive because of the Living One will not see death. ³Does not Jesus say, "The world does not deserve the person who has found himself?"

The world will not end in our presence through cosmic disaster, they said, but through ending the procreative cycle and experiencing birth anew out of the Living One. When procreation ceases, the destruction of the cosmos is taking place.

So these Christians were trying to create a utopian community apart from this world. They were to fast the world (*GThom* 27), disown the world (*GThom* 110), keep watch against the world (*GThom* 21), to enter the Kingdom as celibates (*GThom* 49, 75). So these were people who resolved their apocalyptic memory crisis, by reinterpreting older eschatological expectations as already fulfilled in the present moment. The cosmological battle became a personal battle, immediately engaged and body-focused. By overcoming their body and worldly desires, they progressively transformed themselves.

So the apocalyptic mysteries shift from the revelation of secrets about the end times and God's coming Kingdom, to the present and the recreation of Eden on earth. This refocus meant that the moment of encounter with God and personal transformation became an immediate experience, a mystical one. The language that the *Gospel of Thomas* engages here, is the language of a visionary mysticism that appears to me to be familiar with streams of mystical traditions emerging from Judaism and Hermetism.

Now I have published my views on this at length in previous articles and books, so I'm not going to rehearse here all the fine details.⁶ But I would like to mention that my opinion that the *Gospel of Thomas* showcases a practical vision-centered mysticism has been criticized by a few scholars who have said that there is no evidence of visionary language in the *Gospel of Thomas*, nor do texts like saying 37 or 50 *have to* suggest mystical ascent. They could simply be representative of post-mortem ascent when the soul returns to God after death.⁷ Have these

⁶ DeConick, *Seek*; ead., "Voices;" ead., *Recovering*; ead., *Translation*.

⁷ Uro, *Historical Context*, 71-72 n. 90; Dunderberg, "DeConick's Voices (Review)."

scholars missed saying 59? – a saying whose mystical force is undeniable in my opinion.

GThom 59. Jesus said, "Gaze upon the Living One while you are alive, in case you die and (then) seek to see him, and you will not be able to see (him)."

The visionary language is very strong, and the pre-mortem focus is forceful. These Christians believed that if they did not seek to see God while they were still alive, they would not be able to overcome death. This saying is part of the collection as a whole, and its presence suggests that the visionary and ascent language prominent in other sayings was understood by these Christians in pre-mortem terms.

I have pondered long and hard why there is a resistance to the idea that the *Gospel of Thomas*, and other early Christian literature for that matter, represent early manifestations of mysticism in Christianity. I don't really have an answer for this, except to wonder if the idea of experiential religion is simply too difficult for us to manage with our academic categories because it cannot be controlled nor deconstructed very well. It defies our categories of mapping the natural world, so we simply don't know what to do with it. Usually we have tried to find rational reasons for visionary claims among the Christians – they made them up to give authority to themselves as leaders of a new religious movement, they were hallucinating, or the best, let's ignore the evidence, and the scholars working on the evidence, and see if it goes away. I think of Albert Schweitzer in this regard, who wrote what I consider to be one of the best books ever written on Paul, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*.⁸ His analysis took seriously Paul's claims to revelation, and maps out how this revelation became the ground for his theological and ritual musings. His analysis brings alive Paul's understanding of the spirit and its workings within the human being to progressively transform the bodies of believers into their perfected resurrection bodies. But his work was largely ignored by other scholars at the time. Why? I wonder if it could not be tolerated because it presents a picture of an ecstatic Paul, not a legalistic one. Redemption occurs through revelation, ritual, and progressive transformation, a position that neither the Catholic Church nor the Protestant denominations were (or are) all that fond of.

There also appears to be a disturbing notion that mysticism in Christianity started with Pseudo-Dionysus, was Platonic, and any evidence before this in the literature was only "background" to this. This common assumption appears to me to be the result of an understand-

⁸ Schweitzer, *Mysticism*.

ing of mysticism formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that, by definition, it involved a union of the soul with God. We even see Albert Schweitzer struggling with this in the first chapter of his book, especially since Paul's mysticism doesn't jive with this definition.⁹ Again we are talking about "fit," Paul's mysticism didn't fit the categories that we had created to talk about mysticism. Did that mean that Paul wasn't a mystic? Or that our definition was wrong?

It is my opinion that our definition was wrong because it was not created to talk about mysticism in our period or in our texts.¹⁰ If we discard the modern definition and work out from the text, listening to what the ancient people tell us, we find that the early Jews and Christians usually use the word "*apokalypsis*" to describe their encounters with God. In the Jewish and Christian period-literature, these religious experiences are described *emically* as waking visions, dreams, trances and auditions which can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys. The ascent journeys involve the passage through seven heavens usually envisioned as holy rooms of the Temple or *hekhalot*. Fierce guardian angels must be reckoned with along the way to the highest heaven where God's manifestation (in Hebrew the *Kavod*, in Greek the *Doxa*) sat enthroned. Before him were myriads of angelic host worshipping and hymning. Usually these experiences are garnered after certain preparations are made or rituals performed, although they can also be the result of rapture. The culmination of the experience is transformative in the sense that the Jewish and Christian mystics thought they could be invested with heavenly knowledge, join the choir of angels in worship before the throne, or be glorified in body. The point is that they would not be the same person after the experience. Seeing God on his heavenly throne imprinted God's Image on the pure in heart, resulting in a complete remodeling of their own psyches.

So how can we talk about mysticism in our period? We need to recognize that "mysticism" is an *etic* term, a modern typology, that we are imposing on the ancients in order to investigate their religiosity. It serves us heuristically as a taxonomy, aiding our engagement in historical investigation and research. In *etic* terms, it identifies a tradition within early Judaism and Christianity centered on the belief that *a person directly, immediately and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or one solicited by a particular praxis*. This definition, although framed in *etic* terms, remains sensitive to the fact that the

9 Ibid., 1-3.

10 For more on this definition and discussion, see esp. DeConick, "Mysticism", 1-26.

early Jews and Christians themselves made no distinction between unsolicited rapture and solicited invasion experiences – all were “*apokalypses*” – nor did they describe their experiences in terms of the *unio mystica* so central to later Christian mysticism.

The persistent core of early Jewish and Christian mysticism is the belief that God or his manifestation can be experienced immediately, *not just after death or eschatologically on the Last Day*. This belief appears to me to be the consequence of at least two aspects of religiosity during the Second Temple period: hermeneutics and religious experience. It has been unfortunate that past academic discussions of the period-literature has been dogged by our need to treat these as antithetical. This dichotomy, of course, is a false dichotomy that has not served us well. It appears to me that this false dichotomy has been set in place because modernists have little patience for the so-called “supernatural,” feeling that the “supernatural” can and should be deconstructed in the wake of God’s death. But in so doing, we have forced our own demarcation between the natural world and the “supernatural” onto the ancient people we are studying, imposing as well our disposal of everything “supernatural” onto people who profoundly were invested in their “experiences” of God. The ancient Jews and Christians believed that they experienced the sacred, and they wrote about it. These people were deeply religious people whose texts are filled with feelings about and hopes for religious experience as they understood and imagined it.

In this regard, Paul’s own first-hand testimony cannot be emphasized enough, because it demonstrates that the first Christian Jews believed that they were recipients of ecstatic experiences both in the form of rapture events and invasions of heaven (*Gal* 1:12; *1 Cor* 15:8; *2 Cor* 12:2-4). In the context of this latter discourse, Paul also implies that he knows of other Christian Jews, perhaps associated with the mission of the Jerusalem church, who boast of mystical experiences (*2 Cor* 11:21-12:11). This is implied by the author of *Colossians* too (*Col* 2:16-18). We have a quite strong tradition that the disciples and members of Jesus’ family who formed the initial church in Jerusalem had visions of Jesus following his death (*1 Cor* 15:5-7). To Paul’s first-hand witness we must also add the waking visions of John of Patmos and the dream visions of the *Pastor Hermas*. Of course, the evidence for mystical experience from second-hand accounts in the early Christian literature is staggering, ranging from the transfiguration of Jesus to the post-resurrection appearances to the vision of Stephen (*Mark* 9:2-8; *Matt* 17:1-8; *Luke* 9:28-36; *Mark* 16; *Matt* 28; *Luke* 24; *John* 20; *GosPet* 12-14; *Acts* 7:55-56).

As an historian, I am not concerned whether these ancient people “actually” experienced God. I can never know this. But this does not

make its study pointless. What I wish to understand and map is their belief that God had been and still could – even should – be reached, that the boundaries between earth and heaven could be crossed by engaging in certain religious activities and behaviors reflected in the stories of their primordial ancestors and great heroes.

What these Jews and Christians seem to me to be saying is that intellectual pursuit of God and “truth” can only advance a person so far spiritually. It can get the person to the gate of the highest heavenly shrine, so to speak, but no further. They insist that knowledge of the sacred itself comes only through the direct experience of God that is by actually meeting him face to face. It was this experiential encounter, they thought, that transformed them, that pulled them beyond the limits of their ordinary human senses and perceptions. This new godlike perspective, they believed, would lead to new understandings and revelations, allowing them to reinterpret the concealed truths and hidden histories locked within their sacred scriptures and the words of Jesus.

I think what the *Gospel of Thomas* shows us about early Christianity is that there were Christians in the late first and early second centuries who were of the perspective that they could have the promises of the eschaton in the present – the transformed body, the new world, intimacy with God, equal status with the angels, life beyond death. These were Christians who did not just work to understand God, but to “know” him in the deepest and most intimate sense. They wished to experience God immediately and directly. The first step toward this experience appears to have been the achievement of a state of passionlessness, of control of the body. So many of the sayings point to an encratic praxis as has been pointed out by numerous scholars from the very beginning of academic studies of the *Gospel of Thomas* (*GThom* 4.1, 4.3, 11.2-4, 16.4, 21.1-4, 21.6-9, 22, 23.2, 27.1, 37, 49, 64.12, 75, 85, 101, 105, 106, 110, 111.2, 114). They honored the life of the solitary, the celibate, above all else, and worked to recreate within themselves the conditions of the Garden of Eden before Adam’s sin. They taught that we are supposed to fast the world and guard against temptations and worldliness. I think that the allusions to Jesus’ crucifixion (*GThom* 55, 56, 58, 80, 87, 112) understand it in terms very different from Western Christianity. It represents the ultimate example of a person crucifying the flesh and its appetites. They seem to have taught that we receive the Holy Spirit at baptism, which helps us to fight the apocalyptic battle internally, overpowering our inner demons (*GThom* 21, 29, 70). They appear to have placed great stock in the power of the eucharist, mentioning on several

occasions the power of divine food and drink to render the person "equal" to Jesus (*GThom* 13, 61, 108).

Once these Christians had achieved the passionless body in imitation of Jesus, I think that they were encouraged to study and meditate on the words of Jesus in this Gospel, to find their meaning (*GThom* 1). Through this praxis, they sought revelation and vision. This God-Experience included journeys into the heavenly realms to see Jesus (*GThom* 37) and worship before God's throne (*GThom* 15), but was also described as an internal experience of meeting Jesus within (*GThom* 24). Knowledge of the passage through the heavens was memorized (*GThom* 50) so that the believer could gaze on God before death in order not to die (*GThom* 59). In heaven, they would meet their divine doubles, their lost Images, their true selves (*GThom* 84). They would directly encounter the Living God – God the Father and Jesus his Son. They believed that these experiences would bring about their full transformation into their primal bodies of Glory, so that they would no longer die.

There is nothing about this mystical spirituality that is "heretical" or "Gnostic" even by traditional definitions. In fact, after I published my first book, a monk and professor from Marquette University – Alexander Golitzin – wrote me a long personal letter. In this letter he thanked me for finding the origins of his religious tradition. At the time I remember thinking, "how nice, but what is he talking about?" I was a young protestant woman from rural Michigan, and had no knowledge of the theology or practices of Eastern Orthodoxy. I had been nourished on the Western traditions of Christianity and never gave a second thought that there might be Christians in the world who had a different perspective on the teachings of the Church. Didn't all forms of Christianity today focus on the death of Jesus and the cross? Weren't all in love with Augustine's teaching that Adam's sin severed us from God's Image, leaving us dark, lost and helpless. I had been taught that the central act of Jesus was that of atonement for the sin of Adam through his torturous death on the cross. This is reenacted through the eucharist, the sacrificial meal in which we participate and reap the vicarious benefit.

At the time I wrote *Seek to See Him*, I hadn't given much thought to the Orthodox tradition in terms of how it might be different from the Western. Since then, I have come to understand that the Orthodox teach that the human heart is indwelt by the Holy Spirit which works to progressively transform the soul into the primal Image of God. This transformation is possible because the glorious Image that was ours in the beginning has been diminished or slowed due to Adam's decision.

But it is not lost. It is recovered through the hard work of the believer who aligns his or her life with that of Jesus, imitating him. When the Orthodox Christian eats the eucharist, they think they are ingesting a divine body and achieving atonement with God. The Incarnation, not the death of Jesus, is the focus of this tradition, when the human and divine united allowing for the rekindling of the soul's progress into its glorious Image. Orthodox believers are called to self-knowledge, renunciation of the flesh through temperance in marriage or monasticism, spiritual warfare and purification of the passions, the path of virtue, contemplation, and personal glorification through "gnosis" and "theoria," the great vision of God in this lifetime. Temperance and asceticism are directly connected to the Ultimate vision as a means of purification, imitation and preparation.

Once I started to investigate the Orthodox tradition, I recognized immediately, as had Alexander, that the mystical Christianity I had been writing about in the *Gospel of Thomas*, appeared to have a familiar relationship with Orthodoxy. Now it looks to me to be an old form of Orthodoxy, a kind of "proto-Orthodoxy." Since I came to this conclusion only a couple of years ago, I have been shocked with how close my descriptions of the theology and praxis of the *Gospel of Thomas* has been to descriptions of the theology and praxis of the Orthodox. So much so, that when members of the Orthodox Church hear me lecture about the *Gospel of Thomas*, they become exuberant. Why? Because they hear their story there in the words of Jesus.

I was rummaging through a bookstore last autumn and came across an old book on Orthodoxy called *Eastern Orthodoxy: A Way of Life*.¹¹ I opened it to a chapter entitled, "Can a man be perfect?" The author says this:

"That which is great in each one of us is the image of God...Because we are made in the image of God we have a mind and free will. We can know God and have communion with him. If man makes proper use of this faculty for communion with God, he will progress toward the goal of divine likeness...This accounts for the great emphasis the Greek fathers place on the theosis of man, that man through Jesus Christ and by the grace of the Holy Spirit can be lifted out of the life of fallen humanity into the very life of God...But how, you object, can we set about imitating the perfections of Almighty God?...How are we to imitate our heavenly Father when we have never seen him?...This is a real difficulty and it was raised by Philip over 1900 years ago. "Lord, show us the Father," said Philip, "and we shall be satisfied." Jesus replied, "Have I been so long a time with you, and yet

11 Coniaris, *Eastern Orthodoxy*.

you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father.'" This, then, is the answer to our difficulty. We have seen the goodness and the perfection of the Father. Through the Incarnation it was translated into a language we can understand: a human life, the perfect life of Jesus. He who sees Jesus sees two things: he sees God the Father and he sees also himself as God wills him to be."¹²

The literature of the Orthodox Church emphasizes that this transformation into the primordial Image begins with a praxis of self-control and leads to a life of contemplation, self-knowledge and vision, which I should add they couch in terms of self-vision, vision of the perfected self, a direct intuition of the essence of God within. This vision is spoken of as "in a mirror" by which is meant a vision of God in the soul itself, in the deified mind which is the image of God. Eastern theologians speak at length of this vision of God, a Taboric Light, through the vision of the self. This vision of God also is fused with the vision of "the place of God" which is understood to be the heart. So the Orthodox talk about God going out of himself to meet us in our hearts as well as our own ecstasy and journey to God. The idea of internal and external journeys are bound together in one accord.¹³ A passage from Gregory Palamas is illustrative:

"He who participates in the divine energy, himself becomes, to some extent, light; he is united to the light, and by that light he sees in full awareness all that remains hidden to those who have not this grace; thus, he transcends not only bodily senses, but also all that can be known by the intellect...for the pure in heart see God...who, being Light, dwells in them and reveals himself to those who love him, to his beloved (*Homily on the Presentation of the Holy Virgin in the Temple 22*)."

Another from Symeon the New Theologian (eleventh century),

*I often saw the Light. Sometimes it appeared to me within myself, when my soul possessed peace and silence; sometimes it only appeared at a distance, and at times it was even hidden completely...Finally having formed me according to your will, you have revealed yourself to my shining soul, becoming invisible to me once more. And suddenly you did appear as another sun, O ineffable divine condescension.*¹⁴

This God-Presence is described in the teachings of Seraphim of Sarov (nineteenth century) in more anthropomorphic terms:

I looked and was seized by holy fear. Imagine in the middle of the sun, dazzling in the brilliance of its noontide rays, the face of the man who is speaking to you. You can see the movements of his lips, the changing expression of his eyes, you can hear his voice, you can feel his hands holding you by the shoulders, but you can see nei-

¹² Ibid., 135-137.

¹³ One of the best overviews to consult is by Spidlik, *Spirituality*.

¹⁴ Symeon the New Theologian, *Sermon 90*, 146-147.

*ther his hands nor his body – nothing except the blaze of light which shines around...*¹⁵

We could recite here account after account of these Ultimate experiences, when the Orthodox say that they have when they reach the highest level of gnosis and theoria, the visions of God as the divine Taboric Glory, God of light. This light fills the person and results in a total transfiguration of the soul and continual communion with God even while the person is living on earth.

So I am completely convinced that the *Gospel of Thomas* theologically and practically is an infant of Orthodoxy. It is one of our earliest, if not our earliest text showcasing a very old form of Orthodox thought. As such, it is very at home in the Syrian environment and represents old Syrian religiosity. In this literature, the human being regains Paradise lost through his or her own effort of righteous living as revealed by Jesus, not through some act of atonement on Jesus' part. Over and over again through story after story, the Christian is taught that he or she must become as self-controlled as possible, overcoming desire and passions that lurk in the soul. He or she is taught through discourse and example that marriage should be abandoned in order to achieve the prelapsarian conditions of "singleness." When this is done, gender difference are abolished and the believer can be united with his or her divine double in the "bridal chamber." This divine double, the person's new spouse, is in fact Jesus himself. It is Judas Thomas, Judas the Twin, who becomes the metaphor for all believers since Jesus is described as his very own Twin.

Arthur Vööbus taught us long ago that Christianity in eastern Syria in the first couple of hundreds of years demanded celibacy and asceticism for admission into the Church.¹⁶ The literary evidence from Nag Hammadi, the apocryphal Acts, the Pseudo-Clementines, the records of the Church Fathers, point to a form of Christianity in Syria which was encratic, honoring the solitary life over the marital. The larger Catholic Church particularly in the West did not favor this position, so our historical memory of these people is that of sectarians and even heretics. But they were neither. For these Christians, baptism followed by daily washings and renunciation of the body extinguished desire and made it possible for them to begin to restore their souls to the glorious Image of God. This position on the solitary life appears to me to have shifted with Aphraates, whose writings show us that the demands of celibacy

¹⁵ English translation in Lossky, *Theology*, 228.

¹⁶ Vööbus, *Celibacy*; id., *History*.

were eventually relaxed, reserved for the privileged class of the Syrian Church, the "sons and daughters of the covenant."

The mystical tradition in the *Gospel of Thomas* is very old, and emerges out of connections with apocalyptic thought. Once the eschatological story did not manifest as expected, these Christians remodeled the familiar sayings of Jesus by shifting their focus to the mystical dimension of Jesus' sayings. The theology that they developed shares the megastory of the earliest Christianity in Syria, and ultimately should be recognized as an early Orthodox Syrian Gospel. I think that the "place" of the *Gospel of Thomas* within early Christianity has been wrongly identified in the past, not because it represents a type of Christianity unfamiliar to the canonical tradition or deviant from it. I think it has been wrongly identified for the simple reason that our categories, particularly in regard to mysticism in this period, could not contain it. That Western religiosity has controlled the discourse on this Gospel hasn't helped matters, since this Western discourse did not possess the conceptual framework to explain it.