

RE 444/620E (FALL 2001)
GNOSTICISM

I. INSTRUCTOR

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II. CLASS TIMES AND LOCATION

Tuesdays 4:00-7:00 p.m.
Peters 3027

III. COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

An introduction to Gnosticism, particularly as an important second century religious ideology that intersected and at times overlapped with various forms of Christianity. We will explore its nature and history, emphasizing close reading of the primary sources. I am hoping that those entering the course with little or no knowledge of Gnosticism will gain an understanding of the classical forms of that religious tradition and the leading modern academic points of discussion. We will also examine modern appropriations of this ancient religious ideology.

IV. COURSE FORMAT

This will be a seminar course in which each person is expected to come to class ready to discuss the readings and the weekly agenda. Some sessions will be student-led and generated; others will be facilitated more directly by the instructor.

V. TEXTBOOKS AND WEB RESOURCES

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987 (available at the WLU bookstore, and on 3-hr/overnight reserve at the library).

Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. NY: Harper and Row, 1983 (available at the WLU bookstore, and on 3-hr/overnight reserve at the library).

Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*. NY: Random House, 1998 (available at the WLU bookstore, and on 3-hr/overnight reserve at the library).

Philip K. Dick, *VALIS*. NY: Vintage Bks., 1991 [1981] (available at the WLU bookstore, and on 3-hr/overnight reserve at the library).

The Gnostic Society Library: <<http://www.gnosis.org/library.html>>.

The Gnosis Archive (maintained by Lance Owens): <<http://www.gnosis.org/welcome.html>>.

VI. IMPORTANT UNIVERSITY CALENDAR DATES, SERVICES AND REGULATIONS

- September 14: Last day to drop or change courses without late registration fee (Graduate)
- September 21: Final day for late registration (Graduate and Undergraduate)
Final day to drop this course at 10 percent tuition charge (Undergraduate)
- November 2: Final day to drop course without denotation of “Withdrawn” on official transcript and for tuition adjustment (Undergraduate)
Last day for withdrawing without failure from this course (Graduate)
- December 3: Final day to drop course without failure (Undergraduate)

The Writing Centre provides access, free of charge, to individual writing instruction, for both graduate and undergraduate students. Students who consult with the Writing Centre tend to get better marks. To make an appointment, just drop by the office (Room 2C5-ABC), or contact the co-ordinator (Emmy Misser; 884-0710, ext. 3339; <emisser@wlu.ca>). It is a good idea to book an appointment at least a week in advance of your due date because the Writing Centre gets busy, and you need time to revise your paper after your visit. You will meet with either the co-ordinator or one of the student tutors for a consultation that lasts about 45 to 50 minutes.

The Special Needs Office provides information for, and assists students with, disabilities at Wilfrid Laurier University. Staff at the Office are committed to assure students equal access and support services for programs, facilities and services in the university community. These disabilities include, but are not limited to: sight, hearing, learning, chronic pain, head injuries, mobility, psychological/psychiatric. Do not hesitate to consult with them, preferably early in the term. The Office is located in 1C11 on the bottom floor of the Arts building (884-0710, ext. 3086).

The Information Technology Services Help Desk is there to help you to get a computer account, and with Internet access (Woods 1-305; 884-0710, ext. 4357; help@mach1.wlu.ca).

Academic Misconduct at Laurier can have serious repercussions. Check the University website for more detailed information (<http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwregi/2000-2001/sec_276.htm>). The most common form of academic misconduct is plagiarism. If you are in any way uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult a Writing Centre handout (<<http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwwc/handouts/sources.htm>>) or the Department’s *Blue Book*, or speak with me in person.

VII. COURSE CONCERNS, REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

Gnosticism is an area of study with which I have been involved for over twenty years. I would like to build on that background to offer you as fine an introduction to this area as possible. I am also eager to experience your reactions to the material as we read and discuss it.

The course requirements emerge out of six concerns:

* My first concern is with pedagogy. I am in the first stages of thinking about preparing an introductory textbook on Gnosticism. I would deeply welcome direct input from you — e.g., what could such a book contain? what would work for you? So I have structured this course in a way that gets us all thinking about pedagogical issues, week by week, and leaves as much room as possible for different interpretations and avenues of exploration.

* My second concern is with primary sources. My plan is to cover several primary texts that are commonly considered “gnostic” or basic to understanding Gnosticism (hopefully you will read more on your own). Three of these will form the basis of individual classes (selections from Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, *The Secret Book According to John*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*), and several others will supplement our weekly discussions. This focus on primary sources is grounded in the view that all theorizing about ancient religion begins with the primary data, and in the case of Gnosticism that material is textual in nature. So I would like you to engage several primary sources.

* My third concern is with contemporary academic approaches to the study of religion. “Religion,” in this case “Gnosticism,” is not an objective category perceived identically by all people at all times; rather, it comes to be what it is through the way people approach it. Scholars study Gnosticism through certain lenses, and the study of Gnosticism includes an examination of those lenses. So I would like you to become sensitive to the academic perspectives on Gnosticism.

* My fourth concern is with having you take more direct responsibility for some of the learning. So I would like you to have the experience of (jointly) leading two of the classes; I expect that you will all be directly involved in every session.

* My fifth concern is with encouraging you to consider the relevance which gnostic sources might have for you. We are not dealing (Sophia has told me so!) with ancient texts prepared by aliens. People wrote these texts, and their concerns are sometimes ours, sometimes not. So I would like you also to consider ways in which these texts speak to you, and ways in which they do not.

* My sixth concern is with the appeal that Gnosticism continues to have with people in our own day. There are gnostic churches, for instance, in California, Toronto and Waterloo, and gnostic teachers and magazines, and writers and film-makers who try to incorporate a gnostic perspective into their art. One of these individuals is Philip K. Dick. More recently, another is Erik Davis. And several movies consciously and unconsciously fall into a modern gnostic orbit. So I would like you to explore works from contemporary gnostic artists, and artists of Gnosticism.

What I propose as course requirements is the following (to be discussed in the first class, and finalized in the second):

□ That you prepare a 1500-2000 word book review of **EITHER** Philip K. Dick’s *VALIS* **OR** Eric Davis’s *Techgnosis*, and that you help facilitate the class discussion about the book you’ve chosen. I will provide you with more information about what to include in the review (and am always delighted to read drafts of your work); what I have in mind is a summary of the book, an exploration of how it relates to the classical gnostic world views we’ve studied, and a personal appreciation (three parts, kept separate). If

you choose *VALIS*, your paper is due October 9; if you choose *Techgnosis*, it is due December 4. [Value: 30%]

□ That you bring to a series of primary texts two questions (keeping them separate): (a) What is being said in this text, e.g., what are the main points, images, messages? You want to be as “objective” as possible here, aware of nuances, rhetorical concerns, and authorial biases. (b) What do you find fascinating about this text and why (“fascinating” does not mean that you necessarily agree with the perspective)? Your concern with the second question should be with exploring your personal reaction to the text.

a) That you bring these questions to **ONE** of the six shorter primary texts that will supplement our weekly meetings (i.e., *The Hymn of the Pearl*, *The Thunder-Perfect Intellect*, Valentinus’s “Fragments,” *The Cologne Mani Codex*, Ptolemy’s *Epistle to Flora*; *The Gospel of Mary*) and prepare a 1000 word (absolutely no more!) summary of your views. The summary is due in class the day the text is discussed in class. [Value: 15%]

b) That you bring these questions to **ONE** of the three longer primary texts that will form the basis of individual classes (i.e., selections from Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, *The Secret Book According to John*, *The Gospel of Thomas*;), and prepare a 2000 word (maximum) analysis of this text. Your analysis is due the day this text is discussed in class (again, no extensions please). I expect, again, that you will directly help to facilitate class discussion around that text. [Value: 25%]

□ That you prepare a final paper addressing the textbook question, as a way of integrating your learning. The question is this: given all that we’ll have read for class and said in class, how would *you* structure an introductory textbook on Gnosticism? What would be the chapters, the orientation, the format? I don’t expect you to write the book (!), but I am looking for as much detail as possible. My hope is that you will use this assignment as a nudge to focus your thinking about Gnosticism week by week: what’s working for you, what isn’t, and why? I’m also hoping that your input can help me think more clearly about the book project. We’ll discuss the parameters of this assignment as the term progresses. [Value: 30%]

□ **Senior undergraduates:** given your heavier course work load, I suggest that you omit 2b, and redistribute grades as follows: 40% for 1, 20% for 2a, and 40% for 3.

VIII. COURSE CALENDAR

1. *September 11*

Introduction to the Course and to the Academic Study of Gnosticism

2. *September 18*

Thematic Introduction 1: Sources; The Nature and Structure of Gnosticism 1: Dualism; Cosmology and Cosmogony; Anthropology and Anthropogony

PRE-CLASS READINGS: *Gnosis*, 9-113; *The Hymn of the Pearl* (Layton, 371-75)

3. **September 25**

Thematic Introduction 2: The Nature and Structure of Gnosticism 2: Redemption and the Redeemer; Ascent of the Soul and End of the World; Community Cult and Social Practice

PRE-CLASS READINGS: *Gnosis*, 113-272; selections from Michael A. Williams's "Rethinking 'Gnosticism'"; *The Thunder-Perfect Intellect* (Layton, 80-85)

| 7:30-10:00: Screening and discussion of *The Matrix* (Modern parallels 1)

4. **October 2**

History 1: The Valentinians

PRE-CLASS READINGS: *Gnosis*, 275-326; the "Fragments" of Valentinus (Layton, 229-49)

5. **October 9**

Modern parallels 2: *VALIS*

PRE-CLASS READING: *VALIS*

6. **October 16**

History 2: Mandaeans and Manichaeans

PRE-CLASS READINGS: *Gnosis*, 326-366; *The Cologne Mani Codex* (handout); <http://www.gnosis.org/library/manis.htm>

7. **October 23**

Overview of the Primary Sources 1: Those Available Before 1945

PRE-CLASS READINGS: *Gnosis*, 9-52; Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora* (Layton, 308-15)

8. **October 30**

Selected Primary Sources 1: Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*

PRE-CLASS READING: "Ptolemy's Version of the Gnostic Myth" from Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (Layton, 276-302)

Your analysis of this section of *Against Heresies* is due today (if you've chosen this text)

| 7:30-10:00: Screening and discussion of *Blade Runner* (Modern parallels 3)

9. **November 6**

Overview of the Primary Sources 2: Those Available After 1945

. PRE-CLASS READINGS: R. Smith, “The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism”; J. M. Robinson, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices” and “Getting the Nag Hammadi Library into English,” from *Biblical Archaeologist* 1979 (handouts); *The Gospel of Mary* (handout)

10. **November 13**

Selected Primary Sources 2: *The Secret Book According to John*

. PRE-CLASS READING: *The Secret Book According to John* (Layton, 23-51)

Your analysis of *The Secret Book According to John* is due today (if you've chosen this text)

November 20: no class

11. **November 27**

Selected Primary Sources 2: *The Gospel of Thomas*

. PRE-CLASS READING: *The Gospel of Thomas* (Layton, 380-99); Gospel of Thomas Homepage (Stevan Davies): <http://home.epix.net/~miser17/Thomas.html>

Your analysis of *The Gospel of Thomas* is due today (if you've chosen this text)

| 7:30-10:00: Screening and discussion of *The Gnostics* (Modern parallels 4)

12. **December 4**

Modern parallels 5: *Techgnosis*

. PRE-CLASS READING: *Techgnosis*