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Lived Religion among second-century ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’

This contribution focuses on the socio-historical details of a number of so-called ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’ active in second-century Rome. The material derives primarily from Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* (ca. 180 CE), a heresiological tractate that aims to draw boundary lines between different Christian specialists and their communities. A close reading of *Adv. Haer.* and Irenaeus’ sometimes scathing portraits of certain Gnostic hieratic specialists – particularly a Valentinian Christian known as Marcus the Magician (*Magus*) – reveals that Irenaeus himself, like many of the so-called Gnostics he scorned, formed a new class of Christian textual producer in the imperial period. The study seeks to refute Irenaeus’ claim to be an authority representing the ‘Great Church’, and highlights the diversity of practices that comprised second-century Christianity.

This essay turns to heresiological sources – primarily the writings of Irenaeus, with support from Hippolytus and Tertullian – to interrogate the charges of aberrant religio-sexual practices, gender troubles, and ritual improprieties that dogged a class of individuals I term here ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’. How did these individuals “form and reform ritual actions and theological constructions” (to cite the Call for Papers)? Can attention to ‘lived religion’ help us to understand differently the heresiological charges against these individuals and their innovative crafting of new Christianities?

We will begin with Irenaeus of Lyons, a second-century theologian whose life and circumstances remain largely opaque. Irenaeus himself does not provide modern readers with any biographical insights in his extant works; what little we know of him is drawn from Eusebius. Traditionally, Irenaeus has been the subject of theological inquiry, particularly for his articulation of ‘recapitulation’; alternatively, as a significant source for information on those whom he derides,

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1 I want to thank Jörg Rüpke, Georgia Petridou, and Richard Gordon for a wonderful and stimulating conference in January 2015 where a preliminary form of this paper was circulated.
2 For recent biographical studies, see Minns (2010); Osborn (2001), and the excellent volume of collected essays by Parvis and Foster (2012).
3 Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.1.
i.e. those who possessed “falsely-called knowledge (gnosis)”.⁴ Central to all these studies has been a tacit understanding of Irenaeus as a champion of the Great Church, or rather, according to those scholars for whom such a notion at this period is anachronistic, an important voice of nascent Christian orthodoxy or proto-orthodoxy. In this essay, I resituate Irenaeus within the context of second-century Rome, unmooring him from a fictive ‘Great Church’ and considering him within a matrix of second-century religious ‘providers’ or ‘specialists’.

A relatively recent strand of scholarship paves the way for resituating Irenaeus by pointing out his training in rhetoric and thus, his active participation in the intellectual life of the Second Sophistic.⁵ In fact, we do Irenaeus a disservice if we consider him anything less than fully immersed in the predominant intellectual or literary preoccupations of his day, which included the composition of works ranging from scientific treatises to rank satire. It is in this vein that I am tempted to consider Irenaeus’ œuvre. His heresiological work, Adversus Haereses (c. 180 CE), paints a world of chronic deceit and dissembling, coupled with a relentless spiritual ambition.⁶ The scorn for religious innovation which saturates its pages it shares with other works from the Second Sophistic – surely not accidental, but an indication of how Irenaeus perceived himself as a public intellectual and social critic. There is a striking parallel, for example, between Irenaeus’ Adv. Haer. and the Philopseudēs (‘Lover of Lies’) of his contemporary Lucian of Samosata, with its stable of dubious religious specialists: Lucian regales the reader with hilarious accounts of a Babylonian magos who heals with philtres and conjurations (11–15); a Syrian exorcist (16); a Pythagorean expeller of ghosts (daimōnes) (30–31); and an Egyptian adept of Isis who animates

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⁴ On Irenaeus’ theory of recapitulation, see Osborn (2001); Dunning (2009); Holsinger-Friesen (2009); Smith (1994). The scholarship on Irenaeus and Gnosticism is vast. The meaning of the term is highly contested. More on this topic below.

⁵ See, for instance, Schoedel (1959); also Grant (1949). Note esp. Ayres (2015, 154): “One of the most striking evolutions in Christian thought and practices between the middle of the second century and the middle of the third is the rise to prominence of a Christian exegesis that is heavily dependent on the techniques of literary analysis honed within the developing disciplines of grammar and rhetoric”. Steenberg (2012, 202) notes Irenaeus’ familiarity with Plato, Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Aristophanes, Menander, and the pre-Socratic: “[...] Irenaeus certainly sees the best of ‘Pagan learning’ as part of God’s redemptive economy, useful to the Christian”.

⁶ The Latin and surviving Greek texts of Adv. Haer. are reproduced in Rousseau (1965–1982). Translations in this paper are my own or else, where noted, from the useful, if dated, English translation in the ANF series (1885).
brooms and pestles (33–36). Irenaeus similarly introduces us to Simon, a flamboyant Samaritan *magos* who parades his consort whom he considers the reincarnation of Helen of Troy (1.23); the profligate demon-worshipper Carpocrates, who believed that to escape the bondage of the body one had to have sexual intercourse with as many women as possible (1.25.4); and another *magos* named Marcus, a practitioner in the dark arts and beguiler of wealthy women (1.13). A keen reader also detects parallels between Irenaeus’ Marcus and another one of Lucian’s characters, Alexander of Abonuteichos, a magician (*goēs*) and oracular prophet who travels through northern Asia Minor with the financial support of wealthy women. The difference between these competing profiles of Lucian and Irenaeus lies in interpretation; we read Lucian’s work as satire, but Irenaeus as anything but. In fact, *Adv. Haer.* has always constituted a compendium, encyclopaedia, manifesto, ‘handbook’ of heresies – what you will, at any rate, a usable map of second-century Christianity in all its multiplicity and absurdities.

I suggest in this essay that we should read Irenaeus differently, with the same appreciation for humour, exaggeration, and posturing that we allow for Lucian. The reason we have not done so reflects, in the main, our own theological commitments and convictions. We also must develop a keen sensitivity to Irenaeus’ own self-positioning within the competitive landscape of second-century religious options rather than assume that he was somehow able to rise above these, the omniscient eye of a sober churchman looking down from above at a fissiparous and farcical set of Christian improvisations on key theological themes. This essay presents a different Irenaeus – a participant rather than observer, deeply involved in fashioning not orthodoxy (which is the conventional reading) but perhaps a more self-serving, even independent, Christian identity. From this perspective, Irenaeus’ profile of what I call here ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’ tells us only marginally about them, but, recursively, a good deal about Irenaeus himself.

1. On ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’

First, though, a word on terminology. The rise of independent religious specialists in the high Roman Empire has been a recent and fruitful new area of inves-

7 For more on Lucian’s profiles of independent religious specialists, see Wendt (2016, 1–5, 24–26, 139–142).
8 See also Jan Bremmer’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 2, esp. 62–68).
tigation. We owe this new direction in scholarship to Jörg Rüpke and Richard Gordon, and I am indebted to them for turning our attentions away from monolithic and hence nonsensical subjects of study such as ‘second-century Christianity’ to individuals and their interactions within ‘small group religion’. The term ‘specialist’ seems to me preferable to the more Bourdieusian ‘entrepreneur’, which carries with it economic overtones which these figures cannot always readily sustain. The term ‘hieratic’ is more precise than ‘religious’, a term that, like ‘second-century Christianity’, is too often used thoughtlessly. I do not believe that Christianity was sufficiently developed in the second century to receive a monolithic designation; I prefer, instead, to speak of ‘Christians’ or ‘Christian groups’ without imagining meaningful networks and top-down organisation. By ‘hieratic specialist’ I mean individuals who drew from a broad set of ritual practices circulating in the second century, and who apparently considered themselves experts in the performance or knowledge of ritual practices and behaviours. The term ‘Gnostic’, however, gives me the most pause. I have argued throughout my professional career for the inaccuracy of this term. I use it here because it is Irenaeus’ preferred term. The fact that he uses it is not an argument in favour of its historical appropriateness. On the contrary: it is a key to his entire interpretive project.

If Irenaeus’ claims in *Adv. Haer.* about these Gnostic hieratic specialists are true, then each of them pushed beyond the limits of licit Christian behaviours. Some of these ritual innovators explored the interface between baptism, death, and exorcism. Others worked in the fringes of Christian practice, drawing on traditional practices of oracular utterance and dream-interpretation. Most were accused of dealing in magic. Whether or not Irenaeus and his continuators were accurate or truthful in their sketches of these specialists remains a matter of debate; nevertheless, the second century found nascent Christianity at perhaps its most audaciously experimental, and historically at its closest point to Roman, Greek, and Egyptian hieratic behaviours. Without established limits to confine them, one might argue that all these figures operated ‘beyond duty’, creating moments of religious meaning in the intersections of life, sex, and death.

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9 For the current literature on ‘small group religion’, see Gordon’s contribution to the present volume (Chapter 11).
10 On Bourdieu, see also the contribution to this volume by Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli (Chapter 12).
11 There exist in the field of Gnosticism and Gnostic Studies deeply-entrenched opinions on the appropriateness of the adjective ‘Gnostic’ in antiquity. For arguments against, see Williams (1996) and King (2003). For arguments in favour, see the work of, *inter alia*, April DeConick and Birger Pearson.
In this essay, I will disrupt and subvert a conventional story – that a nascent Christian orthodoxy was ‘perverted’ by Gnostic hieratic specialists, who introduced into Christian teachings and practice a series of innovations – innovations destined to fail, if only because more orthodox Christians such as Irenaeus were successfully able to hold the line. Rather, I argue that we must rethink who, of these figures, were the true innovators and whose vision or version of what each of them considered proper Christian practice and belief was ultimately lost.

2. Sorting behaviours, not groups

Second-century Rome presented a diverse, fissiparous religious landscape of Christians – surprisingly difficult to identify as cohesive groups or communities, but easier to see as independent, itinerant individuals with followings, patrons, and sometimes confrontational or unsuccessful relationships with more settled ‘communities’ of Christian believers.¹² Thus we might start by thinking differently about the accuracy of group designations such as ‘Valentinians’ or ‘Carpocratians’. These group designations, in reality, had little true meaning. For example, both Irenaeus and Tertullian take pains to note that Valentinians all practised and believed slightly different things; indeed, Irenaeus states that Valentinians often felt free to disagree with Valentinus himself (haer. 1.11–12).¹³ Given this perceived diversity, it is fair to ask to what degree Valentinians identified themselves within the group or community of ‘Valentinians’. While it is possible that such perceived diversity was an attempt to undermine a strong, emic sense of group cohesion, I will follow Irenaeus’ own lead by starting our investigations with accounts of individual innovators rather than with groups.¹⁴

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¹² I mean ‘communities’ here in the loosest possible sense: Christians involved in expressing their beliefs and maintaining their practices within the context of a house assembly, private commercial space, ‘school’ or household, balancing their Christian identity with a multiplicity of other social roles, of which Christian adherence might be the least stable or dominant. For a recent dismissal of the idea that Christians met solely within the domain of a house assembly, see Adams (2013). On Christian identity and the problem of assuming ‘community’, albeit for a slightly later era, see Rebillard (2009) and Rebillard (2012).
³¹ Indeed, this diversity is manifest from the writings scholars conventionally label ‘Valentinian’ and their division into ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ branches (Thomassen 2006; Markschies 1997), as well as from the extant fragments of Valentinus’s writing, which bear no theological similarity to the system that Irenaeus lays out in Adv.Haer. 1.
¹⁴ There is a marked shift through time to move from describing individual ‘heretics’ (as in the writings of Irenaeus) to groups, as in Hippolytus’ Refutation of All Heresies. Only rarely does Hippolytus refer to individual ‘heretics’, such as Colorbasus at haer. 4.13 or Justinus at 5.18. By the
These hieratic specialists, as Irenaeus paints them, share certain seminal similarities in their practice, if not consistently in their beliefs. The broad outlines of praxis can be defined along six specific areas of expertise:

1. Textual production and circulation, building on techniques of exegesis, allegorical readings, and harmonisation/explanation of scripture.
2. Christian ritual innovation, particularly in the area of baptism and Eucharist.
3. Prophecy and oracular utterances.
4. Practices related to healing, including miracles, spells, and exorcism.
5. Education of groups or individuals in forms of esoteric knowledge, particularly eschatology, numerology, and cosmology.
6. Social innovation that is, providing areas and opportunities for social change or growth for disadvantaged groups or classes.

Within each of these categories, Irenaeus frequently depicts individual hieratic specialists as pushing the margins of acceptable behaviour to the point of absurdity or obscenity (witness, for example, the profligate religio-sexual practices of Carpocrates at *haer.* 1.25.4). My intuition is that Irenaeus, in these character sketches, aimed not at conveying accurate historical information but rather at satire through hyperbole and outright slander, in the style of his Second Sophistic contemporaries. Nevertheless, a careful and perhaps discerning re-evaluation of these characters can separate hyperbolic description from a set of essential practices which frame them; in the case of Carpocrates, for example, a more sober framing might place him within the ambit of religious hieratic specialists who practised ritual innovations that may have involved behaving (or having his students behave) in ways that challenged the social status quo. But let us consider each one of these categories in more detail.

### 2.1. Textual production and circulation

This practice depended upon literacy and patronage, thus locating these Gnostic hieratic specialists within a certain social class: most probably members of subelite groups who used their literacy skills in order to reinforce their own social
capital. Some of these so-called Gnostics produced our earliest works of Christian exegesis – notably, the Valentinian scholar Heracleon’s exegesis of the Gospel of John. That Irenaeus had access to much of this type of work in its written form is beyond doubt; what unfortunately remains opaque is: how. Did these Gnostic hieratic specialists have, and travel with, libraries? What facilities were there for the copying and dissemination of these documents? Under what circumstances, and in what capacity, does Irenaeus encounter ‘Gnostic’ treatises?

To take a step back from Irenaeus into the world of extant second-century Christian writings, it is clear that texts, and the production of texts, mattered. In particular, allegorical readings of scripture were common exercises that generated considerable controversy. Indeed, an overarching goal of Adv. Haer. is an attempt to undo perceived interpretative damage wrought by those ‘Gnostics’ whom Irenaeus despises and calls “evil interpreters”, ἐξηγηταὶ κακοὶ τῶν καλῶς εἰρημένων γινόμενοι (haer., praef. 1), in pages after page of elaborate refutation through proof-texting and counter-exegesis. The number and quality of details that Irenaeus provides on the more hieratic (viz., ritual) activities of our specialists pales in comparison with what he tells us of the textual worlds they create. In this way, both Adv. Haer. specifically, and heresiological literature generally, was very much part of the strenuous textual production and circulation that characterised, even dominated, one stratum of second-century Christian activity: identity and authority were brokered through a largely contentious, competitive environment of textual production, including the interpretation, and indeed the creation, of the very category ‘scripture’.¹⁹

¹⁵ The term ‘textual producers’ derives from modern work in Cultural Studies, particularly the seminal work of the French theorist Michel de Certeau (1925–86), who writes of the tension between readers and textual producers to contain and direct possession of a text and to control its meaning (e.g. [1984]). Thoughtful work has been done recently on textual producers in the high Empire. See, for a start, Stowers (2011, 35–56).
¹⁶ For a reconstruction of the text and commentary, see Pagels (1989).
¹⁸ Perkins (1976); Ayres (2015, 155ff.). More generally, see Young (1997, 49–76).
¹⁹ On the formation of the concept of ‘scripture’ and ‘canon’ in Irenaeus, see Reed (2002).
2.2. Christian hieratic ritual innovations

Here, let me emphasise that ‘innovation’ may be a misleading term, since it implies crafting something new to replace or improve on something old. Rather, Christian rituals were actively in development and there appears to have been no consensus on how rites such as baptism were to be performed and what they signified. On that level, at least, all Christian ritual production constituted innovation. This is an easy point to forget if we read Irenaeus without due suspicion. As Irenaeus presents them, all ‘Gnostic’ Christian rituals, like all ‘Gnostic’ exegesis, constitute perversions. For instance, he criticises followers of Valentinus for their practice of a double baptism – one of water and one of the spirit or fire (haer. 1.21.1). But double baptisms were not unique to Valentinians and indeed have a precedent in the gospels, which distinguish between a ‘first’ baptism in water and a second in fire or the Holy Spirit. Even among followers of Valentinus, there was apparently considerable disagreement over what constituted a double baptism – it might mean a single baptism with two levels of meaning, one literal and one spiritual. It might mean a baptism with water followed by a chrismation or anointing with oil, symbolising light or fire. The Valentinian Gospel of Philip mentions five sacraments, including baptism, chrism, and two others which may or may not have been related to baptism: apolytrosis and ‘Bridal Chamber’, both of which are famously elusive.

The Eucharist appears also to have been celebrated in innovative ways by second-century Gnostic hieratic specialists. Irenaeus and Hippolytus both mention that Marcus ‘the Magus’ celebrated a Eucharistic rite whereby a small chalice, invested with the power of charis, was held up and poured into an empty larger one, causing the latter to overflow:

Pretending to consecrate cups mixed with wine, and protracting to great length the word of invocation, [Marcus] contrives to give them a purple and reddish colour, so that Charis, who is one of those that are superior to all things, should be thought to drop her own blood into that cup through means of his invocation, and that thus those who are present should be led to rejoice to taste of that cup, in order that, by so doing, the Charis, who is set forth by this magician, may also flow into them [...] [Marcus] himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has consecrated, and pouring from the

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20 On baptism in the early centuries, see Ferguson (2009); Jensen (2011).
21 See Denzey Lewis (2013).
22 Again, the literature on ‘Gnostic’ ritual in general and Valentinian baptism in particular is substantial. For a start, see Denzey (2009); Sévrin (1982); Pagels (1972).
smaller one consecrated by the woman into that which has been brought forward by himself [...]
he then appears a worker of wonders when the large cup is seen to have been filled out of the small one, so as even to overflow by what has been obtained from it


In the version recounted by Irenaeus, and later, Hippolytus, this story contains several interesting elements, and I will return to it presently. For now, however, we may count it as a ritual innovation which resembles a Eucharist, but which involves not direct associations with the body and blood of Christ, but instead the descent of the female hypostasis Charis which consecrates the cup(s) by giving those who drink from it the ability to prophesy.

### 2.3. Prophecy and oracular utterances

Marcus ‘the Magus’, whose skills according to Irenaeus included the ability to prophesy through his own spirit familiar (*haer.* 1.13.3), had the power to make prophets of others as well; in Book 1, Irenaeus recounts a story of how Marcus convinced wealthy women to follow him by giving them the power and authority to prophesy. Flattering them at a feast, Marcus would offer verbal encouragement: “Behold Charis has descended upon thee”, Irenaeus has Marcus say to these women, “Open thy mouth and prophesy!” The woman in question, blushing, is at once embarrassed and flattered: “I have never at any time prophesied”, she protests, “nor do I know how to prophesy!”

[...] then engaging, for the second time, in certain invocations, so as to astound his deluded victim, [Marcus] says to her, “Open thy mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to thee, and thou shalt prophesy”. She then, vainly puffed up and elated by these words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently [from emotion], reaches the requisite pitch of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit. [...] Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess, and expresses her thanks to Marcus.

*haer.* 1.13.3, tr. ANF.

It is worth noting here the connection between women and prophecy, clearly a hotly contested topic in the first centuries of Christianity. We see it most clearly in the case of Montanism, but prophecy was evidently practised by other women and/or became part of the allure of specific (male) hieratic specialists. Irenaeus clearly links Marcus’s legitimising acts – in effect, giving hieratic agency to women – with his attractiveness and popularity. In return for this gift of spiritual charisma, the women support Marcus financially or – what Irenaeus finds more
appalling – provide for him sexually (1.13.3). How far this represents an actual historical situation is an issue to which I return later.

2.4. Miracles, healings, exorcisms, and other acts of ritual power (i.e. ‘magic’)

Another form of hieratic ritual behaviour within Christian circles but one never considered sacramental, the performance of exorcisms and miracles – particularly miraculous healing, as in the gospel narratives – had found audiences and practitioners since the earliest decades of the Christian movement. However, unlike baptism and Eucharist which were the specialities of Irenaeus’ ‘heretics’, healing miracles and the expulsion of demons constituted ‘equal opportunity’ religious rites, disconnected from one particular religious group. Clearly, Irenaeus uses the verb *thaumaturgein* to refer to some Gnostic hieratic specialists, though always as a second-order category. Thus Marcus, “an adept in magical impostures”, is considered a miracle-worker by his followers (1.13.1), while the followers of Simon and Carpocrates, “who are said to perform miracles” (*qui [...] virtutes operari dicuntur*) (2.31.2; cf. 1.13; 1.23), cannot in fact do so:

> For they can neither confer sight on the blind, nor hearing on the deaf, nor chase away all sorts of demons—[none, indeed,] except those that are sent into others by themselves, if they can even do so much as this. Nor can they furnish effective remedies for those external accidents which may occur

*haer. 2.31.2; cf. 2.32.3, tr. ANF.*

Techniques of exorcism and exorcistic healing perdured in Christian antiquity. As David Frankfurter notes, life in antiquity involved a “perpetual negotiation with a range of ancestral and landscape spirits”. Exorcism appeared to have been a particular lay specialisation, continuing under the radar of ecclesiastical sanctions. Irenaeus intimates that these lay specialists worked for a fee, unlike those within the church who very frequently (*saepissime*) healed people without fee or reward (*haer. 2.31.3*). Given that Irenaeus recognised the power of exorcism and healing for building group adherence – that is, healing was a powerful tool for ‘conversion’ into Christian circles – it is hardly surprising that he was both

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24 See Kelhoffer (1999).
25 See Frankfurter (2010, 42).
26 On exorcism in Christian circles, see MacMullen (1984, 21–29); for what I consider examples of Christian exorcistic spells (in Coptic and Greek), see *PGM* IV 86 – 87, 1227 – 1264; XXXVI 275 – 280; *Suppl. Mag* 84. All however are considerably later than the second century.
troubled by, and likely downplayed, the miraculous acts of Gnostic hieratic specialists.

One further comment about magic is, however, in order here. Gnostic hieratic specialists are consistently said to be practitioners of magic – most frequently, of love spells or erotic magic – with their own demon familiars. The followers of Simon Magus, for example, “practise magical arts, casting spells and charms, exorcisms and incantations. They call themselves Paredri (‘familiars’) and Oneiropompi (‘dream-senders’)” (haer. 1.23.4). These innovators also practised dream-interpretation or advocated the practice of incubation to obtain dreams (1.23.4; cf. the followers of Carpocrates at 1.25.3). Both erotic magic and incubation practices were widespread in the second century, making me disinclined to consider Irenaeus and other heresiologists as merely resorting to slander. The issue for Christians, apparently, was the involvement of demons, thus constructing both incubation and magic as ‘demonic arts’ theoretically antithetical to Christian practice, although evidently widely performed.²⁷

2.5. Education/paedagogy

Not all intellectual activity involved the production and circulation of text. The social setting for textual production is frequently understood to have been relatively loose study-circles or ‘schools’.²⁸ However, Einar Thomassen has recently urged us to consider the misleading associations of words such as ‘circle’ or ‘school’.²⁹ Consequently, I propose here a different model that better reflects our second-century sources, particularly Adv. Haer., according to which religious specialist ‘tutors’ travelled from place to place (both between cities and within individual cities) and were hired privately to work one-to-one with a client.³⁰

²⁷ A new class of books consider the social role(s) of magicians from a perspective useful to those of us who do ‘lived religion’; see, inter alia, Dickie (2001); Frankfurter (2002). For Christian magic, see Meyer and Smith (1999).
²⁸ The term is Irenaeus’ own, but we may interpret this more literally than he. It may be, too, that he deliberately favoured ‘school’ over ekklesia. On whether it is proper to think of the Valentinians as a ‘school’, see the seminal essay of Markschies (1997).
²⁹ Thomassen is nuancing his work represented in, for instance, Thomassen (2006) into a bolder dismissal of the very idea of Valentinianism as a ‘school’: see Thomassen (forthcoming).
³⁰ Although Irenaeus provides scant biographical details, it is clear that many second-century ‘Gnostic’ hieratic specialists traveled. Valentinus hailed from Alexandria and taught in Rome; Marcion moved from Pontus to Rome; Cerdo, a student of Simon in Samaria, likewise travelled to Rome to teach (haer. 1.27.1). Marcellina too led a group in Rome, although it was not her native
This model – rather than the elusive ‘house church’ – seems to have characterised many Christian intellectual exchanges, particularly those whose adherents were primarily upwardly-aspiring freedmen, as many ‘Gnostics’ appear to have been.

The best evidence for the importance of the teacher-disciple model among second-century Christians remains Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*, a rare example of what must have been a fairly common epistolary exchange.\(^3^1\) Most of our other later extant epistles are either pseudepigraphic (e.g., *Letter of Peter to Philip*) or, like 1 Clement or the letters of Polycarp, were sent to communities.\(^3^2\) Ptolemy, a Valentinian Christian, indicates that he has previously met with Flora and will meet with her again; in the meantime, his letter to her addresses theological questions which she has posed. There is no indication that Flora is part of a school, so the relationship seems to be that of a private instructor to a private student.

I suspect more work remains to be done in fleshing out the nature of teacher-disciple relationships in the high Empire among members of the freedman class. These relationships may have been enduring: according to Tertullian, complete Valentinian instruction could last as long as five years, and involved rigorous self-discipline (*Adv. Valent.* 1). He adds that those who received private instruction were bound by a duty of silence not to disclose the contents of these teachings to non-initiates (ibid.). Similarly, in a rare sketch of an individual Gnostic hieratic specialist, named Justinus, Hippolytus notes that Justinus “rejected the scriptures” but reinforced his instruction with mysterious books of ‘Greek fables’, insisting that his followers swear oaths of secrecy (*Haer.* 5.18).

What was the content of such teachings? It seems to me, at least, that they were not primarily exegetical, and that they provided different forms of esoteric information. I am struck, for instance, by the tremendous amount of numerological material in both *Adv. Haer.* and Hippolytus’s *Refutatio*. For whatever reason, numerology appeared to have been in vogue in that century, matched only, perhaps, by an interest in astrological and cosmological information. Given the em-

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\(^3^2\) Another example from Nag Hammadi would be the *Treatise on the Resurrection* (*NHC* I, 4), a second-century (?) letter from an unnamed teacher to an otherwise unknown private student, Rheginos, on the nature of the resurrection. It begins with noting that many are anxious to learn material such as the letter-writer is about to disclose; at the end of the letter, the letter-writer suggests that Rheginos not be “jealous of anyone of your number who is able to help” with further insights.
phasis on the ‘secret’ nature of this material, it is possible that much of this instruction was oral rather than textual.

It is likely that, despite the persistent use of the term ‘mysteries’ to refer to the content of oral teachings from itinerant specialists to their disciples, the chief pedagogical model they employed little resembled ‘mystery religions’ but rather, private instruction within a household. It may well be that this sort of private instruction – associated with the upper classes, whose households employed tutors and *paedagogi* to educate their children – brought significant social capital for members of a socially aspiring freedman class, much in the same way that employing a nanny or private tutor today carries with it a sort of bourgeois prestige. Indeed, this ‘private education’ model, by which a teacher promises powerful, secret information to be disclosed, may have been particularly attractive to women, who are consistently identified as the main audience for Gnostic hieratic specialists.

### 2.6. Social innovation

One area at which so-called heretics excelled was in upsetting the status-quo, particularly when it came to overturning social conventions regarding the place of disenfranchised people. Tertullian wonders at the egalitarianism of Valentinian communities: *pariter adeunt, pariter audiunt, pariter orant; etiam ethnici si superuenerint*, “they all have access equally, they all listen equally, they all pray equally – even pagans if they happen to come” (*De praescr. haer.* 41.2). He also inveighs against their loose ecclesiastical hierarchy: *Itaque alius hodie episcopus, cras alius; hodie diaconus qui cras lector; hodie presbyter qui cras laicus. Nam et laicis sacerdotalia munera iniungunt*, “Today one man is bishop and tomorrow another; the person who is a deacon today, tomorrow is a reader; the one who is a priest is a layman tomorrow. For even on the laity they impose the functions of priesthood” (41.8). In Marcus’ community, similarly, those who might speak, or prophesy, at a banquet were selected by drawing lots (*Iren. haer.* 1.13.4).

Just as pagans or lay-people might be selected as hierophants, women, too, might serve as bishops among Valentinians – something that Tertullian clearly

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33 The point was made long ago by Pagels (1979a), particularly in relation to women. Since then, the role of women in so-called Gnostic communities has received its share of scholarly attention, though the focus is more often on doctrinal issues rather than social formation. See King (1988); D’Angelo and Kraemer (1999).
found abhorrent (De praescr. haer. 41.5). I will have more to say presently about
the ‘gender troubles’ arising from women’s active participation.

These categories are not discrete – for example, those considered to be prac-
tising magic (and there are many in Irenaeus’ text) were presumably engaging in
both textual production (the writing of spells or curses) and, for example, ritual
innovation. We might also note that one other second-century freelancer who
does not fall under the unsteady rubric ‘Gnostic’, namely Marcion (haer. 1.27),
was equally engaged in activities that fall into these categories. Indeed, Mar-
cion’s chief blasphemy, according to Irenaeus, was that he mutilated the scrip-
tures, not merely through erroneous interpretation, but through altering extant
Christian authoritative writings (namely the Gospel of Luke and the letters of
Paul) to suit his own understanding of Christian doctrine. As such, Marcion pro-
vides a key example of a textual producer whose main specialisation as a fre-
elancer was literary rather than hieratic.

Within the pages of Adv. Haer., the most frequently-encountered dimension
of second-century Gnostic hieratic specialists is – at least in contemporary liter-
ature – not their ritual or hierophantic activities, but their status as private tutors
and textual producers. Much of our information on other named individuals in
the source material – Basilides (1.24), Saturnilus (1.24), Cerdo (1.27), Menander
(1.23.5), Cerinthus (1.26.1), and Colorbasus (1.12), not to be exhaustive – concerns
what they taught, rather than what they did as ritual practitioners. Irenaeus also
neglects to tell us, in all these cases, where these individuals came from and
whom they taught. It might be, then, that the dominant model of second-century
specialist or freelancer was primarily that of an itinerant scholar whose chief
social role was to move around conducting private study courses in various
types of textually-based knowledge.³⁴ Alternatively, Irenaeus’ scant biographical
details of the men and women he profiles – and in particular, his omission of
information as to their hieratic activities and skills – mean that, although
most of these specialists exercised a more robust set of skills including a bundle
of ritual techniques, such as compounding love-philtres, performing baptisms or
exorcisms, what really bothered Irenaeus was not their hieratic activities but
their prolific textual production and dissemination of knowledge. It bothered
him, I suspect, because he was one of them. In other words, I suggest that Ire-
naeus wrote Adv. Haer. not from the perspective of a member of the Church
writ large (which did not yet exist), but from the perspective of another private
entrepreneurial textual producer. Adv. Haer., seen in this light, is combative

³⁴ On the challenges faced by itinerant religious specialists in Rome, see Esther Eidinow’s con-
tribution to this volume (Chapter 10).
and antagonistic *pro domo*: Irenaeus piles up heaps of material he claims to find utterly false and erroneous because he is competing in a market-place. His success, even his livelihood, in all likelihood depended on displaying his counter-knowledge, his expertise in techniques of exegesis and allegorical interpretation (or, as may be, their folly), his exposure of what he clearly saw as so much hot air. He did this, I would urge, not truly on behalf of the Church, but on his own.

Since Irenaeus has been so consistently perceived as an agent of the Great Church, some will have difficulties with this last claim. In order to reinforce my argument and place it on a broader footing, I now turn briefly to a case-study of the only figure concerning whom Irenaeus does provide some additional information relevant to the theme of ‘lived religion’, namely Marcus the ‘*Magus*’.

3. Marcus, a ‘Gnostic hieratic specialist’

Irenaeus’ portrait of Marcus and the Marcosians is the most substantial of all his heresiological portraits in *Adv. Haer.*, comprising a large proportion of Book 1 (haer. 1.13–22). Typically, it is Marcus’ teachings – from cosmology to numerology – that most infuriate Irenaeus; he takes pains to refute them or to depict them as plainly ridiculous (1.14–16). Marcus’ work as a scriptural exegete receives extensive attention (1.18–19). In the present context, however, it is significant that Irenaeus portrays Marcus above all as a hieratic specialist, celebrating a false and ridiculous Eucharist with his overflowing magic cups (1.13). Irenaeus is also incensed by Marcus’ erotic attraction: he accuses him of making love potions (1.13), and there can be little doubt that Marcus’s willingness to perform an Eucharist with women partners, as well as his enabling of women prophetesses, commanded not just women’s loyalty but their amorous attachment.

One story about Marcus is of particular interest here. A deacon from Asia Minor invited Marcus to stay in his house. His beautiful wife promptly fell in love with Marcus and actually abandoned her husband to travel with him, apparently for some period of time. Irenaeus is of the opinion that Marcus must have employed erotic magic to win the woman over, a ploy which he claims was typical of Marcus’s *modus operandi*. Irenaeus reports that it took some work to bring back the wife over to the true Church of God (his expression), after which she devoted the rest of her sorry life “weeping and lamenting over the defilement which she received from this magician” (haer. 1.13.5).

There is much to say about this vignette. Let us start with the story as it stands. It is easy to see how Marcus’s techniques attracted women adherents: he imparted them a rare agency and voice, which must have been a tremendous-ly powerful incentive to join him and build a movement. As for the charge that it
was through erotic magic that Marcus actually wielded his influence, relatively recent work in the sociology of magic suggests that women used the idea of erotic magic as a sort of cover for their sexual promiscuity, or even just falling in love with someone who was not their husband. The claim ‘I was enchanted’ acts to protect the honour of the adulterous woman, particularly in a case like this, where the woman returns and is compelled to do public (?) penance for her actions. Magic acts here to reduce or displace the active agency of the woman, as in the famous ‘the devil made me do it’ defence.

There is however reason to be suspicious of Irenaeus’ narrative, which gives the impression of a cautionary tale with little basis in fact, lacking as it does all mention of specific names and places. One thinks immediately of The Acts of Paul and Thecla, in which the betrothed heroine is lured away from her home and her impending marriage to follow Paul. Paul, for his part, is thrown out of Iconium by a host of angry men, who accuse the apostle of bewitching their women. To me at least, the parallel between ‘Paul, the itinerant teacher who lures away women by magic’ (even though the women insist that they are drawn to his teachings of their own volition) and ‘Marcus, the itinerant teacher who lures away women by magic’ (even though the women protest that their reasons for joining them have to do with the agency and voice that Marcus gives them) is simply too good to be true.

4. New and old Paulinism(s): Rethinking hieratic innovation among Christian specialists

Irenaeus’ characterisation of Marcus and its relation to stereotyped narratives of women’s agency in early Christian circles, including Paul in the Acts of Paul and

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35 The argument, in a slightly different form (that erotic magic was directed by young men at young women guarded within their households) was first proposed by Winkler (1990): women in love were “considerably more watched and guarded and disciplined than their brothers, and presumably had less access to male experts with their books and the money for hiring them”. The theory was accepted by Graf (1998) and further nuanced by Dickie (2000).

36 The phrase first appears in the English vernacular, at least in print, in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (1952) – an excellent example of women’s agency being reduced by resort to the excuse of external compulsion.

37 It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Tertullian claims that the author of the Acts of Paul and Thecla was a deacon from Asia Minor caught red-handed producing the legend, out of love for Paul (De Bapt. 17.5). The terminus ante quem for the Acts of Paul and Thecla is ±190 CE, thus around the probable date of the composition of Adv. Haer.
Thecla, reminds us of something fairly obvious that we have been neglecting: that in the second century, we have evidence for an active and protracted ‘battle for Paul’.\(^\text{38}\) If we keep this in mind, we might read Irenaeus’ accounts of Valentinian teachers – particularly Marcus – with a slightly different eye: even in Irenaeus’ highly negative characterisation, Marcus appears to be a standard, even faithful, continuator of Paul.

Let us consider the social situation in 1 Corinthians, i.e. mid-first-century CE Corinth. From that letter, we learn something of the community of Christ devotees there.\(^\text{39}\) It is of mixed social status, with ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ uncomfortably sharing fellowship together. One issue that arises is whether or not a Christian can eat meat sacrificed to idols, something Paul does not actively ban (1Cor 8), although Irenaeus uses the practice as a way of condemning ‘heretics’, including all Valentinians (haer. 1.6.3; cf. 1.24.5 on the followers of Basilides and Saturnilus eating meat sacrificed to idols; 1.26.3 on the Nicolaitans doing the same; 1.28.2 on the Carpocratians). The community shares meals (1Cor 11:17–33) (cf. Marcus’s feasts, Iren. haer. 1.13.4) and, more to the point, engages in prophecy – something which apparently involved women, albeit somewhat controversially. Paul, though striving to put prophetic women in their place, does not completely exclude women from the practice (1Cor 11; 14).

Paul’s letters had not yet reached the status of ‘scripture’ by the time that Irenaeus was writing a century later, but it is clear that Irenaeus knows of them. He cites 1 and 2 Corinthians in Adv. Haer., along with Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles.\(^\text{40}\) Although he never grants too much authority to the man he simply calls ‘the apostle’, at times Irenaeus quotes from him at length to refute Valentinian doctrines, focusing particularly on 1Cor 15:50, “flesh cannot inherit the kingdom”.

At this point, we may pause and ask why Irenaeus is so focused on Marcus. I detect here a major battle over Paul – not so much Paul’s letters as Pauline communal and ritual practice. In short, every element of Marcus’s ritual activity, as Irenaeus describes them, has precedent in the ritual and social lives of Pauline Corinthians. This is not to say that there was a direct line of continuity between Paul’s Corinthian Christ-followers and those of Marcus, but that Marcus most likely considered himself to be acting perfectly in keeping with Paul’s...

\(^{38}\) The theory that Paul became, in the second century, the apostolus haereticorum was first proposed around the turn of the twentieth century by e.g. Adolf von Harnack (1964 [1909], 382–386) but has since been discredited (Lindemann 1979; Dassmann 1979; White 2011).

\(^{39}\) The best study remains Meeks (2003).

\(^{40}\) 1Cor in Adv. Haer (1:3); 2Cor in Adv. Haer (3:7); Gal (3:22); Ephes (5:2); Phil (4:18); Col (1:3) 1Thess (5:6); 2Thess (5:25). On Irenaeus’ use of the Pastoral Epistles, see White (2011).
teachings and community-formation. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Valentinians traced their spiritual or apostolic lineage back to Theudas, who was a disciple of Paul (Clem. Al. Strom. 7.17; cf. Letter to Flora 1). If it is the case that Marcus saw himself as a Pauline Christian and strove to educate and consecrate others into Pauline Christianity, we might need to re-consider whether it is accurate to call him, or other Valentinians, ‘Gnostic hieratic innovators’ or ‘entrepreneurs’. They advocated a form of Christian ‘lived religion’ that was already a century old.

5. Rethinking Irenaeus

To conclude, I suggest that we turn an old paradigm on its head: rather than perceiving Marcus as the ‘heretic’ who took liberties with Paul, we might consider Irenaeus as the true innovator here. That would be ironic indeed, given that Irenaeus is widely acknowledged as the first member of a nascent orthodoxy to mention an early form of the doctrine of apostolic succession at Rome (haer. 3.3.3). Yet no one, to my knowledge, has ventured to ask where Irenaeus fits in this model of apostolic succession, or why it was truly important to him.¹ He was not himself a Roman, and did not hold any ecclesiastical office in Rome. There is no indication that he had any direct connection with Roman Christians. According to Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 5.5), he was a ‘auditor’ of Polycarp from Smyrna, but Irenaeus himself – perhaps tellingly – does not lay out his own pedigree anywhere in Adv. Haer.² Were such a pedigree important, one can be sure that he would have told us. Eusebius also tells us that Irenaeus was despatched to Rome in 177 CE with a letter for the bishop, Eleuterus, on the suffering of the Christians at Lugdunum in Gallia Lugdunensis under Marcus Aurelius, but then, when the Christians were martyred, he returned to become bishop in place of Pothinus, who had been killed in the massacre (Hist. eccl. 5.4.1). If so, as

¹ Steenberg (2012) does note in passing that Irenaeus conveyed apostolic teaching rather than apostolic succession, as is usually presumed. In other words, Irenaeus faithfully transmitted the theology he had learned from Polycarp. Steenberg however also believes that the reason why Irenaeus’ theology was rarely espoused and transmitted in ‘orthodox’ or Catholic tradition is that its proponents already agreed with him and thus had no reason to cite him by name. However, I see no compelling reason to imagine that Irenaeus’ theology represented the dominant understanding of ‘the’ Christian faith in the second century. Steenberg rightly accepts that the ‘Great Church’ did not yet exist in Irenaeus’ day, yet he consistently uses the term ‘perversions’ to characterise those forms of Christian practice that Irenaeus denounces.

² At haer. 3.3.4 he notes, in his discussion of apostolic succession, only that he saw Polycarp when he himself was young, not that he studied under him.
Steenberg notes (2012, 202), he must have been in Rome at the same time as Justin. Although Steenberg sees Justin’s influence in Irenaeus’ writing, it is curious that Irenaeus does not mention him as one of the great ‘guiding lights’ of apostolic teaching. If Irenaeus were not the only representative of a True Doctrine in Rome, one gets no sense of this from Adv. Haer., only of Irenaeus’ overriding contempt for Gnostic hieratic specialists across the Empire, from Simon in Samaria to Marcus’ followers, who had, so he reports, penetrated the Rhône valley by the middle of the second century (haer. 1.13.7).

But there is evidence that Irenaeus, perhaps like Marcus, saw himself as a true continuator of Paul. The very title of Adversus Haereses, Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως, (the Refutation and Overthrow of What is Falsey Called Knowledge), invokes 1Tim 6:20, τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως, and Irenaeus invokes Pauline terminology throughout the tractate. Yet membership of a Pauline community was not a pre-requisite for citing Paul. And even if he were a member of such a group, it was certainly not identical with a supposed ‘Great Church’ in whose name he wrote. Irenaeus himself participated in Christian theological disputes and knowledge-production as a textual producer rather than as a bishop (whatever that meant in the second century) or as someone concerned with the direction and oversight of a community of Christians.

Could it be, then, that we have overstated his pastoral role, while insisting upon seeing him as a dominant and driving voice of a ‘Great Church’?

It is perhaps instructive that, for all the value that we place on Adv. Haer. today, it is one of only two of Irenaeus’ works to have survived antiquity, nor is it well-attested. In antiquity, at any rate, Irenaeus’ legacy was modest:

43 The title is missing from our Greek manuscript of Adv. Haer., but is given by Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 5.7.1). As Benjamin White has pointed out, this is the sole attestation in extant second-century literature of the phrase used in 1Tim 6:20; the next known occurrence is Clem. Alex. Strom. 2.11; 3.18 – but only as a direct citation of 1Tim 6:20 (White 2011, 126). On Pauline citations in Adv. Haer., see Dassman (1979, 296–7); Norris (1990); Balás (1992).

44 Parvis (2012b) observes that Irenaeus understood ‘bishop’ (episkopos) at this time as “above all a teacher, a publicly accredited witness to the teaching of the apostles”. I find his explanation both helpful and a tinge apologetic: “It is easy for us to misunderstand that and to read him as if he were speaking of authority and some kind of juridical power. He is not” (Parvis 2012b, 14). It seems to me that his authority as ‘bishop’ is something asserted much later by Eusebius rather than a claim by Irenaeus himself.

45 I love Paul Parvis’ wry comment concerning Irenaeus’ rhetorical style: “There was a Baptist friend of the family who used to write in the margin of his sermon notes, ‘Weak point. Shout like hell’. Does Irenaeus ever do that?” (Parvis 2012a, 198).

46 Foster and Parvis (2012, xi). We have no complete Greek manuscripts. An extensive fragment of a papyrus roll from Oxyrhynchus (PΩxy 405), dated c. 200 CE, contains portions of Book
[T]here is no great or obvious Irenaean history in the decades and generations following his death. The man whose theological expression is taken today by many as a kind of landmark of the second century, who is described, rightly, as “one of the most important theologians in the period before the Council of Nicæa”, is not remembered, not discussed, by his peers and successors – at least, not in theological terms [...].

As Steenberg notes, Irenaeus’ lasting utility was not as a theologian, or as a representative of some True Doctrine, but as a polemicist. His work of exclusion and his gift for satire served perfectly the needs of a developing orthodoxy.

6. Conclusion

I have endeavoured here to ask what type of ‘lived religious experience’ individuals such as Marcus offered their clients. In particular, I have asked two questions of the material: a) what exactly counted as ‘innovation’ in the entrepreneurial environment of the high Empire? And b) in a context evidently obsessed with issues of continuity, succession, and legitimacy, how did these Gnostic hieratic specialists establish their authority? On the basis of their own talents? Or did Irenaeus substitute their claims to apostolic connections with a false genealogy of heresy, tracing them back to the ‘arch-heretic’ Simon Magus?

At one level, we may say, Irenaeus’ success has lain in convincing generations of Church historians that in the second century there was already one True Church that was nevertheless imperilled by the attacks of ‘heretics’ – the people I term ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’. But if this picture is false, what conclusions are we to draw? If there was indeed as yet no ‘Great Church’, there cannot have been a system in place that provided secure authority for theological claims. If, as everyone agrees, the genealogy from Simon Magus is a fabrication, these hieratic specialists must truly have been self-authorising. Conversely, we need to ask who, then, was authorising Irenaeus? My suggestion here is that Irenaeus’ success has lain in convincing generations of Church historians that in the second century there was already one True Church that was nevertheless imperilled by the attacks of ‘heretics’ – the people I term ‘Gnostic hieratic specialists’.

3.9.2–3, which suggests that Adv. Haer. made its way to Egypt shortly after its composition, most likely during Irenaeus’ own lifetime. There is also a fourth-century papyrus now in Jena that contains the Greek text of Bk 5.3.2–13.1. Books 4 and 5 are also extant in Armenian, along with fragments of other parts of the work. Beyond its (extensive) use by Hippolytus and Epiphanius (who merely plagiarise it, without crediting Irenaeus or drawing explicitly on his authority), it does not have a robust Nachleben until the modern era. See Gamble (1995, 80–81); Foster and Parvis (2012a). Parvis (2012a) provides a fascinating account of the creation of modern critical editions of Irenaeus and the ecclesiological wranglings that lie behind them.

47 Steenberg (2012, 199).
48 Steenberg (2012, 199).
næus was on the margins of merely inchoate systems of ecclesiastical transmission (which he himself never articulates in this work). He built his own authority upon the very techniques he works so hard to expose and condemn: deploying proof-texts and exegesis, philosophical argument, radical polemic, down-right fabrications. In other words, Irenæus plunged whole-heartedly into a battle of the books.\(^49\) We can only imagine what Marcus ‘the Magus’ might have thought of all this – assuming that Irenæus was important in his world at all. Though Irenæus depicts him as a dangerous innovator, it is by no means impossible that Marcus clove to the Pauline form of Christian worship. If there was a religious innovator here, it was Irenæus himself, with his page after page of words, spilling out into the broad, open landscape of late second-century Rome.

References


\(^49\) Even if we were inclined to grant Irenæus his succession of apostolic teaching going back to Polycarp and (traditionally and problematically) the Gospel of John, we may remember that Valentinus, Irenæus’ chief opponent in *Adv. Haer.*, traced his own lineage through Theudas and back to Paul. Many could, and did, play the apostolic succession-game, and Irenæus had no more claim to authenticity through Polycarp than Valentinus did at this point in the development of Christianity.


