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**Sexuality and the Sacred  
in Gnostic Literature**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.”

Saying 1      Gospel of Thomas <sup>1</sup>

"Jesus said to them 'When you make the two one and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the above like the below and when you make the male and the female one and the same so that the male be not male nor the female female... then you will enter the kingdom.'”

Saying 22      Gospel of Thomas <sup>1</sup>

The enigmatic sayings above come from a tractate in a collection of 52 texts of Christian Gnostic gospels found in Upper Egypt in 1945 and which shed new light on the early origins of Christianity. They are known as the Nag Hammadi library. Scholars sharply disagree about the dating of the original texts. Some of them can be hardly later than 120-150 C.E. as Ireneaus, the orthodox bishop of Lyon, writing about 180C.E., declares them heretical and complains that they have already won wide circulation from Gaul through Rome, Greece and Asia Minor.

Professor H. Koester<sup>2</sup> of Harvard University has suggested that the collection of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, although compiled in 140C.E., may include traditions even older than the gospels of the New Testament “possibly as early as the second half of the first century” (50-100) – as early as or even earlier than Mark,

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<sup>1</sup> The Nag Hammadi Library in English J. M Robinson, 1988, publ. By E.J Bull, hereafter cited as NHL,

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to the Gospel of Thomas, H Koester, NHL 117

Matthew, Luke or John. It has also been long recognised that what we have in the New Testament canon is the end result of a complex process.

Why were these texts buried - and why have they remained virtually unknown for almost 2000 years, asks Elaine Pagels<sup>3</sup>? She suggests that their suppression as banned documents and their burial on the cliff at Nag Hammadi were both as a result of a critical struggle for the formation of early Christianity. The Nag Hammadi texts, and others like them, which circulated at the beginning of the Christian era, were denounced as heretical by orthodox Christians in the middle of the second century.

The campaign against heresy involved an involuntary admission of its persuasive power; yet the bishops prevailed. By the time of Constantine's conversion, when Christianity became an officially approved religion in the fourth century, Christian bishops, previously victimised by the police, now controlled them. Possession of books denounced as heretical was made a criminal offence.<sup>4</sup> But in Upper Egypt, someone, possibly a monk from a nearby monastery of St Pachomius, took the banned books and hid them from destruction, in a jar, where they remained buried for almost 1,600 years.

It is interesting that the source of much of the sayings material for the orthodox canon comes from the synoptic sayings source 'Q' which emphasised the eschatological expectation of a future coming of the Kingdom; the Gospel of Thomas and other

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<sup>3</sup> The Gnostic Gospels, E Pagels, Penguin Books, 1979, introduction p 17

<sup>4</sup> In 367 Athanasius, the powerful bishop of Alexandria sent out an order to purge all 'apochryphal books' with 'heretical tendencies'

Gnostic sources in the oldest form stressed the finding of Wisdom and of the 'Kingdom of the Father,' in the knowledge (gnosis) of oneself.<sup>5</sup>

As the opening saying hints, the gospels can be read on different levels and as in the canonical gospels of the New Testament<sup>6</sup> and with its ubiquitous "let those with ears to hear, listen", there is a suggestion of hidden knowledge available to serious followers of truth and salvation.

The term 'gnostic' itself is from the Greek '*gnosis*' meaning knowledge. The Greek language differentiated between scientific or reflective knowledge (he knows mathematics) and knowing through observation or experience, (he knows me) which is *gnosis*. The Gnostics used the term in the sense of 'insight', or the intuitive process of knowing oneself. We shall look more closely at this concept below.

Since earliest times scholars, theologians and philosophers have been at odds to understand the link, if any, between 'sacredness' and 'sexuality'. The idea evokes a dualism that is evident in most spiritual and philosophical writings. The epithet commonly applied to both concepts is 'love', be it '*agape*' or '*eros*'. But are these concepts compatible or are they mutually exclusive? This question has been the source of much debate over the centuries<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> NHL - Saying 3 Gospel of Thomas

<sup>6</sup> Mk4:11

<sup>7</sup> Agape and Eros : Anders Nygren: translation by PS Watson, Harper Torchbook ed. NY 1969. Nygren made familiar the idea of an opposition between two kinds of love, 'agape' and 'eros', the former a self-giving love, the latter rather an aspiration towards a desire for that which was inherently desirable or beautiful. Nygren himself however did not profess in this to be describing the linguistic use of the Greek Bible exactly: he did not maintain that every time 'agape' appeared in it, it meant self-giving love. Indeed he admitted tacitly that it did not, for he gave some attention to the use of the verb 'agapan' in a negative sense, 'to love the wages of unrighteousness'. Thus Nygren was not seeking to describe all linguistic usage but to draw the contrast between two profound theological motifs..

On the whole, the attitude of mainstream Christianity, particularly in Paul, Origen, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine has been predominantly in support of the latter, that is that they are mutually exclusive. While the gnostics are often accused of hating the flesh and everything of this world, we shall see another picture emerging in the Gospels of Philip and Thomas, which illustrate not only a positive reconciliation of sex and sacredness, but indeed posit it as a necessary requirement for the transformation of a Christian into a Christ <sup>8</sup>.

This approach appears to have even older roots in classical antiquity. The Gospel of Philip unites Jesus and Mary Magdalene as a loving couple, “he kissed her often on the mouth”<sup>9</sup> Is the language of this Gospel and that of Thomas to be interpreted as ‘love’ in the physical sense of ‘Eros’ or only in a mental non-physical way such as is usually associated in New Testament exegesis with ‘*agape*’? In this dissertation we shall examine love through the lens of both sacredness and sexuality, with the Gnostic gospels as the primary focus, in an attempt to understand how this apparent difference of approach arose and what implications there may be theologically and otherwise as a result.

The survey will examine four themes which appear in many Gnostic texts, these are: i) knowledge; ii) the sexual imagery used of the male and female; iii) the role of sacramental rites, in particular, that of the bridal chamber, and iv) dualism, in its many forms, which will be threaded throughout each of the three main thematic sections.

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<sup>8</sup> Gnosis, The Mysteries and Christianity selected by A Welburn, Floris Books 1994 (saying 67 Gospel of Philip)

<sup>9</sup> Gnosis op cit saying 55

In addition to the Gnostic texts themselves, we shall gauge the influence of contemporary philosophical and spiritual movements including: classical Greek philosophy as represented most notably by Plato and examine his views on knowledge, sexuality and the Divine illustrated in both his works ‘The Symposium’ and ‘Phaedrus’<sup>10</sup> where these themes are developed at large and together; the influence of the pagan mystery cults; the New Testament approach to sexual love and that of the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

The Gnostic texts of primary interest are the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip and Gospel of Mary .

The Gospel of Thomas consists of a collection of traditional sayings of Jesus and makes the claim that the apostle Thomas preserved and wrote them down. As indicated earlier, the signs are that in terms of chronology, this may well have been written by the original Apostle and close in time to the historical events around the life and times of Jesus Christ. It may be the same apostle Thomas who had strong links with South India and which would account for the Eastern flavour: seeking knowledge and the light.<sup>12</sup> The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, in his book “Buddism and Gnosis” in suggests that it was. He points out that ‘Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians in South India.’ Trade routes between the Greco-Roma world and the Far East were opening up at the time gnosticism flourished; for generations Buddhist missionaries had been proselytising in Alexandria. Some popular writers, Holger Kersten “ Jesus lived in India”,<sup>13</sup> and

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Symposium and Phaedrus’, Everyman’s library translated by Tom Griffith, 1986

<sup>11</sup> Holy Bible NRSV, Anglicised edition Oxford University Press 1995, NT , OT

<sup>12</sup> Le origini dello Gnosticismo : Colloquio de Messina 13-18 Aprile 1966 (Leiden 1967) 665

<sup>13</sup> Harper Collins 1998

Elizabeth Clare Prophet," The Lost years of Jesus"<sup>14</sup> , have suggested that in the 17 years from the age of 12 until 30 when Jesus began his ministry, he may have spent some time in India.

The Gospel of Philip is a compilation of statements pertaining primarily to the meaning and value of sacraments. A striking feature of it is Jesus' openly affectionate behaviour towards Mary Magdalene together with their seemingly physical and intimate union in the sacrament of the bridal chamber. The absence of any affectionate behaviour by Jesus in the New Testament canon contrasts with this image of Jesus in the Gnostic texts. Further, whereas the canonical gospels describe the life of Jesus, the Gospel of Philip is a book of loosely-related Christian thoughts set around sacraments describing the basis of the Christian life and alluding constantly to the 'Mysteries' which Jesus established, and it is claimed, performed.

The Gospel of Mary, generally accepted as referring to Mary Magdalene, consists of two parts: First a dialogue between the risen Saviour and the disciples, on 'matter and sin', and second, a description by Mary, of a special revelation given to her by the Saviour. It is unusual in itself that a gospel be attributed to a woman, but among such gnostic groups as the Valentinians, women were considered equal to men.<sup>15</sup>

Early Christianity was a radical movement. Jesus called for a reversal of values advocating the end of the world as we know it and its replacement by a quite new, utopian kind of life in which the ideal would be real. Some followers reaffirmed his story, others opted for a more conventional way of life. The latter gradually became

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<sup>14</sup> Summit University Press, 1988,

<sup>15</sup> Some were revered as prophets; others as teachers, travelling evangelists, healers, priests, perhaps even bishops. From about the year 200, we have no evidence for women taking prophetic, priestly, and episcopal roles among orthodox churches.)

an established organisation with a concern to maintain order, continuity based on the Jewish heritage, lines of authority and stability.

A recent book by Cambridge historian Andrew Sinclair, “The Secret Scroll”<sup>16</sup> traces the development of Gnosticism as it went underground and reappeared as Alchemy, then on to the movement of Knights Templar who in turn passed on the legacy to the Free Masons. The Secret Scroll of the title refers to a scroll found in a Free Masons’ lodge in the Orkney Islands in Scotland displaying symbols of the androgynous male/female figure, the Jerusalem Temple, the tabernacle or holy of holies, and a chalice or Holy Grail, all symbols found in the Gospel of Philip in relation to the sacrament of the bridal chamber.

## I. KNOWLEDGE

The Gnostics held four virtues sacred: faith, hope, love and knowledge<sup>17</sup> as opposed to the traditional three of the Pauline epistle to the Corinthians<sup>18</sup> ( 1 Cor 13:13). The Gnostic gospels are also called the ‘apocryphal’ gospels, and, depending on the context, mean ‘heretical’ or ‘hidden’. The type of knowledge they emphasised was the kind that comes from direct personal experience, especially of the Divine, as opposed to received wisdom, taught or passed on by others.

Knowledge or gnosis in the fullest sense promised initiates in the sacraments or Mysteries transformation from a Christian into a Christ<sup>18</sup>, birth into the light<sup>19</sup>, with it

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<sup>16</sup> “The Secret Scroll”, by Andrew Sinclair, 2001 publ.by Sinclair-Stevenson

<sup>17</sup> Gnosis op cit. (saying 115)

<sup>18</sup> NRSV op cit

<sup>18</sup> Gnosis op. cit. 67

<sup>19</sup> Gnosis op. cit 77

freedom from the powers of darkness and ignorance.<sup>20</sup> Paul also speaks of the struggle against the ‘cosmic powers of this present darkness’,<sup>21</sup> in terms similar to those of the Gospel of Philip where they are referred to as ‘the archons’.<sup>22</sup> The Gospel cautions against false knowledge due to ‘nominalism’ or knowledge of names and categories, labelling, which invites division of perception or duality, a sense of right and wrong, us and them. As Saying 10<sup>23</sup> indicates in a directly anti-dualistic fashion, “The light and the darkness, life and death, right and left are brothers for one another. It is impossible that they separate one from another. Therefore each one will dissolve into its original from the beginning.” Sayings 11 – 14,<sup>24</sup> elaborate on this and how the names that are given to worldly things contain a great error. True knowledge sets us free<sup>24</sup>. This whole theme of what constitutes true knowledge, false knowledge and ignorance\* is also developed by Plato in ‘Phaedrus’.

According to the Gnostic teacher Monoimus, to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of gnosis.<sup>25</sup>

“Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, ‘My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.’ Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate...If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him in yourself.”

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<sup>20</sup> Gnosis op. cit 127 “He who will receive that light will not be seen, nor can he be seized. And no one will be able to molest such a one even if he lives in the world.”

<sup>21</sup> Eph.6:12)

<sup>22</sup> Gnosis op cit 13, 14 16a), Gospel of Mary, saying 15.NHL

<sup>23</sup> Gnosis op cit.

<sup>24</sup> Gnosis op cit

<sup>25</sup> (Hippolytus Ref 8.15.1-2)

Orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from its creator: God is wholly other. But some of the gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self- knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the Divine are identical. Further the ‘living Jesus’ of these texts speaks in mystical terms of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance, like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as spiritual master: the two have become equal- even identical.<sup>26</sup>

Sayings 2 and 3 of the Gospel of Thomas outline both the prize of seeking knowledge and the consequences of failing to do so:<sup>27</sup>

The exhortation to seek and find is also to be found in the New Testament canon.<sup>28</sup> The expression ‘know thyself’ comprises two elements – the first is an exhortation to understand ourselves in our human condition; the second, an imperative to be ‘active’ and find out for ourselves, take personal responsibility and not rely on received wisdom or blind obedience to others. This latter meaning makes it particularly unlike the orthodox religions which encourage dependency on the priests to provide wisdom and knowledge thus abrogating the responsibility of each individual.

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<sup>26</sup> (no longer a Christian-but a Christ, saying no 67; He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him’ GTH 35.4-7 and 50.28-30 conflated in NHL 119 129)

<sup>27</sup> “2. Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled he will be astonished and he will rule over the all”.

3. Rather the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realise that it is you who are the sons of the loving father. But if you will not know yourself, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

<sup>28</sup> (Mat.7:7 and correlates with Luke 17:21 “The kingdom is among you”.)

If we look to the early Dialogues of Plato, especially ‘The Symposium’ and ‘Phaedrus’, we can see strong links to the ideas found in the gnostic gospels and can surmise that he had much influence on their thinking on love in general and on sexual love in particular.

In the ‘Symposium’ Plato states that “knowledge of love is what is most useful to men”<sup>29</sup> He is interested in Eros for its effects and to where it leads- to a sacred or a purely physical end. He sets out first the usual descriptions men give to love with its focus on sexual desire and satisfaction. He distinguishes between a heavenly Eros and a common Eros, the former composed solely of a male element ‘with none of the female, and hence is free from lust and is naturally stronger and of superior intelligence’.<sup>30</sup> Common *Eros* can involve men and women but involves the body rather than the mind as all that the common *Eros* is interested in is the sexual act<sup>31</sup>

Here we have a dualism between a higher and lower *Eros* which is not considered as good or bad in a moralistic sense but looks rather to the end result. The heavenly *Eros* leads to union with the Divine as we shall see in a later part of the dialogue, whereas the common *Eros* prevents the soul ascending to the necessary heights, as it is based on lust, rather than the pursuit of direct experience and knowledge of the All.

Like the Gospels of Thomas and Philip, the emphasis is on the male element. Women are associated with lust. However, higher love between a man and a woman is not ruled out. As he narrates through Aristophanes, the origin of man is in an

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<sup>29</sup> Symposium op cit ( 188b).

<sup>30</sup> Symposium op cit 181c)

<sup>31</sup> (181a-b).

androgynous being that was split in two and seeks to be reunited with its other half.<sup>32</sup> and in stating that “in general (and this applies to men and women) the happiness of the human race lies in the successful pursuit of love, in finding true love that is part of our original self and is returning to our former state”.<sup>33</sup> This also recalls in symbolic terms, the Fall of Adam and Eve, (a symbol found in the Book of Genesis and throughout the New Testament where the interpretation is given another slant as we shall see in the next section.) and that their reunion will restore the androgynous state, which they enjoyed together in paradise, in the Kingdom, before their separation from God.

Having narrowed down the categories of what is or is not that which is generally called love, Plato, through his main interlocutor Socrates, seeks to expand the view of what love really is. First Socrates describes love as taught to him by Diotima before revealing his own conception of truth. “Love is the desire for permanent possession of the good” (206d). Next that the sphere of activity is ‘reproduction’ whether physical or mental which includes the divine element, this germ of immortality, in the conception and begetting (206 b-c). “Those with a creative urge that is physical, turn to women and pursue Eros by this route, imagining the production of children gains them immortality” (208e). In others the impulse is mental and they “conceive and produce thought and all other human excellence”. (209a). Plato suggests here that physical procreation is less praiseworthy than spiritual acts of procreation.

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<sup>32</sup> (189d – 192c)

<sup>33</sup> (193c).

Having set the goal, Socrates then lays out the optimum stages of initiation towards achieving it: starting with the love of beauty in a person up to love's participation in divinity, Diotima now speaking in the languages of the Sacred Marriage borrowed from the Eleusinian Mysteries describes this final stage:

“He contemplates beauty itself in its pure form unclogged up with human flesh and colouring... the divine beauty itself in its unique essence. Only then will it be possible for him seeing beauty as it should be seen to produce, not likeness of good, but the real thing... and that makes him if anyone, immortal.” (210a – 212a)

For Plato direct and personal experience of the divine is true knowledge and is necessary to satisfy men's desire for love, i.e. to possess the good eternally and to reproduce it. The path to this goal is through the understanding and redirection of the physical desires so as to integrate them with the desires of a spiritual kind satisfying both, at one and the same time.

In the final section through Alcibiades, Plato describes the effects of the refined, heavenly Eros in the exemplary behaviour of Socrates and the effects of the lust-driven common Eros in the behaviour of Alcibiades himself. It also suggests, as we shall see in the elaboration of this sexual theme in Phaedrus, that the correct induction of *both* sexual partners is necessary for a lasting relationship and the attainment of the spiritual goal.

Throughout the earlier parts of Plato's exposition of love there is a presumption that where women, and men who love women, are concerned, their creative urges can only be physical, lust-driven and therefore inferior for the purposes of achieving

immortality as their only means of reproduction would be by the production of physical children. This may reflect the contemporary absence of formal education for women resulting in a belief that they were incapable of higher levels of thought and understanding and whose only utility was as producers of babies, fodder for the armies and fields. The Gnostic interest in making women like men may be based on this interest to enlarge the hitherto restricted role of women seen as being primarily that of a wife and mother. The solution would therefore be education or knowledge as the problem is surely not based on a congenital inability or unwillingness even, to seek the Divine.

Although Plato does not reject Pausanias' basically homosexually-biased definition of what constitutes the heavenly and common Eros, the possibility for male – female physical love based not on lust or on the desire only to produce children, but rather on the common desire for contemplation of the Divine, *is* open to those who are “successful in their pursuit of love; in finding the love who is part of the original self and in returning to one's former state. This is the ideal.” (193c)

The theme of sexual love is elaborated further in Phaedrus. First he indicates that it should be on a free and equal basis, not based on dependency or fear of losing the object of one's love(243c-d). This is a radical notion in terms of the contemporary mores – where arranged marriage was the norm (Symposium 192b, Phaedrus 240c). Second that there is a need, through self-knowledge(229e) to understand and control our desires, the result of which leads to the Platonic love which unlike the diluted connotation of the term today, is sexual, but stops short of seeking sexual

gratification. “Greater good than this can neither human virtue nor divine inspiration offer a man”. (256 a-b)

The “greatest harm” one could do to a loved one, according to Plato, was to keep that person from the very thing that would help him gain in wisdom, that is, Divine wisdom.(239b).

Love is defined as some form of ‘desire’. This has both sacred and sexual connotations. Moreover even when men are not in love, they desire ‘what is beautiful’. (237d). The beautiful and the good are synonymous for Plato<sup>34</sup> and represent the call (of the human soul) to a higher immortal state.

Next, that for each of us there are two things which rule and guide us: our innate desire for pleasures and an acquired capacity for judgement, and aspiration towards what is best. The dominance of judgement is called ‘self- control; and the dominance of desires, ‘excess’. The irrational desire has as its motive force the ‘enjoyment of beauty’ (238c). ‘Enjoyment’ here seems to suggest a type of using, taking or consumption of beauty to be contrasted with the ‘giving’ type of desire that was typical of Socrates’ behaviour in the Symposium. (176 b-c, 206 c-e).

Plato likens the twin drives of the human soul to a winged charioteer with two horses. One of his horses is handsome and noble, and its pedigree the same, while the other is the opposite, and of opposite pedigree ...with an element of evil in its nature. (247b). Humans have lost their wings and seek to regrow them in order to be lifted to the

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<sup>34</sup> (Symposium 197c; 201c, 204 d-e)

heavens and reunited with the divine, which is beautiful, wise, good, and everything of the kind. This is what the soul's plumage mostly feeds on; whereas what is ugly and bad, all the opposites, cause it to waste away and perish.

He then describes how the souls which reach the summit and make their way to the outside, to a place beyond heaven.<sup>35</sup>

In Plato, 'beholding the truth' is commensurate with the Christ-like ideal in the Gospel of Philip<sup>36</sup> and comes from the soul's recollection of what it once saw when travelling with a god. Only the man who makes good use of memories of this kind and is fully initiated in perfect rites can become truly perfect.<sup>37</sup> This passage could be easily mistaken for an excerpt from a Gnostic Gospel so full of light, wholeness and disdain for the body. The description of the spiritual place is one of completeness, light, joy and knowledge through initiation into the most blessed of mysteries. It contrasts with that of man as "entombed" with all its connotations of death, darkness and defilement, and characteristic of he who is not recently initiated or has become corrupted and does not worship real beauty, instead "he gives himself up to pleasure, going at it like a four-footed animal and trying to father offspring. Excess is his companion and he follows pleasure without fear or embarrassment in defiance of nature" (250e).

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<sup>35</sup> At 247b-d "Being what really and truly is without colour, without form, intangible to reason alone, the talisman of the soul, the being to which is category of time knowledge applies... any soul rejoices when it sees what really is... Beholding the truth, it thrives... it does justice itself, it sees self control, it sees knowledge..." and corresponds to the description of the idea of Beauty in the Symposium\* at 211e.

<sup>36</sup> "You saw the spirit, you became the spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw the Father, you will become the Father... for what you see you shall become", Gnosis op. cit 44,

<sup>37</sup> "Withdraw from human interests and chose what is Divine he is criticised by the many; they say he is out of his mind. They do not realise, the many, that he is possessed by god. This sole/soul journey is reflected in Gnostic literature too. Each one enters the bridal chamber alone. The withdrawal from human interests recalls the command of Jesus to leave behind the duties and ties of one's earthly family and follow him.

What the soul has to focus on is remembrance of the pre-Fall state: "initiated into... the most blessed of mysteries. Celebrating those rites, whole in ourselves... we were initiated and granted final revelation in the pure light of day... manifestations which are whole, uncompounded, unmoving and full of joy. Ourselves, pure, we were not entombed in this thing we now call our body..." \*250b-c

In this last excerpt, the image of the four-footed animal recall the ‘many beasts in the world which are of human form’ in the Gospel of Philip( 119).

Plato seems to suggest once more that ‘trying to father offspring’ in the physical sense is in defiance of nature; it would be if it refers only to homosexuals, but is equally radical when applied to heterosexuals. However, this idea is implicit in the Gospels of Philip and Thomas where women will only enter the kingdom if they become as ‘males’, and that there is much power in the undefiled intercourse (saying 60).

It is also to be found in another Nag Hammadi text, ‘Exegesis of the Soul’ and in the Gospel according to the Egyptians, not part of the Nag Hammadi collection, but one used by a Gnostic group and perhaps the author of 2 Clement, a Roman writer of the mid-second century. It contains a dialogue between Jesus and one of his disciples, regarding the time when his kingdom or ‘the end’ would come. Clement of Alexandria reproduces the dialogue more fully<sup>38</sup> :

“Salome said “How long will men die?”

The Lord replied, “as long as you women bring forth”.

Salome replied, “I did well, then, by not bringing forth”.

The Lord said, “Eat every plant, but do not eat the one which contains bitterness.

(Cf Gen 3:16).

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<sup>38</sup>Strom. 3,64, 1, (3, 45, 3); 3, 66, 1-2; 3, 92, 2 :

This notion is also in the New Testament at Luke 23:29. “Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed” Is this meant to be understood in a literal sense? The answer may be revealed later when we examine the meaning of the sacrament of the bridal chamber.

Contained or chaste sexual contact, however, is the very essence of Platonic love. “Phaedrus” elaborates this and takes over from where the Symposium left off. The proper stages of initiation in love towards true affection and trust are followed, but now, there is an emphasis on the need for both parties, as opposed to only one, to be good charioteers.<sup>39</sup> Desire is not suppressed but transformed to a higher end.

In short for Plato understanding our desires and learning to keep them in balance, under control and directed towards the Divine, the result to be attained is more one of completeness within the human being, more holistic than the effect of the satisfaction of purely physical desire which is based on lust or, what St. Augustine referred to as ‘concupiscence’.

One major difference between the Platonic and Gnostic as opposed to the New Testament notion of love, is the importance of some form of sexual act, a contained act of intercourse. Let us examine how other scholars have dealt with this notion in regard to Plato.

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<sup>39</sup> “When they go to bed together this horse is prepared for its part to say yes to the love, should he ask for sexual satisfaction. Its yoke-fellow, on the other hand supported by the charioteer opposes the suggestion with modesty and rational argument. If their better natures win the day and guide then towards the disciplined life of philosophy, then the life they live is blessed and harmonious. They are masters of themselves and decorous in their behaviour, they have enslaved that which encourages the growth of evil in the soul and set free what encourages growth of excellence. On their death they grow wings... greater good than this can neither human virtue nor divine inspiration offer a man.” (256 a-b)

In his article “The Dialectic of Eros in Plato’s Symposium”<sup>40</sup>, R. A. Markus seeks to discern in the Platonic ‘dialectic of love’ the features which have recommended it to Christian thinkers like St. Augustine and others. He focuses on two interrelated issues: first a dilemma based on his understanding of the ‘desire for the continued possession of the object loved’ and second on Plato’s extended use of *Eros* to cover behaviour that is more characteristic of the modern theological notion of ‘*agape*’.

Markus states that on the Aristophanic view of love when union with the beloved is achieved, and desire satisfied, we are driven to saying either that love ceases or that desire continues. Socrates chooses the second option and explains that love is compatible with possession of its object, since desire continues even after its fulfilment: it is desire for ‘continued’ possession of the object loved. Markus thinks Socrates does not consider the consequences of this expedient, calling for two remarks: first, on this view, “‘love’ means ‘wanting to hang on to what you’ve got’ and that ‘wanting’ means ‘being afraid of losing what you’ve got’. Are we then to call love a kind of fear?” Markus asks.

But more important than this for Markus is the logical dilemma still involved in this position: for either perfect happiness (which he says consists in “perfect possession of the good and the fulfilment of all desire-204E”) is impossible of attainment; or love must cease, since it must, by definition involve unsatisfied desire on the attainment of perfect happiness. For him there is no escape between the horns of this dilemma short of redefining ‘love’ in a way which loosens the logical connection with ‘unsatisfied desire’ and that Plato should have realised this.

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<sup>40</sup> The Downside Review Vol. Lxx111, “Eros in Plato’s Symposium”

However, in adopting this view Markus does not incorporate the whole of Plato's rationale on love, especially sexual love, presented as a whole in the Symposium and Phaedrus together. For it is vital to see Aristophanes' completion and reunion of halves in the light of the Platonic notion of sexual love. For Markus 'perfect happiness' means "perfect possession of the good and the **fulfilment of all desire**" but this, I would suggest, is at odds with the final notion of Platonic love as it merely conforms to the common meaning of *Eros*, and the one stated by Pausanias, Eryximachus and by implication, Agathon, meaning 'sexual satisfaction'. For Plato, love will cease if it is founded on lust or sexual fulfilment but is likely to continue if based on his recommended approach. Hence there is no dilemma for Plato on this point.

Markus points out too that Plato goes on to develop a 'philosophy of love' in the language of *Eros* but with an interest and scope far transcending the 'erotic'. For Markus this is "the problem" in the Symposium. He believes the wider notion of love would have been more adequately conveyed by the use of the word '*agape*' or '*filia*'.

On a reading of Plato's dialogues, desire-driven *Eros*, rather than being feared or shunned, can be used to achieve the highest realms of love provided it is controlled in the way Plato recommends. As a result it fits his philosophy of love and is productive of loving acts towards others. Rather than being seen as a barrier to higher realms, it becomes the means, the winged charioteer with well-trained horses, capable of transcending its usual narrow bounds and, by its uplifting power, attains that highest

form of love referred to more often as ‘*agape*’, and manifests in our love for our neighbour.

Markus concludes that Plato’s expansion of the category of desire enables him to talk of the type of love which Kierkegaard in his work “The Works of Love” calls ‘the duty to love one’s neighbour.’ He says that Plato shows us both love as natural impulse and inclination as well as free, self-imposed inclination or duty, the duality of which love, St. Augustine has in mind when he speaks of ‘a love which is itself to be loved, and a love which is not to be loved’, and of human virtue, as the right order freely imposed on human love by human love itself.

This interpretation strikes me as a misunderstanding of what Plato was expressing. St. Augustine may have been referring more readily to the heavenly *Eros* which is ‘the one to be loved’, the aspiration towards God, and the love which is not to be loved, that is the common *Eros* or concupiscence, rather than seeing virtue as a “duty” to love one’s neighbour. Plato who was a major influence on St. Augustine, sees the act of giving as the natural fruit of love properly cultivated, it is the spiritual offspring of such union.

In “Love in Plato<sup>41</sup>”, G. Vlastos states quite bluntly that Plato’s theory is not, and is not meant to be, about personal love for persons. He says that what it is really about is love for place-holders of the predicates “useful” and “beautiful”. For him the cardinal flaw in Plato’s theory is that what we are to love in persons is the “image” of the Idea in them. We are to love persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and

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<sup>41</sup> The Downside Review Vol. Lxx111, “Eros in Plato’s Symposium

beautiful. He points out that most humans are far from being masterworks of excellence and if we are to love them for their uniqueness, then the individual will never be the object of our love. He posits this as the reason why personal affection ranks so low in Plato's *'scala amoris'*. Further he says that Plato has missed that dimension of love in which tolerance, trust, forgiveness, tenderness and respect have validity.

I disagree fundamentally with Vlastos already in his basic premise; the whole of the Symposium and Phaedrus have been about nothing other than personal love for persons, which when developed in the Platonic way generate a love for justice, social reform and other noble thoughts. It also fortifies the individual mentally and physically in such a way as to enable him or her to perform noble deeds and acts of courage. Alcibiades' eulogy to Socrates is evidence of this and testifies to his tolerance, trust, tenderness and respect too.

The Idea of beauty or goodness is described in the Symposium as the unchanging form (211a-b) in much the same terms as later Cappadocian Fathers have described God, the ineffable Monad, in their discussions on the Trinity.<sup>42</sup> Plato is suggesting that having been initiated in the proper way to see or appreciate people, customs, institutions and knowledge nourished by the ultimate truth, one sees it in everything around including individuals. This is what lust-induced love but tempered and matured by the experience of the contemplation of the highest love helps us to see. This is to be compared with the later the Pauline notion of 'taking on Christ' and seeing one another as souls struggling to reach our potential to be Christ-like. It is a

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<sup>42</sup> "Gregory of Nazianzen: Fifth Theological oration, New Eusebius

question of perception, having seen God we are transformed and see one another differently, no longer as separate entities but as all part of God's created oneness.

In appendix II to this chapter on "Sex in Platonic Love", Vlastos considers first of all how far the modern connotation (purely spiritual love between heterosexuals) has strayed from the original description. He then discusses the latter. He accepts that certain scholars have gone too far in suggesting that there is no place for heterosexual Eros in "Platonic love" though admits, wrongly in my view, that such an interpretation fits everything in the Phaedrus and most of what Diotima says in the Symposium. For him the most profound formula in the latter dialogue is the one starting from boy-love but ending when Diotima undertakes to state the most general condition which the pursuit of Beauty has to meet to qualify as Eros, namely "birth in beauty". For Vlastos this is all too patently a generalisation of procreative - hence necessarily heterosexual- love (Italics his, underlining mine.) Hence this understanding of love has, for him, a plainly heterosexual paradigm.

While I agree that Platonic love has arguably more relevance for heterosexual couples than for homosexual ones, his focus on 'birth in beauty' as "necessarily" meaning 'procreative' in the physical sense is far too narrow and indeed off the mark.

First of all, procreative can also mean generative i.e. generative of ideas or good acts. The fact that physical procreation is excluded for homosexual *Eros* does not mean that spiritual procreation is denied them nor that the same spiritual procreation is excluded to heterosexuals. As indicated earlier, having met one's complement or 'other half', which includes a male-female coupling, love nurtured in the correct way

according to Plato's rules, will produce a higher appreciation of 'beauty' that results in loving thoughts and a desire to produce good deeds and procreate spiritual offspring.

In conclusion Vlastos states that "in the drive to reproductive coupling Plato recognises the archetypal expression of *Eros*, its most elemental and universal form" and cites Diotima at 207b-c in support of this. However, that part of Diotima's speech comes at an earlier step in the process before the final revelation and while reflecting the animal instinct to reproduce, does not take account of the effect of higher revelation on man described later at 210e.

If Platonic love is understood as a paradigm for heterosexual love with physical procreation as its aim as suggested by Vlastos, or as "the sulphurous breviary of the pederast" quoted by Vlastos of J. J Chapman (1934, 133), a commentator on the Symposium, then indeed it will not be 'the life-transforming miracle, or secular analogue to religious conversion that opens up new, enchanted horizons'. However with a full understanding of Plato on love, such "a life- transforming miracle" does appear open to heterosexual couples practising the Platonic sexual technique.

Desire plays an important role in the understanding of both sacredness and sexuality, a fact as we have ascertained from the examination of Plato's notion of love and his focus of self- knowledge. How far did that understanding of desire, which was reflected too in the gnostic Gospel of Philip, differ from that of the early Church Fathers?

Apart from the two principle commandments given by Jesus in the New Testament to love God and love one's neighbour as oneself, the latter being explained by the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Mat 22:37-40, 7:12; Luke 10:27, 30-37), it is only in the practical application of these to the desires of the flesh in the letters of Paul that we see the main guide in the Canon for dealing with sexual desire. Self- control above all is extolled as the prime virtue. ( I Cor 7:5,9,37, (:25; gal 5:23; I Thess 4:4; 2 Tim 22; Tit: 2:15) To that extent he is in agreement with Plato and as we shall see later, by implication with Thomas and Philip.

However, Paul indicates his preference for celibacy over marriage which is recommended to those who cannot practice self- control. (1 Cor 7:9) Does this mean he recommends no sexual contact at all? Or can it be interpreted in a sense of loving, but chaste sexual contact such as those who have mastered their desires described in principle by Plato in Phaedrus?

The Oxford English dictionary defines 'chastity' in three ways: first: purity from unlawful sex; continence; second, abstinence from sexual intercourse; virginity; celibacy; third ceremonial purity. It is clear then that the term 'chastity' incorporates the notion of total abstinence or celibacy as well as contained sexual intercourse. In my view this has often been lost sight of when interpreting the gospels and the stricter form of total abstinence has been chosen almost exclusively. This seems also to have been the choice of the early Church Fathers who promoted virginity in women with Mary the virgin Mother of Jesus as the role model for women<sup>43</sup> and the apparently

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<sup>43</sup> (Jerome \* Letter 22 Chapt 25 to Eustochium which extolled the virtues of virginity\* "Death came through Eve, but life came through Mary," the virgin mother of Jesus. Consecrated virginity and the celibacy of the early ascetic movement is well documented too. What was novel however was the idea of a sexual union between a man and a woman that entailed continency and in doing so made them not Christians but a Christ!\*. )

‘asexual’ Jesus as the role model for men. The absence of any reference to an intimate life for Jesus in the few gospels chosen for the orthodox canon compiled around the third century would have reinforced that selected stricter interpretation. The revelations of a Gospel like the Gospel of Philip casts Jesus in a whole new light as we shall see below.

How did the Church Fathers of Eastern Christendom regard the role of desires? Kallistos T. Ware in an article on ‘Pathos’, “The Meaning of ‘Pathos’ in Abba Isaias and Theodore of Cyprus”<sup>44</sup> asks the question: “Are the passions according, to the Greek fathers in Greek ascetical theology, to be seen as intrinsically evil, as corruptions and distortions of our true nature and therefore no part of God’s creation? Or are they rather to be viewed as neutral impulses, neither good nor bad in themselves, but becoming such according to the use we make of them?”

He distinguishes between the connotations of *‘paschein’*, to suffer in a passive state and *‘dynamis’*, an active power, both of which are contained in the meaning of ‘pathos’ which is not conveyed by the English word ‘passion’.

It denotes something that happens to a person or object, an event or experience that is undergone passively. Thus sleep and death are named ‘pathos’ by Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzen describes phases of the moon as *‘pathe’*: He identifies two different attitudes towards the passions in Greek philosophy prior to the Patristic period. In the Stoic view ‘pathos’ signifies a disordered and excessive impulse in the soul. Zeno stated that “passion is a once natural impulse which is now

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<sup>44</sup> “Studia Patristica” Vol. XX, Ed by Eliz. Livingstone

out of hand, disobedience to reason, and so contrary to nature.” The wise man therefore aims at “*apatheia*”.

Ware indicates that alongside this unfavourable view of passion there is also a more optimistic assessment to be found in Plato and in a more developed form by Aristotle. Ware refers to Plato’s ‘Phaedrus’ and the analogy of the winged charioteer, where he states that the charioteer evidently needs both horses if his chariot is to move properly; without the vital energy the ‘*pathe*’ supply, the soul will lack dynamism and the power to act. Reason cannot dispense with either the noble emotions or the baser passions but it endeavours to keep them under control. Our aim is not total suppression of the *pathe* in any part of the soul, but their maintenance in proper balance and harmony.

A similar view was expressed by Aristotle in the Nicomachean ethics. In themselves the passions are ‘neither virtues nor vices’, neither good nor evil, and we are neither commended nor blamed because of them. They are neutral and everything depends on the use to which they are put. Our objective then is not the total elimination of the passions, but a moderate and reasonable employment of them.

Ware states that it is on the whole the more unfavourable of the two views that is adopted in ‘Patristic’ theology. In the New Testament the term ‘*pathos*’ occurs only three times, in each instance in Paul and always in an unfavourable sense.

Evagrius of Pontus associated the passions closely with the demons, spiritual warfare begins with the expulsion of the ‘*pathe*’. Gregory of Nyssa is slightly less hostile to

the passions than Evagrius but he too regards them in predominantly Stoic terms, “passions have a character that is bestial... and they are specifically an expression of our humanity in its fallen condition.” However, like Philo, he always admits the possibility of turning the passions to good use; evil lies not in the path as such, but in the free choice of the person making use of them.

Ware points out that the Stoic understanding of the passions, although frequently found in the Greek Fathers is not the invariable point of view. Abba Isaias and Theodore of Cyprus came far closer, he says, to the position of Plato and Aristotle. For Abba Isaias, desire, along with envy or jealousy, anger, hatred and pride are all of them fundamentally in accordance with nature: “There is in the intellect a desire that is in accordance with nature, and without desire there is no care for God.”

In the end Ware emphasises the deep symbolic power of words and the manner in which they are used can decisively influence our views of reality, a matter of particular importance in pastoral counsel and for ourselves. This is of particular relevance to the word ‘desire’ or ‘passion’. Do we say ‘mortify’ or ‘redirect’, ‘eradicate’ or ‘educate’, ‘eliminate’ or ‘transfigure’?

Plotinus, a Neo-Platonist writing at the time of the main flourishing of gnosticism, thought them so dangerous to Platonic and Hellenic philosophy that he encouraged his two best pupils, Amelius and Porphyry to write lengthy a treatise, “Against the Gnostics,” disparaging their numerous so-called Books of Revelation. He attacks however only what is of the essence of all alike- the gnostics of Plotinus are hard to identify. Porphyry mentions five Gnostic works in his biography on Plotinus, *Vita*

*Plotini* 16,1-3, but none includes the gospels of Philip which reflect Platonic notions of love and knowledge very strongly.

The Gnostics shared with Plato awareness of the double nature of desire, and recognised too that properly focused, it could lead to the light of God. The Gospel of Philip\* warns against being afraid of the flesh and also against loving it. “If you are afraid of it, it will rule you, if you love it, it will swallow you up and throttle you.” Saying 62. Ignoring the shadow side of our nature is dangerous.<sup>45</sup> This finds parallels in modern day psychology where people with addictions of all kinds are encouraged to recognise and admit to the ‘excess of desire’ rather than remain in denial.

## II SEXUAL IMAGERY OF THE MALE AND FEMALE

In this section we shall see how the Gnostic gospels provide us with a strong and powerful symbol of the woman as lover, mother and female deity. Indeed the absence of feminine symbolism for God marks Judaism, Christianity and Islam in striking contrast to the world’s other religious traditions, whether in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, Africa, India and North America, which abound in female symbolism. As E. Pagels points out<sup>45</sup> Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologians are quick to state today that God is not to be considered in sexual terms at all, but she responds, the actual language they use in daily worship and prayer conveys a different message:

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<sup>45</sup> “and lives... for as long as the root of evil is hidden, it is strong... let each one of us dig for the root of evil which is in him and let him pluck it out of his heart by its root, but it will be plucked out if we recognise it, but if we are ignorant, it t“whilst a root is hidden it sprouts akes root in us and brings forth its fruit in our heart. It is lord over us we are its slaves”. Saying 123 G Ph

<sup>45</sup> E. Pagels The Gnostic Gospels op cit P 71

“who, growing up with Jewish or Christian tradition, has escaped the distinct impression that God is masculine? And while Catholics revere Mary as the mother of Jesus, they never identify her as divine in her own right: if she is the ‘mother of God’, she is not ‘God the Mother’ on an equal footing with God the Father.”

Many texts discovered at Nag Hammadi demonstrate one striking difference between these ‘heretical’ sources and orthodox ones: gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism to describe God. One might expect these texts would show the influence of archaic pagan traditions of the Mother Goddess, but for the most part, their language is specifically Christian, unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage. Yet instead of describing a monistic and masculine God, many of these texts speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements. Some gnostics suggest that the primal source can be understood in terms of a harmonious, dynamic relationship of opposites- a concept that is akin to the Eastern concept of *yin* and *yang*, but remains alien to orthodox Judaism and Christianity.

However in the Gospel of Thomas at saying 114<sup>46</sup> the equation of “living spirit” with “male” would strike many readers as misogynous. But becoming ‘male’ refers rather to a transformation of mind set not least towards the suppression of a woman’s physical capacity for motherhood. The essential role of women in gnostic groups demonstrates that this apparently misogynous attitude was not characteristic of Gnosticism.

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<sup>46</sup> “Simon Peter said to them ( the disciples): Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life,’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her, in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit., resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’

The patriarchal tendency in mainstream Christianity was encouraged by the writings of the early Church Fathers such as Paul, Chrysostom, Irenaeus and Tertullian. The archetypal references to the origins of humankind in the Book of Genesis are carefully selected to emphasise Gen 2:22 where woman was formed after man, and even ignore Gen 1:26 which states that man and woman were made in God's image. By the year 200, the majority of Christian communities endorsed as canonical the pseudo-Pauline letter of Timothy, 1 Tim 2:12-15 which stresses (exaggerates even) the antifeminist element in Paul's views.

In Discourse 2 on Genesis, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, denied that women were made in the image of God as men were, stating that 'image' meant authority, not essence and linked her subordinate status to this deficiency.

In *'Against Heresies'*, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, emphasised the transgression of Eve. It was she who brought death upon herself and the human race. He contrasts her with the virgin Mary, the disobedience of Eve against the obedience of Mary in his 'Doctrine of Recapitulation'. The cross is the tree of Eden, Mary and Eve, Jesus and Adam. Mary 'recapitulates' or restores, who was a virgin and was immortal before the Fall, on the basis that she had just been formed and had not the time to commit any transgressions. This tortuous reinterpretation of the story of Genesis is based on Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament Adam and Eve story in Ephesians 5:23 where the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the Church.

As we shall see later, this metaphor became **the** orthodox Christian interpretation of the Genesis story and was used by Origen and St. Ambrose to interpret other Old

Testament passages in the light of the belief of the Church as the living body of Christ in the world.

Tertullian was perhaps the most virulent in the image he projected of women stating that “In pains and anxieties you bring forth children, woman, and your inclination is for your husbands and he rules over you... And you know not that you are also an Eve? God’s judgement on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. *You* are the Devil’s gateway!... because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die. ”\* “On the Dress of Women” early third century.

Medical tractates of the time referring to women’s inherently weaker disposition both mentally and physically because of their menses, further contributed to a general belief that women were by nature, inferior to men. Thus selective use of the scriptures, justified the socially weaker position of women and helped reinforce the status quo. With such an image, it is hardly surprising that God could have a feminine aspect equivalent to that of God the Father. The fact that men had the Church’s authority to rule over women in all aspects, socially, economically and legally, meant they were more than equally responsible for the making of those children that compromised the status of women as mothers in the eyes of the early Church. That fact was not lost on the Suffragettes centuries later whose battle cry was not only “votes for women!”, but also “chastity for men!”.

While scholarly comment tends to focus on the references in the gnostic literature to making the female male, with Mary as the archetypal female,<sup>47</sup> the male too according

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<sup>47</sup> saying 114 Gospel of Thomas, saying 9 Gospel of Mary

to the Gospel of Thomas is required to transform too.<sup>48</sup> We find a parallel of this idea in the New Testament , ‘becoming a eunuch for the Kingdom’.<sup>49</sup>

It is unlikely that actual physical castration was intended or that women develop male genitalia. It is more readily on a mental and spiritual level with implications for the physical, that it is to be understood. It may also be suggesting that females are to transform from a passive to an active role in seeking the Kingdom. The assertive, ‘active’ quality being more usually associated with the male character, the passive, with the female.

A further clue to what this transformation may involve lies in the other transformation that is encouraged by Jesus – to be like ‘children’.<sup>50</sup> Again, a change of mindset is the likely implication. Apart from adopting the innocence and sense of wonder that is characteristic of children – the vital difference between them and adults is their pre-pubertal state – when the body is not yet ready to engage in the physical process of procreation. It is through this latter condition, the suppression of the procreative tendencies, that makes most sense, in my view, of the transformation of perception that was required of the Gnostic in the undefiled intercourse, saying 60 (Philip).

When the ‘When the two become as one’ (flesh)<sup>51</sup> is elaborated to include ‘and is neither male nor female’ as in the Gospel of Thomas saying 22, then the resultant state is one of no gender or androgyny. How a man and a woman are to attain this

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<sup>48</sup> saying 22 of the Gospel of Thomas ‘making the male and female one and the same so that the male be not male nor the female’, this is also found in the Gospel of Philip and in other Gnostic texts.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew at 19.12. “...and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can”.

<sup>50</sup> sayings 21,22, 37, 46 of Gospel of Thomas, 22, 99, 127 Gospel of Philip, Matthew 18.3

<sup>51</sup> Genesis 2:24,Mat 19.5

ideal androgynous or suprasexual oneness is revealed more fully in the sacrament of the bridal chamber in the Gospel of Philip and to which we shall return in the next section.

Women are seen in both a positive and negative light in the Gnostic Gospels. The imagery takes two forms predominately, female divine figures and elements with human beings designated female, regardless of the gender of humans. The Gospel of Philip, one of the most philosophically sophisticated among the Nag Hammadi texts, is extremely interested in the female figure: we have a Mother, Sister and a Bride. We also encounter Sophia, Mary, Eve and the Holy Spirit as representatives of the heavenly aspect of the female and we shall look at each of these images.

Gnostic speculations on the female seem to derive particularly from the Adam and Eve story of Genesis 2-3 and from Greek, partly Platonic traditions about the soul – the soul here being female. Orthodox Jewish and Christian views present Eve in a negative light and the classical Greek heritage stresses the fallenness of the soul. Let us look at the effect of these differences of interpretation.

An example of the gender balance generally suppressed in orthodox Christianity is that of the Trinity. In the Gospel of Philip, however, that imbalance appears to be redressed.<sup>17</sup> “Three were walking with the Lord always, Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene who is his companion. For Mary is his sister, his mother and his companion.” The whole trinitarian notion is represented in the single name and multiple symbol of “Mary”.

The Gospel of Philip deals with the Spirit as female. The document states that it is a sign of inferior understanding to believe that the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary. ‘For when has one ever heard of a female making another female pregnant!’<sup>52</sup> The text conflates the female Truth with Holy Spirit, Mary Magdalene and Sophia. All four have earthly as well as heavenly aspects, and their earthly manifestations necessarily imply some kind of imperfection or destructive characteristic.

In identifying these females with one another and giving them a double nature, the Gospel of Philip exemplifies the kind of gnosis that takes the nominalist-realist dispute seriously. The text states outright that when names come into the world, they distort the divine entity to which they are attached. The reality is out of reach - hidden by names, labels and symbols. Truth, which came into the world “in type and images” is also distorted and spurned because it is forced to reveal itself in material terms.

Both the Holy Spirit and Sophia are deadly as well as live-giving figures and Mary has a three-fold character: she is Jesus’ Mother, his sister and his lover, Mary Magdalene. He kisses her often and the male disciples became envious and ask Jesus why he loves her more than he loves them. As it is common in this type of Gnostic text Jesus offers no straight answers but mockingly echoes the question – as if to say: if you have to ask, you know how ignorant you are. He kisses his favourite disciple Mary Magdalene because she is the only one who understands who he is – and who

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<sup>52</sup> saying 17:

she is herself: a female counterpart to the divine teacher. Their kisses produce spiritual children who are the real, not the nominal, Christians.

Philip and other Gnostic texts testify to two models of healing operating simultaneously. One is the same sex merging of one's lower aspect with its Lightworld prototype. For example, the lower, sinful Sophia becomes united with her upper, positive real self. The other model shows a merging of opposite genders. Here the human beings in the ritual of the bridal chamber in a kind of spiritualised sexual act – make the two genders one, which is to say, none. Dualism is transcended. This is the hint Jesus provides when he kisses Mary, for it is an activity that the male disciples, especially Peter, still on a lower level of *gnosis*, cannot comprehend.

Catholicism seeks to offer at least some symbol of heavenly femininity and elevates Mary to a nearly- divine status as Mother, but as a mother of God, not as God the Mother, to equate with God the Father. Meanwhile, Protestants submit to a stern prohibition against any positive female figure on equal footing with the male God. Does the matching of Mary Magdalene to Jesus Christ, the second Adam, as he is regarded by the Pauline epistles,<sup>53</sup> make her the second Eve? Certainly the integration of the mother, lover and even sister, as different aspects of the one symbol representing womanhood, does make for a more complete symbol and one that offers more realistic role models for Christian women today than those offered in the rather incomplete, albeit important, symbol of a virgin mother.

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<sup>53</sup> I Cor 15:20

In a stroke this Gnostic account raises the status of the male-female couple, pure and simple, to a divine level, replacing the Old Testament ideal of an earthly marriage and family based on mother, father and children, with a new paradigm in the New Covenant demonstrated and represented by the example of Christ and Mary Magdalene through the sacrament of the bridal chamber, with acts of love as the offspring, and the family now becomes the whole of humankind. The equality of the male and female as a unified symbol of the Divine brings gnostic Christianity into line with other great ancient religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, where a balanced male-female entity is also to be found.

In his article “Mary Magdalene in the Canonical and Gnostic Gospels”,<sup>54</sup> Bradley Te Paske contrasts the views of Mary in these two separate bodies of writing. He states that all four New Testament Gospels describe the experiences of Mary Magdalene at the tomb of the resurrected Christ. According to Matthew, Mary first encounters an angel at the newly opened tomb and then meets Jesus before the other disciples do. Jesus even instructs her to go and tell the others to meet him in Galilee (28:1-10). Mary records “Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.” (16.9). He points out too that it is ironic and revealing that this single verse combines both Magdalene’s claim to pursue credentials for heading the Roman Catholic Church (as the first person Christ chose to visit after the resurrection) with the fateful pathology from which she suffered. However this is to be compared to Peter’s claim as rightful head of the Christian movement, a person who denied the very being and relevance of Christ denying him three times to the enemy.

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<sup>54</sup> “Mary Magdalene in the Canonical and Gnostic Gospels,” *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism: Studies in Antiquity & Christianity*, ed Karen King, Fortress Press, 1988

Further Luke recounts how Mary's words concerning the Resurrection were received by the Apostles as an 'idle tale' and not believed (24.10-11) (a point reiterated in the Gospel of Mary, saying 17). John describes a poignant conversation between the grieving Magdalene and a compassionate gardener whom she suddenly recognises as her Master. (20.1-16). It is likely that the contemporary position of women as social inferiors precluded any chance of her leading or sharing in the leading of the Christian movement, despite Jesus' endorsement of her in this capacity. Society was no yet ready for such an enlightened approach.

While Magdalene's place in the entourage of Jesus is familiar, the complexity of her nature and the magnitude of her importance are generally underestimated. For example, Mary is seldom acknowledged as a woman of means, with upper class connections, rather than as a person of marginal standing.<sup>55</sup>

We know that Mary possessed sufficient courage to witness the crucifixion<sup>56</sup> and, more than anyone else, beheld and conversed with angels at the tomb. She readily appears larger than life.

Conspicuously absent from the canonical records is any mention of Magdalene as a prostitute. There are simply no scriptural references to support this traditional Christian prejudice. Rather a cluster of women and two discrete instances of an anointing of Jesus' feet have frequently been confounded. The Mary who anoints the

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<sup>55</sup> "Soon afterwards he went on through the cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as the women who had been cured of evil spirits, and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Suzanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources." (Luke 8.1-3)

<sup>56</sup> John 19:25

feet of Jesus at Bethany with “costly perfume made of pure nard”<sup>57</sup> is another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. The “Woman in the city, who was a sinner”<sup>58</sup> and who anoints the feet of Jesus with tears and ointment, is likewise someone else. And although attempts have been made, any identification of Magdalene with the “woman who had been caught in adultery”<sup>59</sup> is even more strained.

However even if Mary had been a prostitute, despite the absence of scriptural evidence in support of it, and had been using her loving power for commercial gain, then her redemption by Jesus is all the more poignant, powerful and salvific. For in forgiving and redeeming Mary, through the bridal chamber, Christ redeems all women who have ever had ‘defiled intercourse’ i.e. used their sexual power in return for material gain or were driven by lust to satisfy physical desires alone, out of ignorance of its potential for higher purposes. Through this sacrament, women like men can realise the fullness of their Christ-like potential on this earthly plain. With Jesus as divine lover, the roles available to men is extended too to include, man as lover and not only as father, thus rendering the symbol for man more complete also.

What Te Paske highlights in the canonical gospels is of great value in helping us understand the central place of Mary Magdalene, as opposed to the virgin Mary, in the life of Jesus described in the Gnostic texts.

Marvin W. Meyer in an article on Mary Magdalene<sup>60</sup> draws attention to the central role of the ‘family’ in the Gospel of Thomas, but the family properly understood. As

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<sup>57</sup> John 12.3

<sup>58</sup> Luke 7.37

<sup>59</sup> John 8.3

<sup>60</sup> Making Mary Male: the categories Male and Female in the Gospel of Thomas, NT Studies: vol 31 1985 pp 554-570

in the synoptic gospels<sup>61</sup> so too in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus claims to throw division upon family life. He points out that the Coptic word translated 'alone' is 'monarchos', with definite ascetic overtones. The implication is that the 'monarchos' is a solitary one who is not one of the masses, but rather is free from distracting social and sexual ties. Meyer concludes that the sexual imagery of the Gospel of Thomas leads to a recommendation of 'asexuality' (p.558). "Whether through the adaptation of appropriate motifs such as the nature of children or the adaptation of the 'family', the properly spiritual person is one who transcends sexuality." P.561

If he means by this total abstinence, then I think he is mistaken in his interpretation of the gnostic texts, unless he means the transcendence over procreative sexuality alone. As regards 'monarchos' the existence of the ideal Gnostic disciple is characterised by the term 'solitary one' which describes the one who has actively sought knowledge and left behind everything that binds human beings to the world (sayings 16, 23, 30 and 76). Women can attain only if they achieve 'maleness' of the solitary existence (saying 114). It does not necessarily mean that the journey is totally a lone one at every level, indeed saying 22<sup>62</sup> would suggest otherwise. Meyer indicates that several commentators have regarded this conclusion to the Gospel in saying 114, as a "considerable embarrassment". Many might wish it could be removed. For Meyer however, the message of 114 is harmonious with the rest of the Gospel.

If saying 114 in general make modern readers feel uneasy, Peter in particular emerges as especially hostile towards Mary. While Jesus insists that Mary can be saved, Peter

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<sup>61</sup> Matthew 10.34-36, Luke 12.49-53

<sup>62</sup> Thus also in the Gospel of Mary, Peter is pictured hot-tempered, 'contending against the woman (Mary) like the adversaries', even though as Levi states, 'the Saviour made her worthy,' and 'loved her more than us'. Similarly in Pistis Sophia, Peter rails against Mary and the verbosity of her speeches; Mary in turn responds, 'I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and hates our sex' (genos).

doubts even that!. In the 'Dialogue of the Saviour' too, a certain Mary, probably Mary Magdalene, is addressed as 'sister', is acclaimed 'a woman who knew all' and is taken in rapture with Judas and Matthew to the boundary of heaven and earth.

Since, for Gnostics, females can encompass passion, earthliness and mortality, it is reasonable to see how they can propose that all humans are involved in femaleness. Such universal participation is made even more obvious by virtue of the Hellenistic theory of the soul. 'Psyche', the feminine form for the soul is presented throughout the Greek-speaking world as a female, and the subsequent myths of the soul indicate the female aspect present in all human beings. The myth of the soul is recounted in the Gnostic "Exegesis of the Soul" which gives a dramatic account of the fall, prostitution and eventual salvation of the soul: she – indeed every Gnostic, is finally saved and transformed by being united with the heavenly brother in the spiritual forum of the bridal chamber.

Meyer in conclusion states that although the categories of 'male' and 'female' have a different symbolic value in the final saying of the tractate compared to the rest of it, these categories reflect the varieties of contemporary Hellenistic and Gnostic usage. What is true for Mary as a woman is equally true for all who participate in femaleness. "Sensuality and sexuality are overcome, the dying cosmos of the mother goddess is transcended, and she and all human beings who are physical and earthly can be transformed to the spiritual and heavenly" p.561.

The conclusion Meyer draws is that "sensuality and sexuality are overcome". In this I think he errs in his interpretation of the material as it suggests the total abstinence

from sexual encounter as that is very much the realm of sensuality. He confirms by this a preference of interpretative approach to the Gnostic texts which is somehow purely spiritual and not corporeal. While his overall interpretation of the Gnostic goal appears sound, his understanding of the means to achieving it, is deficient. For saying 60 of the Gospel of Philip suggests that 'intercourse' is appropriate, only the 'defiled' type is to be avoided.

Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley "The Holy Spirit is a Double Name"<sup>63</sup>, *Holy Spirit, Mary and Sophia in the Gospel of Philip*, examines the images and female symbolism in this Gospel in great detail. She writes that the Gospel of Philip insists on interaction between or among the realms (whether three or two) in spite of the divisions they represent. The Gospel underlines that one may know Truth exclusively through symbols, never directly. Hence the importance of a complete symbol as incomplete ones leave those who do not fit, nor wish to fit in with more limited roles offered by the orthodox regime, with marginal status, considered outsiders. Failure to meet what is perceived as the family's or society's expectations can lead to much suffering. The foundation for those expectations are to be found in the symbols that society holds sacred, a fact that was of much interest to C.G. Jung in understanding psychological dysfunction.

She states that it is in the bridal chamber ritual that the collapse of separate aspects of the female symbol is actively sought and made possible. This most important sacrament in the Gospel of Philip achieves the unity of male and female 'in this life' thereby creating the transcendent pleroma here and now. "the world has become the

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<sup>63</sup> *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism: Studies in Antiquity & Christianity*, ed Karen King, Fortress Press, 1988, pp211-227

aeon. “\* The bridal chamber aims at such unification by providing spiritual rebirth for the partakers; one’s ‘original nature’ is regained and immortality is ensured. Participants can experience Christ personally and directly.

Buckley quotes Giversen’s translation of the Coptic term for ‘companion’ which can mean ‘spouse’ or ‘wife’ and elaborates on how Mary Magdalene’s position as Jesus’ possible spouse has been restored. R. M. Grant states too that “by the end of the second century Mary Magdalene had become identified with Mary the sister of Lazarus and the woman in Luke 7:36-50.”

### III SACRAMENTAL RITES- THE BRIDAL CHAMBER

With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, new light has been shed on one of the most enigmatic aspects of Christian beginnings, the sacraments. In the canonical gospels as we have them handed down, Christ is presented as having performed no ritual act whatsoever. In Paul there is a great deal about Baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit; but this too became largely remote from the life of the Church after Baptism became a sacrament for infants and no longer affirmed ‘conversion’ on the part of an adult.

In the introduction to “St. Ambrose on the Sacraments and on the Mysteries” by J. H Srawley,<sup>63</sup> the author points out that after the conversion of Constantine, the Church was flooded with converts. The Church needed to be highly organised and have clear

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<sup>63</sup> St. Ambrose on the Sacraments and on the Mysteries” by J. H Srawley, publ SPCK 1

lines of authority. On the inner side, a clearly defined 'orthodoxy', a 'right belief' was required. Out of the rich weave of the early tradition, a few were selected to be the focus of the great campaign to win souls. Could this massive increase in workload for priests have led to the formulation of a basic package of liturgical rites that were necessary to set a person on the right path as a Christian? As the Church began to expand, it was perhaps inevitable that the more esoteric ideas should be blurred by popularisation.

The disappearance of virtually all the other traditions including especially any gnosticising texts, meant that the fascinating confluence of ideas and images which we can now begin to trace once more, could no longer be grasped. Only the Old Testament background with its emphasis on traditional family values was accepted as valid, and the Christians came to see an external historical happening somehow independent of Man's inner participation. The more mystical aspects that focused on a personal transformation into a Christ-like being, were wiped out.

Conversely, the 'Gnostic' who insisted upon the reality of an inner event and a cosmic dimension were rejected as 'heretics' starting in the second century. Spiritual currents that had flowed together and enriched one another were turned into opposite channels once again.

Although the pagan mysteries were rich in ritualistic rites, any link between them and the development of Christian sacramentalism is denied by Walter Burkert in his work "Ancient Mystery Cults"<sup>64</sup> In it he debunks certain 'myths' about the ancient mystery

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<sup>64</sup> Ancient Mystery Cults, W Burkert Harvard University Press 1987

cults. In particular he highlights the fact that initiation at Eleusis or worship of Isis or Mithras did not constitute adherence to a religion in the sense with which we are familiar in relation to Judaism, Christianity or Islam. While the latter are consciously distinct, in the pre-Christian era the various forms of worship were never exclusive; they appear rather as varying forms, trends or options. The fact of having been initiated into several cults can be read on the inscriptions on tombstones dating from early Antiquity.

He points out that while in modern languages, the word 'mystery' is mainly used in the sense of 'secret; a usage that goes back to the New Testament, in fact secrecy was a necessary attribute of ancient mysteries, *disciplina arcani*, though not all secret cults were mysteries. It is also misleading to associate mysteries with 'mysticism' in its true sense, that is, the transformation of consciousness through meditation or related means. It is only through a complicated development of Platonic and Christian metaphors that the word 'mystikos' finally acquired this meaning. It was the established Latin translation of the 'mysteries' as '*initia*' that the word and concept of 'initiation' came into our language. Accordingly, we find that 'mysteries are initiation ceremonies, cults in which admission or participation depend on some personal ritual to be performed on the initiand; hence the significance of the Mystery of the sacrament of the bridal chamber .

According to Burkert, the evidence of the Nag Hammadi library makes it difficult to maintain a thesis of a pagan origin of Gnosticism. He suggests rather if the texts are pre-Christian, they are not pre-Jewish but are attached to the speculations of Hellenistic Judaism. In particular as regards the 'mystery of the bridal chamber' there

is a degree of directness in describing sexual encounters that is hardly paralleled in the Roman Bacchanalia.

Andrew Welburn in the introduction to his book "Gnosis"<sup>65</sup> writes that the emphasis on sacramentalism in the gnostic tradition would indicate that Christianity flowed directly from the stream of the mysteries present in Palestine in Mandaean form and influenced the Jewish sects of the Essenes, (p50-51,) John the Baptist and so on. The ancient mysteries were able to provide Christianity it seems with a sacramentalism that its Jewish heritage failed to give.

There has been speculation in recent years that John the Baptist and even Jesus Christ had belonged to an Essene community. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 revealed the practices of initiation and the theology of a sect of Jews at Qumran who had evidently broken away from the rule of the Jerusalem Temple and formed their own Community Rule at sometime between 150-100 before C.E.. The evidence indicates that 'knowledge' and the 'seeking of light', concepts that are common to the gnostics and other mystical traditions, were central to their theology and suggest that later gnosticism either inherited that tradition from the Essenes or grew out of the same sources and influences.

He says we can point to a specific mystery stream in the background of the Mandaeans and the tradition of the Gospel of Philip. Their mysteries are based on the same fusion of ancient Babylonian and Iranian teachings which are found in the rites of

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<sup>65</sup> Gnosis, op. cit

Mithra, the sun-genius, whole cult spread from the East and in its pagan form was widely diffused through the Roman Empire.

According to St. Ambrose,<sup>66</sup> Christian sacramentalism pre-dates Jewish sacramentalism, and he claims Melchizedek, the priest who offered Abraham food and wine, as the author of the sacraments. As Abraham was older in historical terms than Moses, the Christian sacraments must therefore be older than those of the Jews. In this work, St. Ambrose refers only to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. However, what is interesting, is that while he does not mention any sacrament of the bridal chamber he does use the very sensual imagery of the bride and bridegroom of the “Songs of Songs” from the Old Testament Book of Solomon to describe the effects of the sacraments and the love for God they induce.<sup>67</sup>

In his work on the Mysteries, the Song of Songs is further employed.<sup>68</sup> With this he signifies that the Mystery should remain sealed with thee, that it “be not profaned by the works of an evil life and the betrayal of chastity, that it be not spread among the unbelieving by babbling loquacity.” What is interesting is the interpretation of ‘betrayal of chastity.’

In the original setting of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, the bride would have been a virgin and the song describes this fact in delightfully poetic terms.

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<sup>66</sup> “De Sacramentis” Book IV, Chapter III Verses 10 and 11

<sup>67</sup> Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. In Chapter II verse 5 – 11, he says “Thou hast come to the altar; the Lord Jesus calls thee or thy soul as the Church and says ‘let her kiss me with the kisses of her mouth.’ Wouldst thou apply it to Christ? Nothing sweeter. Wouldst thou apply it to thy soul? Nothing pleasanter.” And so on.

<sup>68</sup> De Sacramentis, op.cit Srawley, In Chapter IX verse 55, he states that Christ feeds his church with the sacraments; by them the soul’s very being is strengthened. And seeing her continuous growth in grace, he rightly said to her ‘How fair are thy breasts become, my sister, my spouse! ... a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed.’

However it is only when the literal fact of bride and bridegroom is rendered metaphorical to represent Christ and the Church, ( not a wholly appropriate analogy perhaps) a trend started by Paul in Ephesians 5:23ff, <sup>69</sup> that the potential to over-interpret that theme opened up. Fidelity is prized, but the matter of chastity in its absolute sense of strict virginity comes to be revered as the most noble state in which one can honour God. Since the whole purpose of marriage according to the Old Testament scriptures was to procreate, virginity ceases to be, and is no longer an attribute of the marriage. The analogy therefore stops after fidelity which can be encouraged to the full in both situations. In the attempt no doubt of the Church Fathers to maintain the status quo of the socially inferior position of women, they appear to have devalued marriage and put virginity and celibacy onto a higher level, creating a mass of confusion in its wake.

This use of the ‘Song of Songs’ to compare the bride and bridegroom to the relationship of the Christian to Jesus and the Church was also used by Origen in his homily on the ‘Song of Songs’.<sup>70</sup> The fact that Origen is believed to have castrated himself so as to deny the sexual urges of the flesh, might suggest that any sexual interpretation of the Song of Songs in a literal sense, would not find a ready place in his particular conceptual landscape.

However, in his second homily on the Song of Songs, he states that God created all the emotions of the soul for good; but because of the way in which we exercise these emotions, it often happens that things which are good by nature lead us into sin through our bad use of them. One of the emotions of the souls is love; and we use this

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<sup>69</sup> (Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16, 7:10; Ephesians 5:31.) (“ the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the saviour” )

<sup>70</sup> Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies trans RP Lawson Longmans Green & Co 1957

emotion well if its objects are wisdom and truth. But when our love descends to baser levels, then we love flesh and blood. “Further, the Bride is not fair if she has been far away from her spouse, she becomes beautiful only when she is limited with the word of God.” Again, real male-female union cannot be equated with spiritual union in Origen’s eyes.

As we shall see the Gospel of Philip, the powerful symbolic imagery of Adam and Eve is used in a different way from that used by Paul, Origen and Ambrose. Here Jesus is the second Adam and Mary Magdalene is his consort, representing Eve. By their union in the holy of holies of the bridal chamber, they restore each other to the primal oneness, and immortality, saying 71. Thus restoring it for everyone. It appears to have been a real physical act of love, that transformed one’s perception of the world with consequences for one’s behaviour thereafter.

The veil of the holy of holies hiding the true knowledge of the living God has been rent from top to bottom.(saying 76). The meaning ascribed to the same image in the New Testament is that the Old Covenant between God and Israel, the chosen people was now extended to include Gentiles. While this seems to have resulted in the access of Christians to the living Christ, in practice the Holy of Holies was still reserved for the very select few, the high priests, the chosen ones, just as it had been in traditional Judaism. Nothing in fact had really changed. Direct personal experience of the Divine was not available to the masses, but only to male priests of the Petrine Apostolic succession who were allowed that privilege and acted as agents for the Church and Christ.

By contrast, the renting of the veil for gnostics, meant that direct experience of the living Christ was available to Christian men and women everywhere who sought the highest sacrament of all, the sacrament of the bridal chamber. As a consequence, the meaning of what it is to become 'clothed in Christ', Paul Gal 3:28, (the imagery of 'being clothed' or naked etc referring back to Adam and Eve in Gen 3:7), " ...there is no longer male and female" has arguably much more significance for gnostics than for mainstream Christians for whom the experience is filtered through a priest.

Paul's intuitive rejection of Peter's insistence on the retaining the characteristic form of Jewish worship (exclusive table fellowship, Sabbath observance, circumcision and strict dietary rules) is recounted in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It resulted in his own departure from the Jerusalem school of Christianity headed by Peter.

Until now we have seen that knowledge, and self- knowledge in particular, is a fundamental part of the growth towards transformation. That the Male and Female entities have to be understood in a new light particularly in regard to how they inter-relate on the earthly realm through the Mystery of the Sacraments. What are the Mysteries in Gnostic circles?

"The Lord has done everything in a Mystery, a baptism and an anointing and a Eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber" (saying 68) " So it is with the bread and the cup and the oil, even if there is something more exalted than these"(saying 98). That something more exalted is the sacrament of the bridal chamber. What exactly is it?

It is clear that this was not a rite of marriage in the external sense and to that extent differs from the sacrament of marriage in mainstream Christianity, but is rather a union of the soul with its divine archetype: “While the union of this world is man and woman, the place for the power and the weakness, in the Aeon the likeness of the union is something other”. The effects are interesting “ But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber. But those who have been united in the bridal chamber shall no longer be separated.” (saying 79) If someone becomes a child of the bridal chamber, he will receive the light(saying 127). He who will receive that light will no longer be seen, nor can he be seized ( by the powers of the world) . The children of the union are spiritual acts (saying 28) and recall those of Plato’s dialogues. Most importantly the ultimate effect of this highest of the sacraments is that one is no longer a Christian, but a Christ.(saying 67)

There is little detail of what the rite entailed in Gospel itself except that it seemed to consist of undefiled intercourse (saying 60), with the exchange of holy kisses (saying 31). Ironically it is through the work of the anti-heretic, Irenaeus that we have some idea of what it was about. R.M Grant in his article on “The Mysteries of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip.”<sup>71</sup> quotes from Irenaeus who wrote about a mystical initiation, for which some Valentinians constructed a ‘Bride-Chamber’ and special formulas in the ceremony. “Adorn yourself as a Bride awaiting her Bridegroom, so that you may be what I am and I may be what you are. Place the seed of light in your bride-chamber. Receive the bridegroom from me and contain him and be contained by him. Behold grace has come upon you.”

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<sup>71</sup> *Vigilae Christianae* 1961-62 vol xv North Holland Publishing Co 1961

According to Irenaeus, spiritual marriage was not very spiritual. Some of the female initiates afterwards became pregnant. It is not certain that this was the ordinary result of such an initiation; Irenaeus may be describing isolated cases of abuse rather than the ordinary rite. However, he may also be describing cases of mishap. The reference in the formula to 'seed of light' (heavenly Eros?) and each to 'contain' the other does seem to recall the Platonic notion of contained sexual intercourse. If so, without particular care and attention by both parties as to the ultimate goal of becoming Christ-like, such an activity could result in pregnancy. This certainly seems to suggest that the activity was real and not purely metaphorical.

Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley in “the Holy Spirit is a double name<sup>72</sup>,” also suggests that the activity of the bridal chamber was carnal with a spiritual end in view and that Jesus’ kissing of Mary Magdalene openly and often was related to the sacrament. The gospel states too that grace is received by a holy kiss (saying 31) a notion we also find in the Pauline epistles (1Thess.5:26; 1Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; Roms 16:16) and in 1 Peter (5:14). If this reconstruction of what the sacrament of the bridal chamber may have consisted in, *grosso modo*, is right, then it does not entail a rejection of sexuality and sexual intercourse altogether, at all, but rather advises a cautious approach. As saying 62 indicates, neither fear the flesh nor love it but be aware of its power.

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<sup>72</sup> Buckley, op.cit

If we are to read into the rite of the bridal chamber that men are to 'contain themselves' and become 'eunuchs for the kingdom', then the "Second Gospel according to Mark", found in 1958, becomes less opaque. Many theologians have been embarrassed by the passage about "a youth who came to him wearing nothing but a linen cloth and remained with him that night. For Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God" for its possible connotations of homosexual activity on the part of Christ. If the secret of the kingdom is about continence, as both Plato in Phaedrus and the sacrament of the bridal chamber seem to suggest, then it would be entirely appropriate for Jesus, the Master and teacher to teach a young man how to control his sexual impulses.

Such sexual continence was considered an abomination by the early Church hierarchy as it flew in the face of the Old Testament command to go forth and multiply in Genesis 1:28. It also took the power to preside over the living Christ of the tabernacle or holy of holies out of the hands of a carefully chosen few priests of the orthodox apostolic Succession, and put it into the hands of men and worse still, 'sinful' women. The fact that they may have been guided by Apostolic authority in the works of the gospels of other Apostles of Jesus, such as Thomas and Philip, is of course of little import.

The obvious rejection of homosexuality as a means of salvation and the utter disdain from the daughters of Eve meant that the responsibility for protecting and developing the living Christ could only be entrusted to spiritually pure, higher- level Christian

men, that is, anointed priests practising celibacy. While the concern to preserve the sacred body of Christ may have been a noble intention, the expression of it appears to have been founded on a deep fear, mistrust and possible hatred of women expressed in various tortuous reinterpretations of the Adam and Eve story. Further the development of the Christian Church based on Petrine authority with its roots firmly in traditional Judaism and an interest in preserving that legacy contrasts with the fresher, possibly Essene –influenced gospels of Mary, Philip and Thomas. Mary was considered as the Apostle to the Apostles and her being the first to be visited by the risen Christ suggests her higher status in the eyes of Christ.

The success of the orthodox bishops in the struggle for supremacy in the early Christian era was aided enormously by the ‘conversion’ of the Emperor Constantine who nonetheless delayed ‘the dying to the previous life’ of Baptism until he lay on his deathbed. The result of the victory of the “orthodox” canon of the New Testament has had important political, social, legal, economic and theological implications that are still very apparent today.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We can see from the above arguments that love in regard to sacredness and sexuality were treated differently by the gnostic and the mainstream Christians. While certain Gnostic sects, such as the adherents of the gospels of Philip and Thomas, could combine a certain form of sexual love to engender the experience of sacred love,

mainstream Christianity on the whole separated the two out and put them into a hierarchy.

Self –knowledge, which entailed an understanding of the power of desire, together with an understanding of the Divine, and the use of one to achieve the other, resulting in *gnosis*, or higher knowledge, was a top priority for Gnostics. It also suggested that the individual be active in seeking it. This was the same for Plato and strongly suggests that in this regard these particular Gnostics were influenced to a certain extent by Platonic thinking directly or through the same sources. While secret knowledge is referred to by Jesus in the New Testament canon the seeking of it by the individual alone is not encouraged by the Church in mainstream Christianity where guidance on theological, liturgical and ethical matters is handed down by the priests as in traditional Judaism .

The sexual imagery used in the gnostic texts highlights new roles for women and men- instead of the focus on the nominal family, with the roles being those of mother and father and the production of physical offspring; the new role becomes that of Divine lovers who produce spiritual offspring for the benefit of the family of humanity at large. Mary Magdalene as the consort of Jesus, the second Adam in the bridal chamber, becomes the second Eve and through their loving act focused on oneness with the Divine, rather than on being mothers and fathers on the earthly plane, they restore Adam and Eve to the pre-Fall Paradise and with their example, light the way for everyone else who seeks that goal.

This image of Eve together with the view of the Holy Spirit as feminine makes the hitherto incomplete symbol of Mary the virgin mother that we find in the catholic mainstream orthodox tradition, more rounded and permits women new roles as lovers rather than just as either virgins or mothers. The traditional Christian view of the Trinity as exclusively masculine, is recast to include a feminine aspect to the Deity. Men, too, have a fuller role model with the Jesus Christ of the bridal chamber; they too can achieve the fullness of their humanity and develop the totality of their indwelling Christ-like potential on this plane and discover the Kingdom within. The offspring of this holy union are spiritual acts expressed in creative acts of love-good deeds or works of art.

The implication for mainstream Christians to equate the traditional imagery of bride and bridegroom or Adam and Eve with Christ and the Church seems to deny to Christians one path to the Kingdom through an expression of the natural sexual desires of the body. Marriage is considered secondary to celibacy. Physical procreation is not promoted by Plato, the Gnostics nor indeed by the New Testament as Jesus is nowhere recorded as having fathered any children. The continued support of it by the Church is a legacy of the Old Testament command to go forth and multiply, which has traditionally been interpreted almost exclusively in a literal sense only.

The sacrament of the bridal chamber may have developed from the mystery traditions of the near East, far East or from Plato. However there is no real equivalent in mainstream Christianity. The only symbolic connection between the two sacraments is the holy of holies which, as the locus of the living Christ, is where a male or female

gnostic initiand receives this sacrament and experiences the living Christ directly and personally. But in the Catholic tradition it can be accessed only by male priests, just the same as at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The ritual appears to have been one of undefiled intercourse, or continent sexual contact which suggests carnal connection rather than a purely mental or spiritual one. As for Plato, so too for the gnostics, a proper approach to sexual passion can lead to spiritual fulfilment. However it appears that it was this conflict with the command to procreate in Genesis together with a disdain for women as inheritors of Eve's 'sin' and a reluctance to widen the exclusive access by priests to the sacred living Christ that seems to have been at the root of the condemning of these texts by early Church as heretical and with it the subsequent purge. Only the chance finding of some of these texts in 1945 together with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has new light been shed on these early Christian developments and perhaps with them a new chapter in the revelation of the true Christian message.

THE END