“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.” So begins the Nicene Creed, a statement of orthodox Christian faith. The Creed was composed during the fourth century, but not by Constantine as New Agers believe. In fact, council was called to deal with the Arian heresy which believed that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father. Much of the Church at that time was Arian. The Christian bishop, Arius, was highly influential and every other pope of the day was an Arian.

The Nicene Creed was specifically designed to repudiate “heresies” advanced by heterodox Christians—Christians who were once so strong in number that they threatened to completely overwhelm the orthodox Church from time to time. Thus, the patriarchs of orthodoxy crafted this creed to define for all time what Christians should believe; what they must believe.

The Nicene Creed does not just tell us what orthodox Christians believed during the fourth century. It also tells, by inference, what heterodox Christians believed. For every Creedal statement, there were other Christians who took the opposite position—especially the Gnostics.

Certainly the easiest way to define the differences between Gnostic and orthodox Christianity is to let Gnostic-Christians respond to each of the theological issues within the Nicene Creed. In this case, I will speak for them:

**Orthodox Christian:** “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.”

**Gnostic Christian:** “The creator God is not the ultimate God. The ultimate God is “the All”—the entirety of all that is. Instead, the creator god—Yahweh was a malevolent god full of jealousy, vengefulness and lies. He created the heavens and earth for his own amusement, and his sole purpose in creating man was to incarcerate the human soul within an inferior body that gets sick and dies. Yahweh wanted all human beings to remain ignorant of the True God—the All—from which they had come and to which they would eventually return once they awakened from the slumber of ignorance and illusion.”

**Orthodox Christian:** “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.”

**Gnostic Christian:** “Jesus was no more a son of God than any one of is. But Jesus is the Christ and savior because he came to dispel the illusion of separateness between the individual and the All. He came to bring the gnosis (knowledge) of humanity’s true divine nature.”
Orthodox Christian: “Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man.”

Gnostic Christian: “Humanity is not in need of salvation from sin, because sin is an illusion. He is in need of salvation from ignorance. Jesus was not born of a virgin because that would be impossible.”

Orthodox Christian: “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.”

Gnostic Christian: “Jesus wasn’t crucified for our sake. He was just crucified. But the body of Jesus that died on the cross was not the true Jesus. That is an illusion. The real Jesus—the spirit in Jesus—watched his physical body die and was glad of it since his soul was free once again.”

Orthodox Christian: “On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

Gnostic Christian: “No one can physically rise from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was a spiritual event; the separation of his soul from his body.”

Orthodox Christian: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Gnostic Christian: “Jesus is not coming back, and the Christ was only one of many avatars that proceed from the All whenever humanity is in most of them. Jesus will not judge us for anything, and the kingdom of God has always been present.”

Orthodox Christian: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.”

Gnostic Christian: “Who knows from where the Spirit proceeds, and what difference does it make to our lives anyway? The nature of the Great Invisible Spirit is entirely beyond human comprehension, and That-Which-Is has no need to be worshipped.”

Orthodox Christian: “With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.”

Gnostic Christian: “All meaningless statements.”

Orthodox Christian: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”

Gnostic Christian: “The Church of Rome is the false Church, and no institution should be allowed to tell others what to believe.”
Orthodox Christian: “We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

Gnostic Christian: “As Jesus said in the Gospel of Mary, ‘There is no such thing as sin; rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called ‘sin.’ For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature.’ Baptism is a meaningless act.”

Orthodox Christian: “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

Gnostic Christian: “People rising from their graves is a repulsive idea, and the eternal soul has no need of a material body.” Resurrection of the spirit comes at the moment of enlightenment.

Obviously, the differences between “Orthodox” and Gnostic Christian theology are irreconcilable. But only one of these two religions survived. One wonders if the historical Jesus would have embraced either of them.
Recommended Reading

General Introductions to the Historical Jesus


Books on the *New Testament* and The Gospels


**Books on Christian Origins**


Books on the Gnostic Gospels and Gnostic Christianity


