

How Spiritualism and Theosophy Haunt Early Christian Studies The Case of Gnosticism¹

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“The words Gnosis (gnōsis = Knowledge) and Gnosticism relate to certain sects which, during the first centuries in which Christianity was developing, competed with it upon its own grounds....the memory of the Gnostic sects, after the days when they had been eliminated by orthodox Christianity, did not attract much attention. Thenceforth these heresies were dismissed by historians of the Church as fantastic dreams which a little light had been enough to dispel. It was not until the eighteenth century, that epoch of universal curiosity – an epoch in which, moreover, there were mystics, occultists and hermetists searching for spiritual food in all the most ancient and peculiar places—that the Gnosticism of antiquity began to be thought less unworthy of interest.”

Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*²

Writing in the late 1950s, Jean Doresse sets the stage for his readers to understand “Gnosticism” in ancient and modern thought prior to the spectacular 1945 discovery of the cache of texts known collectively as the Nag Hammadi Library. As his introductory remarks make clear, Doresse defines Gnosticism as ancient, sectarian, heretical competition for the orthodox Christianity that vanquished it; he traces the current interest in Gnosticism to recent historical circumstances sparked by what he calls an age of “universal curiosity” and especially by “mystics, occultists, and hermetists.” It was indeed during the eighteenth century that Europeans encountered documents identified

¹ Some of the ideas in this essay appear both in Denise K. Buell, “The Afterlife is Not Dead: Spiritualism, Postcolonial Theory, and Early Christian Studies,” *Church History* 78.4 (December 2009): 862-872 and in a talk presented in the “Holy Spirits: Spiritualism in the Formation of Religious Studies” Workshop, Williams College, January 2010. My thanks especially to Jason Josephson for his feedback on this piece at multiple stages of its composition; thanks also to the other workshop participants for their stimulating feedback at the workshop: Mary Keller, Jeffrey Kripal, Gauri Viswanathan, Eliza Kent, and Christian Thorne. Special thanks to Jasmine Thomasian for her research and editorial assistance.

² Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, ET by Philip Mairet (French original, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958; ET, New York: Viking, 1960), 1.

as penned by “Gnostics,” in contrast to simply texts that disparagingly discuss “Gnostics,” in what are now referred to as the Codex Askew and the Bruce Codex.³ Both Coptic codices were brought to Great Britain in the second half of the 18th century and acquired by the British Museum.⁴ The texts known from these two codices are the *Pistis Sophia* and *A part of The Books of the Savior* (Askew Codex), and the two *Books of Jeu* and an untitled text (Bruce Codex).

But this spiritual food was not actually made available until well into the following century. Only in 1851 was the Codex Askew published, first in Latin, and later into French and English (1901), and then German (1905). The Bruce Codex was first published in French (1891), and then in German (1892) and English (1933). Also in the late nineteenth century, 1896, a third Coptic codex, known as the Berlin Codex, came to light, containing *The Gospel of Mary*, a version of *The Secret Book of John*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Acts of Peter*, though these texts were not published until 1955. Thus, the discussion about “Gnostics” until the late nineteenth century continued to be based primarily upon polemical sources of the early Christian heresiologists.

Nonetheless, as Doresse notes, starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, some modern works begin to be published that focus on Gnostics or Gnosticism; he marks out Jacques Matter’s 1828 *Histoire critique de Gnosticisme* for special comment, arguing that Matter’s definition of Gnosticism as “the introduction into the bosom of Christianity all the cosmological and theosophical speculations which had formed the most considerable part of the ancient religions of the Orient and had also been adopted by the Neo-platonists of the West,”⁵ found favor among “a generation which was as attracted to mystical marvels as those of the previous centuries had been allergic to them: it went far to make Gnosticism fashionable.”⁶ Matter argued that Gnosticism was a form of “theosophical” thought, drawing syncretistically from other philosophies and religions, including by making a distinction between exoteric and esoteric teachings.⁷ Although Matter himself clearly viewed Gnosticism as a heresy, Doresse’s point is that Matter’s work fueled interest in Gnosticism rather than confining it to a problematic hurdle in the triumph of Christian orthodoxy. Doresse cites Flaubert

³ Both codices are in Coptic and understood to be translations of Greek originals (as is also the case for the texts preserved at Nag Hammadi).

⁴The Bruce Codex was purchased in 1769 in Thebes by James Bruce during his travels and acquired by the British Museum in 1842 while the Codex Askew was acquired in 1785 from the Askew estate (Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 64-65, 76-77).

⁵ Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme, et de son influence sur les Sectes religieuses and philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne* (Paris: F. G. Levrault, 1828), 16; cited in Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 2.

⁶ Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 2.

⁷ Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme*, 13.

and Barrès as among those whose works illustrated modern interest in Gnosticism, and singles out for criticism archaeologists who, “too susceptible to the taste of the public” have been overly quick to label as Gnostic “monuments and relics dug up from the soil of Roman and Byzantine Egypt.”⁸

Although hinting at his discomfort if not disdain, Doresse tells us nothing more about the public with a taste for Gnosticism or about the kinds of mystical marvels captivating his eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors. In fact, it is surprising that he highlights these modern factors at all. One might expect mention of the discovery of ancient manuscripts or monuments as they bear on the study of early Christian movements including those labeled “Gnostic,” but why mention modern mystics, occultists, and hermetists? Why comment that Gnosticism became fashionable in the middle of the nineteenth century, in the wake of Matter’s work?

Doresse’s references to eighteenth century mystic, occultists, and hermetists need to be interpreted in terms of what he does not mention, the flourishing and popularity of spiritualism or spiritism in nineteenth century Europe, Great Britain, and North America as well as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mystics, occultists, and hermetists who took a very active interest in re-interpreting early Christian history and indeed in claiming Gnosticism for themselves, especially the members of the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875. Indeed, the first English translation of *Pistis Sophia* from the Askew Codex was published in 1900 by a theosophist, G.R.S. Mead.⁹ Theosophists and their spiritualist, occultist, and hermetic predecessors and contemporaries actively engaged questions of Christian origins, and found inspiration in the “cosmological and theosophical speculations” that Matter and Doresse among others found problematic about Gnosticism.

This essay focuses on these largely forgotten contributors to the modern study of early Christian history, especially Gnosticism. I argue that spiritualists and theosophists informed late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarly interpretations of Christian origins, especially the definition and interpretation of “Gnosticism” in two major ways.¹⁰ First, they produced their own interpretations of early Christian history

⁸ Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 2.

⁹ G.R.S. Mead, *The Gnostics: Fragments of a Faith Forgotten; A Contribution to the Study of the Origins of Christianity* (1900; repr. 1960; New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1960); idem, *The Gnosis of the Mind* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906); idem, *The Hymns of Hermes* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1907).

¹⁰ I have thus tried to begin to answer Ann Taves’s observation that “little attention has been given to Spiritualists’ interests in Christian origins,” although as a scholar of Christian origins, I realize that much remains to be considered (*Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], n.77, 406). I have not aimed to comprehensively document spiritualist or theosophical engagements with

that challenged doctrinal versions about the origins and development of Christian traditions. Both spiritualists and theosophists offered reconstructions of early Christian history that emphasized teachings and practices compatible with those they favored in the present and proposed reconstructions they used to critique other contemporary forms of Christianity. Theosophists found early Christian forms of gnosis and the categories of “gnostics” and “Gnosticism” especially useful for articulating their own views. Founder Helene Blavatsky as well as early theosophists such as Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater appealed to “gnostics” as the true early Christians and theosophists as their heirs.

Second, spiritualists and theosophists served as foils for others to define ancient Christians. Characterizations of Gnosticism as heretical because elitist in its ideas about who has access to salvation, corrupted by foreign thought, anti-institutional and strongly individualistic, dualistic, and doctrinally flawed especially in terms of understandings of sin and Jesus, echo charges made against spiritualists and/or Theosophists in their heydays.¹¹ Thus, we need to consider whether scholars defining

Christian origins or even “Gnosticism” in this piece but to pursue further some of the issues I raised in Buell, “The Afterlife is Not Dead.”

¹¹ Another standard characterization of Gnosticism concerns sexual ethics, with the assertion that Gnostics adopted a lifestyle of either extreme asceticism or sexual libertinism. Characterizing Gnostics as bipolar in their sexual ethics appears before the 19th century (e.g., Johannes Laurence von Mosheim *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, English trans. by James Murdock and Henry Soames, ed. William Stubbs [Latin original 1737;1741; repr. London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green et al, 1863],1:85), citing as support for this view The late second-century Christian author Clement of Alexandria’s mapping of Christian rivals as either excessively ascetic (Tatian) or excessively permissive (Epiphane) is the most common source for scholars who claim that Gnostics lived out one of these extremes (*Stromateis* 3.5), even though Clement does not himself ascribe these behaviours to “Gnostics.” This view persists even in one of the most respected surveys of early Christian history: “The Gnostic ethic...could take one of two forms...the majority of sects demanded an ascetic life with rules for mortification of the flesh and a special prohibition on marriage...But some groups drew the opposite conclusion...and became notorious for their orgies of immorality” (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, revised ed [1967; London/New York: Penguin, 1993], 36). While charges of ethical extremism among Gnostics thus pre- and postdates the rise of modern spiritualism, I have nonetheless wondered whether it’s a coincidence that biblical scholars call attention to sexual ethics as evidence of Gnosticism’s problematic implications precisely when the counter-normative cultural options available to late 19th c. Americans and Europeans included the celibate, spirit-channeling Shakers, the vegetarian rigorists of Graham and Kellogg, and the Free-love spiritual activism of Victoria Woodhull. Would calls for marriage law reform have sounded like libertinism? For the foundational study about spiritualist activism with respect to gender, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (1989; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); see also Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers; The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

Gnosticism did so with one eye on contemporaries who were interpreting early Christian texts for themselves to quite different ends. In other words, I am arguing that spiritualist and theosophical interpretations of Christian origins served as sites of friction leaving spectral traces upon the professionalized forms of biblical and early Christian studies.¹²

Let me stress, though, that we should not draw too sharp a distinction between scholarly writings and those of spiritualists and theosophists in the time period under consideration. The second half of the nineteenth and even through the first half of the early twentieth century was a period in which biblical studies and church history were becoming professionalized but this was also an era when educated and curious folks published and presented works without being credentialized professionals and when those who were clerics and academics became fascinated with and sometimes active participants in séances, psychical research, and various forms of esotericism and occultism.¹³ Classicist E.R. Dodds, for example, served also as the President of the British Society for Psychical Research. This broader context is crucial for understanding how and why spiritualism as a popular movement and theosophy as one of its esoteric offshoots is relevant to consider in relation to the study of Christian origins.

Considering spiritualist and theosophical engagements with early Christianity and “Gnosticism” in particular challenges us today to question easy distinctions between academic and non-academic perspectives and to rediscover an important set of voices whose perspectives on early Christianity we need not share to appreciate both their sincerity and their significance for challenging and shaping ongoing discourses about what is at stake in the present when we reconstruct early Christian history and interpret ancient sources.

¹²The missionary competition of Theosophists with Christians in India served as specific context for contesting claims about Christian origins, including the place of “gnostics.” In this piece, I do not explore the context of missionary competition between Christians and Theosophists in India on the study of Christian origins. Nevertheless, to give one example, Sydney Cave insists that Christian missionaries must chart a path, as he says the early Christians did, between “idolatry” and “theosophic mysticism.” Sydney Cave, *The Religious Quest of India: Redemption Hindu and Christian* [London: Humphrey Milford, 1919], 230). In his view, “Any one familiar to some extent with the writings of the early fathers of the Church will feel, if he lives in India, that he is living in a world surprisingly like theirs.” Cave even recommends that missionaries read scholarship on early Christianity, continuing: “books as Harnack’s *Expansion of Christianity*, or Glover’s *Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* would, *mutatis mutandi*, serve, far better than any missionary reports would, to describe the religious situation in India today” (ibid., 1-2). See also Buell, “The Afterlife is Not Dead;” and Gauri Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of the Occult,” *Critical Inquiry* 27.1 (2000): 1-20.

¹³ See especially Steven Wasserstrom’s book *Religion after Religion : Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Questions of Approach

So what do we wish to know from a study of Gnosticism? Christianity in all its variety? Why? To provide more options for contemporary theological reflection? To put normative Christianity on a firm historical foundation by showing the superiority of its particular structures and traditions? To legitimate changes to the definitional norms and practices of contemporary Christians (feminist, liberationist, evangelical)? To understand Gnostic phenomena as exempla of the religious experiences of humanity, and hence as possibilities for us? To plumb the depths of human intellectual folly? Or is the task more limited? Is it to distinguish a self-identified group and a complex of textual material? To elucidate the meaning of obscure passages in ancient literature?

Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*¹⁴

The category of Gnosticism has received critical scrutiny in the wake of the Nag Hammadi find.¹⁵ Karen King's important study of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism underscores the connections between the methods, assumptions, and approaches on modern interpreters and the results of their engagement with ancient writings. For example, when Adolf von Harnack writes in 1885: "The movement which resulted in the Catholic Church owes its right to a place in the history of Christianity to the victory over Gnosticism and to the preservation of an important part of early Christian tradition,"¹⁶ he defines Gnosticism so in keeping with

¹⁴ King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2003), 18-19.

¹⁵ Most notably, Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); King, *What is Gnosticism?* (2003); Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); and David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Varsity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). I side with those who reject Gnosticism as shorthand for arch-heresy of early Christianity, preferring instead to reconstruct early Christian history as a series of struggles among groups whose various visions were equally contested and potentially viable—a move that allows me to engage what has been classified as Gnostic on an equal footing with texts and views retrospectively located as representing orthodoxy (see Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], esp. 8-10 and 79-106; idem, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], esp. 116-137).

¹⁶ See Adolf von Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, vol. 2, English trans. Neil Buchanan from the 3rd German edition (German original 1885; 3rd ed. 1900; New York: Dover, 1961), 2-3. "The second century of the existence of the Gentile-Christian communities was characterized by the victorious conflict with Gnosticism and the Marcionite church, by the gradual development of an ecclesiastical doctrine, and by the decay of the early Christian enthusiasm. The general result

one of the possibilities King lists above: “to put normative Christianity on a firm historical foundation by showing the superiority of its particular structures and traditions.” As she notes, this way of framing Gnosticism continues to distort scholarly engagement with early Christian history.

Like King, I emphasize the importance of considering the historical and religious contexts in which modern scholarly creation of the category “Gnosticism” emerged as a way to address this distortion. I do so by highlighting the spiritualists and theosophists whose significance for the production of the category of Gnosticism and terms of debate surrounding it remain largely unknown.¹⁷ I show both what spiritualists and theosophists had to say about early Christians and “Gnosticism” and how we can see the traces and impacts of these views in scholarship that helped to shape the mainstream academic views about Gnosticism.

In other words, I am asking not whether Gnosticism is a viable category but rather, in King’s words, “what do we wish to know from a study of Gnosticism?” My concerns are neither to discern anachronisms that would disable “Gnosticism” as a category nor to uncover historical evidence that would authorize the term. It is certainly the case, as many others have shown, that the term “gnostic” (*gnostikos*; related to Gk. *gnōsis*) appears as both a term of self-designation for some early Christians and the target of heresiological polemic in early Christian literature starting in the mid-100s, and the writings of those considered “orthodox” or respected representatives of Christian tradition long served for as the primary evidence for “gnostics,” including the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and a work attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.¹⁸ Of these authors, only Clement used the term positively but also in contrast to rival Christians he portrayed as peddling a form of “puffed up” and problematic gnosis. And it is also the case that “Gnosticism” as a term seems to be coined in the eighteenth century to designate a heresy of early Christianity, characterized by a multiplicity of opinion (instead of the pure unity of apostolic origins), arising from the corruption of pure teachings with “oriental philosophy.”¹⁹ But this information only gets us so far.

was the establishment of a great ecclesiastical association which, forming at one and the same time a political commonwealth, school and union for worship, was based on the firm foundation of an ‘apostolic’ law of faith, a collection of ‘apostolic’ writings, and finally, an ‘apostolic’ organization. This institution was the Catholic Church” (2:1). For an extensive analysis of Harnack’s interpretation of “Gnosticism,” see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* 55-70.

¹⁷ Jeff Kripal’s *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) does draw from this pool, though in this work he is not directly engaging spiritualist writings.

¹⁸ Brakke, *The Gnostics*.

¹⁹ E.g., Mosheim, *Institutes*, 1:82-85.

Instead, by examining spiritualist and theosophical views about early Christians we can better understand how and why the term Gnosticism came to have the kinds of traction it does. Spiritualists and theosophists may seem marginal now; their voices have been rendered ghostly or aberrant in the study of early Christianity. But we can learn much from recognizing and responding to what haunts our fields. Always double-edged, a “haunting always harbors the violence...that made it, and the... utopian,” the potential for alternatives to present social structures and ethical relations.²⁰ Exploring the traces of their views on scholarship whose impact we still recognize will help us to evaluate how, why, whether, and under what kinds of conditions to use the term Gnosticism in the future.

I have come to find the term haunting useful to make vivid the way my relationship to early Christian texts, my disciplinary predecessors, and my current ethical and social commitments defy mapping on a linear grid.²¹ To speak in terms of haunting is to question assumptions about continuities and discontinuities between the past, present, and future, even as it centers the present (one is haunted in the present).²² To speak in terms of haunting helps us to reject the equally problematic notions of causal determinism or sameness between ancient and modern contexts. Haunting offers one way to avoid the trap of anachronism or the implication that concepts we might wish to transform or undo are timeless, static, or inevitable. Critical reflections on religious studies have focused on theology or specifically Christianity as a haunting force or constitutive exclusion in the study of religion, but the place of spiritualism and esoteric movements such as theosophy in this disciplining process have not received much attention,²³ and virtually no attention in biblical studies. This essay begins to address this lack.

²⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 207.

²¹ Some of the material in the next few paragraphs is adapted from Buell, “God’s Own People: Specters of Race, ethnicity, and Gender in Early Christian Studies,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 167-171.

²² What I am suggesting, then, is somewhat different from the analyses by Terry Castle (*The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993]) and Carla Freccero (*Queer/Early/Modern* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2006]).

²³ There are some exceptions to this rule; e.g., Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*; Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), and Jason A. Josephson, “God’s Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of ‘Religion,’” *History of Religions* 52.4 (May 2013): 309-339.

Setting the Stage: A Brief Overview of Spiritualism and Theosophy

E.R. Dodds depicts ancient Gnostics in terms drawn from the eighteenth century predecessors of spiritualists and theosophists: "I am inclined to see the Gnostic teachers less as 'philosophers' in any modern sense of the word than as natural myth-makers and visionaries, men of the stamp of Swedenborg and William Blake," drawing from personal visions or "mediumistic utterances."²⁴ He does not mention spiritualists per se, but, as I noted earlier, Dodds was a member and one time President of the British Society for Psychical Research, a society dedicated to investigating the claims about spirit communication made by spiritualists.

So what are the central features of spiritualism and theosophy? Spiritualism is best described as a loose, popular set of movements held together by the idea that the human persists after the death of the body and that "discarnate" souls communicate with still embodied ones through mediums—whether objects such as tables to be tipped or rapped, ouija boards, or living bodies through whom discarnate souls may speak or direct hands to write. Most often, spiritualism is said to have begun in 1848, with the rappings of the Fox sisters in upstate New York, though it has important precedents in earlier religious trends of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries including the visions and teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, Methodism, and Andrew Jackson Davis.²⁵

Theosophy, in the form of the Theosophical Society, was founded in 1875 by Colonel Olcott and Helene Blavatsky in the context of their interactions with spiritualist practices among other things. Theosophy departs from spiritualism in offering both a systematic doctrine and a coherent collective identity, even though there many subgroups and variations of theosophy arose in the wake of the society's founding. Theosophical writings often were and are authorized with reference to mediumship—that the source of their knowledge is not the human author so much as a "master" who has communicated through a chosen person; theosophical groups structured themselves around knowledge understood to be secret, but theoretically accessible to all humans in a series of levels—correlating to levels of spiritual and physical perfectability.

Spiritualists largely held the view of Jesus as fully human (where human is importantly defined as characterized by spirit) but in communication with divinity or transformed into divinity and thus an exemplar of the kind of spiritual development

²⁴ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience From Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 19 n.1. Dodds suggested, building directly on E. de Faye and echoing Hans Jonas, that we should imagine a "Gnostic tendency" that expressed a profound experience of alienation in imaginative mythological terms welling up from "what we now call the Unconscious" (18-19).

²⁵ See Anne Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*.

potentially available to all humans. Theosophists develop this point, though some viewed Jesus as a fully divine being whose divinity humans can also accomplish, rather than as a perfected human. By means of insights gained from discarnate spirits and the training of one's own mediumship (spiritualists) or by means of insights gained from adepts and initiation corresponding to one's own spiritual development (theosophists), they interpreted biblical and early Christian sources to proffer an optimistic sense of human potential.

Spiritualist and theosophical writings, despite important differences, share some general tendencies in the ways they speak about Christian origins. Most broadly, these writings tend to view Christian history as the story of one manifestation of universal truths and of a process of covering over or turning away from these truths.²⁶ Thus, they produced narratives about Christianity that located the tradition within a much larger, often explicitly comparative, framework arguing that neither Jesus nor the central claims of Christianity were unique; if properly understood, the key doctrines and practices of Christianity are glosses on insights (gnosis) that predate and exceed Christianity.

For most spiritualists and theosophists, the truths in Christianity could also be found in, if not causally traced to, contexts including mystery cults of the Mediterranean, Egyptian religion and hermeticism, Greek philosophical thought, Buddhism, and Vedic Indian traditions. In making such connections, spiritualists and theosophists continued the trends that Jean Doresse notes in describing the eighteenth and nineteenth study of Gnosticism, with Gnosticism being linked to a wide variety of sources, and the framing of ancient gnosis coming to include *both* a negative and positive valence.

If Jacques Matter's 1828 study of Gnosticism offered a negative interpretation of Gnosticism, Charles William King's 1864 *The Gnostics and their Remains* is its positive counterpart. King, a numismatist at Cambridge University, proposed that Gnosticism was of Indian origin, transmitted to the Mediterranean world via Buddhism.²⁷ For King,

²⁶ As Ann Taves discusses, spiritualists also read biblical texts to support a universalizing kind of comparative theory of religion in which Christianity is just one type of religion through which spiritual truths may be accessed—but only in some contexts (*Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 180-202).

²⁷ Charles William King, *The Gnostics and their Remains, Ancient and Medieval* (Originally published 1864; second, revised edition, 1887; reprinted, San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1982). King's expertise was in gemstones and numismatics but *The Gnostics and their Remains* was cited extensively by theosophists and reprinted by theosophists. It is not clear that King himself was a theosophist but his skepticism of what Karen King calls the "master narrative" of Christian origins made him a very useful source for theosophists. For example, C.W. King writes very critically of an earlier study of Gnosticism in English that unquestioningly accepts the heresiological perspective; King states that this earlier study errs by "taking for granted, upon the bare word of their opponents, that the various Teachers of the Gnosis were mere heretics, that is,

Gnosticism was less a heresy than a Christian expression of a pre- and non-Christian way of thinking and living. *The Gnostics and Their Remains* became widely cited by members of the Theosophical Society to support their universalizing esoteric views.

In the next two sections, I'll examine spiritualist and theosophical writings in turn, showing how their views relate to those of their contemporaries.

Spiritualists

Salvation, in its more philosophic sense, is soul-growth—divine unfoldment from the innermost outward, and a strictly personal matter. My savior is the *Christ* principle. It was born with me—it is *in* me—it *is* me. It was before the wandering Galilean; before Abraham; before astral world commenced their stately march through sidereal heavens—it is pre-existent—eternal!....

'Work out your own salvation,' is among the best of the Pauline writings.

-James Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*²⁸

Spiritualist writings of the mid- to late-nineteenth century rarely invoke the notion of gnosis but their critiques of nineteenth-century Christianity as moribund and overly materialistic, their disdain for the doctrine of atonement, their positive emphases on the spirit as the persisting element of human personality, and their interest in connecting Christian ideas to non-Christian sources may help us to understand modern depictions and critiques of ancient Gnostics. In addition, as we shall see later in this section, spiritualist optimism about the use of new technologies such as photography, radio, and telephone may shed indirect light on characterizations of Gnosticism.

When spiritualism took off in mid-19th century North America, its participants and proponents were primarily Christian in upbringing, and many maintained relationships to various Christian groups. So it is not surprising many spiritualists interpreted both biblical texts and Christian history. Spiritualists "built an entire religious system around belief in spirit activity and the practice of spirit communication" available to all.²⁹ Spiritualists looked to Christian origins especially to support their central claims of the ability of those still living to communicate with the

perverters of the regular (!) Christian doctrine which they had at first embraced as a divine revelation, he [Walsh], like his guides, did not trouble himself any further to investigate the true origin of their systems, but was content with roughly sketching their most prominent features; whilst in explaining their extant productions, he refers all, however diverse in nature, to the same school, and interprets them according to his own preconceived and baseless views of their character" (King, xiii).

²⁸ James Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*, 92.

²⁹Bret Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 8.

spirits of those who have died (the discarnate). Spiritualists found ample evidence in biblical and other ancient writings of spirits communicating with the living, and that this communication is available to all—the two central tenets of this wide-ranging, diverse movement.³⁰ Not only the story of the “witch of Endor,” but also the transfiguration scene in the synoptic gospels (Mark 9:2-10; Matt. 17:1-9; Luke 9:38-36), as well as Mark 13:27, Matthew 10:20 and John 14:12 were among the most cited biblical texts. Furthermore, biblical and early Christian writings were resources for spiritualists’ critiques of centralized authority and institutionally determined structures as well as support for alternatives to Christian doctrines, notably about resurrection, Christology, and salvation in early Christian writings.

Spiritualists rejected the idea of physical resurrection,³¹ understanding that what survives after death is the spirit, a view correlated with the notion of communication between the spirits of those discarnate and those still living in bodies. Unitarian minister turned spiritualist James Peebles, who also served for a time as the editor of the spiritualist publication *Banner of Light*, appealed to Gnostic texts to support this view: “[Gnostics] held to the oriental philosophical theory, that all spirits emanated from God, and were a part of him;that Christ, as a heavenly spirit, was not invested with a mortal body after his resurrection, or, better, emancipation.”³²

Especially popular with spiritualist interpreters were the ideas that Jesus had been an ordinary human who developed himself into a particularly successful and sensitive medium for spiritual forces. Abraham Wallace put it this way in a 1904 lecture to the London Spiritualist Alliance, that Jesus was “a highly gifted psychic” who never claimed to be divine but was “the most divine expression of humanity,” and thus an exemplar for all humans.³³ This understanding of Jesus both supported and helped to articulate the view that human salvation is a matter self-cultivation—that all have a

³⁰ For fuller discussion, see Denise Kimber Buell, “Hauntology meets Post-Humanism: Some Payoffs for Biblical Studies,” in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer Koosed (Semeia Studies; Atlanta: SBL Publications, 2014), 29-56.

³¹ Spiritualists portrayed Jesus as a fully human exemplar for spiritual intercourse or mediumistic development. In this respect, spiritualists differ sharply from most scholarly characterizations of early Christian Gnostics. While biblical scholars regularly characterize Gnostics as having a docetic Christology, that is, interpreting Jesus as a divine redeemer who only appeared to be human. Some favoured an adoptionist Christology, that is, the idea that Jesus was born fully human but was spiritually transformed by the reception of the holy spirit at his baptism.

³² Peebles, *Seers of the Ages: Spiritualism Past and Present. Doctrines stated and moral tendencies defined* (Chicago: Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1903), 130.

³³ Abraham Wallace, *Jesus of Nazareth and Modern Scientific Investigation: From the Spiritualist Standpoint*. 2nd ed. (Manchester, UK: Two Worlds, 1920), 13, 6. Also discussed in Buell, “Hauntology Meets Posthumanism,” 46.

“Christ principle” within that can be developed, that is the link between one’s living self and the spiritual plane. Peebles’s strongly individualist notion of salvation nonetheless presupposes that the self is permeable: we all have a Christ-principle within and thus are fundamentally connected; we each must pursue our own salvation through soul-growth, but that means the living person ought to become a medium for spirits; this kind of salvation through ministering spirits is available to everyone; and indeed this is what Jesus did. For spiritualists, there are spirits out there to engage; spirits *and* mediums may be deceitful, so one can and should cultivate one’s body to be the best medium for spirits and to ensure one’s own spiritual advancement.³⁴

Peebles was typical in asserting that salvation does not require the doctrine of atonement—Jesus death on the cross is not interpreted as the central theological event:

Personal character, not the sacrificial blood of goats and kids under the law, not Christ’s under the gospel, decide your individual destiny. Jesus’ merits saved him, none else. Your merits must save you. Each *soul* is a manger, cradling a savior--God in man. The blood of one cannot atone for the sins of another.³⁵

Some spiritualists left their congregations and those who remained were often censured for lack of attendance or doctrinal deviance, especially on the matter of rejecting atonement theology.³⁶

Spiritualists regularly criticized Christian churches of their day as ossified and doctrinally misguided. As Peebles put it,

The age demands, not aping shadows, gloved gentry, nor cowed clergymen fashioned to order in ‘Theological Seminaries,’...not sluggish conservatives infected with stagnant, deathly torpor, staying on earth as do oysters in their beds, praying for the Millenium, because they then hope to ‘sit’—sit under ‘ambrosial’ vines—fearing to brush down cobwebs in their temples lest the roof fall in, and piously opposing the ‘new moon,’ out of a profound respect for the old, forgetting the Carlylean maxim, that the ‘old skin never falls from the serpent till a new one is formed;’ but it demands men and women enthusiastic

³⁴ See Bret Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 107-119.

³⁵ Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*, 92.

³⁶ Ann Taves adduces the case of a woman from my hometown of Oberlin, OH, Elizabeth Schull, who was charged with “not attending church for two years, denying the ‘divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the atonement,’ and ‘embracing modern Spiritualism” (*Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 181). Shull, whose reply Taves quotes, appealed to the authority of her ministering angels and on the correspondence between modern and ancient spiritualism to defend herself.

and full-orbed, *who see in every soul a possible Christ*, in every life a symbol-thought of God...³⁷

Peebles emphasizes the idea that religiosity emerges from the individual not the institution. As Bret Carroll has persuasively argued, spiritualism developed as a movement that simultaneously embraced strong individualism and structure, especially adapting Swedenborg's cosmological visions of heaven and combining them with a concern to establish order in American society that they perceived to have been lost in the time since America's founding. Thus, while critical of religious institutions, spiritualists were not anarchists but appealed both to Christian and American origins as the two ideal forms they aimed to restore in their lives, directed by spirit guides.³⁸

We find these kinds of ideas echoed in—or projected onto—descriptions and assessments of Gnosticism in early Church history in other scholarly writings. For example, in his 1868 lectures on "Gnostic Heresies," Oxford scholar Henry Longueville Mansel argued that "Gnostics" aimed to place human knowledge above divine revelation,³⁹ and rejected the idea of "redemption from sin" and the idea that evil takes the form of sin "as a transgression on the part of a moral agent against the laws and will of a moral Governor," thus challenging the doctrines of both original sin and atonement.⁴⁰

Mansel defined Gnosticism as a distinctively Christian heresy; although he thought that the concept of gnosis and a philosophical perspective arising from its significance should be traced to Plato with Philo as an important Jewish interpreter, he held that "it is not till after the Christian era that the term [gnosis] comes into use as the distinct designation of a certain form of religious philosophy." He continues,

in their actual use, if not in their etymological meaning, the terms Gnostic, Gnosis, Gnosticism, as names of a sect of philosophers or the doctrines professed by them, have been employed exclusively with reference to philosophical

³⁷ James M. Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*, 18-19. In turn, spiritualists came under fire, esp. by clergy (see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 180-190).

³⁸ See Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 9, 16-34, 36, 40, 60-84, 152-76. The idea that Gnosticism "failed" because its adherents eschewed institutional structures persists, relying on a casting salvation by *gnosis* as individualistic and thus inimical to organized communities of Christians, held together by common practices (see e.g., Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* [New York: Vintage, 1979], 142, 178-179).

³⁹ Henry Longueville Mansel, *The Gnostic Heresies of the first and Second Centuries*, ed. J. B. Lightfoot (London: John Murray, 1875), 8.

⁴⁰ Mansel, *Gnostic Heresies*, 12, 13.

systems which have distinguished themselves, not merely as ontological speculations, but also as heretical perversions of Christianity.⁴¹

For Mansel, what makes Gnosticism a Christian heresy and not simply a “philosophy from which the name and many of the leading ideas of Gnosticism are borrowed” is “the idea of Redemption—of a Divine interposition to deliver the world from the dominion of evil and its consequences.”⁴² He also claimed that Gnostics “revived the idea, familiar to the heathen but wholly alien to the spirit of Christianity, of one religion for the wise and the initiated, and another for the ignorant and profane vulgar.”⁴³ These criticisms that Mansel launches define almost exactly the disputed areas between those aligned with spiritualism on the one hand, and those aligned with institutional Christianity including more biblical scholars, on the other hand.

Similarly, for Harnack a generation later, Gnosticism threatened the notion that God created this world and the idea of redemption through Jesus’ death. Gnosticism’s syncretism, in his view, led Gnostics to embrace what he saw as the Hellenistic “soma-sema” (body as a tomb) dualism of spirit and flesh and to make a false distinction between the real God and an inferior creator. These positions radically undermined the idea of Jesus’ death on the cross as salvific, with that salvation being indexed by physical resurrection. Harnack recognized atonement and physical resurrection as central to the forms of Christianity that won and to be contested ideas among early Christians.

Spiritualists did not claim that any being apart from God was responsible for creation, even though they privileged “spirit” and condemned materialism as a scourge of their day. But the other specific doctrinal concerns that Gnostics were characterized as advancing as unsustainable and wrong, notably a rejection of physical resurrection and the doctrine of atonement, were ones spiritualists made vividly central in their critiques of contemporary forms of Christianity.

Yet another characterization of Gnosticism may bear traces of spiritualism, namely, associations of Gnosticism with corruption of Christianity by “foreign” thought, and anti-institutionalism and doctrinal “heresy.” Harnack, for example, famously described Gnosticism as “acute hellenization:” “Gnosticism in all its phases was the violent attempt to drag Christianity down to the level of the Greek world.”⁴⁴ Some spiritualists did view ancient Gnostics as indebted to sources predating Christianity; Peebles, for example, suggested that the eternal truths he proffered had their historical origin in India and had traveled by way of Egypt and Judea to make their way into

⁴¹ Mansel, *Gnostic Heresies*, 2, 2-3.

⁴² Mansel, *Gnostic Heresies*, 3.

⁴³ Mansel, *Gnostic Heresies*, 10.

⁴⁴ Harnack, *History of Dogma* 2:3.

Christianity only to become corroded and degraded by doctrinal and institutional deadweight: "It is averred, with great plausibility, that the Asiatic Gnostics were acquainted with the Gymnophists of India and the Magi of Persia."⁴⁵

But I discern a less direct resonance between spiritualism and descriptions of Gnosticism. The ways that spiritualists employed new technologies both metaphorically and literally to explain and support their insistence that the material and spiritual worlds communicate was something for which they were well known; as Jeffrey Sconce puts it, "American Spiritualism presented an early and most explicit intersection of technology and spirituality."⁴⁶ One of the early spiritualist publications, *The Spiritualist Telegraph*, was named after Samuel Morse's 1844 invention; spirit photography was a popular form of this new imaging technology; and by the end of the 19th century, the telephone and radio supplanted the telegraph as the new frontier for imagining and evaluating wireless communications, including those from spirits.⁴⁷ As the emergence of psychical research in the late 19th century suggests, a number of folks were willing to entertain spiritualist claims using precisely these technologies.

Psychical researchers and spiritualists, as blurry as this distinction might have been for some individuals, differed in their approach to science while both claiming scientific legitimacy. As Daniel Cottom puts it, "spiritualists...would not allow scientific authority to be owned by scientists and confined to the procedures and logic being codified with increasing rigor throughout this century;"⁴⁸ spiritualists both embraced the changes in their world and resisted what we can see in retrospect was the emerging centering of authority in a discourse and practice of professionalized "science." Spiritualists forged a path through dualisms such as rational/irrational and belief/empiricism as well as spirit/matter and self/other, in ways that destabilized the security of claims about the distinction of religion from science or of the claims of any "science" to exclude experiential claims.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Peebles, *Seers of the Age*, 130.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 25. He further holds that "many of our contemporary narratives concerning the 'power' of electronic telecommunications have, if not their origin, then their first significant cultural synthesis in the doctrines of Spiritualism" (25). See also Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 66-71.

⁴⁷ On photography, see Clément Chéroux et al., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); on telephone and radio, see Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 59-91.

⁴⁸ Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60.

⁴⁹ As Daniel Cottom has argued, spiritualists were very much part of the Enlightenment project of and for reason. In Cottom's words, "spiritualism [was]...defined, in part,through a

In a speech delivered at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religion, Cora Richmond, a widely known medium and co-founder of the National Spiritualist Association, made this connection explicit: "all scientific minds who have investigated the phenomenal phases of this movement readily admit, and many of them openly declare that Spiritualism will compel a re-statement of science."⁵⁰ In her view, some of this re-thinking entailed proofs for the persistence of the human personality after the death of the body and thus for immortality.⁵¹

Although spiritualists were critiqued for failing to meet scientific standards of investigation, they were certainly known for using and explaining themselves in terms of the latest technologies. In this combination of association with presentist concerns and divergence from what is claimed or perceived as the dominant center, spiritualism recalls the way that Gnosticism gets defined in many texts as heretical because it sullies pristine earliest Christianity with foreign and "faddish" ideas.

Directly on this point, biblical scholar Francis C. Burkitt, in his 1931 lectures on Gnosticism (funded by an endowment established by Samuel Morse!) writes: "The various forms of Gnosticism are attempts to reformulate and express the ordinary Christianity in terms and categories which suited the science and philosophy of the day."⁵² Burkitt's assessment of this attempt strikes me as self-consciously aware of competition in his own day over the right to articulate what constitutes real science: "when the Church of the second century rejected what seemed to be a scientific account of Religion and clung to an annalistic account it was taking a course that was

struggle epitomized by the question of who would control the name and legacy of reason" (Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason*, 17).

⁵⁰ Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond, "Presentation of Spiritualism. A Paper Arranged by the Guides of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond for the Word's Parliament of Religions at Chicago, October 1893" (Washington, D.C. National Spiritualists Association, 1893), 5.

⁵¹ Richmond summarizes the scientific insights gained by the study of spiritualism as follows: "1st, the existence of the individual human spirit; the continued conscious existence of the individual spirit after the change called death; the intercommunion of the two states by the voluntary action of individual disembodied spirits to and through those existing in human form; by automatic action upon the brain or any part of the human organism without the conscious concurrence of the individual acted upon; 2d, by action upon sentient or non-sentient objects without the intervention of any human being, excepting that these manifestation usually occur in the presence of a medium who does not voluntarily aid in their production; 3d, by action upon all bodies and substances upon the earth or in its atmosphere, without the intervention of any human agency, and by methods not known in any existing science. The scientific statement is the *knowledge* of a future life, *demonstrated* truth of immortality" ("Presentation of Spiritualism," 5-6, emphasis in original).

⁵² Francis C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis: A Study of Christian Thought and Speculation in the Second Century* (1931; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1978), 58.

appropriate to the time and therefore truly scientific.”⁵³ Robert McLoed Wilson continues this refrain in the late 1950s, without reference to science. For Wilson, “Gnosticism may on the whole be regarded as a phase of heathenism....It arises out of the attempt to express Christianity in Hellenistic terms without the safeguards which Paul and his fellow-labourers imposed on their world” (68).

Theosophists

The real fact, therefore, is not that Gnosticism was a “heresy,” a departure from the true “Christianity,” but precisely the opposite, i.e. that Christianity in its dogmatic and ecclesiastical development was a travesty of the original Gnostic teachings. William Kingsland, *The Gnosis of Ancient Wisdom in Christian Scriptures or The Wisdom in a Mystery*⁵⁴

If spiritualist views appear only spectrally in modern characterizations of ancient gnostics and Gnosticism, theosophists might be described more as forgotten or excluded (“ghosted” in the sense of disappeared from scholarly discussion). As the quotation from Kingsland above indicates, theosophists explicitly discussed (and continue to discuss) early Christian gnosis and gnostics to support their own views. In this section, I highlight two main features of theosophy that help us to understand key features of late nineteenth and early twentieth century non-theosophical discussions about Gnosticism. Theosophists stressed that the truths they found in Christianity were not unique to Christianity, which helps us to understand one facet of scholarly preoccupations with the question of the origins of Gnosticism; theosophists also found in Gnosticism evidence for multiple levels of initiation as one progresses spiritually, which helps us to understand charges of Gnosticism as elitist.

Theosophists were especially excited by the mid-nineteenth century “discovery” of the Coptic manuscript *Pistis Sophia*, which Blavatsky describes as “a genuine *evangel* of the Gnostics” and states “it is genuine and ought to be as canonical as any other gospel.”⁵⁵ G.R.S. Mead, who translated *Pistis Sophia* into English, argued that there was a Christianized gnosis whereby Christians could access a singular and universal gnosis, “the Religion of the Mind,” which he defined as “preeminently one of initiation, of perpetual perfecting” but also potentially available to all (1906: 16, 17, 40, 44). Mead

⁵³ Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis*, 147-48.

⁵⁴William Kingsland, *The Gnosis of Ancient Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures or The Wisdom in a Mystery* (London: Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1937), 17.

⁵⁵ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888; 3rd edition, Covina, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1925), 2:566n.1206.

contrasts gnostic Christianity with other ancient forms of Christianity that he viewed as a “saving cult” focused on surface matters. Other theosophists argued more strongly that Gnosticism was the lost essence of true Christianity and the Christian way of accessing a universal and eternal truth. Theosophists thus took an interest in defining “Gnosticism” as a positive precedent for their own views and practices.

Beginning with writings of the Theosophical Society’s co-founder Helene Blavatsky, theosophists insisted that Christian Gnostics support the central theosophical claim for

the existence of one primeval, universal Wisdom—at any rate for the Christian Kabalists and students. The teachings were at least partially known to several of the Fathers of the Church....Origen, Synesius, and even Clemens Alexandrinus had been themselves initiated into the mysteries before adding to the Neo-Platonism of the Alexandrian school, that of the Gnostics, under the Christian veil.⁵⁶

As this quote makes clear, Blavatsky and other theosophists argued for a universal wisdom to be discerned in sources from multiple traditions. They defined Gnostics as those within the Christian tradition who best expressed and transmitted this universal wisdom.

Jesus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the text *Pistis Sophia*, as well as polemical sources such as Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Epiphanius, serve as key referent points for Theosophists in adducing the esoteric origins of Christianity, origins that they see as continuous with the knowledge available also through other sources, including Eleusynian mysteries, and some philosophical schools including neo-Platonist and Pythagorean.⁵⁷ As Kingsland writes:

I am not using the term Gnosis as applying merely to the tenets of certain Gnostic sects which were more or less in evidence in the early centuries of the Christian era, but I am using it in connection with a definite super-knowledge which can be traced back to the remotest ages and the oldest Scriptures of which we have any literary records, and which was taught by Initiates, Adepts, and Masters of the Ancient Wisdom in the inner circles of those Mysteries and Mystery Cults which are known to have existed in Egypt and elsewhere, even in remotest times.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Helene P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 3rd ed., 1:xliv.

⁵⁷ See G. de Purucker, *Studies in Occult Philosophy* (Covina, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1945), 67; Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 51-76.

⁵⁸ Kingsland, *The Gnosis of Ancient Wisdom*, 14.

We might ask whether insistence on Gnosticism as “too much Hellenism” also partly responds to this kind of claim, one that would challenge any Christian claims of not just uniqueness but need to draw sharp boundaries between what is Christian and, say, Greek philosophy or mystery cults.

As Karen King has ably discussed, a major scholarly preoccupation in the 19th and 20th century was seeking to determine the origins of Gnosticism. Should it be defined specifically as arising within Christianity—and more specifically as a heresy or aberration? Should it be defined as a non-Christian worldview, philosophy, or religion that takes a Christianized form during the second century? Regardless, scholars approached Gnosticism presuming that answering the question of its origins was crucial for locating its place and significance in the development of Christianity and for interpreting the largely polemical and negative representations of Gnostics in ancient sources such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius. The theosophical insistence that Gnosticism is not only the true kernel of Christianity but also found in non-Christian sources further illuminates this concern about Gnosticism’s origins.

For example, W.H.C. Frend posits that “Gnosticism may perhaps be regarded as a rival religion rather than a heretical manifestation of Christianity.”⁵⁹ To understand Frend’s position, we need to know more about how he defines its main features and relationship to other ancient practices, ideas, and movements. Frend writes,

[Gnosticism’s] approach to religion was so similar to that of other mystery cults as to have no difficulty in harmonizing with them....[The Gnostic’s] message, like that of a priest of Isis or Cybele was one of personal salvation obtained through successive initiations into mysteries, each providing the believer with a knowledge of how to overcome fate and outwit the planetary deities who watched over the destiny of each individual. The gnostic Christ and Mithras were both bringers of personal salvation....The rites and beliefs common to Gnostics and the worshippers of Mithras which impressed contemporary opinion were not fortuitous. Both cults were ultimately part-heirs to the astrological lore of the Chaldaeans. The characteristics of Gnosticism may be traced back to the dawn of known religion.⁶⁰

Frend’s comments pack in many assumptions about Gnosticism, not simply that it predates Christianity, that it resembles a mystery religion in being a religion of personal salvation through a series of initiations, that it can be traced to Chaldaean astrology in particular. For Frend, “the Gnostic shared to the full in the religious syncretism of the

⁵⁹ W.H.C. Frend, “The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5.1 (April 1954), 30.

⁶⁰ W.H.C. Frend, “The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire,” 29.

age" (30), despite a "show of exclusivity and mystery-making" (30). Frend additionally characterized Gnosticism as "as school rather than a church" (29), thus lacking in communal organization. He elaborates: "The Gnostics...could make individual converts but they lacked the organization of the Catholic Church....They were not, as they put it (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* iii.15.2) *ecclesiastici*" (36).

Another first generation theosophist, Charles W. Leadbeater, shows us that theosophists were well aware that they were offering a kind of counternarrative to the development of Christianity that Frend epitomizes. Leadbeater maps early Christianity as emerging along three lines: 1) "Gnostic philosophers," 2) the precursors of the "orthodox" whom he characterizes as "comparatively quiet and respectable people who, though without any knowledge of the Gnosis, took what they know of the Logia of the Christ as their guide in life," and 3) "the ignorant horde...whose only real religion was a vague hope of revolution."⁶¹ For Leadbeater, as with Harnack, the orthodox party evolved in conflict with the Gnostics but Leadbeater's valuation is the converse of Harnack's: "Being united in its distrust of the higher teachings of the Gnostics, [the orthodox party] found itself compelled to develop some sort of doctrinal system to offer instead of theirs....to set up against the true one as propounded by the Gnostics."⁶²

Theosophists were generally insistent that Gnosticism was not uniquely Christian but rather, while Gnosticism took a distinctively Christian form, its insights permeate many traditions of the world. Indeed, Christian Gnosticism or Gnosticized Christianity could be understood as the esoteric, and thus for theosophists the true, form of Christianity that linked it fundamentally to esoteric forms of other religions.

Although sharing with spiritualists a high valuation on knowledge gained through spirit communication and revelation, and even sharing with spiritualists the idea that spiritual improvement is open to all humans, theosophists nonetheless shaped a much more clearly esoteric and hierarchical system such that individuals had to pass through stages of initiation and levels of spiritual insight.

With a strong emphasis on stages of human spiritual evolution correlating with levels of initiation into spiritual knowledge, theosophists may thus help us to understand that the attribution of elitism and secrecy to ancient Gnostics does not merely reproduce ancient heresiological polemic. Theosophists looked to Christian origins to support their claims for an esoteric or hidden dimension to all "major" religious traditions, which they viewed as springing from a common source; within early Christianity they found evidence for levels of spiritual development and initiation

⁶¹ Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Christian Creed: Its Origin and Signification*, 2nd ed. (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917), 25, 26.

⁶² Leadbeater, *Christian Creed*, 26.

in both biblical and non-canonical writings, charting a narrative of a move to suppress the esoteric dimensions of Christianity over time (which, for Theosophists, is a story of decline). Annie Besant, one of the most influential Theosophists in early 20th century, aims in her 1901 work *Esoteric Christianity* “to prove clearly that in the Early Church, at least, Christianity was no whit behind other great religions in possessing a hidden side, and that it guarded, as a priceless treasure, the secrets revealed only to a select few in its Mysteries.”⁶³ For Besant, evidence for such a hidden tradition in Christianity can be found in canonical writings including gospels and Paul’s letters, the work of Clement of Alexandria, and “the famous Gnostic treatise, the *Pistis Sophia*.”⁶⁴ According to Besant, the first few centuries of early Christianity featured the notion of secret doctrines but that, over time, especially from the 4th century onward,

even the Christians were caught up in the whirlpool of selfish warring interests. We still find scattered references to special knowledge imparted to the leaders and teachers of the Church, knowledge of the heavenly hierarchies, instructions given by angels, and so on. But the lack of suitable pupils caused the Mysteries to be withdrawn as an institution publicly known to exist, and teaching was given more and more secretly to those rarer and rarer souls, who by learning, purity, and devotion showed themselves to be capable of receiving it. No longer were schools to be found wherein the preliminary teachings were given, and with the disappearance of these, the “door was shut.”⁶⁵

She held that “Gnosis” is what the Mysteries communicated,⁶⁶ a gnosis of human potential to become Christs.⁶⁷ Kingsland maintains this view, a couple of generations later: “[Gnosis] is the mystic knowledge which effects regeneration, rebirth into the full consciousness of one’s divine nature and powers as a ‘Son of God.’”⁶⁸

⁶³ Anne Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or the Lesser Mysteries*, 6th ed. (Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1953), 2-3.

⁶⁴ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 34.

⁶⁵ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 79-80.

⁶⁶ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 80.

⁶⁷ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 103.

⁶⁸ Kingsland, *The Gnosis of Ancient Wisdom*, 14. Charges of elitism and the association of both ancient Gnostics and modern Theosophists with esoteric knowledge as a path to salvation are entangled also with theories of race. Any attention to the haunting aspects of spiritualism and Theosophy must also tackle the question of how these movements as well as the emerging fields of biblical studies and comparative religion helped to construct and perpetuate racialized and racist interpretive frameworks. I plan to explore this intersection in a future work, but see the excellent analysis by Gauri Viswanathan on their convergence in the work of Theosophist Annie Besant in colonial India (*Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 182-207).

Some scholars who were not theosophists also make an explicit link between ancient gnostics and theosophists, such as Wilhelm Boussett. In a 1913 work that remained influential through the 20th century, Boussett states: “Basically Gnosticism is the native soil of all bluntly supernaturalistic theory of revelation....Gnosis is...mysterious wisdom which rests upon secret revelation; *one might better call the Gnostics Theosophists*. Gnosticism is the world of vision, of ecstasy, of secret revelation and the mediators of revelation, of revelational literature and of secret tradition.”⁶⁹ Boussett’s description of Gnosticism explicitly links it with Theosophy, on the basis of their ideas not just of revelation but of secret tradition.

The association of Gnostics with elitism thus emerges partly by comparison with a contemporary religio-philosophical movement and not only by friendly readings of the ancient charges against so-called Gnostics and the followers of Valentinus. Certainly, ancient Christian polemicists charge their rivals with teaching that some humans are “saved by nature” while other humans are not, with “puffing themselves up” with their claims to *gnosis* while belittling other Christians for merely having faith (*pistis*); and with secret apostolic traditions. But theosophists’ emphasis on both the existence and value of revelatory knowledge and also the need to acquire this knowledge through a progressive series of initiations under the guidance of those further along the path of spiritual evolution than oneself may have sharpened modern scholarly reconstructions of early Christianity.

The Specters of Spiritualism and Theosophy in Definitions of Gnosticism: Concluding Thoughts

By reading scholarly discussions of Gnostics and Gnosticism from the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries in light of spiritualist and theosophical interpretations of Christian origins and Gnostics, we can understand facets of these discussions differently. My argument is not that spiritualism and theosophy explain everything about the category of Gnosticism but rather that these movements played an unrecognized or underappreciated role in its shaping and deployment, even at historical remove. Debates about whether Gnosticism is a phenomenon internal to Christianity or pre-Christian or overly infused with elements of its context, identification of Gnosticism as primarily a view of salvation as attained by stages of initiation through secret knowledge transmitted especially through characterizations of Gnostics as doctrinally

⁶⁹ Wilhelm Boussett, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, English trans. John E. Steely (1913; ET, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 252-253; my emphasis. See also Boussett, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen: vanden Hoeck and Ruprecht, 1907).

problematic find counterparts in either the views of spiritualists and theosophists or criticisms made of them.

In this final section, I briefly consider how one other typical characterization of Gnosticism, dualism, might relate to the spiritualist and theosophical material considered above. In 1929 Oxford classicist and biblical scholar Burnett Hillman Streeter wrote: "What we know of Gnostic theosophical speculation is so grotesque that we are apt to wonder what there was about the movement that made it so alluring to that age as to become a really formidable enemy to the Church. No doubt its chief appeal lay in the dualism which offered a solution, theoretical and practical, to the problem of evil."⁷⁰ Here and elsewhere, Streeter associates ancient Gnostics with contemporary theosophists, and indicates that ancient Gnosticism was a significant "enemy" for Christianity, especially characterized by dualism.⁷¹ In the view of Streeter and others, the danger of dualism is its rejection of God as the creator of this world and the correlations they saw to problematic ethical practices (hedonistic or ascetic).

Both spiritualists and Theosophists, in their different ways, did critique their contemporaries for excessive materialism and their own assertion of the spirit as the essence of the person may make them appear either dualistic or problematically averse to real world concerns. Nonetheless, both displayed a confidence in the positive value of material existence even as they privileged spirit communications as the basis for organizing embodied life and advocated bodily practices aimed at achieving purification closer to that of spirits.

Spiritualists thought *with* the dualism of spirit and flesh while seeking to transform material, this-worldly practices. Spiritualists interpreted contact with spirits to entail an ethical obligation to the dead as well as to the living to materialize social arrangements that are more just in this life—not simply to hold on for glory in Summerland, a term coined by Andrew Jackson Davis as the glorious abode of the spirits. Indeed, spiritualists used spirit communications to comment on social issues ranging from slavery to gender inequality to U.S. displacement of Native Americans and imperialism.⁷²

⁷⁰B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studies with special reference to the origins of Christian Ministry* (The Hewett Lectures 1928; London: MacMillan, 1929), 6-7.

⁷¹ For citations and further discussion of Streeter, see Buell, "The Afterlife is Not Dead," 862-872.

⁷² See Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008). I do not mean to romanticize: theosophists participated in and helped to sustain and spiritualize some nasty ideas about race; not all spiritualists were progressives.

Spiritualist thinking with the dualism of spirit and flesh anticipates a recent turn in scholarship on the texts and groups associated with Gnosticism. Karen King, for example, interprets the distinction between spirit and matter in the *Secret Book of John* as a critique of imperialist structures of the world, offering a cosmologically framed narrative that accounts for its current grip on the world while denying its existential legitimacy by appeal to a superior, spiritual source.⁷³ Her reading of the *Secret Book of John* also echoes the kind of reading and social critique spiritualists performed in light of their higher valuation of the spiritual—a view that in fact did not discount the significance of how one lives while embodied.

Spiritualism and theosophy may thus constitute unrecognized precedents and sites for unrealized possibilities in both religious studies and ethics. After all, as the various forms of Christianity even today, let alone the proliferation of interpretive approaches to this tradition attest, what constitutes the broader inheritance for Christians is contested by different heirs, insiders to the plural forms of Christianity, and interpreters who distance themselves from or stand outside this entire tradition. As Jacques Derrida insists, “one must filter, sift, criticize; one must sort out the several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction.”⁷⁴ Spiritualists and theosophists activate some of the possibilities in early Christian texts, authorizing their readings under the sign of *gnosis* to embrace the idea that every human has an element of the divine within—a simultaneously individualistic and radically contingent notion of humanity—and that individuals must work out our own salvation precisely by making ourselves open to external spiritual agencies. Spiritualist practices embody a non-linear temporality—futures and pasts commingle in the present through spirit communications with the living. By contrast, historical criticism, the central method of modern biblical studies, does not accommodate the possibility of ghosts—that there might be something that could disrupt linear temporalities. To reckon with the legacy of spiritualism and theosophy on early Christian studies requires consideration of the epistemological and ontological claims of spiritualists and theosophists—claims that destabilize notions of rationality and agency by which biblical and early Christian studies have largely authorized themselves as academic disciplines.⁷⁵ In other words,

⁷³ See, e.g., Karen L. King, *Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 157-73.

⁷⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (French orig. 1993; London: Routledge, 1994), 16. I do not mean to suggest that Derrida is the first to articulate this point; this is a central insight and basis for authorizing virtually all feminist, womanist, postcolonial, queer, and other liberationist as well as deconstructive engagements with biblical texts.

⁷⁵ I build especially on Avery Gordon and Jacques Derrida’s suggestions that justice ought to be the motivation for speaking in terms of hauntings and ghosts. See, Derrida, *Specters of Marx*,

the legacy of spiritualism and theosophy for early Christian studies may extend far beyond the question of "Gnosticism."

xix–xx; Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, for example, 63–64. As Gordon puts it, "if the dead start to take the living back to the past, it is connected to the labor aimed at creating in the present a place (a past or future), a something that must be done" (*Ghostly Matters*, 182–83, italics in the original). Gordon is here revising a statement by Michel de Certeau in his *The Writing of History*, English trans. Tom Conley (French original 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 101. But as Derrida stresses, haunting is not simply the force exerted by the past on the present, the dead on the living; the specter is untimely, bringing future possibilities both dreaded and utopian (*Specters of Marx*, 4)