

Journey to The West Series: In the 21st century it is important to grasp the essentials of Asian cultures, sometimes for strategic or business purposes, or as part of an individual exploration of rich philosophical and religious perspectives. However, deep 'Western' traditions, many of which originated through interactions with the Middle East and Eurasia, are worth revisiting as well.

Gnosticism: The Wise Sister of Christianity¹

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Christianity was not born in a vacuum. It was fed from the fonts of religious turmoil in the Near East and from the rich philosophical and literary tapestry of Hellenism. To define itself as a unified and institutionalized religion, however, it had to divide and suppress two related tendencies: to purge itself of many gnostic tendencies that claimed a special place for divine knowledge over that of faith, and to relegate classical and Hellenistic learning to definite but limited roles. Greek philosophy had to be tamed, making it a useful adjunct, rather than a competitive educational system that might tempt the mind to prideful erudition.² These processes of co-option, transformation, expulsion and suppression were the midwives of Christianity and Christendom. Gnostic bodies of thought were related trends that emerged as the distained sisters, but not the twins, of early Christianity. Gnosticism is indeed 'a modern construction' rather than a unified body of ancient thought, as noted by Michael Williams.³ However, the sociological construction of religion is itself a modern phenomenon. In this case, several different types of counter-canon, social protest, and demiurge polemics overlap, though no single group was likely to demonstrate all the features of the modern construct of Gnosticism.⁴ It may thus be safer to 'speak of Gnosticisms rather than Gnosticism'.⁵ Nonetheless, certain patterns of thought, focused on discontent with a flawed creation and the desire for a direct knowledge that would lift one beyond rigid dogma, are shared by most groups identified as 'gnostic'.

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

² For the powerful amalgam of thought, culture and politics that such learning could constitute, see JAEGER, Werner & HIGHET, Gilbert *Paideia*, Vols I-III, N.Y., OUP, 1986.

³ WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p7.

⁴ Contra WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p28. For this notion of textual convergence, see EHRMAN, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, p116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p122.

Many Christianities, Diverse Gnosticisms

The canonical and ideological battles among diverse Christian traditions were framed by the digestion and selective exclusion of the teachings of the classical past. It was at the end of this transformational period, in 529 CE, that the last neo-Platonic philosophers were expelled from Athens, symbolising the end of non-Christian academic institutions in the Roman Empire. They packed up and went to Persia, where they were welcomed into the centre of learning at Jundisapur, and thereafter influenced its medical school and later Persian thought.⁶ This event symbolised the eclipse of classical learning as *the* touchstone of the civilised person in the late Roman Empire. Classics were still studied, but as a secondary preparation for religious texts (as suggested by Clement of Alexandria for example, circa 150-215 CE). The choice of classic texts would be rethought under Christian inspiration and their interpretation profoundly altered. Plato and Cicero could still be appreciated, but only as inferior inspirations that hinted at later, more complete revelations. Ancient Greece had much wisdom, but had already been inspired, Christian and Jewish scholars claimed, by Moses.⁷ This 'war of the books' would lay the basis for the hegemony of Christianised educational institutions, the dominance of Latin in Western Europe, and the tools later on used by the institutions for governance during the Middle Ages: the cleric, lawyer and scribe, the monastery, university and chancellery.

In setting the context for these family feuds of faith, the obvious must be repeated. Jesus was a Jew,⁸ and none of the early apostles at first called themselves 'Christians'. Jesus and his followers were viewed by contemporaries as one sect within Judaism, and were sometimes identified as Galileans or Nazarenes, from the regional home of Jesus.⁹ They might more accurately be described as 'communities of the "New Covenant"', following the 'Spirit' rather than the letter of Jewish law.¹⁰ Even St Paul did not yet identify what he taught and believed in as 'Christianity': -

Thus, in terms of the history of religions, Paul's religion is not "Christianity" at all. He never uses that term; nor, indeed, does he use the adjective "Christian." Paul's religion is nothing other than a new, sectarian form of Second Temple Judaism. To be sure, Paul's writings and

⁶ FRYE, Richard N. *The Golden Age of Persia: Arabs in the East*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975, p22.

⁷ See HADAS, Moses *Hellenistic Culture: Fusion and Diffusion*, N.Y., Columbia Uni. Press, 1963. For the intellectual climate of such claims combining Hellenistic influences and counter-claims of Jewish priority that sought to make figures like Moses intelligible to Greek and Roman audiences, see GRABBE, Lester L. (ed.) *Did Moses Speak Attic? : Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001. Thus Hecataeus of Abdera views Moses almost as the traditional founder of a colony and thereby the founder of cult and political institutions, something Greeks could understand from their own founding of colonial cities, see ALBERTZ, Rainer "An End to the Confusion? Why the Old Testament Cannot Be a Hellenistic Book!", in GRABBE, Lester L. (ed.) *Did Moses Speak Attic? : Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, pp40-42. Josephus explains Moses as a religious legislator, see *Jewish Antiquities*, Book I.4 (18).

⁸ A fact well known by both pagan and Jewish converts to the teaching of Jesus and his followers, see EHRMAN, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, p144.

⁹ GRANT, Michael *The World of Rome*, N.Y., New American Library, 1987, p107; PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, pp87-88.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch *Epistle to the Magnesians*, Chapter XIII; PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p91, following 2 *Corinthians* 3:6.

the Pauline tradition did contribute much to the new religion of "Christianity" that eventually developed. The inventor of the term "Christianity," Ignatius of Antioch, heavily imbibed the writings of Paul, but in the process subjected the Pauline to an interpretation which would have been utterly foreign to the historical Paul.¹¹

'Christianity' is a description used anachronistically when speaking of the early first century. The term evolved from its usage in Antioch and was then Latinized: -

It is also at Antioch that the appellation "Christian" was first applied to the "messianist" followers of Jesus, presumably by outsiders (Acts 11:26). The word *Christianos* is a Latin (or Latinizing) word wherein "Christ" (*Christos* = Messiah) is construed as a proper name, probably in confusion with the rather common Greek name *Chrestos*.¹²

Once Christianity was spread among non-Christians, especially Greeks and Romans (Gentiles), the issue of self-identification would take on a new and forceful significance. For Ignatius of Antioch (died circa 107 CE), the main issue was the need to make a strong distinction between Judaism, and 'its replacement', Christianity.¹³ This significance was deepened once the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, and the second wave of the Jewish diaspora spread throughout the Roman world. Christianity found an existing network of synagogues in the empire, with a prepared audience among the hellenised Jews and 'god-fearing' friends who were not Jews.¹⁴ However, Christianity had to break away from both Judaism, with its ritual regulations, and also from an 'easy' syncretism and mixing with Hellenised saviour cults that flourished at this time (as found in the cults of Isis, Asclepius, and Sarapis, for example). On this basis, it is true to speak of early Christianity as 'polychromatic', with the terms 'orthodox' and 'Catholic' being useful if largely ahistorical' at this early stage.¹⁵ One such syncretistic trend is found in a 'sister' of Christianity: the loose body of religious thought called, for want of a better term, Gnosticism. It must be stressed, however, that among these different strands of thought and religion there was a great deal of diversity and 'mutual intolerance'.¹⁶

It is not surprising, then that one of the hotly debated problems for scholars over the last hundred years has been the nature of early Gnosticism and its relationship to Christianity.¹⁷

¹¹ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p92.

¹² Ibid., p88.

¹³ Ignatius of Antioch *Epistle to the Magnesians*, Chapters VIII & X; PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p103, footnote 48.

¹⁴ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, pp90-91.

¹⁵ A useful term used by Robert Wilken, in McKECHNIE, Paul "'Women's Religion' and Second-Century Christianity", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 no. 3, July 1996, pp409-432. See further see BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

¹⁶ ELM, Susanna "Review Article: Uncovering the Roots of Christian Origins", *Classical Philology*, 96 no. 3, Jul 2001, pp309-317.

¹⁷ There is a huge and growing industry on the subject. A small sample of early books on the topic includes JONAS, Hans *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd. ed, Boston, Beacon, 1963; BORSCH, Frederik H. *The Christian and Gnostic Son of Man*, Naperville, Allen Allenson, 1970; YAMAUCHI, Edwin *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Downers Grove Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1973; DART, John *The Laughing Saviour: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library*, N.Y., Harper, 1976; RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of*

Some scholars, e.g. A. Harnack, A.D. Nock, and Simone Petrement (who saw Gnosticism as essentially parasitic on Christianity),¹⁸ would argue that Gnosticism did not emerge until after Christianity appeared, and that Gnosticism was really a variant of essentially Christian ideas. Another stream of thought, originally proposed by W. Anz in 1897, but developed by Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein,¹⁹ argued that Gnosticism was an earlier and independent phenomena which later became part of a syncretic Christian Gnosticism. As we shall see, these issues revolve around the debate over whether some strands of gnostic thought were substantially independent of Christianity, and over the relationships that emerged between Gnosticism and Christianity as the later developed a more cohesive doctrine and institutional identity. Although a prior dating is hard to sustain, the 'History of Religions' approach has suggested that both Gnosticism and early Christianity evolved in the context of highly Hellenised religions of the eastern Mediterranean. Gnosticism emerged as a partly independent religion, based on the idea of a special knowledge that was more important than faith.²⁰ Gnosticism, in general, was inspired by both Hellenistic and Jewish thought which converged around the idea of saviour cults and the escape from an innately corrupt world.

The root meaning of Gnosticism derives from the term *Gnosis*, knowledge, but this knowledge is of a particular kind, involving self-knowledge as a path to god, and a liberating knowledge of the true nature of the cosmos.²¹ Based on 'a lived experience of spiritual regeneration', it 'is a transforming knowledge, whose immediate effect is salvation'.²² Helmut Koester argues that Gnosticism did not derive directly from Judaism, nor from Platonism or from Christianity alone.²³ He argues that Gnosticism took 'mythical concepts of wisdom, cosmology and astrology, dualism and Genesis interpretation, law and apocalypticism, God, demiurge, angels, demons, Satan', which are 'amalgamated into a new vision of the world and salvation'.²⁴ Gnosticism, however, does retain key features found in a large number of texts that were loosely linked with a particular world-view. As such, Gnosticism first evolved as a series of overlapping orientations among diverse social groups, rather than as a unified institution.

Gnosticism, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1977; CHURTON, Tobias *The Gnostics*, London, Widenfeld & Nicolson, 1987.

¹⁸ See YAMAUCHI, Edwin *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Downers Grove Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1973, p20; NOCK, A.D. *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (2 vols), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.

¹⁹ See REITZENSTEIN, Richard *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*, Pittsburg Theological Monograph Series 15, Pittsburg, Pickwick, 1978; BULTMANN, Rudolf *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. Fuller, London, Collins, 1962.

²⁰ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p81.

²¹ PAGELS, Elaine "Gnosis: Self-Knowledge as Knowledge of God" in *The Gnostic Gospels*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980, pp119-141; EHRMAN, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, p114.

²² FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p41.

²³ KOESTER, Helmut *Introduction to the New Testament: Vol I & 2*, N.Y., Walter de Gruyter, 1987, I, p384.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p386.

Double Dualism

Gnosticism is strongly dualistic.²⁵ It divides the world into two principles or powers which cannot be reduced to each other. This dualism operates in several ways. The first is a dualism between a good god and an evil power, either the devil or some other figure such as Belial. This second power is often viewed as the source of evil and corruption in the world. This sort of dualism is most strongly developed in the Manichees (originating in the 3rd and 4th Centuries CE), who were deemed as a threat to social order for both the Roman Empire and early Christianity.²⁶ This type of dualism is not an orthodox feature of Judaism, nor of early Christianity, which emphasise an all-powerful and omniscient God. In Judaism we sometimes hear of a tempter figure, of an adversary, and even of fallen angels. Yet these are not universal figures which take part in a cosmic struggle. The tension for Christianity in dualist systems was twofold. If it admitted another independent divine power, then it limited the omnipotence of God. If, on the other hand, God created this evil divinity, it placed responsibility for evil back onto the divine creator. The answer for Christianity was to view the 'Devil' as an inferior creature, an angel of light who had fallen into sin. For St Augustine, human evil was hinged on the issue of free will operating to mitigate the original sin of the Fall, where Adam and Eve committed their offspring to ejection from both innocence and Paradise.²⁷ Evil, for Augustine, was not a substance or thing, but the incorrect valuation of objects from the lower part of creation over the true good derived from God. Evil required no powerful counter-creator to explain its occurrence in the world.

The second, related form of dualism emphasized in Gnosticism is that between the spirit and the material world. The human spirit is held to be trapped in the heavy matter of an imperfect universe, and must seek to escape these material chains to return to a higher reality with the 'One' divine source, often expressed as the 'light'. This aspect of dualism involves a need to see beyond the physical and imperfect world. At its most extreme, this implied a rejection of creation and divine providence, and hinted at a creation which was not just imperfect but an evil prison enslaving the soul.

The ethical problem posed by these two dualist strands was sometimes solved by inventing a kind of abortive intervention in creation: the physical world with all its imperfections was not created by the One God, but by an inferior Demiurge (sometimes helped by fallen angels). This notion of the demiurge goes back to the dialogue *Timaeus* by Plato, but by the later Hellenistic period this conception was a commonplace in several philosophical and mythological systems, with reflections in Neo-Platonism, Hermetic literature and Gnosticism. In the *Corpus Hermeticum* we find the following cosmological chain: -

²⁵ See EHRMAN, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, pp199-120.

²⁶ Trenchant criticism is found the writings of St Augustine on the subject, see for example *On the Morals of the Manicheans* and other refutations, collected together in the database of Nicene and Post-Nicene writers on the Internet at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-04/TOC.htm#TopOfPage>

²⁷ Discussed in detail in St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, Books II & III.

Then Mind (or God), being bisexual, existing as life and light, generated by a word another Mind, as Demiurge. The latter, being god of fire and breath, created seven administrators, who in their orbits envelop the world of sense perception. Their administration is called Destiny.²⁸

In the extreme form of the argument, this demiurge is identified as the Evil One, or as evil authorities (ruling archons), who hold the world under strict control. The world is regarded as an imperfect creation imprisoning and deluding the spirit. At the best, the world is a piece of cosmic bungling, at worst a snare to entrap the soul.

These dualisms were extended to human nature, which in gnostic thought is held to be a manifold of several elements. Humans contain a divine spark or spirit (*pneuma*) that is always seeing to break free from the material world and return to its source, the 'Higher God'.²⁹ This is not the individual mind or *psyche*, and is distinct from the Stoic conception of the seed of *logos* (the universal, unifying principle of reason) in man.³⁰ The world of sensation and matter is not simply an alien world; it is actually a destructive creation which imprisons the true person. This spirit is the *pneuma*, a higher principle than that of the soul or body.³¹ There are numerous accounts, moreover, to explain how the spirit found itself trapped within the material creation. Most involve some kind of Fall. This Fall may be precipitated by temptation (the serpent, the apple of knowledge, the flawed Eve, an attractive reflection in the lower world), but thereby requires a redeeming agent to help humans rediscover their true nature and proper location in the universe.

Such entrapment requires the saving action of a 'Gnostic Redeemer' who awakens the true 'Self' or 'Spirit', helping it find its freedom and return to the One. The redeemer may be some type of Logos conception, although the notion of Sophia (Wisdom) takes on a strong role as well. Saviour figures are often identified with Jesus or John the Baptist, or at least a Redeemer figure from a higher world.³² Essentially, this Redeemer is the son of the supreme deity and is a heavenly figure of light. Since this true spirit had to be prepared for its ascent back to its source, this required the passing on of special knowledge to help this happen. The Gnostic Saviour comes to 'reunite the Gnostic with himself',³³ showing his true origins and awakening him to his true, higher nature. This process is found in many of the gnostic texts, and it is possible that ritual oral formula, sacraments, baptisms and sacred meals included

²⁸ *Corpus Hermeticum I. Poimandres* 4-9, lines 26-30, translated in BARRETT, C.K. *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, London, SPCK, 197 p96.

²⁹ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p42. See for example *On the Origin of the World*, 117.29-35, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p183. For the diverse nuances and usages of this term in the Greco-Roman and early Christian era, see LEVISON, John R. "The Pluriform Foundation of Christian Pneumatology", in HINZE, Bradford (ed.) *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2001, pp66-85.

³⁰ BAUMLIN, James S. "Reading Bloom (Or: Lessons Concerning the "Reformation" of the Western Literary Canon)", *College Literature*, 27 no. 3, Fall 2000, p27.

³¹ BULTMANN, Rudolf *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. Fuller, London, Collins, 1962, pp197-198.

³² *Ibid.*, pp194-195.

³³ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p106.

elements of *gnosis* symbolism.³⁴ The idea of a 'laughing Jesus' is also portrayed in some of these traditions, with laughter having a disruptive and critical function indicating that both his enemies and followers lack real knowledge.³⁵ Parallels from Mandaeen religion suggest that ritual meals and funeral customs could also be used to express elements of the gnostic world view.³⁶ At least among the Valentinians (founded in the second century CE) it seems that there was a 'ceremony if the bridal chamber' for married believers, celebrating the spiritual marriage of male and female, soul and spirit.³⁷

Gnosticism, moreover, involved a radical reversal of existing religious orientations, whether these values derived from Hellenism, Judaism or indeed early Christianity. This inversion of the sacred leads in three related directions. Firstly, it entails a radical contempt for the physical creation, and second, a dismissal of some religious regulations, as found in an increasingly institutionalised Christianity, as an even greater corruption. When this greater corruption is detected and rejected, there is a further change in attitude towards the body and the physical world. The third orientation was to insist that the saving *gnosis* could be experienced in this life, and did not need to be delayed into the afterlife or some future resurrection.³⁸ In this, Gnosticism emerges as a virulent counter-tradition that at various stages challenged Christian 'orthodoxy' as it gradually emerged through the second to fifth centuries: indeed, orthodoxy and heresy are mutually defined through their contrasts with each other.³⁹ However, claims of sexual indulgence and intentional sacrilege of existing religious symbols need to be treated with caution, since these accounts mainly derive from sources deeply hostile to such independent movements, i.e. those seeking, and naturally finding, heresy (see further below).

The French poet Jacques Lacarriere gives us a modern reinterpretation of this gnostic horror at the world: -

The world in which we live is not only opaque, heavy and given over to death, but it is above all a world born of a monumental machination; a world that was not foreseen, not desired, flawed in all its parts; a world in which every thing, every being, is the result of a cosmic misunderstanding. In this whirlpool of errors, this universal shipwreck which is the history of

³⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. Fuller, London, Collins, 1962, p202; BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p141, p179. For parallels in Hermetic thought, see the ritual elements implied in *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp328-329. For disputes over the value of baptism by water, see *The Paraphrase of Shem VII*, 1, 30.20-35 in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p354.

³⁵ NEL, Marius J. "He Who Laughs Last – Jesus and Laughter in the Synoptic and Gnostic Traditions", *HTS Theological Studies*, 70 no. 1, 2014, pp1-8.

³⁶ See BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, pp34-36.

³⁷ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp180-182. For other parallels between religious mystery and sexual union, see the Hermetic text of *Asclepius* 21-29 (65.15-37), translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp330-332. In general terms Gnostic and Valentinian circles often allowed a role for women in religious study, BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp62-63.

³⁸ BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, p220.

³⁹ HILL, Jonathan *Christianity: The First 400 Years*, Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2013, p174,

matter and of man, we on earth are rather like survivors condemned to eternal solitude, planetary detainees who are the victims of injustice on a truly cosmic scale. Stars, ether, aeons, planets, earth, life, flesh, inanimate matter, psyche - all are implicated, dragged into this universal disgrace.

Fortunately, the gaps, the perforations which shine in the celestial wall of our prison show that a possible way of escape exists. In the star-studded night, the Gnostic knows that not all contact with the higher circles is irremediably lost, and that perhaps he can conquer his fate, break the ancient curse which made the world a cheat and a sham, and cast us down, far from the sparkle and the blazing illumination of the hyper-world, down into the gloomy circle in which we live, this 'circle of dark fire'.⁴⁰

The gnostic orientation was at first known to us from the writings of its Christian opponents, especially Justin (whose mid-second century work the *Syntagma* or *Compendium Against All Heresies* is lost in the original), Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons, circa 130-202 CE, who wrote the 'Exposure and Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So-Called' (with the Latin title *Adversus haereses*) and Hippolytus (died circa 235 AD), author of the *Refutation of All Heresies*.⁴¹ These alternative viewpoints on salvation came to be regarded as erroneous or heretical by what gradually triumphed as mainstream Christianity. Hence many of the views of gnostics only survived in the distorting accounts of their opponents.

One of the clearest earliest mentions of an apparent gnostic is the figure of Simon Magus in Samaria, described in *Acts* 8:9-25. He is represented as a powerful magician, with the notable title of 'Great Power'.⁴² In the account presented in the New Testament, he was impressed by the apostle Philip, and Simon Magus was himself baptised. However, when he saw that Peter also imparted the power of the Holy Spirit, he offered money for this laying on of the hands. Peter thus regarded Simon's heart as warped and trapped in sin.⁴³ Now, this Simon might have been no more than another impressive magician-cum-charlatan. However, by the second century he is regarded as the first great heretic and the founder of a dualistic Gnosticism which sees the world being ruled by competing angels, as outlined in the writings of Irenaeus.⁴⁴ These later stories may be partly legendary, and probably ascribe later trends back onto this figure.⁴⁵ However, it is interesting to see that Gnosticism here is equated with a powerful magician who is ready to appropriate the power of the early apostles. It is possible that both he, and his successor Menander (probably active in Antioch), were in reality non-Christian gnostic prophets whose views seemed to infringe upon the salvation-rhetoric used by Peter and his followers.⁴⁶ By the second century Simon was part of a narrative in which he

⁴⁰ LACARRIERE, Jacques *The Gnostics*, trans. Nina Rootes, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1989, p20.

⁴¹ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp1-4.

⁴² *Acts* 8:10; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p148.

⁴³ For the later use made of Simon Magus made by medieval Christianity in an attack on Islam as a heresy, see FERREIRO, Alberto, "Simon Magus, Nicolas of Antioch, and Muhammad", *Church History*, 72, no. 1, March 2003, pp53-71.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* I.23:1-4; PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p98.

⁴⁵ HARVEY, A.E. *The New English Bible Companion to the New Testament*, Cambridge, CUP, 1970, pp428-429.

⁴⁶ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p99; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp157-158.

emerges as Peter's counterpart and 'enemy *par excellence*', including contests of miracles in which Simon eventually fails, breaking his leg rather than flying from a height.⁴⁷

We can see a further example of this Christian criticism of gnostic trends in *2 Timothy*, 2:16-18. Two teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, are held to be spreading a 'gangrenous' doctrine when they say that the resurrection had already taken place. The implications of such a doctrine are pernicious for Christian ethics: they imply that the world of evil is past and that humans are free from the chains of sin. This would end the need for baptism, repentance, and in its most extreme form suggests that the spirit cannot be polluted by the actions of the (resurrected) body. To some this implied a sexual and behavioural freedom that was abhorrent to the early Church. This idea of the resurrection as a current reality is advocated by one of the main gnostic texts, *The Treatise on the Resurrection* from the Nag Hammadi library, though in the somewhat different form of a spiritual resurrection that had already occurred for those who have understood the nature of death, suggesting that this idea was one strand of thought that had currency before it was rejected as heretical.⁴⁸ Likewise, the *Gospel of Philip* suggests that spiritual resurrection is needed while people are still alive.⁴⁹ Some of these ideas seem to have been current during the late first and early second century CE, if not earlier. From the point of view of the main disciples of the early church, these doctrines were being promoted by false teachers who led people into fruitless and dangerous speculations.⁵⁰ We can further explore some of these 'dangerous doctrines' by briefly examining a few of the leading gnostic writings in some parallel traditions.

A wide scattering of gnostic-influenced texts can be found in several key collections of documents. The Egyptian Hermetic texts of the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, called the *Corpus Hermeticum*, are wisdom texts ascribed to the God Hermes Trismegistos, i.e. Hermes 'Thrice Greatest'.⁵¹ These texts show some strong parallels to early Gnosticism in their orientation towards knowledge and revelation as the source of redemption. One of these is the famous Poimandres document, a dream interpretation meditating on the order of the world. These documents are largely gnostic in tone, though of a particularly syncretic and philosophical type.⁵² The *Primal Man* concept found in this document certainly relates to the celestial origin of man's spirit in other gnostic texts. Richard Reitzenstein claimed that this teaching was borrowed from the Persian *Avesta* texts, which has Gayomart (or Gayomard) as a primal

⁴⁷ (*Apocryphal*) *Acts of Peter* XXVIII- XXXII, translated in JAMES, M.R. *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924 [<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspeter.html>]; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p151.

⁴⁸ *The Treatise on the Resurrection* I, 4, 15-20. See the comments by the translator Malcolm Peel in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp52-53.

⁴⁹ *The Gospel of Philip*, II, 3, 73.1-9, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p153.

⁵⁰ *2 Timothy*, 2:14-18, 22-26.

⁵¹ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p8.

⁵² FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p8.

man, who in turn finds reflection in the figure of the Son of Man in the Gospels.⁵³ Scholastic consensus has largely turned against Reitzenstein, though the parallels he outlines are suggestive and repeat in later Manichaean thought.⁵⁴ What is more certain, however, is that the status of the created world was still under intense debate. Some of the Hermetic documents seem to engage in controversy with certain (simplified) gnostic positions.⁵⁵ In particular, the demiurge and his creation, though it must be transcended, are not necessarily viewed as being evil, nor as an intentional enslavement. Hermetic thought, then, is a related body of doctrine, but has not moved full-circle into total denial of the value of the fallen world.

The second set of key documents illustrating gnostic thought derive from the Nag Hammadi 'library'.⁵⁶ These were found buried on the desert fringe of the Nile, stored or hidden in a jar, a method commonly used to preserve texts in Egypt, and also used to preserve the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵⁷ The Nag Hammadi collection comprises numerous texts, many of which had either been unknown, or little known, prior to the discovery of the corpus. They are written in Coptic, but were probably originally translated from older Greek texts of the second or third centuries.⁵⁸ It is uncertain as to exactly why these documents were collected together, nor why they were hidden. However, they were found not far from early Christian monasteries, and it is possible these texts were concealed as heretical documents sometime in the late fourth century, when theological disputes were raging in Alexandria and within the Egyptian church.⁵⁹ In 367 CE the Archbishop Athanasius wrote an Easter letter condemning heretics and invented books which claimed saintly authority (Athanasius *Letter XXXIX*). Theodore, the head of the Pachomian monastery in this region, had Athanasius' letter translated and deposited it in the monastery as part of the rule regulating the life of the monks.⁶⁰ One group of these Nag Hammadi documents seem to be basically independent of Christian thought. A mythical figure, Seth (a son of Adam who received revelations from him), is the centre of many of them, and these 'Sethian' texts may span the transition from non-Christian to Christian Gnosticism.⁶¹

The Nag Hammadi texts are of varied nature. Tracts with little or no discernible Christian elements include *The Three Steles of Seth*, *Allogenes*, *Marsanes*, *The Thought of Norea* and

⁵³ See REITZENSTEIN, Richard *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*, Pittsburg Theological Monograph Series 15, Pittsburg, Pickwick, 1978, p524; YAMAUCHI, Edwin *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Downers Grove Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1973, p23.

⁵⁴ See for example BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p14; FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p11.

⁵⁵ KOESTER, Helmut *Introduction to the New Testament: Vol I & 2*, N.Y., Walter de Gruyter, 1987, I, p389.

⁵⁶ See INSTITUTE FOR ANTIQUITY & CHRISTIANITY *The Coptic Gnostic Library (15 vols.)*, Leiden, Nag Hammadi Studies, 1975 (onwards).

⁵⁷ ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p20.

⁵⁸ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p18.

⁵⁹ ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p16. For this context, see BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

⁶⁰ ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p19.

⁶¹ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p97; ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p8.

On the Origin of the World.⁶² Others display only a limited amount of Christian influence; *Zostrianus*, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, *On the Origin of the World*. Within many of these documents there is a challenge to the dominant masculine imagery of the Father and Son as found in developed Christianity. The personified conceptions of *Pistis* (Faith), *Sophia* (Wisdom), *Ennoia* (Understanding), *Norea* (a gnostic heroine identified as the 'spiritual daughter of Eve'), and *Zoe* (Life), generally identified as female principles, are important in these documents.⁶³ On occasion *Sophia* is described the daughter of, or flowing out of, *Pistis*.⁶⁴ Likewise, in the *Exegesis of the Soul* we are told that that: "Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name. Indeed, she is female in her nature as well. She even has a womb. As long as she was alone with the father, she was virgin and in form androgynous".⁶⁵

Women and the Female Principle

These female elements are an important aspect of Gnosticism, allowing some relief from the dominant view of women as imperfect tempters, a view only partially moderated by the later emergence of Mary as a powerful element within Christian piety. In some strands of gnostic thought God is in fact 'Anthropos, Man/Human, or rather the archetypal Androgyne',⁶⁶ with a strong emphasis on combined male and female elements possessed by various Wisdom and divine figures. There is also a 'tragic epic' element to the view of these female beings, with many of them 'subject to loss, pain, humiliation and limits'⁶⁷ because of their fall into the lower world. *Sophia* thus combined inherent fault, in being tempted to enter into the world and engaging in abortive creations, with 'exorbitant power'.⁶⁸ Another text found in the Nag Hammadi collection, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, is a powerful revelatory 'discourse' by an unidentified female figure. It parallels certain gnostic concerns, though it is not always viewed as a gnostic text as such.⁶⁹ It combines negative and positive female imaginary with

⁶² For some of the lines of reasoning, see Hans-Gebhard Bethge in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p170.

⁶³ *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, II, 4, 91-95, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p166; McKECHNIE, Paul "'Women's Religion' and Second-Century Christianity", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 no. 3, July 1996, pp409-432; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p96.

⁶⁴ See *On the Origins of the World*, II.5, 98.10-20, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p172; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp73-74.

⁶⁵ In GALAMBOS, Michaela "Christian Gnosticism: The Road Not Taken", *Gay & Lesbian Review World Wide*, 9 no. 4, July-August 2002, p21, following *The Exegesis of the Soul*, II, 127.18-25, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p192. For the special and high status of virgins dedicated to a religious life in early Christianity, see BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p18.

⁶⁶ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p58, p61. In another text we are told that 'the Father is ungendered', *The Gospel of Truth*, XII, 2, 30-35, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p49.

⁶⁷ MORTLEY, Raoul *Womanhood: The Feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism, Christianity and Islam*, Sydney, Delacroix, 1981, p55, following Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* I.23.2.

⁶⁸ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p38.

⁶⁹ See the cautionary statements by George MacRae and Douglas Parrott in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp295-296, as well as WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking*

the warning: 'Do not be ignorant of me.'⁷⁰ In the most extreme case, found in the Nag Hammadi text known as *On The Origin of the World*, Eve is viewed as a wise being who has been trapped in the world, with the demiurge's evil archangels seeking to rape her in order to defile and pollute her.⁷¹

However, we must be careful to avoid constructing stereotypes of Judaism and Christianity as entirely patriarchal religions, with all gnostic and reform groups being liberators of women, a view which can only be sustained by severe distortion of the evidence.⁷² Likewise, though it is possible to see a liberating concept in the notion of androgyny as found in some gnostic texts, e.g. the *Gospel of the Egyptians*,⁷³ it is unwise to read this as a generalised path towards gay and lesbian values in the religious sense. Some of these accounts do indeed 'subvert gender' roles and stereotypes, with Epiphanius reporting in detail on same-gender sexual acts by high rank gnostic 'Levites' and Hippolytus of Rome claiming that the Naassenes (an early Christian gnostic sect) viewed heterosexuality as wicked.⁷⁴

However, many strands of Gnosticism were rather ascetic in orientation, and in some cases they 'use the term "virginal" as a laudatory adjective and seem to take a dim view of sexual intercourse'.⁷⁵ In cases where extreme libertinism is reported we have to be careful in accepting the stories recounted by Christian enemies.⁷⁶ Of gnostics known to us, only a few such as Prodicus (late second century CE) and possibly the second century Marcus the magician probably embraced a libertine sexual life, in the latter case by taking 'the symbolism of spiritual matrimony in a quite literal way'.⁷⁷ In the fourth century, Epiphanius reported sexual seduction ('obscene acts') as part of a cult of gnostics in Egypt pretending to be

"Gnosticism": *An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p42.

⁷⁰ See *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, VI, 13.1-16, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p297.

⁷¹ *On the Origin of the World* 116,8-117-15; BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, p241.

⁷² For cautions in this area, see KRAY, Susan "'New Mode of Feminist Historical Analysis' - Or Just Another Collusion With 'Patriarchal' Bias?", *Shofar*, 20 no. 3, Spring 2002, pp66-92; McKECHNIE, Paul "'Women's Religion' and Second-Century Christianity", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 no. 3, July 1996, pp409-432.

⁷³ See GALAMBOS, Michaela "Christian Gnosticism: The Road Not Taken", *Gay & Lesbian Review World Wide*, 9 no. 4, July-August 2002, pp19-21.

⁷⁴ CAHANA, Jonathan "Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 41 no. 1, 2011, pp24-35.

⁷⁵ BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p19; see further McKECHNIE, Paul "'Women's Religion' and Second-Century Christianity", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 no. 3, July 1996, pp409-432; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p8.

⁷⁶ For the most sweeping rejection of such evidence as in almost all cases as 'suspect', see WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp164-165.

⁷⁷ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp168-169. For an alternative view of Marcus as proposing a sacralisation of the bridal chamber, see WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p175.

Christians (ninety of them were excommunicated), but once again, this may be a report coloured by anti-heretical propaganda.⁷⁸

Divergent views of the female 'principle' are found within different gnostic texts. Jorunn Buckley has identified at least three types: cases where the female is the middle or lowest element within a tripartite divine mythology; 'the female as a stage to be transcended'; and 'the female possessing a lower and higher self'.⁷⁹ These categories do enhance the valuation of the female principle, but few of them converge on political equality for women and men per se. It is the liberation of the divine understanding in humans, activating both male and female gnosis figures, that is at stake.

Roles within the early Christian Church were divided on a gendered basis - in this world the subordination of women seemed ordained by divine providence. At the very least there was an 'attempt to regulate and seclude active and independent women', a trend which gained strength through the fourth century.⁸⁰ On this reasoning, "Christlikeness and Marylikeness are split to exalt women's spiritual receptivity but deny them sacramental agency as representatives of Christ."⁸¹ It is not surprising then, that some contemporary writers such as Elaine Pagels and Mary Daly see Gnosticism as an attractive alternative to Christianity.⁸² There were indeed some signs in the Hellenistic age of the widening and breaching of traditional roles for elite women, especially in the public sphere, though this was often the target of criticism or satire in male writers during the Hellenistic and early Roman Empire.⁸³ Likewise, women had taken on prominent roles in the spread of the early Christian Church. As patronesses, widows and oracles, they took on a social power that soon led to tensions as to the proper conduct of women in these emerging communities.⁸⁴ In the case of the gnostic communities, there probably was some freeing of limits on their behaviour: "It is true however that our sources do seem to speak in general terms of the freedom of women within the Gnostic churches, and so we must suppose it to be a fairly general phenomenon, spreading across the various sects."⁸⁵ At least according to Tertullian's criticisms, women were allowed 'to teach, to dispute, to exorcize, to promise cures, even perhaps to baptize', thereby implying the ordination of women in some gnostic communities.⁸⁶ In the movement founded by Montanus (mid to early 2nd century CE), two women (Maximilla and Priscilla)

⁷⁸ Epiphanius of Salamis *The Paranarion* 2:5, 26 & 17:4; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p183.

⁷⁹ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p127.

⁸⁰ BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p23, discussing Athanasius' policies in Egypt.

⁸¹ RUETHER, Rosemary "Gender and Redemption in Christian Theological History", *Feminist Theology, Issue 21*, May 1999, p106.

⁸² For a critique, see McKECHNIE, Paul "'Women's Religion' and Second-Century Christianity", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 no. 3, July 1996, pp409-432.

⁸³ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p35.

⁸⁴ MORTLEY, Raoul *Womanhood: The Feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism, Christianity and Islam*, Sydney, Delacroix, 1981, pp46-47.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p61.

⁸⁶ Tertullian *De praescriptiones* 41.2-6, cited in FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p172.

issued ecstatic statements that were taken as divine prophecies: one of these even had a 'vision of Christ in female form'.⁸⁷

Moreover, some early Christian and gnostic groups literally accepted that in Christ there 'is no more male and female', leading to the view that once baptised that there should be no further 'gender hierarchy'.⁸⁸ The *Gospel of Thomas* discusses gender as one dualism to be transcended: -

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside, and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female the one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness, then will you enter [the kingdom]."⁸⁹

The cautions in *1 Timothy* on young widows remarrying were based on women's subordination to men as punishment for the temptation of Eve. It was probably a reaction to specific Christian and gnostic trends that would free women from traditional societal limitations. Some gnostic groups had egalitarian trends focused on religious transformations, with all members brothers and sisters heading towards a shared spiritual salvation. In this setting is it not shocking that Mary Magdalene can come to be viewed as an important companion to Jesus, almost equal to the apostles, as indicated in gnostic texts such as the *Pistis Sophia* and *Gospel of Philip*.⁹⁰ As argued by Rosemary Ruether: -

But this argument in Timothy was itself posed over against communities of radical Christians who continued an alternative early Christian view that gender hierarchy was already dissolved in redemption. For these Christians conversion means entering into a new status of spiritual equality, expressed in renunciation of marriage and sexuality for the virginal state. Spiritual equality restored in Christ not only anticipates the heavenly redeemed state in which there will be no more marrying and giving in marriage, but is expressed here and now in the empowering of women to leave subordination in the family, travel as itinerant preachers, prophesy and heal as charismatic leaders of the church.⁹¹

In some cases equality is achieved by the women becoming 'as men', e.g. in the *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus leads Mary Magdalene 'in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males'.⁹² The exact meaning of this transformation is uncertain, but suggests that the limitations of gender can be transcended. Even if the female state is not always valued as such, it is no longer a bar to gnosis and entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁸⁷ HILL, Jonathan *Christianity: The First 400 Years*, Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2013, p179.

⁸⁸ *Galatians* 3:27-28; RUETHER, Rosemary "Gender and Redemption in Christian Theological History", *Feminist Theology, Issue 21*, May 1999, p99; MORTLEY, Raoul *Womanhood: The Feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism, Christianity and Islam*, Sydney, Delacroix, 1981, p50.

⁸⁹ *Gospel of Thomas* 37.24-36, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p129.

⁹⁰ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p176.

⁹¹ RUETHER, Rosemary "Gender and Redemption in Christian Theological History", *Feminist Theology, Issue 21*, May 1999, p100.

⁹² *Gospel of Thomas* 51.20-25, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p138; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p177.

Parallels for active women in religious communities can be found in the Middle East from the third century CE onwards. The Mandaeans were a 'Baptist' sect with strong gnostic features, with the term *Manda* meaning 'knowledge'.⁹³ It is now clear that women were found not just as copyists of religious texts, but on occasion were also priestesses. Based on reports from Mandaeans living today, who had heard of women in the last century who had been priestesses, from injunctions in their religious texts warning of problems with female priests, and a more literal translation of the term *tarmidata*, indicating female priests and not the theoretically interpolated 'women of priestly family', Jorunn Buckley has identified some thirty 'women priests' in Mandaeanism, ranging from the third century CE down to the 19th century.⁹⁴ These roles are supported by a mythical type found in Mandaean tradition of Miriai, mother of Jesus: -

One might add as possible evidence for the existence of female priests the intriguing tradition of Miriai, Jesus' mother and a Mandaean female community-consolidating figure, who rescued the Mandaeans from persecution in Jerusalem and became the focal point for the community in the East. In JB's [*Book of John*] central story about Miriai, she is portrayed as a majestic leader of the people and, most strikingly, in the role of a priest. But since this presumably quite late text is mythological and legendary, it is exceedingly difficult to discern what sort of historical kernel lies hidden behind the Miriai stories. Still, if there is a historical nugget in the Miriai traditions, one might consider the possibility that the Mandaean tolerance for women as community leaders might have contributed to the hostile climate within sectarian Judaism/Gnosticism in the earliest years of Mandaean religion. For other forms of Judaism may not have been so willing to accept women priests. If the issue of women priests indeed forms part of the "Miriai-as-leader-of-the-people" emigration legend, a more secure historical footing may be found.⁹⁵

In general, Mandaean religion had 'a clearly positive view of women, earthly life, and marriage', a trend that continued into the modern period.⁹⁶ These trends do not provide direct evidence about early gnostic churches, but do indicate that a greater diversity of social practice existed in the ancient Middle East than might be allowed for by a patriarchal reading of the origins of Christianity, perhaps already influenced by the negative strictures on woman that were reinforced later on in the antique and medieval periods.

Equalising views of gender could not be sustained in the early Church, and formed one of the reasons for the rejection and suppression of those trends in some gnostic traditions. Based on Adam-Christ verses Eve-Mary typologies, on the generally inferior status of women in existing Jewish, Hellenistic and Roman societies, and on specific interpretations of scripture, women came to be viewed as inferior creatures in need of the protection (inverted domination) and mediation of men.⁹⁷ The image of the woman as something more than an

⁹³ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p9; BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p20.

⁹⁴ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. "The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaeanism", *JNES*, 59 no. 2, 2000, pp93-106.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p105. Brackets added.

⁹⁶ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p23.

⁹⁷ See in detail PETROU, Ioannis "The Question of Women in Church Tradition", *Anglican Theological Review*, 84 no. 3, 2002, pp645-660.

inferior creation would gradually evolve to haunt the Christian imagination, resulting in complex debates about the status of virginity, chastity, widowhood, the place of nuns and female ordination in the Christian world view.⁹⁸ The popularity of the cult of Mary came to be something more than the celebration of a unique exception, hinting at a submerged celebration of the feminine. By the Middle Ages, female mystics including Hildegard of Bingen (12th century) and Mechtild of Magdeburg (13th century), who would once again see some aspects of God as female.⁹⁹ In 1509 Agrippa von Nettesheim could write his *Female Preeminence*, developing an incipient 'feminist paradigm' based in part on Jewish Kabbalism.¹⁰⁰

However, such views could not be sustained in the early 16th century, and this agenda would only begin to find a place in public life with the reform movements of the 19th century. This was not just a debate on the repression of ideas concerning women, but about the roles they could occupy in society, and the discovery of a 'repressed plurality of identities'¹⁰¹ that was systematically denied all but a few exceptional women. It is not surprising that a burst of new scholarship has found recovered gnostic texts as one way of challenging the primacy of patriarchy in the early, and current, Christian worlds. They open a new light onto traditions that were diverse, controversial, and radical.¹⁰²

Ascent of the Fallen

What remains revolutionary about Gnosticism is the idea of awakening from cosmic slavery to a personal freedom based on direct knowledge. In *On the Origin of the World*, we can see how even Jesus can be radically re-envisioned as an inferior version of the true gnostic Saviour (Christ). This document also speaks not just of a tree of life, but also of a 'tree of acquaintance', that is a tree of *gnosis*. It says that this tree 'is to the north of Paradise so that it might arouse the souls from the torpor of the demons, in order that they might approach the tree of life and eat of its fruit and so condemn the authorities and their angels'.¹⁰³ In other words, to wake up the soul from the oppression of the false gods, it is necessary to eat from the tree of knowledge to re-find immortality. Furthermore, in this story there is a high form of Eve, daughter of Sophia, who is sent to instruct Adam. The authorities (these are the archons who control the lower world) plot against her, and convince Adam, by putting him into a deep sleep, that she comes from his rib in order that he might be lord over her (section 116).

⁹⁸ For some of these debates, see RICHES, Samantha (ed.) *Gender and Holiness : Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, London, Routledge, 2002; BROWN, Peter *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1988; BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp11-79. Note especially Athanasius *On Virginity*, translated in BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp303-309.

⁹⁹ RUETHER, Rosemary "Gender and Redemption in Christian Theological History", *Feminist Theology*, Issue 21, May 1999, p102.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p102.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p108.

¹⁰² PAGELS, Elaine "What Became of God the Mother?: Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity", *Signs*, 2 no. 2, 1976, pp 293-303; TIERNEY, Helen (ed.) *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 1999, pp596-598.

¹⁰³ *On the Origin of the World* 110, line 25.

From this point of view, the standard account in *Genesis* is largely the lying propaganda of the false 'authorities'. These authorities are said to have the form of beasts (119, 15-20), and they are cast down by Sophia to become the evil *daimones* (powers or demons) upon the earth (121, 35).¹⁰⁴ The *Logos* is sent to make all this known, and in the end everyone will go back to the place from which he has come. The end closes with the lines: 'Indeed, by his acts and his acquaintance each person will make his nature known.' (127, 15-18). In other words, a person's real nature is known by his life acts and his knowledge, not by adhering to a predefined pattern of belief which provides them automatic salvation. This *Logos* is again Christ but is understood in a very different way to the suffering Jesus.

A few of the Nag Hammadi texts contain fully developed versions of a more Christian Gnosis: *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Melchizedek*, and *The Apocryphon*.¹⁰⁵ However, these conceptions are rather strange compared to New Testament texts. For example, in *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (*hypostatis* means that which is set under, or that which has substance or reality, hence Marvin Meyer translates this title as 'The Nature of the Rulers'), we find the conception of a group of ancient powers who were blind to the true incorruptible Father.¹⁰⁶ These beings helped model the physical world and created the body and soul of Adam and Eve, but not their spirits, which came from the true incorruptible God. Now in this legend of creation, it is these archons who forbid man to eat of the tree of knowledge, and the snake is an Instructor figure, imbued with the female spiritual principle. It is the archons who cause the subsequent suffering of humans, and from whom they must liberate themselves. The rule of the archons will continue until a true human within a 'modelled form' reveals the existence of the Truth, sent by the father.¹⁰⁷ In this legend too, a female principle called Sophia, wisdom, is one of the key motifs. In other Gnostic traditions we are told that the archons seek to punish Adam who is potentially their 'superior' in wisdom and intelligence, but who needs help to 'awaken' to see the nature of his fall and the 'way of ascent'.¹⁰⁸ Other Christian doctrines would also be directly challenged. In the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, for example, the idea is put forward that those who know the truth have already been resurrected. This resurrection involves a separation of the higher elements from the visible, perishable members of the body, i.e. in this case a physical resurrection in a body as such is disputed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ For the gradual emergence of a negative view of the *daimones* as negative demons in Hellenistic thought, see FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp29-30.

¹⁰⁵ See Birga A. Pearson in MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, N.Y, Harper One, 2007, p595.

¹⁰⁶ MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, N.Y, Harper One, 2007, pp186.

¹⁰⁷ *The Hypostasis of the Archons* 96. See the translation by Marvin Meyer, entitled 'The Nature of the Rulers', in MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, N.Y, Harper One, 2007, pp187-202.

¹⁰⁸ *The Apocryphon of John* 20, 1-5; BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p50.

¹⁰⁹ *The Treatise on the Resurrection* (I, 4), in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p52. For other 'envy' themes, see *The Gospel of Philip*, II, 3, 70.30-34, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p152.

Knowing Jesus, The Twin, and the Father

There are other documents which directly reflect a Jesus tradition, e.g. the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Truth*, but with important variations. The *Gospel of Thomas*, probably derived from a second century Egyptian Greek text, paraphrases many sayings known from the New Testament.¹¹⁰ The Thomas referred to is the brother of Jesus, called Didymos Judas Thomas in the text. The Aramaic *thomas* and Greek *didymos* mean 'the twin'.¹¹¹ Aside from sayings found in the New Testament, it contains other sayings not familiar to us from canonical sources, such as: -

"Jesus said, "He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become that person, and hidden things will be revealed to that person." (*Gospel of Thomas* 108)¹¹²

There is also a philosophical point in the choice of the twin of Jesus: as a twin, knowledge of the self would thereby provide automatic gnosis, as implied in a different work, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*.¹¹³ This is made explicit in the following statements attributed to Jesus: -

Now since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself and learn who you are, in what way you exist, and how you will come to be. Since you will be called my brother it is not fitting that you be ignorant of yourself. And I know that you have understood because you had already understood that I am the knowledge of the truth. So while you accompany me, although you are uncomprehending, you have (in fact) already come to know, and you will be called 'the one who knows himself.' For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all. So then, you, my brother Thomas, have beheld what is obscure to me, that is, what they ignorantly stumble against.¹¹⁴

The status of the *Gospel of Thomas* and related texts reflect part of a longer debate about the message of Jesus, and the degree to which his genuine words may have been transmitted or distorted in the New Testament and other sources. According to scholarly analysis, there may have been one underlying source for some of the oral traditions about Jesus (identified as Q, short for Quelle or 'source' in German). In theory this provided the basis for the fragments of the tradition that made their way into the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke.¹¹⁵ What is surprising is that the actual verbal formula that seem to go directly back to Jesus form a very short, and potentially controversial, corpus.¹¹⁶ Our current four gospels focus more on the

¹¹⁰ KOESTER, Helmut "Introduction to 'The Gospel of Thomas (II, 2)', in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p124; FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p17.

¹¹¹ KOESTER, Helmut "Introduction to 'The Gospel of Thomas (II, 2)', in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p124.

¹¹² Translated in MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, N.Y, Harper One, 2007, p152.

¹¹³ See the comments by John D. Turner in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp199-200.

¹¹⁴ *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, II, 138.8-21, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p201.

¹¹⁵ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p83. See further Helmut Koester's comments in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp124-125.

¹¹⁶ See JEREMIAS, Joachim *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London, SCM Press, 1973.

life, passion, and proclamation of the good news as 'the message', rather than on the words that Jesus spoke or any formal doctrine he may have wished to proclaim. There are, moreover, differences between this Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*, with the later closer to what we would expect from the transcription of an oral tradition.¹¹⁷ Q seems to be more attuned to a didactic purpose within the early communities, relating to the then current notion that a body of law or instructions is needed to inform and regulate behaviour (in Judaism, this is the idea of *halakah*): -

Q contains, for the most part, teachings attributed to Jesus, and those teachings clearly have a halakic purpose in community life since they provide instructions as to how members of the community are to behave vis-a-vis God and their neighbors, in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God and the renewal of Israel. Q, in fact, presupposes the story of Jesus, and can hardly have existed without such a story.¹¹⁸

In partial contrast, *Gospel of Truth* proclaims an open, exploratory form of Christian gnosis. This may be the same 'Gospel of Truth' mentioned in Irenaeus' book *Adverses Haereses* (III.11.9). If so it dates to before the middle of the second century CE. One can get an idea of its tone by the following passage: -

The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him, through the power of the Word that came forth from the plethora, the one who is in the thought and the mind of the Father, that is, the one who is addressed as the Saviour, that being the name of the work he is to perform for the redemption of those who were ignorant of the Father, while in the name of the gospel is proclamation of hope, being discovery for those who search for him.¹¹⁹

We see these themes already widely discussed in Hellenistic religions, especially the emphasis on the *Logos* and The Saviour. By the late Hellenistic period these conceptions had been linked, with the *logos* in a general sense being 'word-discourse, the principle of order, rationality and programming of the divine plan', and taking on the sense of divine 'incarnation' in Christian thought.¹²⁰

Gnostics, moreover, add a strong emphasis on the special role of knowing the Father. The *Gospel of Truth* continues: -

When the totality went about searching for the one from whom they had come forth - and the totality was inside of him, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thought - ignorance of the father brought about anguish and terror; and the anguish grew solid like a fog, so that no one was able to see. For this reason error became powerful; it worked on its own matter foolishly, not having known the truth. It set about with a creation preparing with power and beauty the substitute for truth.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ See PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, pp81-106.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p87.

¹¹⁹ *The Gospel of Truth*, I.16.31; Translated by Harold Attridge and George MacRae in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988.

¹²⁰ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p26.

¹²¹ *The Gospel of Truth*, I.17.5-20, Translated by Harold Attridge and George MacRae in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988.

Here, once again, we see ignorant forces helping in the creation of the material world, trying to re-create a truth which they themselves had lost.

We have one example from the Nag Hammadi collection of the apparent Christianising of a text.¹²² *Eugnostos the Blessed* (a non-Christian philosophical work) is fragmented and put into the mouth of Jesus, appearing then as a separate text in *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*.¹²³ Both works are found in Codex III of the Nag Hammadi corpus. These two texts are very closely related, with the assumption being made that the shorter text is the earlier. Certainly, the gnostic text would fit into the philosophical world-view of first century BCE Egypt, where astrological, magical, alchemical, and philosophical elements easily combine.¹²⁴ The Christianised version would then be an attempt at propagating an early gnostic Christianity.

Interaction, Hostility and Exclusion

There were several types of interaction between an evolving Christianity and early Gnosticism. A borrowing from earlier Essene, Qumranic, and Hermetic thought strengthened existing trends in Christian thought, especially as found in the Christ-as-Logos conception of the *Gospel of John*, and the recognition that inspired learning could strengthen faith, as implied in many of the letters of Paul. Furthermore, the dialectic of the early church was based on the earlier synthesis of Greek philosophy and Jewish conceptions, pointing in the direction of a deep re-interpretative of scripture by analogical reasoning to show several levels of meaning in Biblical texts and the life-story of Jesus of Nazareth. Philo of Alexandria is only one strong example of this trend of using sophisticated allegory to unlock the deeper meaning of scripture.

The search for a deeper gnosis was accepted in the thought of Christians such as Clement and Origen, but did not replace faith, nor an emphasis on a core of inspired books that would form the New Testament.¹²⁵ In part this was a reflection of the vigorous debate between Hellenistic and Christian thought in Alexandria, and the generation of new Christian literatures that substituted for, appropriated, and debated Greek philosophy.¹²⁶ However, this partial acceptance was reduced as Gnosticism fell victim to the desire to restrict the dogma of the early Church. This orthodoxy focused on several early 'markers' including modified patterns of martyrdom, an emphasis on apostolic succession, a closed canon, key doctrines concerning the trinity and Christ's nature, the growing authority of bishops within their

¹²² ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p8.

¹²³ See PARROTT, Douglas M. (trans.) "Eugnostos the Blessed (III, 3 and V, 1) and The Sophia of Jesus Christ (III, 4 and BG 8502, 3)", in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p220.

¹²⁴ PARROTT, Douglas M. (trans.) "Eugnostos the Blessed (III, 3 and V, 1) and The Sophia of Jesus Christ (III, 4 and BG 8502, 3)", in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp220-221; LINDSAY, Jack *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, London, Frederick Muller, 1970. For Egypt as the 'school of religion', see *Asclepius* 21-29, 71.30-35, translated in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p335.

¹²⁵ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p5. For a defence of Origen as genuinely orthodox in belief, reflecting 19th century debates on the issue, see "Was Origen A Heretic?", *Catholic World*, 19, 1874, pp109-124.

¹²⁶ "Was Origen A Heretic?", *Catholic World*, 19, 1874, pp111-114.

communities, the regulation of ascetic practices by bishops and limits set to scriptural interpretation.¹²⁷ These more exclusive thinkers included the earlier Tertullian, Irenaeus and Epiphanius of Salamis.

The emerging trend was one of hostility, denying divine inspiration to most gnostic thinkers, and defending the creation as part of God's just domain. In particular, the Old Testament was retained as part of the divine message, and the physical aspect of god's Incarnation was stressed, points which gnostics found hard to accept. For most gnostics, the true Jesus was divine, his material being a mere semblance.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the body of the Church was held to be unified, with no real division between the pneumatics and ordinary believers, and the authority of the Church was upheld as a binding instrument of God's will on earth. In the great debate which raged from the second century CE onwards gnostics were gradually expelled from the early churches as dangerous heretics and schismatics who threatened the unity of the 'universal' church.¹²⁹ Those attacking heresy, including Justin, Irenaeus and Tertullian, were so successful that few of the gnostic compositions survived intact long enough to form part of mainstream written literature.¹³⁰

The Nag Hammadi texts, of course, form only a tiny, accidentally-surviving fragment of what had been an extensive literature, including gospels, cosmologies, theologies and parables, and possibly a diverse oral literature, plus ritual and liturgical practises that may have varied from those that survived via the main Churches.¹³¹ It is possible that these texts in part reflect esoteric oral traditions that still circulated in the first two centuries, challenging the public institutional authority of the Apostolic Succession,¹³² which verified a route of transmission of truth from the first apostles to their designated successors. It is also possible that certain apostles were given higher prestige in some gnostic texts than found in other Churches, e.g. the importance of James as compared to Peter in a text such as *The (Second) Apocalypse of James*.¹³³ Likewise, religious visions, possession and 'religious enthusiasm' form elements of the psychology of gnostic communities.¹³⁴

¹²⁷ BRAKKE, David *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp97-99; EHRMAN, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, pp140-143; HILL, Jonathan *Christianity: The First 400 Years*, Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2013, p191.

¹²⁸ BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, pp222-223.

¹²⁹ This began to emerge as an important theory in the third century CE, leading to regulatory councils or synods in Antioch circa 264-268 CE, HILL, Jonathan *Christianity: The First 400 Years*, Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2013, p192-196.

¹³⁰ RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism*, Edinburg, T & T Clark, 1998, p10

¹³¹ See for example the call and response hymn linked to a dance, extant in *The Round Dance of the Cross*, translated in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, pp127-131.

¹³² FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p4.

¹³³ See the comments by Charles W. Hedrick in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p269.

¹³⁴ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p155.

These phases of interaction, hostility and exclusion helped form both the canon and the dogma of the early Church, and engendered an attempt to channel new interpretations of the main scriptures in safe directions. This focused on the further working out of interpretations of the incarnation, the trinity, apostolic authority, and a rejection of other oral traditions as later additions of lesser worth. The canon that was being debated was much more than a voluntary selection of books, but rather a 'rule of faith': -

The Greek word κανων [canon] means literally "rule" or "measuring rod" which, applied to Scripture, determines the place of any text or passage within a restricted catalog of authoritative books (the existence and preservation of which establishes both the belief-system and the corporate identity of followers). So a Scriptural Canon is not simply a list of books: it is, rather, *a criterion by means of which any book is to be tested* for its authority (theologically, its "divine inspiration") and, thus, for its *guaranteed place* in such a list. And during the Reformation, it was the difference among competing criteria that led to schism and, ultimately, to centuries of religious warfare.¹³⁵

Thus the early gnostics had a central role in shaping the Christian tradition, partly by sympathetic influence, but more strongly by forcing most Christian thinkers and churches to react against them, e.g. Irenaeus of Lyons, in his book called 'Exposure and Refutation of the falsely so called Gnosis' (commonly known by its Latin title *Adversus Haereses*) developed a positive statement of the 'true' Christian position in the last four books of that work, though most of the text was devoted to attacking various gnostic positions of thought.¹³⁶ Likewise, St. Augustine developed an explicit condemnation of Manichaeism (which he knew in detail during his period as a Manichaean 'Hearer') as the basis for a positive assessment of Christian belief.¹³⁷ Here we see a move towards consolidation, whereby Christianity staked its claim on several exclusive interpretations of a given set of accepted gospels and epistles. Orthodox Christians claimed both a canon of chosen texts and an exclusive right of interpretation over them. In this context, we can see the reason why fierce debates raged over which religious leaders were 'orthodox' and over which writings were legitimate or heretical, e.g. over the status of the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

In doing so, early Christianity avoided becoming just one of a large number of differing creeds of theological speculation and religious philosophy. Early Christianity and Gnosticism both floated in a 'sea' of signs and interpretations, with key religious leaders and writers shaping these into authoritative ideologies that would serve as engines for institutionalised social power. This was creative and interpretive as much as inspirational or revelatory. The social outcomes emerged in the authoritative structure of Christian churches that infiltrated the Roman world between the second and fourth centuries CE.

¹³⁵ BAUMLIN, James S. "Reading Bloom (Or: Lessons Concerning the "Reformation" of the Western Literary Canon)", *College Literature*, 27 no. 3, Fall 2000, p37; HILL, Jonathan *Christianity: The First 400 Years*, Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2013, p190.

¹³⁶ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p97.

¹³⁷ See VAN ORTT, Johannes "The Young Augustine's Knowledge of Manichaeism: An Analysis of the *Confessiones* and Some Other Relevant Texts", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 62, 2008, pp441-466.

This was paralleled by strong resistance to gnostic thought and its influence in the social life of early churches, especially in Rome and the Gaul. Only in Alexandria was any extended attempt made to generate a proper gnostic interpretation of Christ, at first by Clement, later on by Origen. This was perhaps easier to do in the Egyptian metropolis, with its extended history of the syncretism between different religions, and its strong schools of Hellenistic philosophical thought. This city, both the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, and in some ways sitting outside the ordinary life of the countryside (the *chora*), was the focus for an emerging Mediterranean cosmopolitanism that would not survive the fourth century.¹³⁸ These attempts at accommodation nonetheless went too far for thinkers such as Epiphanius of Salamis. A special knowledge (*gnosis*) which allowed a person to come closer to the mystery of Christ and God was never fully reconciled with the later emphasis on faith, obedience and humility. This is explicitly stated in the New Testament: "Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards faith." (1 Timothy 6:20-21)¹³⁹

From the evidence at our disposal, however, it is possible to suggest lines of gnostic transmission across the Mediterranean world. The claim that Simon Magus was an influential source of Gnosticism, made by Justin, Irenaeus and Eusebius, should not be set aside as mere propaganda. Simon seems to have portrayed himself as a great magical figure of Christ-like dimensions. He rejected both the creation and the law, and came to redeem the lost 'first thought' (*ennoia*), found embodied as the 'harlot' Helen.¹⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, he also seemed to have liberal views on sexual morality, though the context in gnostic thought may have been the ability of spirituality to pass beyond evil and sexuality.¹⁴¹ Supposedly his disciple Menander, also from Samaria, taught Saturninus of Antioch and Basilides of Alexandria.¹⁴² Gnosticism then probably spread through cities around the Mediterranean: Antioch, Ephesus, Rome, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon seem to have housed gnostic sects at some time during this period, as well as thriving in cross-cultural areas such as Samaria, Syria and Egypt.¹⁴³ Gnosticism was one of the avenues of social protest during this period, rejecting the current moral, religious and political order. As such, it was natural that such beliefs would both appeal to and develop in the intellectual strata of cosmopolitan cities.¹⁴⁴

One reformist Church, established by Marcion, spread throughout Asia Minor and using an effective hierarchy of officials, was transmitted into Egypt, Italy, Syria, Mesopotamia and

¹³⁸ See further BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, pp236-238.

¹³⁹ Discussed in PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p97.

¹⁴⁰ Justin *Apology* I,26,1-3; Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* I, 23,1-4; Hippolytus *Refutation* VI 9-18; RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, Edinburg, T & T Clark, 1998, pp294-5.

¹⁴¹ Implied in FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp69-70.

¹⁴² RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, Edinburg, T & T Clark, 1998, p276.

¹⁴³ MORTLEY, Raoul *Womanhood: The Feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism, Christianity and Islam*, Sydney, Delacroix, 1981, p61; RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1977, p291.

¹⁴⁴ RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1977, 292-3.

Armenia. It was regarded as one of the greatest challenges to orthodoxy in the second century.¹⁴⁵ It was eventually only suppressed in the West by the legislation of the Christianised Empire. Though not a full-blown gnostic system, Marcionism does include mythic elements such as the Demiurge and has an 'anti-cosmism' aspect.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, Marcion's selection of a narrow group of New Testament documents as his canon, rejecting the Old Testament, helped force the early church into the establishment of its own recognised body of scriptures.

Such gnostic threads as were allowed to remain within the doctrine of Christianity were limited and controlled. This is found reflected in the letters of Paul against the pneumatics in the Corinthian church (*I Corinthians* 8-10). Knowledge remains within the Church as a support to salvation, but love and obedience are given much stronger roles.¹⁴⁷ The closest veering of canonical Christianity towards gnostic conceptions is found in the Gospel of John, with its doctrine of the Logos made flesh, and its entire theme of the comparison between higher and earthly wisdom.

There are several ways we can position the gnostic tradition in relation to early Christianity. Due to the distortion and destruction of much evidence from the period, any reconstruction must be tentative. One account is as follows. The texts of the Nag Hammadi represent a tradition already exemplified by the dualism evident in the Jewish mystical texts of the Qumran convenors,¹⁴⁸ but in a more Hellenised and syncretic form. Gnosticism developed alongside Christianity, was influenced by it and in turn also influenced the emerging Christianities of the period. This creates a counter-trend in Christianity to reject too free an allegorisation of the figure of Jesus, and too extreme a rejection of the world. This impulse continues through the third and fourth centuries CE, and may have been one of the factors influencing Manichean thought. Parallel movements were found beyond the Graeco-Roman world in Iraq and Iran: the small sect called the Mandaeans, or 'knowers' for much of their history have been hostile to Christianity.¹⁴⁹ They can be traced back to Palestine and Jordan, probably 'as an offshoot of baptismal, sectarian forms of Judaism'.¹⁵⁰ They have a tradition of writing and copying religious texts that goes back to at least the third century, and while the

¹⁴⁵ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp162-164; RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1977, p317.

¹⁴⁶ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p165. For problems in defining Marion as a straight-forward gnostic, see WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p26.

¹⁴⁷ RUDOLPH, Kurt *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1977 p302.

¹⁴⁸ ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p7.

¹⁴⁹ PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p99; BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. "Glimpses of a Life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest", *History of Religions*, 39 no. 1, August 1999, pp32-49. Some caution is needed in identifying these groups in Gnostic, even though 'connections' and 'similarities' are present, WILLIAMS, Michael Allen *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p6.

¹⁵⁰ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. "Glimpses of a Life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest", *History of Religions*, 39 no. 1, August 1999, p32.

group is no longer under threat of dying out as a religious community, they are now somewhat dispersed across the Middle East and beyond.¹⁵¹

There are also loose parallels to Gnosticism in medieval and early modern mystical thought, e.g. the Cathars of southern France, the thought of Ramon Llull (c. 1232-1316), various strands within mystical Islam, and even in Voltaire's story *Plato's Dream*.¹⁵² From the 13th century through to the 1490s writers such as Joachim of Fiore, Alfonso Sabio, and then Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Johann Reuchlin furthered this interaction of traditions.¹⁵³ Philosophers and mystics such as Giordano Bruno and Jakob Boehme were influenced by Gnosticism during the 16th and early 17th centuries. Bodies of thought emphasising a special, saving knowledge and 'Cabbalistic modes of thought' would shape modern occult movements such as the Cabbalistic Christians and Rosicrucianism.¹⁵⁴ Artists and writers as diverse as Hieronymus Bosch, William Blake, Victor Hugo, and Goethe have been influenced by dualist and gnostic orientations.¹⁵⁵ These threads emerge in revived gnostic elements within modern writers such as Carl Jung, Hermann Hesse, Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco, driven by 'elective affinities' and a search, sometimes ironic, for 'spiritual therapy'.¹⁵⁶

Gnosticism was a broad religious orientation rather than a single coherent doctrine. It was the search for freedom from the dominion of evil, demanding transcendence above the created world. These ideas swept through the religion and philosophy of the early first millennium.¹⁵⁷ This leaves the question of priority. Basically, most of our texts for Gnosticism are clearly later than the first century CE. The question is: how far back do the oral traditions they derived from go? Attempts to postulate that the Logos and gnostic themes in the Gospel of John rest directly on a pre-Christian gnosticism have not been conclusive.¹⁵⁸ It is possible to build up similar conceptions from Old Testament speculation about a personified Wisdom (see *The Book of Job*), while the Qumran community demonstrates that a strongly dualist Judaism existed in the first century BCE. Further, the very allegorical interpretation of *Genesis* used by Philo helped provide the means for a strongly reinterpreted version of the

¹⁵¹ BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. "The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaeanism", *JNES*, 59 no. 2, 2000, pp93-106; BUCKLEY, Jorunn J. "Glimpses of a Life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest", *History of Religions*, 39 no. 1, August 1999, pp48-49.

¹⁵² SMITH, Richard "Afterword: The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism", in ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp532-549; JOHNSTON, Mark D. *The Spiritual Logic of Ramon Llull*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, p1..

¹⁵³ GIBBONS, B.J. *Spirituality and the Occult: From the Renaissance to the Modern Age*, London, Routledge, 2001, p3; BURCKHARDT, Jacob *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S.G.C. Middlemore, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, pp134-135.

¹⁵⁴ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pxxv.

¹⁵⁵ BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, p246-247; FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pxvi-xvii.

¹⁵⁶ FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pxiv, pxviii; BARNSTONE, Willis "Epilogue: The Inner Light of Gnosis", in BARNSTONE, Willis & MEYER, Marvin (ed.) *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, London, Shambhala, 2010, p247.

¹⁵⁷ ROBINSON, James *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Brill, Leiden, 1988, p6, p10.

¹⁵⁸ YAMAUCHI, Edwin *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Downers Grove Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1973, p33.

Creation myths. Essentially, there is no strong argument for a deep Christian dependence on a pre-Christian Gnosticism of an evolved type. However, an incipient Gnosticism was probably underway by the first century of our era, and it interacted with the reflexive proto-Christian movement which was developing at the same time. Yamauchi suggests that the genesis of Christianity was slightly earlier than Gnosticism, and that we have no evidence that Christianity was strongly dependent on gnostic thought for its original development.¹⁵⁹ We have no sure way of dating the oral traditions which would prove or disprove Yamauchi's position. Nor do we know much about the earlier transmission of gnostic doctrines and little about their communities and disciples: the suppression of these doctrines as heretical helped ensure that the surviving records are slimmer than those that survived on the development of Christianity itself.

An Intellectual Counter-Canon

Though the underlying elements for Gnosticism were probably formed by the 1st century BCE, but we do not see strong evidence for a full-blown Gnosticism till the 2nd century CE. The question of dependence is one that is fraught with ideological claims - Christians wish to defend the originality and independence of Christianity. There is no doubt, however, that both Christianity and Gnosticism drunk from similar fountains of Jewish and Hellenistic thought.¹⁶⁰ Thereafter they went on to influence each other, with Christianity eventually rejecting many gnostic elements in its tradition. This is why today the New Testament includes the Gospel of John, but not the several 'gnostic gospels' now known to us. Even the Gospel of Thomas, which is many ways compatible with emerging Christian doctrine, could not be included.

These gnostic texts, however, should not merely be regarded as rejected discards from a dominant tradition. On the contrary, they remained a dynamic challenge to the closing down of alternate forms of inspiration. That is, they form the social and intellectual functions of a counter-canon. As noted in the wider context by James Baumlin: -

Indeed, Kabbalah and Gnosticism both offer powerful historical instances of counter-canon - that is, of texts and traditions that cannot be assimilated into orthodoxy, and that gain whatever power they wield precisely by remaining unassimilated. Heresy (from the Greek αἵρεσις "to choose" or "take," implying an independent course of action or thought) is an assertion of freedom, though a dangerous freedom when pitted against religious (or literary) orthodoxy . . .¹⁶¹

Lacarrière has taken the radical implications of gnostic thought one step further: -

One must try everything, experience everything, unveil everything, in order to strip man down to his naked condition; to 'defrock' him of his organic, psychic, social, and historic trappings;

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pp185-6.

¹⁶⁰ For the complex relationship to Judaism, see FILORAMO, Giovanni *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp145-146. For later parallels between Jewish mysticism and the Sophia elements of Gnosticism, see SCHOLEM, Gershom G. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, N.Y., Schocken Books, 1974, pp230-239.

¹⁶¹ BAUMLIN, James S. "Reading Bloom (Or: Lessons Concerning the "Reformation" of the Western Literary Canon)", *College Literature*, 27 no. 3, Fall 2000, p35.

to decondition him entirely so that he may regain what is called by some his choice, by others his destiny. As I write this word, decondition, I perceive that I am reaching the very heart of the Gnostic doctrine. No knowledge, no serious contemplation, no valid choice is possible until man has shaken himself free of everything that effects his conditioning, at every level of his existence.¹⁶²

Christianity was not willing to proceed down this path for very long. Yet we may need to experience this radical vision in the 21st century to recapture our selves in a world falsely defined by the new archons of technological control, power manipulation, and ideological persuasion. This will not be done by creating a new gnostic church, as pioneered in the Ecclesia Gnostica of Los Angeles, nor by casting Gnosticism as yet another version of the 'dharma trail' in new age faiths. Rather, it can start rebuilding a critical and radical world view that will free us not just from the chains of labour and capital, but from the blinding attractions of a Western techno-utopia saturated with self-delusion.

Historically, Christianity was declared the most virtuous of the sisters. Made beautiful with the garments of Hellenist erudition and a few selected jewels from Gnosticism,¹⁶³ she went to the ball and became the Queen of the West. She was championed in Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople, Kiev, Moscow and then all of Europe. For more than a millennium, Christianity spread into Ethiopia, India, Persia and even into parts of China with the influence of Nestorians. Christianity tried to keep her sister traditions well out of sight, and for a time managed to suppress serious mention of them except in the most negative of terms. Nonetheless, Gnosticism remains a significant substratum in the West, while Manicheism became a powerful influence in Central Asia and eastern China down till the spread of Islam.¹⁶⁴

There is another insight from this period that is worth retaining in the 21st century. The Hellenistic Age, during which these religions emerged, was a period of rapid change, the growth and fracturing of empires, and an emerging cosmopolitanism that brought together diverse elements in a period of social experimentation: -

The new spiritual identity is based on, and helps to nurture, a new social identity. The protagonists of this decisive internal revolution, carried out silently in the depths of an intimacy cultivated, loved and known with vivid recognition, were in fact none other than 'the rootless and the weary', children of a society that was expanding and continually changing, a world that was cosmopolitan and open to the most diverse experiences. It was a world that encouraged travel and trade, but undermined family ties, bonds of friendship and social relationships to the point of destruction.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² LACARRIERE, Jacques *The Gnostics*, trans. Nina Rootes, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1989, p97.

¹⁶³ Birga Pearson suggests a symbiosis between early Christianity and Gnosticism, PEARSON, Birga A. "Early Christianity and Gnosticism in the History of Religions", *Studia Theologia*, 55, 2001, p99.

¹⁶⁴ See in detail KLIMKEIT, Hans-Joachim, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 1993, pp1-24; LIEU, Samuel N.C. *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, Leiden, Brill, 1998.

¹⁶⁵ FILORAMO, Giovanni A *History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Anthony Alcock, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, p34. For the cosmopolitan diversity of the period, see KOESTER, Helmut *Introduction to the New Testament: Vol I & 2*, N.Y., Walter de Gruyter, 1987; HADAS, Moses "From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4, 1943, pp105-111; HADAS, Moses *Hellenistic Culture: Fusion and Diffusion*, N.Y., Columbia Uni. Press, 1963. For some of the implications of cosmopolitanism today, see HELD, David *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*, Cambridge, Polity

The divergent patterns of early Gnosticism were crucial and creative counter-traditions that still bear fruit and were not cut from the vine of human knowledge. Gnosticism is worth study today as one of the more innovative patterns of ancient thought that was able to cross cultures, languages and religious systems. It has continued to influence thinkers, poets and mystics for over two thousand years.

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