"Are you, or have you ever been a gnostic?"
Caricatures, Blacklists, and Understanding the Aspirations and Lives of Real People

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I have been asked to provide a summary of principal theses in my books *The Immovable Race* and *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"*[1] and an update on how my views have evolved during subsequent debates regarding the usefulness of "gnosticism" as a critical category for reconstructing Christian origins. I am certainly honored by this invitation and I offer my sincere thanks to Lane McGaughy and the steering committee of the Christianity Seminar of Westar Institute for the opportunity to be included in this discussion.

A confession at the outset: The connection in my title of the term "blacklists" with the topic of so-called "gnostics" is an application I have borrowed from a just-published book by Geoffrey Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity,*[2] a fine and important study that I had the privilege of examining somewhat in advance. I don't recall that Smith actually conjures up Joseph McCarthy by means of any explicit reference, and certainly Smith's intriguing thesis about what is going on with Irenaeus of Lyons is far subtler than a heavy-handed blacklisting of the bishop himself as a theological McCarthyite. But Smith's study is one the many helpful analyses by new generations of scholars from whom I have learned an enormous amount about a topic that has preoccupied me for almost five decades. And as I was reflecting on themes for this paper, Geoff's use of "blacklists" struck me as something worth stealing for inclusion in the caption. A little more about his study later on.

I became interested in Nag Hammadi studies already as an M.A. student at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio), mentored by the late Roy Bowen Ward. I wrote an M.A. thesis (1970) exploring the nature and possible motivations for reinterpretations of the Jewish creator God as a flawed figure. In my Harvard dissertation (advisor George MacRae) I turned to the theme of "stability, immovability" in Nag Hammadi and related sources, and the context for this in Platonic tradition and in Platonizing sources such as

[1] Michael Allen Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (NHS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1985); idem, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2] Geoffrey S. Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Philo of Alexandria and others. I almost published that dissertation, but then decided after a while that I wanted to frame things quite differently.

Over the period between the completion of my dissertation and the publication of *The Immovable Race*, I had learned an enormous amount from my colleagues in other disciplines (sociology, anthropology, etc.) at the University of Washington, and had begun to ask new questions of this material. I remained very interested in the relation of mythemes in Nag Hammadi and related sources to Middle and Neoplatonic traditions. But I had begun to feel that my work on these themes needed a tighter organization, so I pulled out material related to one particular self-designation, "the immovable race." I attempted to locate such a self-designation not only against the background of Platonic theorizing about the changelessness/immovability of the invisible realm of forms, but also within social worlds expressing admiration of "immovable" heroes (e.g., philosophers; certain Christian monks).

In addition, because I was focusing on a single and rather rare self-designation, I explored possible implications for sectarian social history. I was still using the term "gnostic," by the way, but already in this book I was beginning to squirm against the limitations of some conventional boxes. As I expressed it in the very last paragraph of that book:

> If this study has contributed something to the understanding of the historical significance of a sparsely attested gnostic designation within the wider flow of late antique spirituality, then perhaps I will be forgiven for the presumption of devoting an entire monograph to the topic. In part my courage for doing so has been drawn from the conviction that when members of a religious movement call themselves something we ought to pay at least as much attention to that designation as we do to things other people call them or to the devising of our own designations and categories, for frequently such self-designations condense in compact form the most important dimensions of a religious community's self-understanding.[3]

In my last chapter ("The Immovable Race and Sectarian *Sitz im Leben*") I was pushing back a bit against Frederik Wisse's resistance to the sorting of Nag Hammadi texts according to sectarian labels familiar from heresiological texts, but also (on the other side of this argument) against some aspects of the "Sethian" gnostic model under which Hans-Martin Schenke had classified four of the "immovable race" texts (*Ap. John, Gos. Eg., Zost.,* and *StelesSeth*)—but not the fifth (the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*).

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[3] Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 209.

Already in *The Immovable Race* my engagement with some of the sociological research on sectarianism had also begun to intensify my dissatisfaction with certain features in conventional descriptions of "gnosticism." This was especially the case with the topic of soteriological determinism vs. free choice. Of course, resistance to that generalization had already been mounted by other researchers.[4] But I was focused specifically on a select group of texts and concluded that all of them in one way or the other expressed an open-endedness to membership in the "immovable race." This involved a kind of paradoxical assumption that one could be *converted* to a race that was also somehow "elect."[5] In hindsight, I think this element in *The Immovable Race* anticipated what evolved into a more fundamental preoccupation that drives a lot of my work today—i.e., looking beneath the abstractions of theological or mythological formulas to ask about how real people behave. In that study I was exploring how converts might have thought about the social act of joining a community that espoused the notion that members belonged to a preexistent "seed"—i.e., did that make "conversion" and expectations for post-conversion behavior different from most other proselytizing groups?

But over the decade between *The Immovable Race* and *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* my inquiry had expanded to a wider range of related issues. In various paper presentations and published articles I wrestled with how Nag Hammadi and related sources treated themes such as the body, sexuality, gender imagery, ethics in general, the material cosmos and social engagement. This was also a period in which I worked on some quite concrete features of Nag Hammadi manuscripts—namely, handwriting and scribal habits. There were social-historical implications to this technical analysis of paleography. Building on earlier studies by others, I was trying to fine-tune inferences about how

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[4] E.g., Luise Schottroff, "Animae naturaliter salvandae: Zum Problem der himmlischen Herkunft des Gnostikers," in *Christentum und Gnosis* (ed. Walther Eltester; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1969).

[5] See chapter: "The Inclusiveness of the Immovable Race," Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 158-85. An earlier version of this conclusion was developed in the paper: "Conversion to Chosen Races in Gnostic Literature," in a section on "Conversion in Greco-Roman Antiquity," at the AAR/SBL meetings in San Francisco, December 19-22, 1981. Of course, this is no more paradoxical than the assumption by other writers or traditions of the necessity for conversion and appropriate behavior even though "election" is also an integral theme (e.g., Paul; Calvin; et al.). It pertains to the issue of free will vs. determinism addressed in various schools of ancient Mediterranean philosophy (e.g., the Stoics), but with a very long history in various cultures to the present day. But this was partly my point—i.e., that somehow shoving "gnosticism" into some kind of special deterministic corner ignored how real people in analogous traditions have behaved. The other part of my argument was that prior *expectations* of "gnostic determinism" (due to stereotypes) actually prevented recognition of explicit open-endedness in some of these myths.

many scribes had been involved in the production of the Nag Hammadi books, and then I eventually collated this with other evidence pointing to possible compositional design in individual codices.

Aspects of all of this work came together in *Rethinking "Gnosticism."* The fundamental argument of the book was that the ways in which "gnosticism" had come to be used and abused as a category were not merely confusing—that much had been obvious for a long time and had been commented upon by many. More importantly, in my opinion, was that assumptions and assertions about the *character* of "gnosis," "gnostic," or "gnosticism" inherent in prevailing uses and definitions of this category had coalesced into a chant of easily repeated stereotypes that too often drowned out the actual voices of our sources. Thus, in the central chapters of *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* I targeted what I felt were some of the more important of these assumptions and assertions:[6]

(1) A conventional wisdom had emerged that "gnosticism" was a religion whose heart and soul was a gleeful "protest," a systematic reversal of all values in scripture, an "inverse" or "protest exegesis."[7] In fact, I argued, inversion of values is not at all consistent or systematic in such sources. What reversals of value do appear tend to be targeted at resolving problematic or ambiguous texts (e.g., embarrassing anthropomorphisms where God appears jealous, capricious or ignorant).[8]

(2) "Gnosticism" had been characterized as a "parasite" religion, infesting and feeding off of hosts such as Judaism or Christianity or other traditions.[9] But I argued that this is merely a prejudicial metaphor that describes the fact that most of the movements in question did not turn out to be successful new religious movements. The "parasite" metaphor offers no explanatory power for accounting for this general lack of

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[6] For convenience, in the following portion I draw on elements of an earlier summary in: Michael A. Williams, "Was There a Gnostic Religion? Strategies for a Clearer Analysis," in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?* (ed. Antti Marjanen; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 87; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

[7] E.g., see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 91-95; idem, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Teil I: Die mythologische Gnosis* (FRLANT Neue Folge, 51; Göttingen: Vandehoeck & Ruprecht, [1934] 1964), 216-21; Ioan P. Couliano [Culianu], *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (trans. H. S. Wiesner; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 121.

[8] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 54-79.

[9] E.g., Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 54-55; Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (SAC 5; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 8; Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, *Savoir et salut* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992), 11.

success. In fact, it tends to preempt sociological analysis of this question by creating the notion of a single organism called "gnosticism" that was simply genetically parasitical.[10]

(3) Among the most common features alleged for "gnosticism" is a virulent anticosmism, a distinctively radical depreciation of the material world and society. "Gnostics" supposedly had no sense of beauty or order in the cosmos, and above all no sense that the material cosmos could function positively to reveal the nature of God. World-rejection allegedly meant that these people were in explicit revolt against the political structures of their age or were apolitical, and showed little or no interest in surrounding society—they were anti-social dropouts.[11] However, this important dimension in the usual definition of "gnosticism" is seriously misleading. Much of the evidence we have for social behavior by members of such movements suggests persons who were evidently *less* inclined toward social deviance than many of their ("orthodox") critics, and more interested in the reduction of sociocultural tension. For example, some are criticized for avoiding martyrdom,[12] or for their lack of dietary scruples (eating idol meat) and their willingness to continue normal social interaction associated with community religious festivals or public entertainment (attendance at gladiatorial games), or for their introduction into their teachings of material from the theater or from poets and philosophers.[13] If "anticosmism" is meant to imply a high level of world-rejection in the form of sociocultural deviance and tension with surrounding society, it is precisely the wrong description.[14]

(4) Closely associated with the notion of "gnostics" as world-rejecters is their reputation as body-haters, having nothing but contempt for the irredeemable "prison" of the material human body and positive interest only in the spirit.[15] However, once again it is the complexity and variety in our sources that such a cliché tends to obscure. We do find language in some sources that is disparaging of the material body, but this is only part of the story. Even the physical body is sometimes portrayed as bearing something of the divine likeness, as actually being an important medium of revelation,

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[10] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 80-95.

[11] E.g., Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 241-65; Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (trans. Anthony Alcock; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 55; Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist I*, 252-72; Hans Kippenberg, "Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus," *Numen* 17 (1970): 219-20.

[12] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer*. 1.24.6; 3.18.5; 4.33.9; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*. 4.71-72; Tertullian, *Scorp*. 1.5; 1.8; 15.6; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 4.7.7.

[13] E.g., Irenaeus, *Adv. haer*. 1.6.3; 1.24.5; 1.26.3; 1.28.5; 2.14.1-9.

[14] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 96-115.

[15] E.g., Filoramo, *History*, 91-92.

and even as being potentially transformable.[16] So setting up readers of "gnostic" sources to expect hatred of the body as an obvious feature can stand in the way of even noticing the surprisingly rich real-life diversity in perceptions and sensibility about life in the body among these traditions.[17]

(5) There may be no cliché with respect to "gnosticism" that had been more commonly repeated than the claim that "gnostic" myth typically produced either fanatical asceticism or the debaucheries of libertinism—either the systematic denial of the material body or the systematic violation of the ethical laws imposed by its creator(s).[18] There is also probably no cliché more completely erroneous. There are indeed texts with an emphasis on asceticism, though of varying types, but there are also sources assuming the importance of marriage, procreation and family life in general. And the reliable evidence for licentious practices among these groups is slim to none. It is not possible to distill the ethics of the sources in question into one neat "gnostic" program. There are several genuine ethical concerns in such texts, including communal values, idealization of the family, aspirations for personal growth and achievement.[19]

(6) Often coupled with the cliché about asceticism or libertinism, and the assumption of the lack of any serious ethical concern, is the assertion that "Gnostics" were determinists. They considered ethical behavior irrelevant for themselves since they were automatically destined for salvation because of their fixed, inner divine nature. As one scholar has put it, "One cannot *become* a pneumatic, but rather one either *is* or is not one."[20] Though there are possible instances of some type of determinism in certain of these sources, most of the texts normally classified as "Gnostic" conceive of the possibilities for humans as being far more open-ended in principle. For example, precisely the writing that is often identified as the example of "Gnosticism" par excellence, the *Apocryphon of John*, presents a decidedly non-deterministic typology of souls and their responses to revelation, with eventual damnation reserved only for those who have once known the truth but then later have rejected it (*Ap. John* II 25,16-27,30). Contrary to past conventions in scholarship, soteriological determinism is useless as a

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[16] An example of the one-sidedness so common in the construction of "Gnostic" body hatred is Giovanni Filoramo's discussion of Valentinian teaching about the body being the abode of demons (idem, *History*, 98-99). He is correct that this was Valentinian teaching (and also that of a wide spectrum of other groups in antiquity!), but he leaves out any discussion whatsoever of the rest of the story, the *good* news. Hippolytus, for example, says that the Valentinians teach that the body can be *cleansed* of its demons (*Ref*. 6.34.4f).

[17] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 116-38.

[18] The assertion has been too common in the literature to require specific citation here. For several examples, see the citations in idem, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 292-93, nn. 1-6.

[19] idem, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 139-88.

[20] Karl-Wolfgang Tröger, "Die gnostische Anthropologie," *Kairos* 23 (1981): 41.

defining characteristic for the writings usually categorized as "Gnostic." Not all of them, and probably not even very many of them, actually share this feature.[21]

In the next-to-last chapter of *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* I touched on the famously difficult debates about "gnostic origins." It is fair to say that I did not solve the problem so much as to suggest that many of its difficulties derived from viewing it as a *single* problem. That is, if one is imagining "gnosticism" as a single ("parasitic"!) organism, then you end up seeking to trace the origin of its genome. But if there is no single organism, and many of its alleged DNA base pairs are not there in the first place, then you do have a problem. I suggested that the various phenomena usually lumped under the category "gnosticism" probably derive from multiple origins, multiple innovations. We might do better by breaking down the task: how to account for the origins of Valentinian speculations, for example? At least we know there was a Valentinus, and we know the names of some historical figures at least associated by others with his name (Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus, Marcus, etc.) whose teachings share some distinctive overlapping features.

And in the final chapter, I developed some of the implications of my work on scribal hands in Nag Hammadi manuscripts into hypotheses about the rationales for composition of individual codices.[22] The details in that chapter cannot be summarized here given the space limitations, but I will cite my overall observations that the producers of at least most of the Nag Hammadi books

> seem to have been persons (1) who accepted the biblical demiurgical proposition that the cosmos was not created as a result of the initiative of the highest God,[23] (2) who were intensely interested in speculation about the true nature of divinity and the supra-cosmic realms, (3) who were focused on the soul's eventual transcendence of the created order and on patterns of spirituality that would contribute to this goal, and (4) who saw nothing un-Christian in these views.[24]

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[21] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 189-212.

[22] idem, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 235-66. This chapter developed material from an earlier paper published as: Michael A. Williams, "Interpreting the Nag Hammadi Library as 'Collection(s)' in the History of 'Gnosticism(s)'," in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification: Actes du colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Anne Pasquier; Québec, Louvain and Paris: Les presses de l'Université Laval and Éditions Peeters, 1995).

[23] Today I would word this first point more cautiously and introduce an important caveat: Whether the 4th (or 5th?) century CE producers of the codices were attentive to the fact or not, several of the demiurgical texts in the Nag Hammadi books do *effectively* trace initiative for the creation of the cosmos to the highest God (e.g., by reassuring that everything took place in accordance with the will of God).

[24] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 261-62.

Here I was invoking the admittedly somewhat awkward term "biblical demiurgical" to describe a specific feature rather than a sect. I argued in the book that perhaps we would do better not to use the terms "gnostic" or "gnosticism" as though we were indicating a commonly agreed-upon religion or religious type, since (1) there has not in fact been any common agreement on the definition of "gnostic"/"gnosticism"; (2) these labels have been used so diversely that confusion has gathered on them like tar on boots; and (3) too many past attempts at clarity in definition have incorporated clichés such as the ones mentioned above which I had discussed in the central chapters of the book. Given this situation, tag a text as "gnostic" and the likelihood that it will be misunderstood is immediately elevated.

Thus, I was not suggesting simply a new name for the same thing, but rather a new analytical approach that takes more seriously multiple movements and innovators. One can continue to make progress in mapping specific individual movements and traditions that fall into recognizable clusters due to their use of specific sets of mythemes and doctrinal and ritual jargon (e.g., "Valentinian" traditions, or the cluster of sources that some scholars call "Sethian"). One can also employ a specific feature such as "demiurgy," but without front-loading it with an assortment of expectations. Instead, we can observe that a variety of figures and movements have held to demiurgical cosmologies, and can explore the variety of factors accounting for this and possible implications for other doctrines, communal formation, ritual performance, social engagement, and so forth.

Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?* appeared a few years after my *Rethinking*,[25] and the two have often come to be cited together. Over the years I had been involved in several conference projects or committees in which Karen was also member or leader, and we had shared ideas and I had benefited from her work. Her book voiced fundamental views that at many points overlapped with my own, but her overall approach was quite different. I had been focused primarily on how typological definitions of "gnosticism" had come to be impediments too often blocking recognition of the actual content in original sources. I think Karen agreed with those arguments, but her main focus was different, aimed at the history of how modern scholarship *constructed* those obstacles—how it had constructed "gnosticism."

Therefore our two studies are in many respects complementary, though Karen expressed some dissatisfaction with my conclusions. From her point of view I had climbed out of a pit only to slide back down on another side. She felt I was merely

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[25] Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

"jettisoning the term 'Gnosticism' and replacing it with 'biblical demiurgical,' a designation that would, nonetheless, still 'classify most of the same myths together for study and comparison.'"[26] Though she stated that my goal was laudable, in the end I was only privileging "one mythic element over all others as the determinant characteristic," and that in justifying this choice on the basis of the importance of demiurgy as a catalyst of controversy in late antiquity I was still taking my lead "from the polemicists about which features are most important to focus on in reading these texts."[27] This is an important and appropriate caution, but I have always felt that it missed my point. Or it could be the case that on this point we do have different views; I confess that it was hard for me to tell. For I was suggesting a heuristic classification that might help explore and appreciate variety, not a new name for some rigidly defined heresiological box. And Karen herself seems to be looking at a similar roadmap when she says that:

> the most important problems arising from typological method have less to do with the improper application of the method than with its ahistoricizing, essentializing, homogenizing effects. Trying to fine-tune application will not resolve these difficulties. This means, not that we should dispense with typologies altogether, but rather that their purposes and positionalities need to be clearly articulated and their provisionality recognized.[28]

I thought I had been suggesting much the same. It could have been that in addition to the level of importance I accorded to demiurgical cosmology as a provisional classification she was also disappointed with my characterization of demiurgical speculations as failed new religious movements. I did not intend this as some sort of triumphalism but rather as an observation about numerical outcomes, and perhaps predictable ones in sociological terms.[29] Central to the Karen's argument is the completely legitimate observation that modern constructions of "gnosticism" are heir to ancient constructions of "heresy." But she argues that my suggestion of grouping demiurgical sources for comparison only repeats the mistake, because the "study of the materials continues to be governed by the traditional approach, established by the polemicists and reinscribed into scholarly study."[30] Here we may simply disagree.

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[26] idem, *What is Gnosticism?*, 168. The last part quotes wording from *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 265.

[27] idem, *What is Gnosticism?*, 215.

[28] idem, *What is Gnosticism?*, 227.

[29] Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 236-41, and cf. 103-13. Here I was drawing on theory elaborated by sociologist Rodney Stark and his various collaborators.

[30] King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 216.

Comparing and contrasting varieties of chiliastic eschatology, for example, might privilege for the purposes of analysis something cherished by Irenaeus of Lyons but later attacked by Dionysius of Alexandria. However, such a study would not necessarily traduce either bishop. I am suggesting that we approach demiurgical myths in the same manner.

I turn now to the still different approach proposed by Bentley Layton and David Brakke. Layton's important 1995 article, delineating a new model for defining the "gnostics," was published too late for me to take into account when I was writing *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"*[31] but I did have occasion to discuss his approach in a later article.[32] Layton proposed restricting the term "gnostic" to a specific historical "school of thought" rather than a kind of doctrine. He suggested that the place to start was by labeling "gnostics" those who *called themselves* this, and given my own final words in *The Immovable Race* (quoted above), Layton's approach would in theory have held obvious attraction for me. Layton's argument was reprised, updated and very significantly developed fifteen years later in the excellent book by David Brakke.[33] If the conventional practice in scholarship had always been to use "gnostics" as Layton and Brakke apply the term, I assume that I still would have written some book in the 1990s, but it would not have been *Rethinking "Gnosticism."*[34] As was true with Karen King's book, here I cannot do full justice to these works by Layton and Brakke but can only comment on my general stance toward their fundamental theses, granting most attention to David's volume.

As I mentioned, both scholars argue that we should begin with *gnostikos* as a *self*-designation. Everyone recognizes that some people did use this term self-referentially. The most extensive example is Clement of Alexandria and his notion of the ideal "gnostic." But there are a few places where heresiologists, including Clement, explicitly claim that certain people called themselves *gnostikos*.[35] The stated method followed by

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[31] Bentley Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[32] Williams, "Was There a Gnostic Religion?," 172-76.

[33] David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010). I wrote a review Brakke's book in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19,3 (2011): 479-80, and a few of my comments here draw on elements in that review.

[34] I acknowledged this in Williams, "Was There a Gnostic Religion?," 74-75.

[35] Cf. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 33-41; e.g., Prodicus (according to Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 3.30.1); followers of Marcellina (Irenaeus, *Haer*. 1.25.6); Naassenes, according to Hippolytus (or whoever was author of this anonymous work), *Haer*. 5.2; 5.6.4; 5.8.29; 5.11.1 (but in *Haer*. 5.9.22, these Naassenes are said to have called themselves "the only true Christians").

Layton and Brakke is to begin with a group that used this self-designation, establish its fundamental profile, and then use that profile to identify other sources belonging to the group. As David puts it, "the 'Gnostics' (and perhaps, if we dare, 'Gnosticism') can be retrieved as a social category, one that corresponds to a group that recognized itself as such—and was so recognized by others."[36] Their point of departure is Irenaeus's claim in *Haer*. 1.11.1 that Valentinus had taken his model for the principles of his own school (διδασκαλείου) from τῆς λεγομένης γνωστικῆς αἱρέσεως, which Layton and Brakke prefer to translate as "the Gnostic school of thought." This is a crucial passage for them, and they connect it with the reference in *Haer*. 1.29 to a *multitudo gnosticorum*, which is followed in 1.29 by the account of a myth that is very similar to the theogony in the first part of the *Apocryphon of John*. David's study was written after the publication in 2006 of the Tchacos *Gospel of Judas*, and, inferring that this writing is likely essentially the same as the "Gospel of Judas" mentioned by Irenaeus in *Haer*. 1.31.1, David then calls upon both *Ap. John* and *Judas* as primary texts constituting the foundation for reconstructing this "Gnostic school of thought."[37] The other basic building block in this reconstruction is the famous third century CE reference by Porphyry, disciple of Plotinus, to Christian "sectarians" who were using apocalypses that included titles that we also see for tractates among the Nag Hammadi texts (*Zostrianos*; *Allogenes*). Porphyry then says that it was these people whom Plotinus was attacking in *Ennead* 2.9, to which Porphyry (not Plotinus) gave the title "Against the Gnostics."[38] So though Plotinus never actually using the term "gnostic" in that lecture, Porphyry had later concluded that it was the most appropriate designation for those opponents.[39]

From there David expands the collection of sources assigned to this "Gnostic school of thought" by identifying texts deemed to represent the same basic myth. Though he has updated Layton's original program, he thus follows the same fundamental strategy in reconstructing "the Gnostics." I should point out that he offers a very helpful distinction between "interpretive" or "heuristic" categories (such as

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[36] Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 27.

[37] idem, *The Gnostics*, 36-40. On pp. 37-38, he does express some caution about the identification of the Tchacos *Judas* with the Gospel of Judas mentioned by Irenaeus, and he also discusses potential problems with identifying the myth in the Tchacos *Judas* with that in *Ap. John* (38-39). But in the end he considers that the arguments in favor of these identifications are more compelling than the objections.

[38] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 16.

[39] It is quite possible, and I think most likely, that when Porphyry applies the term αἱρετικοί, "sectarians, heretics," to the opponents (who were also "friends") of Plotinus in the opening words of *Life of Plotinus* 16, he is consciously applying it in the pejorative sense he had heard from Christian heresiologists in third century Rome. His decision to refer to them as "gnostics" might also bear the influence of or even derive from heresiological usage.

"apocalyptic Judaism") that function "as a tool for comparison," and "social" categories, or "how ancient people actually saw and organized themselves." David observes that although a distinction can be made, "in actual fact nearly all the categories that scholars of religion use are a hybrid of these kinds."[40] And I generally agree.

The part of the Layton-Brakke approach with which I can identify most comfortably is their classification of sources according to amount of shared specific tradition. By that I mean the grouping of *Ap. John* with not only the mythic tradition Irenaeus opposes in *Haer*. 1.29, but also with other texts that share what seem to be special mythemes that constitute something like a common "story," as David puts it. For example, texts that place importance on the peculiar set of four aeonic luminaries Harmozel, Oroiael, Daueithai, and Eleleth (with some variations in spelling), whom David calls "perhaps the most distinctive characters in Gnostic myth."[41] As is well known, most of the sources that Layton and Brakke group by this means into the "Gnostic school of thought" fall into the assemblage that the late Hans-Martin Schenke and others since have referred to as "Sethian." And I argued in *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* that scholars can and should continue research on connections like this among our sources.

On the other hand, one of the stumbling blocks for me about the Layton-Brakke approach has always been their insistence that the grouping they come up with is built firmly on "gnostic" as a self-designation. It seems to me that this remains an unnecessary albatross. And I repeat the objections I have raised before: (1) We have yet to find this self-designation used by devotees in one of the original sources (e.g., from Nag Hammadi) that are assigned to this grouping, and (2) the approach skirts too easily around the stubborn fact that others (e.g., Marcellina; Naassenes; Prodicus) who are *not* included in the reconstructed "Gnostic school of thought" are clearly reported to have referred to themselves as *gnostikoi*. Referring to examples of the latter, David has remarked that "when Irenaeus and Hippolytus say that people 'called themselves' gnostics, this may indicate that the term functions as a secondary claim to perfection rather than as a sectarian self-designation."[42] Just so. And I do not see how it is so easy to draw that conclusion for Marcellina and others while not allowing the same possibility when Irenaeus mentions the "*hairesis* called 'gnostic'" (*Haer*. 1.11.1).

Two other recent studies present further quite relevant but also complicating factors that I can only mention briefly here. In 2009, Tuomas Rasimus published a very fine dissertation in which he turned the spotlight on the mythological tradition

[40] Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 16-17.
[41] idem, *The Gnostics*, 55-56.
[42] idem, *The Gnostics*, 49.

described by Irenaeus in *Haer*. 1.30, which, Rasimus argues, represents a distinct and actually older strand to which *Ap. John* was only secondarily related.[43] The differences between the mythology reported in *Haer*. 1.30 and that in 1.29 had been acknowledged for generations, and 1.30 matches elements in materials that other heresiologists also described and called "Ophite." Rasimus's new contribution is a fresh systematic analysis that charts correlations of this mythology with several of the Nag Hammadi tractates. According to Raismus, original works more closely related to the myth in *Haer*. 1.30 would include the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4), *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5), *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III,3; V,1) , and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4; BG 8502,3). Rasimus calls for revisiting the distinctive content in *Haer*. 1.30 with renewed and more systematic attention to its potential significance for understanding related sources like some of those just mentioned. These, he stresses, have suffered relative neglect in the shadow of research more concentrated on texts classified according to a typological model for "Sethian Gnosticism"—which in most respects matches the social category mapped by Layton and Brakke. Rasimus contends that a proper analysis of the "Ophite" material is essential to understanding "Sethianism" itself, and he proposes that these overlapping sets of evidence should be treated as a single "Classic Gnostic" corpus, but one that manifests distinct stages of development. His study includes a variety of sub-theses that cannot be addressed here, but he has made a compelling case, in my view, that this other group of sources should not be granted only short shrift. Brakke himself tightens the ranks of the mythologies mentioned by Irenaeus in *Haer*. 1.29-31, noting Irenaeus mentions "other beliefs of two sets of 'others' (Chapter 30 and 31). Irenaeus appears to indicate that these 'some' and 'others' belong to a single group of 'Gnostics,' although they would hold somewhat different views."[44] But only the possible connection of 1.31 with the Tchacos *Judas* receives much comment in Brakke's book. After the work of Rasimus, I do not think one can simply skip over the "story" in 1.30, which is noticeably different from that in 1.29. This would not invalidate Brakke's approach entirely, but it would call for dramatic revision, I think. The Layton-Brakke "Gnostic school of thought" would become a more complex assortment of communities, or at least a tradition capable of accommodating multiple "stories." And if the latter, then are we not turning away from the very criterion (common story) that is the basis for the Layton-Brakke reconstruction?

The second study I want to mention is to be published November 2014. Geoff Smith's Princeton dissertation, *Guilt by Association*,[45] takes a fresh look at the emergence

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[43] Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* (NHMS 68; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[44] Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 36.

[45] Smith, *Guilt by Association*.

of the heresy catalogue as a "literary technology" for recasting rivals by organizing "otherwise unaffiliated teachers into coherent intellectual, social, and scholastic communities that are established and sustained by demonic powers."[46] That ancient Christian heresiologists were engaged in creating a heinous and alien image of opponents and portraying them as stemming from a common root of error is not in itself a new idea. But Smith's analysis is the first to provide such a systematic focus on the earliest stages in the emergence of the Christian heresy catalogue as a genre and a nuanced explanation of its unique and decisive role. A central piece of evidence in Smith's analysis is the famous reference in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (26.8) to a "Syntagma" or "Catalogue against All the Heresies that Have Arisen." This lost writing has conventionally been understood as something like the original prototype for the Christian heresiological catalogue, a prototype expanded by Irenaeus in his "Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called," which itself then set the model for heresiologies to come. Smith's analysis offers new perspectives on the social and literary matrix and earliest uses of the *Syntagma*.

I cannot do justice to the structure and content of Smith's entire argument, but will mention only its implications for this present discussion. In his final chapter Smith turns to the adaptation of the *Syntagma* by Irenaeus of Lyons—or more accurately, Irenaeus's adaptation of an updated version of the *Syntagma*, since Smith thinks it very possible that the *Syntagma* had undergone revisions since the version mentioned by Justin (a general idea first suggested by Adolf von Harnack). Smith thinks that the version available to Irenaeus still did not include Valentinus and the teachers in his tradition. It was Irenaeus's project to make clear that Valentinus and Valentinian teachers *should* be added to the blacklist. Smith's argument is that Irenaeus has invented the "school called 'Gnostic'" (*Haer*. 1.11.1), by collectively identifying *all* of the heretics in the updated *Syntagma* as this school. Now this thesis stands in significant tension with the Layton-Brakke theory that the "school called 'Gnostic'" refers to one specific historical sect or tradition (aka, by other scholars, "Sethian"). Smith argues that his approach makes much better sense of the collectivity of Irenaeus's uses of the term *gnostikos*. Most scholars who see in *Haer*. 1.11.1 and 1.29.1 a reference to a particular sect/school, have (like Layton and Brakke) nevertheless had to make room for a second, broader sense in which Irenaeus applied the term *gnostikos*, sometimes applying it to other "heretical" groups. Smith proposes to eliminate the need for assuming a sort of sloppiness in Irenaeus's language, and contends that the bishop has very intentionally

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[46] At this writing I still have access to Smith's book only in manuscript, since the published version has not yet appeared, so I do not have the page numbers for quotations from the book itself.

constructed a "gnostic" school out of the list of names in the *Syntagma*, and then has depicted the Valentinian "school" as only another successor in the same lineage. "Irenaeus draws together two powerful oppositional strategies: the association of misguided knowledge with false teaching, a strategy pioneered by the author of the Pastoral Epistles, and the consolidation of a number of distinct opponents into one single school, a strategy found in sectarian medical polemics." I will say that, for me, a lot of inconvenient oddities or apparent sloppiness in Irenaeus's use of the *gnostikos* terminology suddenly seemed resolved. I was struck by the economy of Smith's theory on this point. Whether scholars agree with Smith's conclusions or not, he has laid out a case that will have to be taken very seriously.

The Layton-Brakke delineation of "the Gnostics" has going for it at least its clarity: They are referring to one historical social group represented by a specific set of texts, and I have always thought that to be the strongest feature of their approach. Some kind of tradition-historical relationship surely does exist among at least most of the sources they identify. However, the necessity of anchoring all this to a "Gnostic school of thought" that is not simply a grouping invented by Irenaeus is in my mind now even more questionable.

I do want to point out that Karen King, David Brakke and I (as well as others) are agreed on something very important. All three of us in different ways have advocated the eschewing of some of the reigning conventional stereotypes about "gnostics"/"gnosticism." Like both King and myself, Brakke wishes to avoid constructing "gnosticism" on the basis of "attitudes," etc.[47] And in recent work I suppose I have become even more preoccupied with pursuing questions along these lines. I have been especially interested in implications of heterodox cosmologies for social behavior, and particularly in everyday life. This is an evolution of certain aspects of the research in *Rethinking*.

The long history of repetition of clichés about "gnostic world-rejection," "anti-cosmism," "hatred of the world," "escape from the world," and so forth, has left deep scars in the discourse about such texts. My impression is that one encounters such clichés somewhat less often these days, but one still does encounter them. I would suggest that whatever shape the way forward will take, we will need to get beyond this in order to understand the significance of demiurgical myth-making as a feature among early Christian societies. Not wishing to extend unduly the length of this paper, allow

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[47] E.g., Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 41-42, 44.

me to provide only a few final observations on which I have elaborated in recent articles: [48]

That demiurgical myths are "world-denying" is a Weberian-type characterization that initially appears only logical, but I have become even more convinced than I was in 1996 that uses of this sort of characterization have led to deep misunderstanding. Something was indeed being denied or rejected in demiurgical myths, but it was most of all essentially the same *moral* evil attacked by other Christians (and Jews and many others) of the era. When we read myths in which the figures who in the end do the actual fashioning of the material cosmos and material humans are not the true God but lower entities (sometimes even rather nasty fellows), we might infer that producers and devotees of such texts could never have enjoyed a single day in their lives; could never have appreciated any beauty in nature; must have despised everything about the natural world in which they lived day to day; must have been obsessed only with poisonous reptiles or vicious carnivores, destructive storms, earthquakes, and so forth. However, when one looks in their writings for these kinds of complaints about the natural environment itself, they are virtually absent. No doubt they saw such "imperfections," but so did everyone.

When you look through the pages of Irenaeus's attacks on his opponents, it is striking how little is mentioned about what we would call the natural world. The debate is elsewhere: over theology, over whether the teachings of Valentinians or Marcionites, for example, counted as belief in the one true God. There certainly were debates about creator(s) and creation, about how the cosmos came into being. But one hears no voices gushing about how the cosmos is a wonderful, flawless material paradise, but also no great moans about the ugliness of the material cosmos or all of its unbearable physical dangers and imperfections. What you *do* hear a lot of, and from *all* sides, is the necessity to resist *moral* evil in the world. And for that, there was something to be done—indeed something had been done, was being done, would be more fully done. Not the complete elimination of moral evil from everyday experience—that would surely have been viewed as a ludicrous assertion by most everyone. Rather, there had been revelations (in gospels; apostolic letters and traditions; apocalypses; preaching, etc.) about new power. Divine power had decisively thwarted evil and would completely annihilate it by-and-

[48] I have elaborated on some of the following in: Michael A. Williams, "A Life Full of Meaning and Purpose: Demiurgical Myths and Social Implications," in *Beyond the Gnostic Gospels: Studies Building on the Work of Elaine Pagels* (ed. Eduard Iricinschi, et al.; STAC 82; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); idem, "Life and Happiness in the 'Platonic Underworld'," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner* (ed. Kevin Corrigan, et al.; NHMS 82; Leiden: Brill, 2013); and idem, "Irenaeus and Opponents on Creator, Creation and the Apostle," in *Irenaeus & Paul* (ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite, forthcoming).

by. I do not see that demiurgical myths in general were any less optimistic about this than Paul, Irenaeus, or many others. Their myths for *explaining* all this simply differed.

In brief summaries of "the gnostic worldview" one so commonly finds the assertion that "gnostics" considered the world to be a "prison," and their all-consuming thoughts were about "escape." However, as most everyone knows this is a familiar metaphor found in Plato and picked up by many others.[49] Take only one example, possibly one that is rather unexpected: Over centuries, in any given year at Passover (Easter) time, many Christians in Sardis, Egypt and elsewhere[50] might have heard, in languages from Greek to Coptic to Latin, to Georgian, to Syriac, the reading of a famous 2nd century CE homily on the Pascha by Melito of Sardis. At one moment in this lengthy melodramatic performance text, congregations will have been reminded that in Eden the first human, like a clod of earth capable of receiving either good or bad seed, "received the hostile and greedy Advisor" and disobeyed the command of God. As a result, the human "was thrown out into this world, as into a prison for the condemned" (ἐξεβλήθη γοῦν εἰς τοῦτον τὸν κόσμον ὡς εἰς δεσμωτήριον καταδίκων).[51] On this passage, one scholar in an important edition and translation remarks that though others had suggested that behind this language is Platonic influence, the "idea of earth as prison corresponds to the Egyptian bondage of Jewish Passover tradition (Deut. 26:5-6)" and rather than Platonic influence "Melito is more probably interpreting Rom. 5:12-6:14 . . . on the consequence of Adam's sin."[52] This is a plausible inference, but how often do we find scholars saying that Melito understood the cosmos to be a prison?

And the constant repetition of the conventional wisdom that "gnostics" thought of the world as prison, despised life in the cosmos, longed only for escape, and so on, gets in the way of one of the most debated issues surrounding such texts: the *origins* of demiurgical myth-making. Where did it come from? As long as we look at these texts and hear only some freakish level of pessimism about life, then we are naturally going to be flummoxed about such a "sudden emergence of a marked 'darkening' of the view of the world . . . for which there are virtually no contemporary parallels."[53] As I have stated recently, "If we do not jump to the conclusion in the first place that these cosmologies confront us with such a radical and unparalleled pessimism about the

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[49] E.g., Plato, *Phaedo* 62b; *Cratylus* 400c; Philo, Conf. 177; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*. 7.62; cf. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 116-24.

[50] For a summary of manuscript witnesses, see, e.g., Stuart George Hall, ed., *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), xlv-xlvi.

[51] Melito, *Homily on the Pasch* 48.

[52] Hall, ed., *Melito of Sardis*, 25, n. 15.

[53] Christoph Markschies, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (trans. John Bowden; London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 83.

world and a disregard for life in the world, then it is not some sudden and radical pessimism about life in the world that needs explaining." Instead, what "does need more discussion and analysis is how men and women writing and reading such texts were apparently able to accommodate themselves quite well in a world built by lesser gods, and to find in these cosmologies affirmation for a wide spectrum of life-styles and patterns of social engagement."[54]

My thanks for your patience, and I look forward to discussing these thoughts and those of colleagues when we convene in San Diego!

[54] Williams, "Life and Happiness," 59.

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