1 Is it still possible to speak about “Gnosticism”?

The assumption that there existed in Antiquity a religious movement called “Gnosticism” was long taken for granted. Although the name “Gnosticism” is itself a relatively modern invention,\(^1\) generations of scholars, from the 18\(^{th}\) century onwards, were rarely in doubt that it referred to a genuine and distinct historical phenomenon. It was also taken for granted that that phenomenon essentially corresponded to what Irenaeus of Lyons in his *Adversus haereses*, the earliest preserved account of Christian heresies, referred to as “the falsely called knowledge”. Following the ancient heresiologists, scholars of the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries usually treated Gnosticism as a chapter in the history of the early Church, either as an aberrant interpretation of Christianity against which “the Church” had to defend itself in order to be faithful to the authentic message of the Gospel; or, more sympathetically, as the earliest attempt to give Christianity a philosophical or a mystical interpretation. At the same time, ambiguity prevailed as to whether the Gnostic phenomenon had originated within Christianity itself or had crept into the early Church from the outside. The latter assumption gave rise to a number of theories that sought to locate the origins of Gnosticism in a non-Christian environment, either in “Oriental” religions, in Greek philosophy or religion, or in some form of heterodox Judaism. Especially influential, for a while, was the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Bousset, Reitzenstein, and others), which regarded Gnosticism as a pre-Christian religious movement whose origins lay in Mesopotamia and/or Iran. Notwithstanding the disagreements over the origins of the phenomenon, scholars generally shared the conviction that Gnosticism represented a distinctive religious attitude, a religion *sui generis*. It was common to speak about “the essence of Gnosticism”.

This conviction was still prevalent at the historic conference on “The Origins of Gnosticism” held in Messina in April 1966,\(^2\) although the leading scholars assembled there were unable in the end to produce a workable and universally accepted definition of “Gnosticism”. In the following decades, research in this area was thoroughly transformed by the publication and intensive study of

\(^{1}\) It is apparently first attested in 1664, in the works of the Cambridge Neoplatonist Henry More (*OED*). In French and German, the appellations *la gnose* and *die Gnosis* have been more commonly used than *gnosticisme* and *Gnostizismus*.

\(^{2}\) Bianchi (ed.), *Le Origini dello gnosticismo*.
the some fifty new “Gnostic” texts discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library. The access to sources that were independent of the interpretive frames imposed by the heresiologists, and the growing appreciation of the diversity of the ideas found in them, led to a reconsideration of inherited categories. In addition, the general anti-essentialist turn in the epistemology of the humanities that emerged in that period had an impact on this field of study as well. As a result, the validity of the category of “Gnosticism” itself came to be questioned.

Many scholars are now of the opinion that the concept of “Gnosticism” should be abandoned altogether. They argue that the concept is unhelpful as a general category because the phenomena it is supposed to cover are too diverse to be brought under a common denominator. Thus, the concept lacks descriptive precision and has no explanatory power. Moreover, “Gnosticism” is a label that derives from the intolerant prejudice of the ancient heresiologists; it is therefore an ideologically loaded term that is unsuitable for proper historical analysis. A representative, some might say extreme, example of this current trend in scholarship is found in the “Report on Gnosticism” produced a few years ago by the Christianity Seminar of the Westar Institute – also home to the well-known Jesus Seminar.\(^3\) With “at least twenty-five internationally known scholars in attendance”, the final report concluded that, “[t]he category of gnosticism needs to be dismantled.” This proposition was voted “Red” by the assembled scholars, a verdict which means that the seminar harboured no doubts about this matter. “[A]fter strong discussion of major papers”, the report states, “the Seminar said clearly that most historians of the past 100+ years were wrong in thinking that such a phenomenon as ‘Gnosticism’ ever existed.”

The chief argument for this claim is that the concept of Gnosticism is inextricably bound up with that of “heresy”, which in turn presupposes the notion of “orthodoxy”. It is inappropriate, however (the argument goes), to draw boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy in pre-Nicene Christianity. It is important not to confuse “the post-Constantinian project of creating a ‘catholic’ Church, characterized by uniform theologies, structures, and practices, with earlier Christian persons and groups”. To avoid such anachronisms, one must also discard such expressions as “the Great Church,” “(emerging) Catholicism”, “mainstream Christianity”, or “proto-orthodoxy”. What we are left with, in the end, is simply a diversity of religious phenomena that in one way or another relate themselves to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth – “Jesus groups and Christ movements”. Scholars should allow them all to be their authentic pre-Nicene...

\(^3\) https://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/christianity-seminar/fall-2014-meeting-report/
selves, without having the labels of orthodox or heretical anachronistically forced upon them.

The current critique of “Gnosticism” as a category relies upon two books in particular that were published in the last couple of decades: Michael Williams’s *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* (1996) and Karen King’s *What is Gnosticism* (2003). Michael Williams’ book was particularly critical of the stereotypical descriptions of the ancient Gnostics as deeply alienated souls who hated the world and their own bodies, who despised the creator of the cosmos who had imprisoned them in matter, and who, being convinced that they belonged to a spiritual race superior to other human beings, sought redemption either through extreme asceticism or transgressive libertinism. Williams argued that these stereotypes do not do justice to the diversity of ideas and attitudes that are attested in the original sources that are now available to us in the Nag Hammadi Library. Transgressive libertinism is not attested there at all, extreme asceticism is not typical, and attitudes to the cosmos and its creator vary considerably. Thus, what has conventionally been called “Gnosticism” was not a unitary phenomenon, and its manifold manifestations cannot be reduced to a common “essence”. Karen King’s book focused on how the blanket term “Gnosticism” has served as an instrument of exclusion, by defining groups and ideas as not Christian, heretical, and a “danger” that the early Church had to fight against in order to remain true to its authentic apostolic heritage.

The critique voiced by Williams and King has, without doubt, led to a higher level of reflection in this area of scholarship. We have become rather more conscious of the way in which the category “Gnosticism” has been pre-formed by ancient heresiology, and we no longer speak about “the essence of Gnosticism” as easily as scholars did a generation or two ago. This last point may be further illustrated by the following observations.

Attempts to define the “essence” of gnosis, or Gnosticism, regularly make use of a combination of criteria, which may be adequately summarised in four points:

1. The idea that the material world, corporeal existence and the passions of the soul are evil and that liberation from these evils is the fundamental goal of salvation;
2. The distinction between a supreme deity and an inferior, more or less evil figure who is responsible for creating the cosmos and the human body and soul;
3. The idea that an inner, redeemable core in (some) humans is of the same substance as (is consubstantial with) the supreme divinity;

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4 A number of definitions and lists of criteria for “Gnosticism” and “Gnosis” have been proposed in earlier scholarship, many of them more detailed than the list offered here. For a general survey, see Lahe, *Gnosis und Judentum*, especially 11–53.
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(4) the idea that redemption requires and is brought about by a certain type of knowledge, gnosis. The problem with this set of criteria is that each of the four themes can be found elsewhere, both in antiquity and in the history of religions at large. Thus, the “Gnostic” views of matter, the body, and the passions were widely shared by the ancient schools of philosophy. The same may be said about the idea of divine-human consubstantiality and that of the soteriological value of “knowledge”. Theological dualism is found in Marcion in antiquity and among the medieval Cathars; neither of these, however, highlighted “knowledge” as the path to salvation.

Many more examples might be mentioned, but in view of the limitations of the present format, I shall move straight to the conclusion: the combination of these four themes within the compass of a single system of religious thought, such as can be found in the classic Gnostic systems reported by the church fathers, does not constitute a set of propositions that are inseparably connected by means of logically necessary mutual implications. Rather, their combination is a matter of historical contingency. In consequence, the themes do not add up to an “essence” whose instantiations may be recognised in different empirical contexts and which may thus serve as the basis for the definition of a general category. A further implication to be drawn from this observation is that we should refrain from referring to “Gnosticism” or “gnosis” whenever we encounter ideas about “knowledge” as a path to salvation, about the divine origins of the human soul or spirit, about a creator figure who is inferior to a supreme deity, or about the material world as evil. Too often, the presence of one of these ideas has been assumed to presuppose all the others, resulting in the indiscriminate use of the labels “gnosis” and “Gnostic” across cultures and historical periods, as well as in endless and futile debates as to whether a given document (e.g. the Gospel of Thomas), or a particular religious movement (e.g. Hermeticism), is to be regarded as “Gnostic” or not.

The current situation remains, however, rather paradoxical, in so far as the term continues to be used quite widely; a fresh example of this is Routledge’s publication of The Gnostic World, which covers everything from gnosis in tribal cultures via ancient Gnosticism and Sufism, Shi’a Islam, Asian religions, Kabbalah, European esotericism, to Scientology and modern popular culture. This highly generous understanding of “gnosis” presents a striking contrast to the deconstructive scepticism expressed by those specialists who wish to abandon

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5 Trompf et al. (eds.), The Gnostic World.
6 Other examples include Hanegraaff (ed.), Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism; DeConick, The Gnostic New Age.
the term altogether, or who accept its use only with reference to a very specific and apparently small group in antiquity that was referred to as “the gnostikoi”, and possibly even adopted that name as their primary self-designation (a topic to which I shall return later).\(^7\) To my mind, these wildly opposing ways of using the terms “gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are another indication that they have little or no informative value – they are terms that obscure and confuse our thinking more than they provide enlightenment.

2 Reconstructing coherence

If we must conclude that “gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are unhelpful as general categories because of their implicit essentialist and heresiological assumptions, we are faced with the challenge of finding other ways to discern coherence in the historical evidence preserved for us by the ancient heresiologists or rediscovered in such finds as the Nag Hammadi Library. It can hardly be satisfactory to regard the numerous theological ideas and positions attested in this material as simply individual varieties of early Christianity. We must certainly give up any ambition of characterising this material as a unit by means of essentialist formulas. But it is equally unhelpful to treat it merely as an arbitrary jumble of unconnected fragments. The deconstructive trend of the last couple of decades needs to be counterbalanced by new attempts at reconstructive historical synthesis that will detect coherence among a wider range of sources than current specialised scholarship is often disposed to acknowledge.

A project that aims to reconstruct a logic of historical development – an Entwicklungslogik – for certain clusters of ideas, even if restricted to parts of the evidence previously classified as “Gnostic”, will first be confronted by the challenge of integrating the evidence of the patristic authors with that of the Nag Hammadi Codices. As is well known, a major difficulty posed by the texts from Nag Hammadi is the fact that these Coptic manuscripts, produced in the late fourth century, provide few indications as to when their original Greek versions may have been written. They do not supply the names of their human authors nor do they inform us about the milieus in which they originated. A further difficulty, to which we have now become increasingly sensitive, is the fact that this literature was typically fluid – texts were revised, improved upon, rewritten, and plagiarised in ways that can be reconstructed only to a very limited

\(^7\) E.g. Brakke, The Gnostics, following Layton, “Prolegomena”.