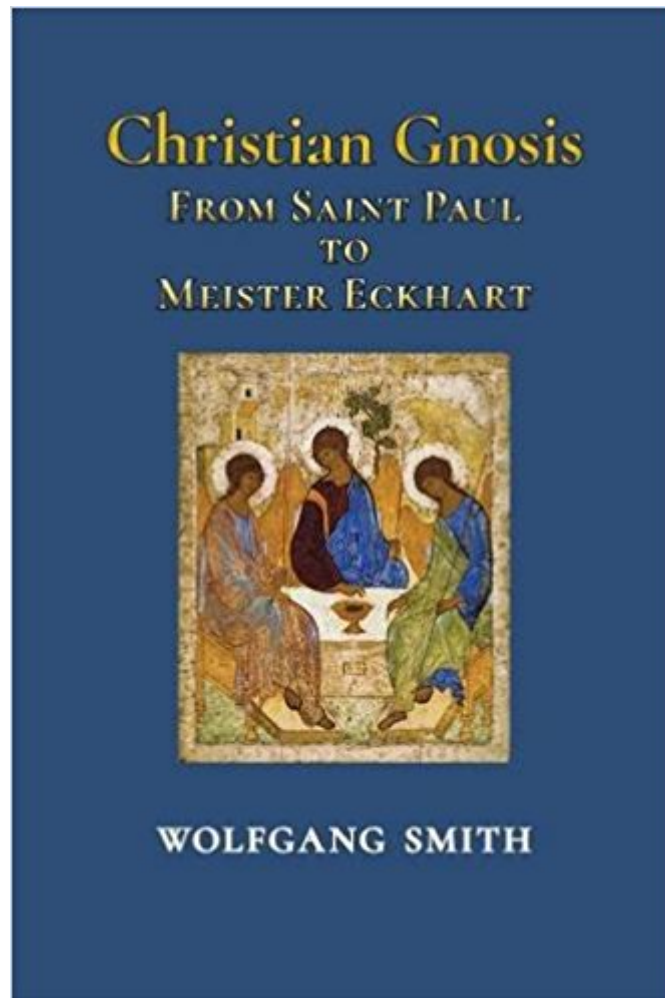




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Christian Gnosis: From Saint Paul To Meister Eckhart



Synopsis

Basing himself principally upon the teachings of Saint Paul and the Clementine Stromata, the author begins the present treatise by distinguishing the idea of gnosis in nascent Christianity from its Gnostic counterfeit. He then considers the implications of authentic gnosis for cosmology, a question that connects intimately with his earlier studies, notably his ground-breaking work regarding the interpretation of quantum theory. The same considerations, however, which invalidate the cosmology, have bearing on the theological notion of creatio ex nihilo as well; it is this crucial recognition that leads the author to consider alternative formulations within the Judeo-Christian tradition: from Christian Kabbalah to Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart. What emerges are the outlines of a Trinitarian nondualism definitive of Christian gnosis. Wolfgang Smith broaches a vast range of subjects with a mastery that bespeaks an immense culture. "Here is that rare person who is equally at home with Eckhart and Einstein, Heraclitus and Heisenberg!" "Wolfgang Smith is as important a thinker as our times boast." "After graduating from Cornell University at age eighteen with majors in physics, mathematics and philosophy, Wolfgang Smith took an M.S. from Purdue, following which he spent three years at Bell Aircraft Corporation as an aerodynamicist. During this period he gained recognition for his pioneering papers on the effect of diffusion fields, which provided a theoretical solution to the so-called re-entry problem for space flight. After receiving a Ph.D. in mathematics from Columbia University, Dr. Smith pursued a professorial career in that field. Soon however his center of interest shifted from the pursuit of science to the critique of scientism and the rediscovery of metaphysics as a theological discipline. He has authored six books and numerous articles, and is today widely recognized as a leading authority in these twin fields.

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Customer Reviews

"Christian Gnosis: From St. Paul to Meister Eckhart" is, in my mind, a definitive outline of Occidental Christian Gnosis. If I had to recommend any work on Christian sapientia in the West to a newcomer it would be this work. Smith moves quickly, starting from the Gospels, Pauline Epistles, and Patristic Fathers, and then moving from the rich late-medieval tradition of Christian Kabbalah to Jacob Boehme, and concluding with, arguably, the greatest metaphysician of the Christian tradition--and by A. K. Coomaraswamy's reckoning "the greatest European ever born"--Meister Eckhart. The revival of the sapiential tradition within Christendom is of great concern to Smith, and while other Traditionalists have lent their insights to the nature of Christian Gnosis, Smith's exposition considers what makes "Christian Gnosis" "Christian". While relying largely on Christian sources (the occasional references to Vedic cosmology and metaphysics notwithstanding) our author argues the case for a Christian Gnosis on the basis of what might be termed "Trinitarian Metaphysics", which is non-dualist, but not in the same way as Advaita Vedanta. Smith is at home in both the Western (Platonic) and Eastern (Vedic) metaphysical traditions, and moves with great erudition and cogent argument through the main points of his outline. What I found endlessly fascinating was his exposition on the Gnosis of nascent Christianity. Smith has proven himself to be not only a scientist of great importance, but a Gnostic with a precious gift to bequeath to the Christian community at large.

In this book, Wolfgang Smith, a genius who solved the philosophical issues with quantum theory, tackles the issue of Christian Gnosis. All of Wolfgang Smith's previous books (Cosmos and Transcendence: Breaking Through the Barrier of Scientistic Belief, Teilhardism and the New Religion, The Quantum Enigma: Finding the Hidden Key, and The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology: Contemporary Science in the Light of Tradition) have been confined to the realms of empirical science and Christian philosophy. In those fields, Wolfgang Smith is truly the definitive authority. I have nothing but adulatory praise of those books. I have never so clearly understood the boundaries between Newton, Augustine, and Aristotle as after I read those books. In this book, he delves into theology. This book has some real strengths. It delves into the history of Christian mysticism from St Paul to St Clement of Alexandria to Lutheran theosophist Jacob Boehme to

German Dominican Friar Meister Eckhart. The book hinges on the theological distinction between exoteric doctrines (for Christians at large) and esoteric doctrines (doctrines that pertain to the domain of Christian gnosis or Christian mysticism). Many of the distinctions that Wolfgang Smith makes are brilliant. In the final two chapters, he sets about trying to defend Meister Eckhart, the German Dominican some of whose teachings were critiqued by the papacy. With his distinctions, he makes clear that the Thomistic theologians hostile to Eckhart were "knowing" from a creaturely perspective whereas Eckhart was "knowing" from a divine perspective. As a result, the two parties were speaking past each other. Much of Smith's argument is undoubtedly true. The book makes a brilliant argument that knowing has a higher priority in theology than being in certain respects. However, in making his argument in favor of Eckhart, Wolfgang Smith admits he is speaking at times "in a devilish manner," a phrase he borrowed from Jacob Boehme. This is the heart of the problem with this book. He does not completely square the circle. In moral theology, both the ends and the means have to be defensible. The end of this book and of Meister Eckhart is knowing God in a divine way. The means is an argument for esoteric doctrines which are theologically heretical from exoteric perspective but nevertheless have their own truth. Smith and Eckhart share noble ends. But theology spoken "in a devilish manner" is unjustifiable from a moral perspective. That is why I believe that the papal condemnations of certain teachings of Eckhart were justified. This leaves us with a seemingly insurmountable problem: the mystical has its own truth but telling someone what it is results in devilish-speak. How then can mystical theology be undertaken and flourish? The answer, I believe, lies outside of the Roman Catholic tradition. Eastern Orthodoxy and the various Eastern Catholic Churches from the Eastern Orthodox tradition (as distinct from the Oriental Orthodox and the Church of the East) have developed an apophatic form of formulating theological arguments. This form of expression is able to portray mystical truths without danger of "speaking in a devilish manner." After reading the book, I conclude the papacy was right to condemn Eckhart's formulations. There is no doubt that mystical theology involves a great deal of private revelation. The private revelation Smith relies on is Jewish Kabbalism. This is defensible, to some extent, I believe. Jesus quotes Scripture verses that were part of the oral tradition and not the written Bible. There is some assumption that some Jewish oral traditions were of divine origin. But Catholics have no authority in separating the wheat from the chaff besides the magisterium. Once entire magisterial pronouncements can be written off as applying only in an exoteric domain, we have a serious problem of theological epistemology. Towards the end of the book, Wolfgang Smith suggests Eckhart benefited from such a private revelation. I believe his private revelation was imperfect. The book taught me things about the intersection of the mystical with the Platonist and

Aristotelian theological schools in Catholicism. But it reemphasized to me that the quest for the mystical remains hampered by the Great Schism of 1054. I recommend that the book be treated with care. It should serve as no more than a way point between the flawed mystical theology of the scholastics like Eickhart of the Latin Church to the brilliant mystics of Spanish Jewish heritage who have never been censored by the Church -- John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila. Or the even more developed expression of apophatic theology in the East.

Bought several books from Dr. Wolfgang Smith and am just getting into this one. I share many of the same beliefs towards Christianity and Catholicism as Dr. Smith so the book has been very interesting so far. Would recommend to anyone who is on their faith journey. While Dr. Smith is known for his highly academic background, the books are easy to read and understand.

"Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of gnosis: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered." - Luke 11:52 This recent publication Christian Gnosis: From St. Paul to Meister Eckhart provides a definitive work on the subject of gnosis in the Christian West, adding an implicit dimension to integral interfaith dialogue that is fundamental in a rapid and ever increasing globalizing era. This work will provide for deeper reflection on the Christian tradition and at the same time contextualizes this presentation within what has been termed the "transcendent unity of religions". Dr. Smith concludes his opus with the following disclosure dedicating its merits to the much needed restoration of the Christian tradition: "there is need today for teachings of Eckhart, the Master who--better perhaps than any other--can help to restore 'the key of gnosis' to its rightful place within the Church." - International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, Vol. 29, 2010

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