



# PILGRIMAGE TO HERESY

## Tracy Saunders TV Interview Transcript

### Supreme Master Television

### Our Noble Lineage

### Priscillianism - Living The Way of Christ

**Our Spanish-speaking Association member (AM):** - To learn more about Priscillianism, Supreme Master Television interviewed author Tracy Saunders. Through a chance encounter while walking the Camino de Santiago, a medical doctor from Salt Lake City - and a priest of the Gnostic Church - introduced to Tracy the name “Priscillian of Ávila”. Extensive research into the life of Priscillian and Priscillianism ensued, which eventually became the book “Pilgrimage to Heresy”.

**Tracy Saunders, Author of “Pilgrimage to Heresy” (TS):** So when I got home I contacted this person again and he gave me the name and I started to Google and I found almost nothing in English at all. There is a wonderful book by Professor Virginia Burras, who’s written another book, quite a big scholarly book, and the one by Henry Chadwick. So I tried to order this and it took me about two years, and when I finally got it and I read it through I thought: this is an amazing story, this man, this very charismatic priest who somehow managed to gain so many followers in the North of Spain, gradually into the South of France.

The truth is we don’t know very much about Priscillian. We know that he was a Roman; we know that he came from a very wealthy family, probably may have been a senator. We know that he was born perhaps around 340 C.E., Anno Domini.

**AM:** All of Priscillian’s practices were aimed at attaining a state of perfection or election (electi Deo). He was tireless in keeping vigils, could endure hunger and thirst, had no desire for riches, and was frugal in the use of things. These were noble characteristics shared by another Gnostic group, the Manicheans. It is generally believed that Priscillian was a student of a master or saint from the Manichean group.

Early in his practice Priscillian became friends with a woman name Agape and a man named Helpidius who had travelled to Spain from Egypt. Agape and Helpidius were practitioners of Manichaeism and were probably the ones who passed on the teachings to Priscillian.

**TS:** We know that at some point he was visited by two people, by a woman whose name was Agape - now this may not have been her real name, but this is the name that we have –and by a man called Helpidius. And after their visit Priscillian’s life changed completely. They brought him some sort of message, probably from Egypt, possibly from a man whose name was Marcus of Egypt. And subsequently Priscillian’s message began to grow until probably about 379 he was asked to become Bishop of Ávila in Spain.



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**AM:** In order to better understand the teachings of Priscillian, we can study the origins of many of his concepts in Manichaeism. These teachings originated in the time of the Apostles, and are said to have evolved from “the wisdom of the Egyptians.” This philosophy was later named after Mani, a Persian prophet who was exceptionally gifted as a child. Prophet Mani spoke of salvation to those around him, and emphasized the importance of education, self-denial, vegetarianism, fasting, and chastity in common with Manichaeism.

The teachings of Priscillianism were based upon the essential contradiction between good and evil. Light was the principal of good, darkness was the principal of evil. All things “spiritual”, the sun, moon, planets, and the soul of man were good because they proceeded from the principle of light.

All things “material”, the world, human flesh, and certain kinds of food were evil in themselves, because they were made by the principle of darkness. Thus, the fundamental belief was that the soul is incorruptible. From this knowledge, both the Priscillianist and the Manichean doctrines explained that human beings could be saved from the negative influence of the material existence if they come to know who they are and identify themselves with their soul.

**AM:** Priscillian had a keen interest in astrology. In common with other early Gnostic teachings, he spoke of the interrelatedness of the stars and the universe with life on our planet. Numerous similarities can be drawn between his writings and the fundamentals of our present day knowledge of astrology. For example, he wrote that the conjunction of stars under which a person is born has great influence throughout their life.

Moreover, the signs of Zodiac influence different parts of the human body. For example, Aries influences the head, Taurus the neck, Gemini the arms and Cancer the chest. Through ascetic practice Priscillian showed his followers how to purify their body and mind in order to experience oneness with God. He believed that the presence of God resulted from a personal experience rather than rational reflection. He therefore recommended that people experience the “nova nativitas” or new birth directly in addition to reading the holy scriptures. He was gentle and kind to all beings, teaching his followers to lead a vegetarian life. Many of the practitioners were very steadfast in their belief of non violence and would not even eat vegetables which had been cooked with meat.

Great weight was added to his words through the pure and ascetic life that he led and he gained much respect from people of all walks of life.

**TS:** Priscillian and his followers were vegetarians. They believed in a very strict dualism as the Gnostics do, between God, a transcendent God, and the material world. The Manichaeans looked at the idea of the properties of light and darkness and a real dualism between God and the Devil.

He and his followers were vegetarian. They abstained from wine, they abstained from meat. The followers of Priscillian practiced poverty, voluntary poverty. Priscillian was probably a very wealthy man. A lot of his followers were probably very wealthy. But the idea was to practice an ascetic ideal and there was no sexual differentiation between men and women in the church.



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The Priscillianists believed that Christ is the only God. They believed that God is everywhere and is accessible to everyone. He can appear at any time through any witnesses. God is not limited to just the prophets of the Canonical Scriptures

Through Priscillian's teachings Priscillianists believed that the Christian way of life should be purer and less materialistic. Similar to Apollinaris, Priscillianists believed in reincarnation. Additionally, they also respected women as equals to men and encouraged them to participate in meetings and exercise their gifts in ministry.

Certainly as the Cathars as well in the 11th, 12th and 13th Century believed in this idea of the flesh as being something that was very against the idea of the transcendent, against the idea of God and that we are somehow trapped in the body; that the body is a casing we walk around in but it's not who we are.

And you find this with the Essenists, the early followers of Christ and before Jesus of course. You find it with the Gnostics and you find it in Priscillian and later with the Cathars. And books like Kate Moss' book "Labyrinth" have really brought this story of the Cathars. So people are interested in what the Cathars said. Well, Priscillian said very much the same thing but five or six centuries before. He believed in celibacy. He advocated celibacy for those who felt a strict calling. But the members, the followers, the lay members if you like, were not expected to practice this. The followers of Priscillian practice poverty, voluntary poverty.

Priscillian was probably a very wealthy man. A lot of his followers were probably very wealthy. But the idea was to practice an ascetic ideal and there was no sexual differentiation between men and women in the church.

They didn't meet in churches. They met in each other's homes. They met outside of the church environment and the house church movement, of course, now which is becoming more and more popular, is very similar. They called them "conventicles".

**AM:** Priscillian also taught that one should purify and care for his or her body, quoting the Apostle Paul that "the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." He warned of the grave effect that intoxicants such as alcohol have on the body and advised to avoid such poisons. His messages were simple and logical; although he advocated celibacy, which he believed would aid in cultivating the purity of the body and soul, he made exceptions for householders who wished to have families.

**TS:** He was a vegetarian. Yes. They abstained from wine, they abstained from meat.

**AM:** Which were his beliefs generally speaking?

**TS:** The beliefs were that we are not the body, we are the soul. That the wisdom of the world is nonsense, that we cannot find a spirituality in the things of the world. That the only way we can find spirituality is a direct communion with the Divine, with God. And of course, the way that the Roman church was set up was the deacons, the priests, the bishops: the only way of accessing the divine was through this hierarchy. And the Priscillianists, as the Gnostics, said "No, it's a direct communion between me and this belief that I have: this deep belief." Priscillianism itself made no distinction between men and women. Women could preach in the same way as men could preach.



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**AM:** Priscillian was also strongly against slavery and abolished the practice in his area. Such understanding that all people were equal was founded by his belief that every soul came from the realms of Light and purity. And the body, as well as the entire material existence, was created by the negative force.

The purpose of the soul's sojourn in this physical realm was, therefore, to realize its true God nature.

In one of his letters Priscillian wrote: "The first wisdom is to understand the nature of the divine virtues in the types of the souls (and to understand) the composition of the body, in which the heavens and earth and all the powers of the world seem to be joined together; to overcome these relations is the duty of the saints."

As a result of this denial of the bodily humanity of Christ, Priscillianists did not accept the traditional communion which was taken on Sundays and Christmas Day. Priscillian and his followers chose not to take any food during these holy times, and held retreats "far from the noise of the world," where they would pray in silence for long hours. And in the year 379 Priscillian was ordained to the priesthood and was appointed Bishop of Ávila. This was highly unusual for a householder to be ordained and become bishop so quickly. Two of his close followers were also bishops, and together they won the respect and reverence of the Emperor Gratian.

Priscillian used his authority as a bishop to try to reform certain aspects of the church in order to preserve the purity of the church and its followers. He requested that the church hierarchy practice chastity as laid down by the council of Elvira.

He also thought that the separation of the men and women was not important and emphasized the virtues of seeking out the traditional practices of Christian ascetism and the importance of Priscillian and the Priscillianists succeeded in convincing many people from all walks of life about the virtues of the Priscillianism's ideals and after his death he was venerated as a saint, especially in Galicia.

The Priscillianist teachings flourished for another 200 years, with numerous bishops reinforcing the original ideas.

In recent years the spirit of Priscillianism has been rekindled with the discovery of the Gnostic scriptures as well as other texts such as the Wurzburg Treatise, a series of texts written by Priscillian and his followers.

These writings and the historians who studied them inspired the author Tracy Saunders to write her book: "Pilgrimage to Heresy". This book is based on the life of Priscillian and suggests that his final resting-place is actually a site in Spain commonly believed to be the burial site of the apostle St. James

Through his pure and courageous life Priscillian and the teachings of Priscillianism are still remembered today.

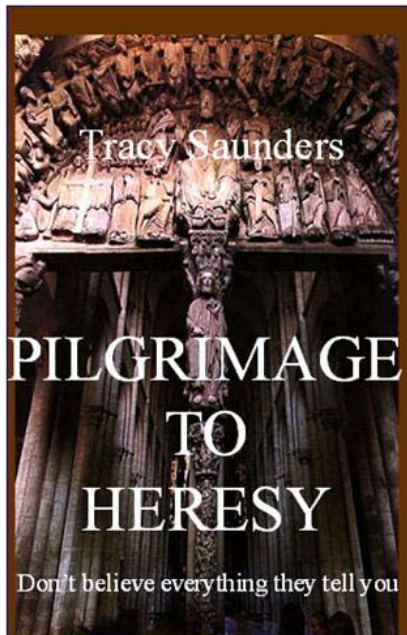
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**TS:** The story that emerges here is such a charismatic human being that he managed to bring those people to him, despite a message of celibacy, a message of vegetarianism, a message of asceticism. What he had to say to be extremely powerful. This idea would not go away and it hasn't gone away; it's still around. And I hope to continue to look into it myself.

**AM:** Thank you for joining us today on Our Noble Lineage.

**Author's Website:**

<http://pilgrimagetoheresy.com>



**Download the three part TV documentary here:**

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