

Questioning the Category of Gnosticism for the Rewriting of the History of Early Christianity

An Appreciation and Extension
of the Work of Karen King

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In order to comprehend the dynamic process by which Christianity was formed, it is necessary to set aside the winners' account of that period and attempt to place ourselves in the midst of debates whose outcome was not yet certain.¹

As the Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar begins in earnest to understand the second century and join the efforts in the larger guild to rethink the history of early Christianity without the blinders of canon and creed, we face major re-conceptualizing tasks. It turns out that the master narrative of early Christianity is neither naïve nor critical in its own construction, but rather grounded in discursive moves designed to hide at least as much as it "reveals" about the history of the first four centuries. As a Seminar we have begun to rethink categories such as Judaism, Christianity, church, orthodoxy, and heresy, although this process is far from finished. In the fall 2014 session for the first time we took on a specific and crucial term used in the twentieth-century version of the master Christian narrative. That term is "gnosticism."

"Gnosticism," "gnosis," and "gnostic" have been central scholarly terms for more than a century. Although this essay primarily focuses on the term "gnosticism," it necessarily treats to some extent the other two. This essay wants mostly to help think about whether there was an actual historical phenomenon anytime in the first through third centuries that can be fairly described as "gnosticism." Or put in a somewhat different epistemological perspective, can the term "gnosticism" act as a reliable critical category for the analysis of first-, second-, or third-century Mediterranean history?

The last forty years have witnessed consistent, if minority, stirrings that questioned the analytical viability of the term "gnosticism," mostly in technical

1. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 2.

studies of specific and most recently discovered texts.² But in the last twenty years several scholars have brought together many of these stirrings into direct challenges to this term's usefulness. And as a result of both the gradual trends in specific textual analysis and the larger straightforward challenges, for the first time we now see a broad range of suspicion building that "gnosticism" may not serve most analysis and reimagining of the early Jesus/Christ(ian) movements well enough.

In this essay I concentrate on the work of Karen King, certainly one of the most thorough and incisive analysts of the category of "gnosticism."³ Since the fall 2014 Westar meeting also had an essay on King's *The Secret Revelation of John*,⁴ I primarily concentrate on her *What Is Gnosticism?* and then return relatively briefly to her most recent book, *The Secret Revelation of John*, for the purposes of showing how both these latest books from her on this topic form a tightly woven pair of considerations. To limit the discussion to these works is simply strategic, since the unfolding of her steady scholarship on these matters in print since at least 1988 is worthy of much more attention, but beyond the scope of this discussion. Her work, both recently and in much of her more-than-two-decades of scholarship on gnosticism, has had important relationships to the work of two other fall 2014 Seminar presenters as well, and I leave here discussion of that work to those colleagues in that fall meeting.⁵

Finally, while it becomes obvious that I find King's work on the category of gnosticism a quantum scholarly leap forward whose importance is almost impossible to appreciate enough, I also have a few disagreements with the work. These disagreements are mostly around places where I think that her arguments need to be extended. I discuss these disagreements in my conclusion, where I attempt to draw implications for the work of the Christianity Seminar.

2. Several examples of this process include the following: (1) Minna Heimola's 2011 book *Christian Identity in the Gospel of Philip* is one of many recent studies of that gospel that distance themselves from the early consensus that it was very "gnostic." (2) Re-readings of the *Gospel of Thomas* in the past twenty-five years, especially in historical Jesus studies, quickly and then thoroughly led to studies of the *Gospel of Thomas* that had nothing to do with gnosticism. (3) First feminist, then spiritualist, readings of the *Gospel of Mary* took it away from its early nomination as yet another gnostic gospel.

3. In the rest of this essay as an issue of style I have now deleted the quotation marks around the word gnosticism. This is not because I have changed my mind about the inutility of the word as an adequate analytical category, but simply because of the clumsiness of the more than 170 times the word is used herein.

4. Cf. in this issue, Kotrosits, "But What Do We Call It? The *Secret Revelation of John* and Crises of Categories."

5. In relationship to my overview of King's work on this subject, Michael Williams's 1999 work, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, relates significantly to the important work he and King did during the 1990s. The Williams volume precedes King's *What is Gnosticism?* by a decade. David Brakke's 2012 work, *The Gnostics*, takes King's latest two books perhaps the most seriously in print of any recent scholar, but parses them somewhat differently than I do. Brakke's book was also extensively treated in a book review by King.

A Summary of Karen King's *What Is Gnosticism?*

I am not used to writing book reports at this stage of my career but am happy for this essay to be considered in that genre. I claim this genre for this effort for three reasons:

1. The larger guild(s) of NT and early Christian studies has/have not caught up with this work, so I provide this as a gentle reminder.
2. *What Is Gnosticism?* is the first book of an elegant pair by King that we considered at the fall 2014 meeting.
3. I hope to have made this book report slightly more interesting at its end, as I engage more strategic questions concerning the implications of the book for both the guild(s) and the Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar.

What is Gnosticism? walks its readers through the history of scholarship on its topic. King's summary does not take shortcuts, and respect for each stage of scholarship is abundant, even when King's assessments eventually undermine many of each stage's assumptions and results.

Gnosticism and Heresy

It is significant that at the beginning of her review of the history of scholarship (a whopping sixty percent of the whole volume) King lays out her primary and basic proposal that applies to the whole of scholarship on gnosticism:

When modern historians adopt the same strategies as well as the content of the polemicists' construction of heresy to define Gnosticism, they are not just reproducing the heresy of the polemicists; they are themselves propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy. We should not therefore be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians using the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity—whether in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, intra-Protestant debate, or the colonial politics of Orientalism ... [S]pecialists in Gnostic studies now clearly recognize the problems in defining Gnosticism, but the ways in which the ancient discourses about heresy are threaded through contemporary historiography is much less clear.

The language, themes, and strategies of orthodoxy and heresy proved to be a powerful discourse, persisting in various forms up to our own day. My purpose in this book is to show how twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism has simultaneously reinscribed, elaborated, and deviated from this discourse. The first revisionary step was the one that has perhaps had the greatest effect: by substituting the term "Gnosticism" for one type of heresy, Henry More and those who followed him established this theme as a perennial topic of church history.⁶

6. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 54.

King agrees with most scholarship that English theologian Henry More in the seventeenth century was probably the first person to use the term gnosticism. That is, any testimony to something called gnosticism began more than a millennium after the period in which it was alleged to have existed. But King's chapter on "Adolf von Harnack and the Essence of Christianity" makes it clear that it was Harnack's scholarship and leading status in nineteenth-century Germany that brought the term to the fore and identified it as the primary early Christian heresy. Here too with both equanimity and open admiration for many of Harnack's contributions to critical scholarship on the emergence of early Christianity, King maps out what Harnack meant by gnosticism as early Christian heresy and how he arrived at such a conclusion. In this portrait it is clear that Harnack's definition of gnosticism was quite different in content than the twentieth-century scholarship that followed him. At the same time in retrospect and with the help of King's analysis, it is equally clear how Harnack's ambition to define Christianity for the nineteenth century through a rhetorical embrace of gnosticism imbricated gnosticism in both subsequent scholarship and twentieth-century Christian identity discourse itself. As King lays it out:

Harnack appropriated many elements from the ancient Christian discourses of identity formation, but he adapted significant variations on these themes as well. He followed the [ancient] polemicists' pattern of allowing a single term—now "Gnosticism" rather than "heresy"—to encompass with ease considerable heterogeneity. He was well aware of the lack of internal uniformity in the phenomena classified as Gnostic, yet he held that these phenomena shared a common culture and a common function: "the acute Hellenization of Christianity." Like heresy, Gnosticism was not a living entity, but rather a rhetorical tool that worked to produce a normative version of Christianity.

Moreover, for Harnack "Hellenization" clearly implied pagan contamination, and he engaged in a thoroughly antisyncretistic discourse in treating this contamination ... He lamented the assimilation of ... the worship of saints into Catholicism, and he contrasted Christianity as a living experience in true Protestantism with Christianity as a moribund superstition tied to cult, sacraments, ceremony, and obedience in Catholicism. In this way, Harnack tended to associate Catholicism with paganism, even as Henry More had when he coined the term "Gnosticism" in the seventeenth century ...

By conflating Catholicism with paganism, Harnack could exploit the polemicists' strategies of heresy ... Despite the chronological discrepancies—most notably that Protestantism is demonstrably later than Catholicism—Harnack rhetorically portrayed the goal of Protestantism as the ideal approximation of the original form of Christianity ...

Harnack's disciplined, historical analysis encompassed a stunning breadth of early Christian materials and resulted in many innovative and important insights. But we need to be aware of the ways Harnack utilized many of the rhetorical strategies of ancient Christian identity to anchor his own views of normative Christianity in liberal Protestantism ... Gnosticism as "the acute

Hellenization of Christianity” was a product of all these historical insights and rhetorical intersections.⁷

Near the end of the book, King’s summary of how twentieth-century scholarship has substituted gnosticism for heresy draws on her processing of the history of scholarship in the intervening 150 pages:

By perceiving how thoroughly the study of Gnosticism is tied to defining normative Christianity, we have been able to analyze where and how the academic study of Gnosticism in the twentieth century reinscribes and reproduces the ancient discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. We can also see shifts in that discourse where modern discourses of historicism and colonialism have intersected it. Such shifts fit very comfortably into the pattern that Michel Foucault has led us to expect when examining the history of discourse. Rather than lines of causal continuity, we see substitutions, transformations, disjunctures, incompatibilities, and entanglements. Gnosticism was substituted for heresy as the object of the discourse. The functions of this object were transformed, at times working to establish Christian identity ... Yet the function of this discourse has remained unchanged: to represent the other. The study of Gnosticism is thus imbricated in intellectual discourses and power relations that extend far beyond any notion of disinterested objectivity and often far beyond the explicit intentions of individual scholars.⁸

The discursive rather than analytical function of gnosticism and the substitutive role gnosticism has for “heresy” are also underlined throughout her book by the failure of any nineteenth- or twentieth-century generation to clearly define gnosticism. She summarizes and assesses this failure in her concluding chapter:

[T]he variety of phenomena classified as “Gnostic” simply will not support a single, monolithic definition, and in fact *none of the primary materials fits the standard typological definition* [italics King] ... Such lists are culled from a wide variety of materials and therefore do not necessarily describe any of them in particular. The same is true for “The Gnostic myth.” It too is a synthetic product that the history of religions scholars assembled from widely disparate materials in Mandaean, Manichean, Persian, and heresiological sources ... [I]t in fact succeeded only in giving the false impression of a monolithic Gnostic myth spread across a wide geographic and culturally heterogeneous area.

Because none of the texts contains all the listed characteristics ... [s]ome scholars emphasize a single characteristic as determinative, such as anticosmic dualism, consubstantiality of the human with the divine, or salvation by knowledge, though a particularly popular choice has been the distinction between the true God and the creator God of Genesis. Others list a set of characteristics

7. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 67–70.

8. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 219.

whose combination signals a phenomenon to be Gnostic. This method has also given rise to the unfortunate compromise terms like “proto-Gnosticism,” “pre-Gnosticism,” and “Gnostoid” to refer to phenomena that contain some, but not all (or at least not enough of) the necessary characteristics to deserve the unreserved designation. Such terms serve to illustrate how blurry this definitional method is and how imprecise its results ... By erasing or at least submerging the differences among Gnostic phenomena, typology hides the problem of variety rather than resolves it ... In the end, the most important problems arising from typological method have less to do with the improper application of the method than with its ahistoricizing, essentializing, and homogenizing effects.⁹

It then should not be surprising that scholarship’s steady (but mostly unconscious) shifts from historical analysis to discourse and rhetoric of heresy and orthodoxy has had the above trouble producing clear definitions of gnosticism.

The History of Religions School

In great detail King traces the interest in gnosticism by the history of religions school from the late nineteenth century approximately in the same time as Harnack through the work of NT giant Rudolf Bultmann. Here a major difference in approach and methodology produced under the same banner of gnosticism a strikingly different portrait both in terms of would be origins and results:

Whereas Harnack had located the impetus for the development of early Christian dogma in the Greek spirit, scholars in the history of religions school would turn increasingly to the folk religion of Iran, Babylonia, and even India for the keys to the origins of pre-Christian Gnosticism that would unlock the meanings of the Gospels and Paul ... History of religions scholars came to the astonishing conclusion that Gnosticism was an independent religion whose origin lay, not in deviant Christian heresy, but in pre-Christian, Oriental myth and cultic piety.¹⁰

Giving credit to the creativity of their new point of departure, King’s treatment of the various parties in this at least half-century-long process slowly undoes both the method and content of the enterprise. Key to her critique at the intersection of method and content is her application of previous work on the problematic epistemological character of search for origins within a historiographic effort. For instance, she notices how the way this research on the so-called gnostic redeemer myth eventually ended up fashioning “a history of the primal”¹¹ that actually undoes historiographic integrity. Or as she says in the conclusion to the book:

The fixation on origins has tended to distort the actual social and historical processes of literary productions because the purpose of determining the origin of

9. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 226–27.

10. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 71.

11. Cf. Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 19.

Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical; it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definition of Christianity.¹²

Ironically in King's view, the lasting success of the school of religions' production of gnosticism in the twentieth century may be one of the key problems of the state of current scholarship on the matter. She summarizes:

Taken collectively, the impact of ... the history of religions school on the twentieth century conceptuality of Gnosticism is hard to overestimate. Their greatest achievement was to extend the study of Christianity beyond the parochial borders of church history by exploring more widely the possible intersections between Christianity and the surrounding cultures of its formative matrix. And they asked historians to consider the meaning of the Gnostic myth as a phenomenon worthy of study on its own right ...

History of religion scholars left an influential legacy of innovative misconceptions and misleading characterizations of Gnosticism. Of these possibly the greatest mischief was done by the invention of the Gnostic redeemer myth, that staple of two-page summaries of Gnosticism. This stirring narrative is the product of motif-history viewed synthetically. It was constructed by taking bits and pieces from particular motifs from a variety of historical and literary contexts, and combining them into a single coherent narrative. The impression that this artificial narrative actually existed gained support from the fact that so many literary artifacts could be interpreted to fit at least some part of the myth. They then appeared as evidence for the whole story—even though in reality *there is no single existing ancient literary source that gives "the Gnostic redeemer myth" as scholars have "reconstructed" (i.e. invented) it* [italics King]. We might also note the irony that contemporary scholars have often characterized this myth as "artificial," but they have seen this artificiality as the product, not of twentieth century method of historical reconstruction, but of the "half-educated" minds of ancient "Gnostics" ... The fact that current scholarship has thoroughly undermined any foundation for this artificial construction has not stopped it from continuing to exert considerable influence.¹³

Gnosticism Reconsidered Over and Over Again

With some of the basic dimensions of the construction of gnosticism in place from her examination of Harnack and the history of religions school, King then follows carefully all of the twentieth-century considerations in her analysis. In her subsequent several chapters, her earnest and patient descriptions of a wide variety of scholarly positions are paired with assessments of each. She chronicles how despite flailing explanations and practically endless reinventions of what gnosticism was/is, the assumption that gnosticism was a real phenomenon in the ancient world nevertheless persisted. Most constructive

12. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.

13. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 107–9.

for our purposes, however, is the way she demonstrates a hauntingly clear picture of an idea lurching wildly, not without discipline or insight so much as tortured by fatally flawed assumptions. King's narration and analysis showed how the various emendations of rationale for gnosticism's reality actually form a counter-weave of various critiques from within, which (when put together) finally acts more like an undoing of coherence than an unveiling of the substance of ancient gnosticism.

She begins this stage of review with the works of two major figures: Walter Bauer and Hans Jonas. Although Bauer's work did not concentrate on gnosticism, it is important in two regards for King. First, Bauer's thoroughgoing critique of what he called "the ecclesiastical position" (more often called the "master narrative" in the twenty-first century) about how Christianity began has much in common with King's (and others') critique of the ancient and modern discursive constructions of heresy and orthodoxy. Secondly, Bauer's push to understand Christian beginnings as very diverse and locally based opens a space for King's case against some monolithic orthodoxy or gnostic heresy. Thirdly, Bauer's strong objection to "the insinuation of theological interests into historical reconstruction"¹⁴ resembles much of King's worry about how gnosticism has been constructed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. King nevertheless worries about Bauer's on-going use of the terms orthodoxy and heresy, ignoring the need for rethinking "our very understanding of gnosticism and Christianity."¹⁵

Appropriately, King's examination of the scholarship of Hans Jonas is the longest in the book. She straightforwardly states that in her many years of considering Jonas's work, she personally has been "profoundly affected" by the "passionate expression"¹⁶ she found in his work, *The Gnostic Religion*. She lays out in great detail the advances Jonas made in his counter to both Harnack and the history of religions school by proposing that gnosticism was neither a heretical version of early Christianity nor an artificial myth coming from the "East." Jonas's insistence that the "gnostic religion" be understood as an independent and authentic religious experience did indeed break through the myopic prejudices of previous scholarship. She acknowledges that his work still remains "the classic starting point for exploring this topic"¹⁷ and that his trust in and proposal for a genuine wholeness of gnostic experience "contributed spectacularly to the reification of Gnosticism as an independent religion and a singular

14. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 115.

15. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 115. For a more reflective and extensive comparison of King and Bauer, cf. the paper for this meeting of the Christianity Seminar by Brandon Scott, published in this issue as "What Categories are Left? A Conversation with Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?*"

16. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 137.

17. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 135.

monolithic phenomenon."¹⁸ Perhaps most telling and cleverly haunting about King's appreciation of Jonas is her quotation that he assessed the field of gnostic studies as "the atomizing, dismembering methods of previous research that leave one feeling the lack of a unified sense of a whole."¹⁹ How ironic that Jonas himself knew that gnostic studies were atomized and that crucial agreements were lacking. As the next section of King's summary illustrates, Jonas's own efforts to provide a satisfactory congruence of gnosticism did not match other research in his own time and after his work.

Much of King's assessment of Jonas develops additionally through critique of what she perceives as Jonas's dependence on both the discourse of orthodoxy/heresy and the dominance of typological definitions of gnosticism she examined in the earlier part of the book. Her critique of Jonas is at least as thorough as her appreciation:

[T]hough Jonas passionately promoted Gnosticism as a phenomenon with its own creative impulses and religious integrity, he maintained the traditional negative evaluation of it intellectually, morally, and religiously. This is clear from his list of the characteristics that most readily distinguish Gnosticism from the other types of the "Oriental wave": pathamorphic crisis, cosmic pessimism, impiety, artificiality, and amorality or immorality. Gnostic myth-making, he wrote, was "arbitrarily high-handed," a "degradation of the Old Testament God ... performed with considerable venom and obvious relish"; a "ruthless derogation," it is not "tolerant" and shows a "ruthlessness of deployment," "bold and scandalizing exegesis"; it stays "unblushing in the tradition of pagan polytheism"; it "perverts" Biblical and Platonic lore, and so on ... Moreover, the Gnostics were arrogant and lacking in proper humility, especially in their claim to possess a divine nature that ensured their ultimate salvation.

These are not impartial descriptions of the phenomena but evaluative judgments based on largely unarticulated assumptions about what constitutes true religion and piety. Jonas's own commitments to philosophical rationalism and ethical monotheism intersected with discourses of heresy and Orientalism. They could remain largely unarticulated only because they were widely shared among scholars of religion.²⁰

While admiring the (mostly psychological) achievement of Jonas to think through what might be the inner integrity of gnostic experience, King's own work relative to newly emerging social readings of early Christ(ian) texts helps call attention to the possibility of theological and psychological reductive tendencies in Jonas's characterization of the texts he saw as gnostic. In relationship to both Jonas and those who follow(ed) him, King cites Virginia Burrus's alter-

18. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 135.

19. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 1.51.

20. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 135–36.

native take on the inner angst and blustery expressions in the texts that prickle Jonas's sensitivity:

Jonas' (suspiciously Orientalizing) syncretism and alienation are pointing toward what might be reframed as hybridity and ambivalent resistance to empire/colonialization, characteristics which arguably mark all products of early Roman (and earlier) Hellenism, yet differently and to different degrees.²¹

This is an alternative reading of a wide range of allegedly gnostic texts that King develops fully in her *The Secret Revelation of John*²² and summarizes in her response to Jonas's puzzlements in *What Is Gnosticism?*:

What if the myth of *ApJohn* [*Secret Revelation of John*] was not so much an expression of the intellectual and moral vacuity arising when ideology became divorced from social reality as it was an evaluation of political rule? What if the "experience" underlying estrangement were to be analyzed less in terms of psychology than in terms of the social-political conditions of imperial violence? How then might we read a myth that describes the powers that rule the world as malignant forces motivated by the will to dominate and coerce? How then might we understand the representation of these powers as evil and ignorant? What hope might Gnostic revelation of divine knowledge and salvation then be seen to offer its recipients?²³

Although politely posed in the interrogative, this perspective can be included in King's assessment of Jonas (and much of the rest of scholarship of gnosticism). The important new dimensions in the past two decades of reading early Jesus/Christ(ian) texts socially in special connection to imperial dominance and violence support King in her intimations that Jonas may indeed be missing major dimensions of the affect and content of what he thought to be snide, impious, and alienated expressions.

Despite his breakthroughs, Jonas's contributions (not just in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*) have not—even for his gnosticism-related colleagues—brought the field past what he himself called "the atomizing, dismembering methods of previous research that leave on feeling the lack of a unified sense of a whole."²⁴ King chronicles several of the setbacks to the Jonas hypothesis, mainly how within the field itself the bases for the key element of almost all profiles of gnosticism and the "gnostic redeemer myth" have come undone. Initially, a short 1930 article by Hans Lietzmann raised serious questions about whether Mandaean material was actually pre-Christian. But as King notes, "[c]redit the

21. Burrus in private communication with King on 23 January 2002. Quoted in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.

22. Cf. in this issue, Kotrosits, "But What Do We Call It? The *Secret Revelation of John* and Crises of Categories."

23. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 137.

24. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 1.51.

final demise of the pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth belongs primarily to the German history of religions scholar Carsten Colpe²⁵ in a series of works that undo many of the assumptions of dating and origin of texts on which this hypothetical “myth” was based. King describes Colpe’s response to his own conclusions, boldly challenging much of the alleged historical basis for additional elements of gnosticism in the ancient world. But he then proposes that “the constitution of Gnosis as a common human religious phenomenon and its historical localization are two different things.”²⁶ King correctly and tellingly notes that this makes gnosticism into a “dehistoricized and essentialized category.”²⁷ As I reflect on how Colpe’s brilliant critique of the gnostic redeemer myth and his nevertheless tenacious recalculated grip on the category of gnosticism itself (even at the cost of dehistoricizing it after his own insightful historical analysis), it puzzles me how attached scholars have remained to the idea of gnosticism. With so much wandering through mistakes and recalculations for the better part of a century, what can account for this strong faith in such a tenuous category? King’s answer seems to me the only possibility:

The reason for the continued confusion ... is not the lack of material evidence but the continued entanglements of heresiological discourses in the scholarly study of Gnosticism.²⁸

Perhaps the most tumultuous reconsiderations about the viability of gnosticism as an analytical category have come from the discovery at Nag Hammadi. In two final chapters of charting the many reconsiderations about gnosticism, King examines the new issues that emerged from having so many previously unknown documents, some of which have some interesting similarities to descriptions of heresies from the second-century polemicists. Her overview is helpful:

The new riches did not provide quick or easy solutions ... The decades since the discovery near Nag Hammadi have seen a flurry of scholarly activity. The sheer volume of the material and its intellectual complexity have required enormous efforts ... Although analysis of the Nag Hammadi texts is still in its early stages, these detailed studies are providing exciting new insight and a sound basis for rethinking every issue related to the study of Gnosticism ... The question of the Gnostic character of these works is being hotly debated ... The Nag Hammadi works have also challenged scholars to reconfigure the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy, and indeed to rethink the usefulness of that distinction for reconstructing the history of the early period. Whereas we might have expected these works to solidify the ancient distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy,

25. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 141.

26. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, 200. Quoted in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 147.

27. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 147.

28. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 150.

they have instead supported Bauer's thesis that distinct varieties of Christianity developed in different geographical areas, at a time when the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy were not at all fixed. As [James M.] Robinson argues ... "[i]n the second and third centuries) [t]here seems not yet to be a central body of orthodox doctrine distinguished from heretical doctrine to the right and to the left, but rather a common body of beliefs variously understood and translated or transmitted ... To this extent the terms *heresy* and *orthodoxy* are anachronistic." Early Christian literature does not divide neatly into orthodox and heretical camps; there are unexpected overlaps and surprising similarities, and crucial points of difference are not always where we expect them to be ...²⁹ Predictably, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts have provoked considerable discussion about the adequacy of prior theories about the origin and typological characterization of Gnosticism, as well as the social character and location of the Gnostics. They have provided a new basis for testing previously held theses and for developing new resolutions for old problems. While the heritage of past methods, frameworks, and discourses continue to shape how scholars interpret new materials, scholars are also forging new avenues.³⁰

One possible sign of such new avenues could be the post-Nag Hammadi emergence of four terms that seem to grapple with the diversity of literary perspectives. King charts the emergence of the terms Valentinianism, Sethianism, Hermeticism, and Thomasine Christianity among scholars of the last twenty years. These terms do seem to be responding both to the new breadth of literature and the lack of clarity in the term gnosticism. But there are reasons to question how productive these developments are. For one, it is not as if all or even most active scholars in these fields have endorsed this as the primary terms to consider. Rather, at best one can say that these terms might be considered as those rising from various scholars with various methods into consciousness of some within this study. Granting that these terms "have become well established within the field," King does worry about what they mean and contribute:

Their status with regard to Gnosticism, however, has become increasingly unclear. Should they be regarded as subcategories of Gnosticism or of Christianity, or as distinct religious phenomena, comparable to Mandaeanism or Manicheism? ... None of these genealogical schema has achieved any wide acceptance, at least

29. Earlier King noted how accusations of heresy occurred in a variety of directions with a variety of meanings and that careful study of Nag Hammadi literature has challenged previous presumptions about who is orthodox and who is heretical: "[D]espite the polemicists contention that true Christians were unified against the diverse heresies, charges of heresy were flying in multiple directions by the third century. Indeed, the polemicists would have surely regarded the radically docetic and ascetic teachings of *Test Truth* as arch-heretical and yoked its author to the Valentinians and other such 'heretics.' The author of *Test Truth*, however, the teachings of both the heresiologists and the Valentinians as of one and the same ilk." King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 53.

30. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 149–53.

partly because any such linear formulation is much too simplistic to account for the complexity of the phenomena, especially given the diversity within the subcategories themselves.

And how are we to classify the texts that do not fit into any of the four categories, such as the texts relating to the early Jesus tradition (for example, *GosThom*, *GosMary*, *ApJames*, *DialSav*, and *GosSav*)? Are there more streams of Gnosticism yet to be determined? Or are such “left-over” works to be considered “generically Gnostic”? Or not Gnostic at all?³¹

King also surveys scholars who have tried to address this larger set of questions, primarily:

1. R. P. Casey: “There is no trace in early Christianity of ‘Gnosticism’ as a broad historical category, and the modern use of ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism’ to define a large but ill-defined movement ... is wholly unknown in the early Christian period.”³²
2. Morton Smith: “primarily a phenomenon of later Platonism.”³³
3. Bentley Layton: With the criterion that “the modern historian must avoid using that word [*gnostikos*] in any other sense [than “to use the name that a social group applies to itself”]:³⁴ because ambivalent usage would introduce disorderliness into the historical discourse.”³⁵ Layton seeks to locate an ancient social group that used the term *gnostikos* as a self-designation. King summarizes the rest of Layton’s complex process:

Right at the beginning he encountered a significant obstacle: the direct testimonies to *gnostikos* or *gnostikoi* (“Gnostics”) occur only in literature written by the enemies of Gnostics. At this point, Layton made a crucial move. He noted that the polemicists associate the Gnostics with a particularly cosmological myth. This myth, in his view, can be considered a relatively reliable pointer to the distinctive character of the group. Thus, whenever one finds this myth, one has encountered Gnostics, even when the myth is not explicitly attached to the self-designation *gnostikoi* (Gnostics).³⁶

Layton then developed a five-step method for deciding which materials could be included in his database.³⁷ Perhaps one of the most significant

31. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 162–63.

32. Casey, “The Study of Gnosticism,” 55. Quoted in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 165.

33. Smith, “History of the Term *Gnostikos*,” 806–7. Quoted in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 166.

34. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 166.

35. Layton, “Prolegomena,” 335.

36. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 167.

37. Layton, “Prolegomena,” 335; King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 167.

results of Layton's complex scheme is that it substantially reduces the amount of literature he would consider a part of "gnosticism."

4. Michael Williams: He proposes to replace the term "gnosticism" with "biblical demiurgical myth":³⁸

Biblical demiurgical myth would not be just another name for "gnosticism" because the intent of the new category would be precisely to cut free from baggage surrounding the old one. While it would be grouping most of the same myths together for study and comparison, it would not make the series of mistakes that ... have been made with the category "gnosticism" ... This category would not require the assertion that some particular hermeneutic program underlay all the sources involved, but would rather allow for the diversity of approaches that we encounter.³⁹

Although King has reservations about each of these efforts, it suffices here to attend to her summary of these positions:

In the end, whether specialists work to construct subcategories, argue to eliminate the term "Gnosticism" altogether, or to use it to designate a more limited range of phenomena than the discussion portends—they all recognize the inadequacy of the term to encompass the variety of phenomena that have been assigned to it. That at least remains an assured result of current scholarly work on the Nag Hammadi literature.⁴⁰

Toward the end of her massive review of research⁴¹ King updates both the origins and typological definitions of gnosticism. Her review of typological definitions considers the persistent use even in the late twentieth century of "three of the most common stereotypical characterizations of Gnosticism (radical anticosmic dualism, incapacity for true ethics, and Docetism),"⁴² deepening her earlier critique of them as "inaccurate and even distorting interpretations of the new materials."⁴³

Her update of the origins issue includes the proposal that gnosticism originated in Judaism. This review occasions her final conclusions on this matter:

Any attempt to resolve the multifarious materials into a single origin and linear genealogy is doomed to fail on its own premise. Such an approach cannot solve

38. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*.

39. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 265. Quoted in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 215.

40. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 168.

41. From my perspective the only major scholar of gnosticism that King does not treat expansively is Elaine Pagels. This may be due to Pagels's most public intervention on the subject being her popular work, *The Gnostic Gospels*, written for a wider public. An important complementary study would assess the ongoing influence of Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* and her other rather extensive scholarly books and articles of scholarship on gnosticism.

42. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 213.

43. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 217.

the problem of the origin of Gnosticism *because no such monolithic entity ever existed*. Because the core problem is the reification of a rhetorical entity (heresy) into an actual phenomenon in its own right (Gnosticism), the entire question of origin is a non-issue whose seeming urgency arises only because of its rhetorical function in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. *We can and should feel free to set it aside and move on, turning instead to analysis of the practices of literary production and social formation.* [italics mine]⁴⁴

King's Conclusions

Although she is careful at each stage of her analysis to summarize the state of her argument, her final chapter ("The End of Gnosticism?") provides a clear, yet understated, assessment (I will return later to the persistence of question marks in King's book and final chapter title):

In the end, I think the term "Gnosticism" will most likely be abandoned, at least in its present usage ... the discourses of orthodoxy and heresy distort our reading and present usage. Perhaps scholars will continue to use it to designate a much more delimited group of materials, such as "Sethian Gnosticism" or "Classical Gnosticism." Perhaps not. It is important ... to recognize and correct the ways in which reinscribing reconstruction of ancient religion. These distortions have both confused historiography and undermined the legitimate work of theological reflection.

This chapter, it turns out, is more interested in "rethinking the methodologies and theoretical foundations of historiography as they are employed in the study of gnosticism" than a final adjudication of the analytical usefulness of the term itself. After the above brief conclusion about gnosticism, she addresses in a powerful and evocative manner how to begin "thinking hard and differently about religious identity formation," which "require[s] revising our notions of tradition and history, reshaping discourse, categories, and methods, and above all, rethinking the ethically informed goals of historical analysis."⁴⁵ For these purposes this chapter is highly recommended to all readers, but especially our Christianity Seminar. For the purposes of our current Seminar topic on the analytical viability of the term "gnosticism," a thorough methodological and theoretical review will need to await another moment.

This is not so much that King's conclusion is incomplete as much as her chapter-by-chapter summary assessments have already compiled a complete conclusion as to how nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship has constructed the notion of ancient gnosticism. At the intersection of Protestant polemic against Catholicism and his own ambitious liberal program for re-interpreting early Christianity, Harnack promoted gnosticism as the key error (heresy)

44. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189–90.

45. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 236.

corrupting the transcendent message of Jesus. It seems not to have mattered that Harnack's notion of gnosticism differed significantly from all the other definitions of gnosticism that would ensue for over the next hundred years, since Harnack's prestige and substituting gnosticism for heresy fit perfectly into the larger and already established discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. Gnosticism's place in this discourse continued to function for each successive generation of scholarship, even though the understanding of gnosticism varied substantially and the epistemological problems with typological definitions continued. The stability of gnosticism as an ancient reality was undergirded with appeals to and debates about its origins, even though late twentieth-century historiography had shown that study of origins could not be an historical task. Even though the first generation(s) of scholarship on Nag Hammadi assumed that the new documents were more or less totally gnostic and as such needed simply to be studied as additional examples of error, a large spectrum of subsequent close textual studies have shown that the diversity of Nag Hammadi simply cannot be accounted for by any of the definitions of gnosticism. With this broader diversity in view and a wide range of new textual studies of Nag Hammadi in place, many devoted scholars of gnosticism now acknowledge the scope of the term must at least be reduced, and a number urge it to be eliminated.

The Significance of the Companion Volume to King's *What is Gnosticism?*

Although Maia Kotrotsits' essay from the Christianity Seminar's fall 2014 meeting focuses more directly on the King book that directly followed and intentionally companioned *What Is Gnosticism?*, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of her in-depth *The Secret Revelation of John*.⁴⁶

On one level her work in *The Secret Revelation of John* is straightforward and traditional. It is a classic commentary in all senses of the term. It contains a new and rigorous translation by King; an important range of manuscript technical observations and notes; extended discussion of authorship, ancient readership, possible contexts, and dating; thorough analysis of the text in its variations; verse-by-verse cross referencing of the four different manuscripts; significant review of the history of scholarship; examination of a wide range of interpretational issues; and, bundles of fresh insights into the text and its possible ancient meanings. It will certainly stand as a classic not only for this very important

46. The ancient document of the *Secret Revelation of John* is more often referred to in scholarship as the *Apocryphon of John*. King's designation of a title that is a more thoroughly English follows a wide trend in the last decade of avoiding esoteric-sounding, non-English laden titles of Nag Hammadi books. Cf. the important changes in titles made by the gnosticizing scholar Marvin Meyer in his important editing of the most recent edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

work discovered in twentieth century, but for Nag Hammadi literature and beyond.

Her choice of the *Secret Revelation of John* could hardly be more significant. It has been for quite some time viewed as the most expansive and classic example of gnosticism. As King herself notes, it is thought of as “the signature example of ‘Gnosticism.’”⁴⁷ Its pre-Nag Hammadi discovery in the Berlin Codex was received as extremely significant. And there are an astonishing three different copies and versions in Nag Hammadi Codices II, III, and IV. As King quite intentionally decided to test her hypotheses in *What Is Gnosticism?* in close textual study, there could not have been a more appropriate or larger challenge than the *Secret Revelation of John* itself.

Furthermore, King’s close textual test is governed by requiring of herself a rigorous set of requirements relative to the problematic assumptions that the text is obviously gnostic:

The analysis of the *Secret Revelation of John* offered in this volume thus demonstrates how misleading such caricatures and stereotype can be when taken as an objective description of the contents and goals of the work. Even in trying to overcome these distortions, it can be difficult to escape the terms of the debate that the early polemicists set ... What I have tried to do in this volume is to set aside those [gnostic-tinged] typological categories to the side and show some of the ways in which the *Secret Revelation of John* can be read—as a story, as social critique, and as intertextual hermeneutics.⁴⁸

Indeed, upon close examination of her companion volume on the text, the entire study is done without dependence on such typological assumptions about its body-hating, anti-cosmic, parasitic, and universal salvation. Rather, King takes on aspects of the text that could be readily read in such caricatures; but through insistent close reading and thorough intertextualities, more complex and quite fresh ancient meanings emerge. In other words, she makes sense of it without recourse to gnosticizing assumptions.

Although much more attention to the combination of King’s paired volumes is deserved, here I simply am content to observe how the proposals she makes in *What is Gnosticism?* are thoroughly explored and tested in *The Secret Revelation of John*.⁴⁹

Extending King

My question especially for the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar has been whether the category of gnosticism is adequate for analyzing and rewriting

47. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 258.

48. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 260–62.

49. King’s work is, of course, ongoing on the issue of gnosticism. Cf. among others her articles, “Toward a Discussion of the Category of ‘Gnosis/Gnosticism’” and “Which Early Christianity.”

the history of early Christianity. As the Seminar enters its post-introductory phases, it has seemed to me that the ways the Jesus/Christ(ian) movements of the second and early third centuries have been understood for most of the last century is that the second century was the serious beginning of a definitive sorting of the good (orthodox) “Christians” from the bad (mostly gnostic and other heretical groups). My reading of leading scholarship on gnosticism over the last twenty years has been that the assumptions of the last century relative to ancient gnosticism have now been seriously challenged and that a re-examination of the issue was in order.

Obviously the context of this question has a great deal to do with the larger task of the Christianity Seminar to re-examine the master narrative of Christian beginnings. So this review of the work of a leading scholar on the question of the adequacy of the category of “gnosticism” and the papers at the fall 2014 meeting by other recognized scholars of gnosticism in the last twenty or more years are meant to orient the Seminar’s work for the next several years, especially as we try to take seriously the second and third centuries relative to writing some different histories of early Christianity.

It has been my opinion for the past eight years (since reading the prepublication manuscripts of both *What is Gnosticism?* and *The Secret Revelation of John*) that Karen King has produced the answer to my question about whether the term “gnosticism” is adequate to the analytical task within a rewriting of the history of early Christianity. A summary of positions relative to this question in King’s two works include the following (quoting King):

1. When modern historians adopt the same strategies as well as the content of the polemicists’ construction of heresy to define Gnosticism, they are not just reproducing the heresy of the polemicists; they are themselves propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy. We should not therefore be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians using the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity—whether in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, intra-Protestant debate, or the colonial politics of Orientalism ... The language, themes, and strategies of orthodoxy and heresy proved to be a powerful discourse, persisting in various forms up to our own day. My purpose in this book is to show how twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism has simultaneously reinscribed, elaborated, and deviated from this discourse.⁵⁰
2. The pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth was the invention of modern scholarship; it is inadequate, when not entirely misleading, for reading the ancient material.⁵¹

50. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 54.

51. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.

3. The fixation on origins has tended to distort the actual social and historical processes of literary productions because the purpose of determining the origin of Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical; it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definition of Christianity.⁵²
4. Any attempt to resolve the multifarious materials into a singular origin and linear genealogy is doomed to fail on its own premise. Such an attempt cannot solve the problem of the origin of Gnosticism because no such monolithic entity ever existed.⁵³
5. Because the core problem is the reification of a rhetorical entity (heresy) into an actual phenomenon in its own right (Gnosticism), the entire question of origin is a non-issue whose seeming urgency arises only because of its rhetorical function in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. We can and should feel free to set it aside and move on, turning instead to analysis of the practices of literary production and social formation.⁵⁴
6. The categories inherited from an earlier generation of scholars ... have produced inaccurate and even distorting interpretations of the new material. Although they are still widely used, specialists are becoming increasingly wary of them. It is time to rethink the entire framework for studying these texts.⁵⁵
7. In the end, I think the term "Gnosticism" will most likely be abandoned, at least in its present usage ...⁵⁶
8. Gnosticism was substituted for heresy as the object of the discourse ... The study of Gnosticism is thus imbricated in intellectual discourses and power relations that extend far beyond any notion of disinterested objectivity and often far beyond the explicit intentions of individual scholars.⁵⁷
9. The challenge before us is to propose a new framework for the study of religion in antiquity by rethinking the methodologies and theoretical foundations of historiography as they are employed in the study of Gnosticism.⁵⁸
10. The variety of phenomena classified as "Gnostic" simply will not support a single monolithic definition, and in fact *none of the primary materials fit the standard typological definition.*⁵⁹

52. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.

53. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189.

54. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 189–90.

55. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 216.

56. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 218.

57. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 218–19.

58. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 219.

59. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 226.

11. Because none of the texts contains all the listed characteristics, typological phenomenology raises the question of how many elements of the ideal type any particular case has to evince in order to qualify as an example of Gnosticism ...⁶⁰
12. [T]he term "Gnosticism" is an anachronism ultimately stemming from hindsight. It belongs to modern attempts to classify certain types of ancient Christianity as heresy, but the lines of orthodoxy and heresy were not so clear in the second and third centuries when these texts were composed. In order to comprehend the dynamic process by which Christianity was formed, it is necessary to set aside the winners' account of that period and attempt to place ourselves in the midst of debates whose outcome was not yet certain.⁶¹

My conclusion from my review and from these twelve quotations is found with the answer "no, gnosticism is not even close to adequacy for the tasks of analyzing and rewriting the history of early Christianity."

But I suspect that I do injustice to King herself in my conclusion here and therefore hasten to add four additional observations:

1. In *What is Gnosticism?* King never answers the larger question definitively. Indeed, the title of her first book of the pair is a clear question, not an answer. It stands in clear contrast to, for instance, the subtitle of Michael Williams's earlier book on the same topic: *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*. Similarly, the title of King's last chapter in *What Is Gnosticism?* is not an answer but the question "The End of Gnosticism?"
2. King's long and distinguished work in the academy has been consistently and movingly dedicated to deep collegiality. It may be that the tension between the twelve clear (to me) "no" answers to my question of whether gnosticism is adequate for analytical study of early Christianity and King's more ambivalent question marks is simply an expression of her ongoing respect for her long-term colleagues who have different positions within the guild on scholarship on gnosticism. This would reflect both the profound collegial ethics of King's scholarship and the truth that there is much to learn from the previous generations and current machinations about sub-and-counter categories of a flailing gnostic category.
3. In *What Is Gnosticism?* King occasionally uses both the terms "gnosticism" and "gnostic" with straightforward references to ancient persons, trends, and literature.

60. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 226.

61. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 2.

4. In personal conversation King has directly told me that she has not rejected categorically the term "gnosticism."⁶²

The tension between my conclusion of King's position on the adequacy of the term for analysis of early Christianity and her own perhaps more nuanced opinion makes me characterize (per above) this portion of the paper as my extension of King's position rather than King's own position. It is an extension I make seriously and as an obvious (perhaps insensitive) derivative of King's better work.

I have five main reasons for proposing that gnosticism is not an adequate category for the analysis and rewriting of new histories of early Christianity:

First and foremost, all of King's analysis makes sense. The category itself of gnosticism is discursive and rhetorical, and neither historical nor analytical. Scholarship has not been able to agree at all on a definition of gnosticism. The main type of definition in scholarship about gnosticism has been typological, which brings with it serious epistemological problems for historical analysis. The prevalence of focus on gnosticism's origins in scholarship about gnosticism gives it less authenticity historiographically. The substitution of gnosticism for heresy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries imbricates such "history" in the discursive production of orthodoxy and heresy. Specialist study of Nag Hammadi literature, especially in the last twenty-five years, has undone many of the assumptions and assertions of previous scholarship on gnosticism.

Generally in other cases, if only half of these important critiques of any other basic historical proposal were accurate, the basic historical proposal would be rejected. So the care and thoroughness of the above aspects of King's scholarship give far more than adequate reason to reject "gnosticism" as an adequate category.

Secondly, scholarship now needs a less blunt tool/analytical category for examination of the Jesus/Christ(ian) literature of the second and third centuries. Recent elaboration of sub-and-counter categories for the previous "consensus" on gnosticism as the governing category for analysis of this literature signals a need for more refined categories, although my suspicion is that the dependence of these recent elaborations on the previous gnostic "consensus" and the ongoing developments (like King's *The Secret Revelation of John*) will probably make the eventual categories different than most of the current sub-and-counter proposals. At any rate, scholarship should stop using the blunt, vague, and rhetorical category of gnosticism for its analysis.

Thirdly, the very success of gnosticism as a governing category during the past hundred or more years makes it unrecoverable given the emerging problems of using the term. Since at least five generations of scholars and two

62. From a conversation of 28 June 2014 in Philadelphia.

generations of the broader American public⁶³ have now been thoroughly taught the truth of the category, the possibility of using the term with some new, revised, or downgraded meaning is almost nil. Rather, especially for scholars, we need to relegate gnosticism and gnostic(s) to the growing list of categories we thought were dependable but were not.⁶⁴

Fourthly, for the Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar, as it stands on the precipice of earnest work about the second century, the relegation of gnosticism to the sidelines needs clear analytical categories, analogous to the decision of the Acts Seminar that the Acts of the Apostles was probably written in the second century and to the Jesus Seminar deciding to take material from the *Gospel of Thomas* seriously in thinking about the teachings of the historical Jesus.

Fifthly, the wealth of documents Nag Hammadi provides to both scholarship and the public has been blocked or caricatured by the imposition of the gnostic label on them. These documents offer important information to scholarship about Jesus/Christ(ian) movements in the second and third centuries and new sources of Christian piety and self-understanding to the public.

The vast majority of the work that beckons us to rethink the second and third centuries of Jesus/Christ(ian) movements can be fresher, more complex, more diverse, more crisp analytically, less pretentious, less vulnerable to outside discourses and rhetoric, more surprising, more laborious, and more creative if gnosticism is rejected fully as an analytical and re-imaginative category. It can change the picture of second- and third-century movements from that of two forces fighting with each other in a specific field to a portrait of a transparent torso with six to nine different major organs and thousands of connections, bypasses, and semi-independent vessels flowing between and around them.

Or perhaps for our second- and third-century projects it is appropriate to reuse a similar alternative image, shift, and metaphor as what I proposed in 1996 in the introduction to the book *Reimagining Christian Origins*⁶⁵ for what might lie ahead, when some of the brittle notions like gnosticism are allowed to fade away:

In the summer of 1921 at Fontainebleau, Pablo Picasso produced two paintings both entitled *Three Musicians*. In these paintings, the standard realist strokes and colors of classical and romantic painters are replaced by cubist angles and curves, by improbable tones and values of color. The three dimensions of realism, so much the lingua franca of earlier schools of painting, are replaced by de-

63. Try spelling gnosticism on your computer without the computer itself correcting your writing by capitalizing the term.

64. The list might include: (1) Paul was a Christian. (2) If a man's wife is not mentioned in an ancient text, that means that she did not exist. (3) The Gospels of Mark and John have the same story of Jesus. (4) Historians have access to original ancient manuscripts. (5) The Roman peace was benevolent.

65. The image and idea for this comparison are mine, but much of the elegant language came from my esteemed co-editor, Elizabeth Castelli.

stabilizing and unlikely planes of imagery, each body seen simultaneously from four, five, or six perspectives depending upon whether one's eye lands upon the face, the shoulder, the hand, the torso, the leg, the violinist's bow, the guitarist's strings, the musical text that forms the tableau's center. The background is made up of harsh and contrasting panels of richly colored geometric figures. The details are there too—the jaunty beret and pencil-thin moustache of one musician, the skeletal structure of the face of another—for those who would take time to puzzle them out. In order to be read, the images of these paintings, so stark and antirealist, demand eyes and imaginations willing to enter the unfamiliar world of the canvas—one where geometry and color and multiple perspectives create a tensive imagery that representations steeped in realism or romanticism cannot adequately narrate ...

In *Three Musicians*, as in many other paintings of that era, we saw as never before. For the first time we saw a single picture that acknowledged the variety of perspectives from which each of us necessarily comes to see. In a single picture we saw conflicting points of view—and as a result we saw more of the subject matter rather than less ... [T]he painters were among the first to show how a complex understanding which involved multiple points of view could emerge ...

It is not accidental that those whose allegiances were bolstered by the singular imperial or exclusive perspective have continued to object vehemently to the revolution of Picasso and company, while at the same time longing nostalgically for classical realism in art and imperial prerogative in social relations ...

... [W]e are ready to take up the cubist's brush and angles of vision in order to paint a new kind of portrait of how Christianity began ... [W]e have turned for inspiration to Picasso's audacious antirealist project in order to highlight the challenge brought to the current study of Christian origins ... In Picasso's *Three Musicians* we find a radical challenge to those who have gone before, masking their own assumptions about the character of representation with the widely accepted conventions ... Picasso's paintings insist that the viewer acknowledge the complex layers, the multiple perspectives, and the constructed character of his representation ... the agonistic struggle of multiple perspectives in the ancient sources and in their modern reframings ...⁶⁶

66. Castelli and Taussig, "Painting Large and Startling Pictures," 3–5.

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