

Effort versus grace



Jesus in the *'Gospel of Thomas'* is guiding us by encouraging us to understand the teaching of his sayings, but at the same time clearly laying the responsibility for our salvation on our own shoulders. Interestingly enough, finding the true interpretation of these sayings is similar to the deeply attentive reading of Scripture that Origen stressed, which according to him led to and was aided by contemplative prayer. This profound intuitive engagement with the text was considered to result in a meeting with the presence of Christ, and consequently would lead to a true understanding of the spiritual meaning of Scripture.

The discovery of who we truly are and the consequent discovery of Truth therefore lie in a combination of our effort, our personal endeavour and personal responsibility, and the grace inherent in Jesus' being and words.

"Jesus said, If they say to you, 'Where have you come from? Say to them, 'We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established itself, and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living father.'"

Jesus points us therefore in this Gospel very directly to our Divine origin. Again the emphasis is on the presence of God, the Kingdom, being within us and moreover amongst us at every moment:

‘Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea, and then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside you and it is outside you.”

This emphasis on each of us containing within ourselves a spark of the Divine was a belief held by many of the Church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen; it was considered an apostolic doctrine in the first few centuries. John Main is totally heir to this tradition. He regretted that modern men and women *“have lost the support of a common faith in their essential goodness, reasonableness and inner integrity.”* and encouraged the awareness *“of the potential of the human spirit rather than the limitations of human life.”* But it was also a main tenet of the Gnostics. This may well have been the reason that this view was later discredited and supplanted by the ‘*orthodox*’ interpretation, which stressed that we were in truth made in the ‘*image*’ of God, but that in the ‘*fall*’ this ‘*image*’ was completely shattered. Only by the grace of Christ could we be saved. We ourselves could do nothing, which is the opposite of the message of the ‘*Gospel of Thomas*’. It is easy to see that this emphasis on personal effort and deep intuitive understanding, rather than pure belief in the accepted teaching, put the ‘*Gospel of Thomas*’ outside the canon of accepted orthodox Scripture of the 4th century.

John Main combined in his teaching the importance of both belief and of intuitive understanding, both of ordinary prayer and pure silent prayer. Only by faith in our Divine origin and Divine connection can we meditate faithfully and in full trust.v

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