

Review of the book A history of gnosticism, G. Filoramo, 1992, 0631157565

Sarot, M.

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Preprint

Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (transl. by Anthony Alcock of *L'attesa della fine: Storia della gnosi*), Oxford, Blackwell, hc. ¹1990, pb. 1992; xx + 268 pp., ISBN 0-631-15756-5 (hc), 0-631-18707-3 (pb.).

Contrary to what the English title – due to the translation of the Italian 'storia' with 'history' – suggests, this book does not provide a reconstruction of the history of gnosticism, but a description of the varieties of second-century gnosticism. [For the non-specialist: 'gnosis' is a form of esoteric religious knowledge, that played a key role in a group of second century religious movements called 'gnosticism'; these movements do not share one essence, but there are some family resemblances: e.g., a strong dualism, involving a very low esteem for matter and embodiment, and the idea that there is a divine spark in man, which needs to be reawakened and eventually reintegrated into the divine realm.]

The book opens with a rather speculative survey of the influence of gnosticism on contemporary thought, which tends to take general analogies as evidence of influence. Here one can find some fine examples of what Antony Flew has dubbed the 'Whatever-follows-must-be-the-consequence Fallacy.' Filoramo's survey of gnosticism and of the history of gnostic studies is generally reliable, but difficult reading for non-specialists. He explains gnosticism as 'the expression of an economically expanding and socially mobile provincial society' (p.170) in an 'age of anxiety' (p.xvii). Behind the contemporary interest in Gnosticism, he surmises the affinity between our 'age of crisis, riddled with anxiety' (p.xvii) and the 2nd century. Like pagan religions which were no longer able to fulfil their function in the 2nd century, Christianity fails today. Filoramo takes no trouble to enhance the plausibility of such statements; at crucial moments, he seems to suffer from a severe argumentophobia. Moreover, if he is correct that gnosticism has had a formative influence on many major thinkers of the 18th and 19th century, the alleged present-day popularity of gnosticism is part of a continuing movement and needs no special explanation.

The book is marred by many minor errors and mistakes, especially in the description of non-English titles; the 'Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift,' for example, has been mangled into 'Neederlandish Theologish Tijdschrift' (p.191). The Index does not cover the many endnotes, and from all its page references to the Introduction, one has to subtract 2 (for example, 'p.xiv' should be 'p.xii'). The back cover claims this book to be the best introduction to Gnosticism; the book itself, however, fails to fulfil the expectations that are in this way created.

Marcel Sarot