The Academic Study of Western Esotericism: Early Developments and Related Fields

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H.E.R.M.E.S. ACADEMIC PRESS
Copenhagen, 2013
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Towards Secular Studies of Gnosticism

The study of Gnosticism in an academic context is generally treated as a sub-domain of theology or of the history of religions depending on the university in question, but it will presumably also become an important sub-domain of Western esotericism once Western esotericism itself has become a more widely established discipline at universities around the globe.\(^{260}\)

The study of Gnosticism might seem like a straightforward undertaking, as for most people it simply involves studying esoteric trends that were excluded from mainstream Christianity during its early formation period. Like the study of Western esotericism and other isms, however, the construct “Gnosticism” contains assumptions that might not always be historically correct. This problem of demarcation has gone hand in hand with the extensive history of research into Gnosticism and posed several

\(^{260}\) Gnosticism is already treated as an important item within many academic books on Western esotericism, including *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western esotericism*, ed. by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and others (Leiden: Brill, 2005), the contents of which can in some respects be regarded as the boundary of the field at the present time.
questions, such as: (1) what is Gnosticism? (2) is it a specific and independent religion? (3) is it a form of Christianity and/or Judaism? (4) is it an oriental religion? (5) what are the origins of Gnosticism? (6) is it only a phenomenon of late antiquity? (7) what are its basic features? (8) is Gnosticism a singular phenomenon or a complex network of several groups? (9) is Gnosticism a scholarly construct or a self-designation? and finally, (10) is the term Gnosticism at all useful?

These questions, among others, have been dealt with in various manners since the earliest days of testimonia about the so-called Gnostics until our present day. For the sake of convenience, clarity, and in order to follow the gradual shift in the research of Gnosticism—from heresy to secular studies—a taxonomy of five distinct approaches will be employed in this chapter. The five categories are as follows: (1) Gnosticism as heresy, (2) Gnosticism in the light of the history of religions, (3) the typology of Gnosticism, (4) post-modern approaches to Gnosticism, and (5) Gnosticism and Western esotericism.

Before moving onto the five approaches to Gnosticism, a short exposition of the basic meanings of the term Gnosticism and its related terms, such as gnōstikos and gnosis will be dealt with in order to eliminate the confusion regarding the meanings of these words.

- Gnosticism

Let us begin with the term Gnosticism. As will be explored in further detail below, the term Gnosticism is the most commonly used designation for the study of a variety of religious texts and groups belonging to late antiquity. Like
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terms such as esotericism and occultism, the English term Gnosticism itself is not ancient, but was, as far as we know, first coined by the influential theologian, philosopher, and “Cambridge Platonist” Henry More (1614-1687). More used the term in *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles* (1669) and in *Antidote Against Idolatry* (1669) as a generic term for gnostic-heresy. This means that the term Gnosticism was not a term employed by any so called Gnostic group or by opponents of such groups before Henry More coined it. It is therefore important to keep this rather late usage in mind, especially because its polemical impetus has colored a great deal of research into Gnosticism since the days of Henry More.

The term Gnosticism is a compound of the early English scholarly loanword Gnostick and ism. The English term Gnostick was derived directly from either the Latin Gnosticus that was in use in the sixteenth century or from the original Greek term Gnōstikos that was used in ancient texts.

-Gnōstikos
While the term Gnōstikos and Gnōstikoi (pl.) came to be associated with several religious groups and texts in late antiquity, the term Gnōstikos had, since Plato (ca. 428-348

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262 This will be shown in more detail below. For a more comprehensive study of this, see Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
BCE), been an integral part of that specific philosophical tradition. Gnōstikos was not a common word; this means that it was not a term used by the general public but a highly technical term, presumably coined by Plato himself in his *Politicus* or the *Statesman* (258e-267a). The original meaning, as it was defined by Plato in the *Politicus*, is quite significant. Plato made a distinction between praktikos and gnōstikos or practical skill and the pure sciences (such as mathematics), which lead to knowledge. Praktikos shows how to practice a craft whereas gnōstikos provides a means to knowledge. Plato furthermore argued that the true political ruler must be aligned with gnōstikos or be a gnostic master: one who is *capable of knowing* and thus being the *Nous* (superior mind) of the people or the link between the human and the divine. Gnōstikos was originally used to designate *being capable of knowledge* or a skill that *leads to knowledge* and not a specific doctrine or body of knowledge.

From Plato and on to the second century CE the term was continuously used within the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition to denote *leading to knowledge, resulting in knowledge, capable of knowing, or an individual possessed of*

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264 Including philosophers such as Aristotle, the Aristotelian Strato of Lampsacus, Archytas, Clinias, Ocellus Lucanus, “Ecphantus”, Philo Judaeus, Plutarch (Moralia), Pseudo-Plutarch, Albinus, Iamblichus, and Ioannes Philoponus.
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such powers.265 In the second century, for example, the middle-Platonist Plutarch (46-120 CE) wrote, “Human souls have a faculty that is gnōstikos (leads to knowledge) of visible things.”266

Finally, the term is also related to gnōstos, “knowable” and to “gignoskein”, “to learn” or “to come to know.”

During late antiquity, however, the term began to be used outside of the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition. Gnōstikos, for instance, was now not only applied to mental faculties and capabilities but to people and groups, some of which appear to have called themselves Gnostics.267

The first known instances of these shifts are found in the Church father Irenaeus’ work Adversus Haereses (ca. 180 CE)268 and in a now lost work of the middle-Platonist Celsus (second century). Fragments of the latter text are contained in Contra Celsum [Against Celsus] ca. 248 CE, a work by the Church father Origen.

Irenaeus for example refers to a “heretic” Christian group known as gnōstikos or as “the so-called ‘Knowledge-Supplying’ school of thought.”269 In another passage Irenaeus, also refers to a group (the Carpocratians)

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that calls itself the Gnōstikoi.\footnote{Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus Haereses}, 1.25.6.} Celsus equally refers to a group who professes to be composed of gnōstikoi,\footnote{Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, V:61, see Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, trans., intro. and notes by Henry Chadwick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 311; see also Layton, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 338; Smith, ‘The History of the Term Gnostikos’, p. 801.} and Prodicus is so designated by Clement of Alexandria\footnote{Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Stromata}, 3.4.30. For an English translation, see \textit{The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325}, ed. by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols (Michigan, Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1963), II.} and the Naassenes by Hippolytus\footnote{Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus Haereses}, 5.2. 5.11.1.} along with the followers of Justin the Gnostic\footnote{Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus Haereses}, 5.23.3.}

The neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry (234-305 CE) also mentions, in his \textit{Life of Plotinus}, a group of Christian gnōstikoi who have abandoned the ancient philosophy because they felt that Plato had “failed to penetrate into the depth of Intellectual Being.”\footnote{Porphyry, ‘On the Life of Plotinus and The Order of His Books’, 16, see \textit{Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus, Ennead I}, trans. by A. H. Amstrong, LOEB Classical Library, 7 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), I, 44-45.} Plotinus (204-270 CE) also produced several arguments against the so-called
Gnostics or “those that affirm the creator of the Cosmos and the Cosmos itself to be evil” in his *Enneads*.\(^{276}\)

One of the important findings of the scholar Morton Smith is that there were a couple of people or groups in late antiquity who actually called themselves Gnostics or gnōstikoi probably including the followers of Adelphius, Aquilinus, Prodicus, Carpocrates, and the Naassenes/Ophites.\(^{277}\)

In the *Book of Thomas the Contender* the Saviour remarks that Thomas is a gnōstikos, that is, one who knows himself.\(^{278}\) The Church father Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 CE) also claimed to be a Gnostic,\(^{279}\) but his usage of the term was as an ideal-type of behaviour rather than a personal designation *per se*.\(^{280}\) According to Clement true, gnosis stemming from the teachings of the divine Logos and imparted via the apostles, as


distinguished from false gnosis,\textsuperscript{281} would lead to moral perfection and divine contemplation.

The problem that has dogged research into Gnosticism is that Irenaeus, as a part of his heresiological polemical rhetoric, expanded the terms gn\'ostikos and gn\'ostikoi to include groups that did not call themselves Gnostics; but which he felt were similar to each other and an equal threat to the orthodox Christianity that he exemplified. Irenaeus argued that there was a homogeneous, Gnostic, heretical, tradition that began with Simon Magus in the first century and continued through the Valentinian school, among many others.\textsuperscript{282} This artificial inclusiveness of the term gn\'ostikos was later repeated in Henry More’s coinage of the modern term Gnosticism, which was derived from gn\'ostikos as we have seen. It is this historical trajectory firstly that has produced the notion of a variety of religious groups being much more homogeneous than they actually were and secondly done so in a highly polemical or negative light.

The original homogeneity of Gnosticism construed by Irenaeus and continued by Henry More continues to exist as a concept today, even though its contents have changed several times, and it has become somewhat secularised. Today, although the usefulness of the term has been deeply challenged, as will be shown below, there is still a

\textsuperscript{281} Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Stromata}, 2.11.52.5.
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general consensus about what texts are included in the study of Gnosticism.283

- Gnosis
Another word related to Gnosticism, and often confusingly so, is the Greek word gnosis which roughly means “knowledge.” Contrary to gnóstikos, gnosis was an ordinary part of the Greek language in both daily life and religious practice, including the religious practice of Christianity and Judaism. The most common example of what type of knowledge gnosis originally designated is the distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge by personal acquaintance. This distinction can be expressed in the following two sentences: “I know that Paris is in France” and “I have been to Paris and know the city very well.”284 The second sentence designates gnosis; the ancient so-called Gnostics thus claimed to have personal acquaintance or gnosis of


who we were, and what we have become; where we were... whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.\textsuperscript{285}

In this sense gnosis signifies a knowledge that has been realised, a knowledge where the object of knowledge and the subject/knower have been united through the act of knowing or inner experience, in contrast to propositional knowledge where the object of knowledge is unexperienced and thus outside the subject’s acquaintance. This form of knowledge is, of course, also deeply related to the subject of mysticism and mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{286}

Like Gnosticism the term has come, however, to have many different nuances throughout Western history. Gnosis was, as mentioned above, a common part of the Greek language and it was used in various contexts. Apart from what are commonly called Gnostic texts, we find the first polemical use of the word in the Pastorals as “science falsely so called” (1 Tim. 6:20, KJV). We also find it used loosely by Saint Paul as either “knowledge” or “knowledge of God” (1 Tim. 6:20; 1 Cor. 13:9; 2 Cor. 2:14). The word can also be found in the hermetic texts,\textsuperscript{287} where it often is used to indicate a spiritual knowledge or a first


\textsuperscript{286} See chapter 1.6. on mysticism in the present book for more details.

\textsuperscript{287} Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction, trans. and ed. by Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), IV, 9; VII, 2; XIII, 8.
state or step on the spiritual path, which is related to the praise of God, ethical purity, and the dispersal of ignorance.

To give a modern example of the use of gnosis, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) will serve as an illustrative case. Jung, who to a large extent laid the foundation of modern depth psychology, wrote “Gnosis is undoubtedly a psychological knowledge whose contents derive from the unconscious.”288 This quote clearly demonstrates how, what in an earlier context was a personal acquaintance or unification with the divine became with Jung a psychological form of knowledge stemming from the unconscious. This might, of course, simply be word variations of the same ideas, yet the term gnosis is at least given a fresh nuance by Jung in its new context. Although Jung generally attempted to distinguish gnosis from Gnosticism289 that was not the general trend in scholarship and especially not in German scholarship—in the period between 1850-1970.

Much confusion regarding the two terms arose, however from the unspecified and often synonymous use of the two terms, as exemplified by A. D. Nock’s (1902-1963) famous quotation, “I am left in a terminological fog.”290 This confusion later resulted in the first colloquium

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on Gnosticism in Messina 1966. The aim of the conference was to clarify the definitions of both gnosis and Gnosticism. The proposal, which conformed more or less with Hans Jonas’s (1903-1993) seminal study (The Gnostic Religion 1963) and the opinion of the Bultmann school of New Testament Theology, was that the term Gnosticism should be used to signify “a certain group of systems of the Second Century AD” and gnosis as “knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for an élite,” that is, something into which one had to be initiated because it was esoteric. Furthermore, it was emphasised that

Not every Gnosis is Gnosticism, but only that which involves ... the idea of consubstantiality of the spark that is in need of being awakened and reintegrated. This Gnosis of Gnosticism involves ... the idea of the divine identity of the knower (the Gnostic), the known (the divine substance of one’s transcendent self) and the means by which one knows (Gnosis as an implicit divine faculty that is to be awakened and actualized).291

Needless to say, this specification of the two terms did not obtain complete consensus within the academic world, but it was perhaps the first collective step toward specifying the terms in modern scholarship.

Quite a few scholars in the field of Western esotericism have continued to use the notion of gnosis somewhat in line with the Messina definition, that is, as a higher form of knowledge, which is to be experienced. Gnosis has, for some, become a sort of “consort” term to

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the notion Western esotericism. 292 Whereas Western esotericism is most often used as a general term for the entire field gnosis is most often used as a term for the special knowledge that esotericists seek to acquire or have acquired. The ongoing debate is whether or not Gnosis is the primary defining term of Western esotericism.293

In sum: The above presentation of the terms Gnosticism, Gnōstikos and Gnosis has shown that the word Gnosticism has a relatively recent history, only being coined in the seventeenth century, and based on Irenaeus’s inclusive notion of Gnosticism as a homogeneous tradition of heresy. The term gnōstikos was originally a Platonic term for a subjective faculty, but it was in late antiquity applied as a self-designation by a few religious groups. The term Gnosis has often been confused with Gnosticism but can be regarded as a more universal concept often used for direct divine insight or divine knowledge.

The academic study of Western esotericism has made the term gnosis one of its primary “tool-box concepts.” It is therefore provisionally suggested here that Gnosticism should generally be used as a heuristic construct that encompasses a variety of groups both inside and outside

292 This is for example evinced in the title of the standard Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism.
early Christianity that practised gnosis or cultivated esoteric and spiritual knowledge by experience. The term gnosis can simply be used as a heuristic “ideal-type” of experiential knowledge that phenomenologically can be found independent of any specific historical period.

1.8.1. Gnosticism as heresy

It was shown above that gnōstikos, as an inner faculty, originated with Plato and that gnōstikos as a form of self-designation originated with a few groups during late antiquity. The idea that a great variety of groups all were Gnostic and thereby heretic or distinct from (orthodox) Christianity was, however, a polemic conception or construction produced in the Roman empire by a group of theologians between the first and the fourth centuries CE.

The primary theologians or Church fathers involved in the construction of gnōstikos were Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Irenaeus of Lyons (second century - ca. 202), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254), Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160-220), Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170-236), and Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310-403).

Among these Church fathers, Irenaeus’s work Against Heresies (ca. 180 CE) was perhaps especially lethal in the way it construed the so-called Gnostics. In short, it focused on Simon Magus (first century CE) as the arch-heretic from whom Gnosticism originated. The work furthermore constructed a genealogy tracing the major later Gnostic groups back to Simon Magus, whereby Irenaeus was able to put all “heretics” into the same category, that is, the so-

294 Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, 1.23.2-4, see also 4.33.3.
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called Gnostics. John Henderson has argued that this “genealogy metaphor,” to use Karen King’s formulation, 295 “gave order and coherence to a very puzzling and diverse set of phenomena by linking them together in a chain of succession.” 296 As has been mentioned earlier, it was exactly this construction that was used effectively by nearly all, later, polemists. Finally, Irenaeus attempted to show how varied and inconsistent the various Gnostic doctrines were in order to exclude them from genuine Christian tradition. 297

It is important to note that for the most of the time the entire study of Gnosticism has been based on the polemics against Gnosticism and the few quotes the polemists extracted from actual Gnostic texts. Until rather recently, almost none of the authentic Gnostic texts were known independently of these Church fathers. A few codices, like the Bruce Codex and the Berlin Codex, were found in the nineteenth century, but it was not until the significant discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945 (first published together in 1977) that a more “authentic” image of Gnosticism began to emerge. Furthermore, in the nineteenth century the human sciences were undeveloped in the sense of theoretical independence (from the natural sciences and theology). The modern discipline of the history of religions itself only dates back to the nineteenth century, not to speak of its slow and gradual “emancipation” from theology in universities, which also

295 King, What is Gnosticism?, p. 32.
297 Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, 3.11.2, 4.6.4.
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must be taken into account in the emerging secular study of Gnosticism. It is therefore perhaps neither surprising nor difficult to understand that the emerging secular studies of Gnosticism have been eager to abolish the term Gnosticism, as will be shown further below.

Although, the writings of the Church fathers can be considered the initial fundament of Gnostic studies, it has been recently demonstrated by a few, influential, secular scholars of Gnosticism that this fundament is in no way neutral in the way it mirrors Gnosticism.298

The Church fathers had their own specific agenda in constructing Gnosticism and for treating it the way they did. I am not suggesting, however, as many scholars inclined towards postmodernism often do, that the motivations of the Church fathers were only about power and winning the right to the status of orthodoxy through clever rhetorical strategies. Such considerations, of course, play important roles in most forms of human conduct, but it was presumably also a quest for meaning and religious truth that drove the Church fathers, a truth they strongly believed in at the time.

Still, as Karen King has shown in What is Gnosticism? (2003), their construction of Gnosticism in order to produce self-identity has had several, subtle, long-term consequences, many of which tend to distort historical actuality:

(1) the notion of a true Christianity (orthodoxy) versus

298 For a more detailed exposition of the Church fathers’ readings or constructions of the Gnostics, see King, What is Gnosticism?, 2003.
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a false Christianity (heresy).  

(2) the notion of insiders versus outsiders, for example, were Judaism and Paganism distinguished from Christianity in ways that distorted their actual historical connections.  

(3) normativity: true versus false traditions, the Church fathers argued that only the apostolic tradition with a pure origin in Christ’s revelation was true. The Gnostic traditions, they claimed, originated with Satan through demonic inspiration.  

(4) theological differences, distortions and simplistic presentations, the reading or presentation of Gnostic texts by the Church fathers tended to be too narrow and simple, a tactic used in order to demonstrate the inconsistencies among the texts and how they deviated from the true Christian doctrines. Irenaeus, for example, focused on cosmology, salvation, and ethics. He thereby attempted to show how contradictory it was to deny the God of the Hebrew Bible, deny Jesus’s physical body and crucifixion as the Gnostics did, and to only claim salvation for a small, spiritual elite, as all of this would undermine the need for the appearance of Christ and the practice of good deeds.  

(5) the notion of contamination from outside, the  

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301 King, *What is Gnosticism?*, pp. 36-37, 54.  
Church fathers were keen to argue that Gnosticism was corrupt because it was contaminated with elements from Paganism or Greek philosophy, which did not belong to true Christianity.\textsuperscript{303}

These elements of the early construction of the Gnostics as a category survived in one form or another throughout Western intellectual history and have had serious consequences for the way in which Gnosticism has been viewed. Even in the nineteenth century, several prominent modern theologians and Church historians were eager to locate the essence of Christianity and, in so doing, repeated to a large extent the Church fathers’ constructions of the Gnostics. This can be seen in the influential works on Gnosticism \textit{Das manichäische Religionssystem} (1831) and \textit{Die christliche Gnosis} (1835),\textsuperscript{304} by the famous leader of the Tübingen school Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860). These studies were followed by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) who in his quest for the true essence of Christianity regarded Gnosticism as an over-Hellenization of Christianity, the true essence of which he regarded as transcendent to history.\textsuperscript{305}

1.8.2. Gnosticism in light of the History of Religions
When the history of religions emerged as a serious academic discipline in the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{306} one of its primary tasks was to genealogically trace religion back to

\textsuperscript{303} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{304} For useful information on the importance of Baur for the study of Gnosticism see Marjanen, ‘Was There a Gnostic Religion? From the Pastorals to Rudolph’, pp. 31-33.
\textsuperscript{305} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. 55-67.
\textsuperscript{306} See chapter 1.4 in the present book for more details on this.
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its origin and from that point to follow its subsequent sequential development through history. This diachronicendeavour equally influenced the study of Gnosticism. The great question was, what is the origin of Gnosticism?

It was briefly mentioned above that the great theologian and religious scholar Adolf von Harnack viewed the origin of Gnosticism as an invasion of Greek thought from outside Christianity, the confluence of which resulted in the development of Gnosticism or Gnostic groups within Christianity. Significant scholars of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, such as Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) and Richard August Reitzenstein (1861-1931), however, argued that Gnosticism originated in ancient Persian/Iranian traditions and that it therefore was both extra-Christian and pre-Christian in origin.

This idea that Gnosticism was a religious tradition alongside Christianity was a serious break with the older theological view of Gnosticism as heresy, in the sense of distorted Christianity, and thus opened up the secular study of Gnosticism.

It was also around this time in the late nineteenth century that early occultists and Theosophists attempted to revive Gnosticism as an ancient esoteric tradition in possession of true, uncorrupted wisdom or gnosis. H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) was one of the first in modern times to write sympathetically of Gnosticism in both her Isis Unveiled (1877) and the Secret Doctrine (1888), on the basis of material found in Charles William King’s (1818-1888)

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307 For useful details on Reitzenstein and Bousset, see King, What is Gnosticism?, pp. 84-90, 90-100.
308 King, What is Gnosticism?, pp. 89-90, 99.
significant work *The Gnostics and Their Remains* (1864, second ed. 1887). The Gnostic scholar and one-time secretary to H. P. Blavatsky, G.R.S. Mead (1863-1933) also wrote several articles and books related to the Gnostics, among which the most significant was his *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900), the title of which exemplifies the idea that Gnosticism was a religious tradition in itself. In his book Mead portrays the first extensive, sympathetic image of the Gnostics as extracted from the sources available at the time (pre-Nag Hammadi).

In a way both the history of religions school and the revival of occultism at the time broke from the category of heresy and moved towards a more secular or more open-minded approach to Gnosticism. This was especially because many of the prominent scholars of the history of religions school considered Gnosticism a pre-Christian tradition and the occultists, as mentioned, concluded it was a part of the esoteric tradition. Although Gnosticism was no longer viewed as a distorted form of Christianity, scholars still treated it as something opposed to or different from historical Christianity. This distinction can, to some extent, be regarded as an implicit discursive inheritance from the polemics of the Church fathers.

The history of religions stage in research on Gnosticism also saw the emergence of a typological study of the subject. Reitzenstein, in his *Die Hellenistische Mysterien-religionen* (1910) for example, argued that many of the significant concepts from the pre-Christian mystery religions, such as *Pneuma* or spirit, *Psyche* or soul, and *gnosis* or experiential knowledge were transferred first into

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309 King, *What is Gnosticism?*, p. 90.
Greek philosophy and Judaism, whence they finally circulated into Christianity or Christology.\textsuperscript{310} The most influential “Gnostic” motif, however, was the notion of the Primal man, Anthropos, the Son of Man, or the Savior, which is also the soul. This idea was Iranian in origin and, together with the three above mentioned ideas, can be regarded as a form of pre-Christian Gnostic typology. The type of the Primal man was extended by Reitzenstein in his \textit{Das mandäische Buch des Herrn der Grösse und die Evangeliumüberlieferung} (1910) and in “Iranischer Erlösungsglaube” (1921). Bousset also established a sort of typology consisting of: (1) a sharp dualism, (2) radical pessimism, (3) alienation or a sense of homelessness, (4) a theology of an alien God, (5) an elitist anthropology, (6) a radical religion of redemption, (7) salvation by nature, through revelation, initiation, and sacrament, (8) esotericism or secret revelation, (9) mythic components, and (10) docetic Christology\textsuperscript{311}.

Harnack, as noted by King also constructed a typology of Gnosticism consisting of eleven primary ideas in his significant work on early Christianity: (1) distinction between a supreme God and the creator God, (2) the supreme God is not the God of the Old Testament, (3) matter is independent and eternal, (4) the world is the product of an evil being, (5) evil is inherent in matter, (6) the absoluteness of God was dispersed in Aeons, (7) Christ revealed a previously unknown God, (8) Gnostic Christology distinguishes between Jesus and Christ, (9) humans are divided into three classes in relation to their embodiment of Spirit, Soul or matter, (10) rejection of a

\textsuperscript{310} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{311} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. 97-98.
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Such proto-typologies, combined with the historical quest for the origin of Gnosticism in earlier traditions, marked a significant advance in research and many of the elements—especially the typological schemata—construed during this period are still with us today. The history of religions school did, however, not focus on the contextual shift of meanings of specific ‘types’ within different groups; \footnote{King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 79.} as this methodological maneuver was not introduced to the humanities until the nineteenth sixties with the advent of structuralism in the form of synchronic cultural analysis. Gnosticism thus remained a fixed category with a more or less static framework, the roots and formative matrix of Christianity itself, however, was opened up more widely than ever before placing Gnosticism on the map as an important field of study.

1.8.3 The Typology of Gnosticism

Even though several typological taxonomies of Gnosticism emerged earlier (as shown in the previous section), when one thinks of typology in relation to Gnosticism one automatically thinks of the German-Jewish scholar-philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993) and his work entitled the \textit{Gnostic Religion} (1958, third ed. 2001), which became perhaps the most influential work on Gnosticism in the twentieth century. The work is an excellent survey of the

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313 King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 79.
Hellenistic period and of the main Gnostic systems in their relation to classical Greek thought and still serves as an important introduction to Gnosticism. As for the academic stance of the work and its typological method, its title is quite revealing because typology, as a theoretical strategy, has as a consequence the limiting of textual material into set categories. In other words, when one inductively sets out to find certain common types in various texts and religious groups, one automatically produces a unified common category or field, such as Gnosticism or the Gnostic religion, which in a sense delineates its own specific set of doctrines or “types”.

This might suggest that the notion of a Gnostic religion was purely a construct. Although Hans Jonas was aware of many different Gnostic groups and texts, he still, with good reason, regarded Gnosticism as a specific religious tradition, which flourished alongside Christianity and Judaism as a third religion utilising Biblical myths.

Michael Waldstein has remarked that Jonas’s construct of Gnosticism was “the expression of a unitary ‘Spirit of Late Antiquity’ defined by Entweltlichung (acosmism).”

The profound rationale behind Jonas’s construct was as follows: Even though Jonas’s approach to Gnosticism, its origins, and its typology was in part inspired by the earlier history of religions approach—which primarily focused on understanding and tracing the origins of Gnosticism in terms of genealogy—Jonas’s approach was

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also quite distinct from it because it was grounded in Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) influential phenomenology and existentialism as expounded in *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time] (1927).315

Jonas innovatively argued that while Gnosticism historically is a syncretistic movement composed of a number of different religio-philosophical ideas, the tracing of those different ideas to their presumed origin will not tell us much about Gnosticism itself. In order to understand Gnosticism, or the unity that amalgamates the various components of Gnosticism we must understand the specific experience, mode of feeling or Gnostic mind that brings together the various elements and the specific cultural environment, which facilitated such an attitude towards existence.316 Gnosticism, according to Jonas, was a unique existential attitude produced by the cultural decay in late antiquity, which was especially characterised by a sense of alienation or homelessness in the world, combined with an urge to religious self-catharsis.317 This “acosmism” or anti “this-worldly-ness” had already been mentioned by Wilhelm Bousset318 as a feature of Gnosticism, but for Hans

315 Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & The Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001 [1958]), p. 335. In short, Jonas expounded on the idea that we experience our being through certain moods or ‘existentials’ and that such moods are common structures in human psychology. Though not identical to Kant’s ‘categories’, they are along the same lines.


318 See Marjanen, ’What is Gnosticism? From the Pastorals to
Jonas it became the primary unificatory and explanatory notion of Gnosticism, substantiated by and compared to the modern philosophy of existentialism. He therefore abandoned the search for origins in terms of genealogy because he considered Gnosticism the religio-philosophical expression of an existential situation that unified several disparate groups and texts.

This whole notion of a cultural situation influencing specific groups and their attitudes towards existence (and thus religious systems) inspired a few scholars to use what we might call the sociological approach to Gnosticism. This trend began in 1970 with the German sociologist of religion Hans G. Kippenberg. In his article, “Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus”319 he analysed the sociological origin of Gnosticism as a result of the frustration and alienation produced by the Roman rulers. Henry A. Green elaborated this thesis in the Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism (1985). Antti Marjanen, however, has criticized this trend by pointing out that it is too difficult, precarious, and too narrow to reconstruct a social reality/situation and a social attitude based solely upon mythological texts, such as the Gnostic texts, because they have many other meanings and functions.320

However, returning to Hans Jonas’ perspective this Gnostic religion, as an attitude, was expressed in various

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320 See Marjanen, ‘What is Gnosticism? From the Pastorals to Rudolph’, p. 49.
related types, which can be identified as constituting the Gnostic system of thought in general.

The following components of Gnosticism construed by Hans Jonas, is derived from the Gnostic Religion and his article ’”Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon—Typological and Historical”;\(^{321}\)

(1) the idea of gnosis or saving knowledge

(2) world history driven by a dynamic emanationism and crisis

(3) the presentation of Gnostic thought in mythical discourse

(4) a dualistic world-view or world-God opposition

(5) aggressive polemics against other traditions

(6) the artificiality of its myths

(7) strong syncretism in its doctrines

(8) a spiritual morality, which resulted either in asceticism or libertinism.

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Many of these types had already been identified in earlier typologies constructed by scholars of the history of religions approach, as evinced above.\textsuperscript{322}

Kurt Rudolph (1929-), the significant German scholar of religious studies who retired in 1996, has in many ways furthered Hans Jonas’s work by viewing it as a religion in itself. His own work, \textit{Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer Spätantiken Religion} (1977; Eng. trans. \textit{Gnosis: the Nature and History of an Ancient Religion}, 1983), was furthermore the first systematic and comprehensive work on Gnosticism which integrated the texts discovered at Nag-Hammadi.\textsuperscript{323}

Birger Pearson (1934-), a Californian scholar of Gnosticism and early Christianity, is one of the active scholars in the field who, especially with his two articles:


\textsuperscript{323} For a brief overview of Kurt Rudolph’s approach, see Marjanen, ‘What is Gnosticism?’, pp. 49-52.
“Is Gnosticism a Religion?” (1990) and “Gnosticism as a Religion” (2005), has continued along the lines of Jonas by arguing that Gnosticism is a religion in itself constituted by various dimensions or types.

In 2005 Pearson wrote, “In what follows I shall attempt to mount a defence of the continued use of the term “Gnosticism” by historians of religions, and to arrive at greater precision in delimiting the boundaries of what I will continue to call “the gnostic religion”.”\(^{324}\) In so doing, he argues that we must use some categories in the study of religions; even “Christianity” is a category, so why not use “Gnosticism” for a religious tradition, which, in his opinion, is a tradition distinct from Christianity?\(^{325}\)

In his quest for “the gnostic religion”, he has in addition to Jonas, been especially inspired by the late, influential religious scholar Roderick Ninian Smart’s (1927-2001) approach to, and framework for, understanding religion. According to Smart, religion can be identified, without being defined, as constituted by seven dimensions. Pearson has used and elaborated these seven dimensions in studying Gnosticism as follows:

(1) The doctrinal/philosophical dimension
   - salvation by gnosis
   - theology
   - cosmology
   - anthropology
   - eschatology

(2) The mythic/narrative dimension (sacred story)

\(^{324}\) Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as a Religion’, p. 89.
\(^{325}\) Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as a Religion’, p. 96, 97, 100.
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- theosophy and theogony
- cosmogony
- anthropogony and soteriology

(3) the practical/ritual dimension

(4) the experiential/emotional dimension (mysticism, etc.)

(5) the ethical/legal dimension

(6) the social/institutional dimension (organizational structure)

(7) the material dimension (iconography, etc)

In addition to Smart’s taxonomy, Pearson has added an eighth

(8) the syncretic / parasitic dimension 326

In the center of this identification of Gnosticism stands, according to Pearson, either the text known as the Apocryphon of John or an earlier version of the text, since it includes the most consistent, most used, and most basic Gnostic myths. 327

In addition to analysing the parameters of Gnosticism within the above phenomenological framework, Pearson argues that gnosis itself is the essential characteristic and

326 Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as a Religion’, pp. 82-87.
327 Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as a Religion’, pp. 91, 95, 96. Layton, along with others, also argues that the Apocryphon or Secret Book of John is one of the central texts of the ancient Gnostics, see his Gnostic Scriptures, 12-17 on the Gnostic myth.
that gnosis as presented in the basic Gnostic myth is what makes Gnosticism a religious tradition in itself.328

Pearson summarizes his thesis in the following manner:

A proper assessment of our extant evidence allows the historian of religions to conclude that the Gnostic religion arose independently of Christianity [out of Judaism] and deserves to be treated as a discrete religion in its own right, even if its history has often (but not always) been bound up with that of the Christian religion.329

He reached the same general conclusion in 2005:

So, in answer to the question posed by the theme of this conference, “Was There a Gnostic Religion?” my reply is: Yes there was, and it still exists.330

On a slightly different note, it is worth mentioning that in our secular, modern world it has become quite customary to treat Gnosticism and gnosis as specific fixed types in themselves. Gnosticism has often been related to a type, which implies a sharp dualism between this-worldliness and anti-worldliness or the basic notion that this world is evil. Gnosis has often been used as a type for unreflective/irrational, direct knowledge or elitist knowledge. Both these notions are therefore often placed in contrast to the modern Western interest in the material sphere, regained curiosity about the world, and the

328 Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as a Religion’, 2005, pp. 95, 100.
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1.8.4 Post-modern Approaches to Gnosticism

In keeping with the rise of post-modern scholarship in the humanities the past forty years, Gnostic studies have recently taken some significant steps away from defining Gnosticism in terms of fixed abstract typologies, such as Hans Jonas did, and attempted to rid itself of inherited polemical/theological content. The focus has moved away from general structures and towards particular historical content in the hope that this will provide a clearer and less preconceived understanding of the actual Gnostics and the Gnostic texts.332 This move has also been prompted by the discovery of “new” Gnostic texts in December 1945 at Nag-Hammadi.

The pioneer scholar of Gnosticism Bentley Layton (1941-) was among the first to focus directly on the Gnostic texts and other ancient writings that describe the Gnostics


332 Williams suggests ignoring the category completely in order to access the source texts without prejudice Michael A. Williams ‘Was there a Gnostic Religion?’, in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*, ed. by Antti Marjanen (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005), pp. 55-79 (p. 79).
as a point of departure for defining/categorising these groups. Layton did not want to construct an abstract definition of Gnosticism or to set out to identify specific core doctrinal types. Instead, he has sought to determine if there actually were groups who called themselves “gnōstikoi” or “Gnostics” in contrast to the Church fathers who classified every and any group they saw fit under that designation. As has been shown above in the treatment of the meaning of the words Gnosticism, gnōstikos, gnosis and in the section on Heresiology (1.8.1.1)—which in part were based on Layton’s research—there is actually evidence or testimonia that there existed a group or groups who called themselves by that name. These groups were also known by the following names given by Irenaeus: “Knowledge-Supplying school of thought”, 333 the Carpocratians, 334 and the Barbelognostics. 335 In Origin’s Contra Celsum we find the following remark, “Let us admit that there are some too who profess to be Gnostics, like the Epicureans who call themselves philosophers.” 336 This group might have been the Ophites, who “called themselves Gnostics, claiming to be the only ones to know the depths,” according to Hippolytus. 337 Clement of

333 Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, 1.11.1.
334 Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, 1.25.6.
335 Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, 1.29.
336 Origen, Contra Celsus, V:61.
337 Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies v, 6, 4, for an English translation, see The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, ed. by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1963), v.
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Alexandria mentions Prodicus, 338 and Porphyry talks about certain “Gnostics”. 339

Therefore, when Layton makes use of the word Gnostic, it primarily refers to “a member of a distinct social group or professional school of thought, not a kind of doctrine.” 340 A Gnostic text is thus Gnostic only as an artefact used by a so-called Gnostic and not because of its doctrines.

The Gnostics, as an ancient social group, largely belonged to the more comprehensive social body of Christians and were not necessarily the distinct groups most theologians since Irenaeus have construed them to be in an attempt to define what was perceived as orthodoxy. Layton formulates it in the following manner:

The Gnostic movement did not simply share in the culture to which early Christianity belonged. Gnostics in fact made up one of the earliest and most long-lived branches of the ancient Christian religion. 341

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338 Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, 2.117. 5; see also Layton, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 338.
341 Layton, The Gnostic scriptures, p. xi; see also pp. xviii-xxi. This observation had already been made by the German theologian Walter Bauer (1877-1960) in his Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum (1934) translated into English as Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971). Reitzenstein also held the opinion that Gnosticism was an essential component of early Christianity. For further details, see Marjanen, ‘What is Gnosticism? From the Pastorals to Rudolph’, pp. 38, 39-40; King, What is Gnosticism?, p. 114.
Once the identity of so-called original Gnostic groups has been established it is possible, according to Layton, to establish the original Gnostic scriptures or what Layton has called the “Classic Gnostic Scriptures.” A distinct sectarian feature of these Gnostic texts is, according to Layton, “the Gnostic myth.” This myth is a “complex and distinctive myth of origins” by which the Gnostics constructed their sense of existence. Other distinctive features of the classic Gnostic texts are the use of specialised jargon, references to ritual baptism, and the attribution of the authorship of the texts to well-known mythic authorities, such as the biblical Adam.

According to Layton, the Gnostic myth or narrative drama consists of four acts and four sub-acts. The four main acts are, in short, about the creation of the universe from the highest principle down to Adam and the subsequent history of the human race. The sub-acts tell the story of man’s loss of divine power and the gradual recovery of that power. It is this myth that Layton traces through the core Gnostic scriptures in one form or another. He identifies the Secret Book According to John as one of the exemplary versions of the myth. Once the most complete versions of the texts have been identified, it thereafter becomes possible to trace the myth in other texts that are

342 See Layton’s fivefold composition of his text collection published in 1987 under the title The Gnostic Scriptures. The five categories are as follows: (1) Classic Gnostic Scripture, (2) The Writings of Valentinus, (3) The School of Valentinus, (4) The School of St. Thomas, and (5) Other Early Currents.


related to “classical” Gnosticism and include or associate them with the category of Gnosticism.

While the aim of this approach is to avoid false constructions of Gnosticism by focusing on the groups who actually were Gnostics and not merely construed as such by others, Layton’s method has suffered some critique from other post-modern scholars of Gnosticism. Michael A. Williams, for example, argues in brief that Layton puts too much emphasis on the term gnōstikos: firstly because the term is not even found in what Layton identifies as the core texts of the group that, according to Layton, called itself the Gnostics and secondly because the term gnōstikos was actually used in antiquity in relation to many other groups who were not Gnostics.347

Williams’s revolutionary book, Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category was published in 1996. In this seminal work he critically examines the term Gnosticism and what Williams argues are its many heuristic defects.348 For example, he re-evaluates former approaches to Gnosticism, such as those of Layton and Jonas, by questioning why certain texts and spiritual groups, which usually are dealt with under the topic of Gnosticism, have actually been grouped together under this category. Williams acknowledges that there are many resemblances between the groups and texts in question and therefore does not question that a common category can be constructed, but he does simply not think Gnosticism is the most suitable category and strongly

347 Williams, ‘Was There a Gnostic Religion?’, p. 75-76.
348 Williams’s arguments have been followed up in a condensed form in Williams, ‘Was There a Gnostic Religion?’.
questions the existence of a Gnostic religion. He finds it a sign of disease that the category has become as blurred as it is today. One of the causes of this, according to Williams, is that when modern scholars discuss Gnosticism it is not always clear if they use the term with regards to Layton’s “self designation” approach or Jonas’s “typological” approach. In other words is the term being used as something certain groups called themselves or as a modern classificatory construct?

Williams furthermore argues that both the self-designation and the typological approach have failed to do justice to the texts they classify by trying to fit them into the underlying organizing structure and conception of their constructed category of Gnosticism. His main criticism of using the self-designation approach to classify Gnostic texts is that (1) the term Gnostic does not appear in any of the texts commonly classified as Gnostic and (2) the term was used more often in terms of a quality than for a group or groups. Furthermore, even though Layton and others have shown that some heresiological reports state that some persons or groups used the term to describe themselves, this is clearly not the case with all the groups classified by Layton as Gnostic.

Williams also argues that, especially since Hans Jonas, it has become an assumption that there once existed a

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350 Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, pp. 3-4.
351 Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, p. 31.
352 See Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, pp. 31-43, (pp. 41-43); Williams, “Was there a Gnostic Religion?”, pp. 72-76.
general Gnostic religion or Gnosticism among the ancients, but this post-modern stance is a distortion of history. Furthermore, the root of the modern construct Gnosticism and its classification of Gnostics goes back to Irenaeus, but Irenaeus had a different agenda with his definition: it was not to explain the phenomenological meaning of religion but to show what heresy was. In order to expose the artificial nature of Gnosticism and the hindrance it is to a clearer conception of the subject, Williams extensively through methodical deconstruction shows how difficult it is to include all Gnostic textual material within the sphere of the common stereotypes with which Gnosticism has been associated. He asks (1) whether Gnosticism is to be viewed as a protest exegesis or as a reversal of values; (2) if the Gnostics were parasites or innovators; (3) if they fostered a hatred towards the body or focused on the perfection of the human; (4) if their attitude was anti-cosmic or anti-social; (5) if they cultivated asceticism or libertinism; (6) if they were deterministic; and (8) whether they were inclusive or elitist.

By analysing these questions Williams shows that it simply is not possible to claim that all so-called Gnostic texts share the same positions, doctrines or attitudes. It is therefore not possible to speak about a common Gnosticism or a Gnostic Religion. While he draws attention to the defects of the self-designation approach and the phenomenological

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353 Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, pp. 43-44.
355 See Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, pp. 54-212.
356 Williams extends this type of critique to Pearson’s approach in Williams, “Was there a Gnostic Religion?”, pp. 63-72.
approach, he does not deny that these approaches can have some usefulness and validity. What he does question is simply why they both have led to the category Gnosticism: a category that he thinks should be dismantled. This does not mean that Williams argues for abandoning categories founded on either traditional relationships or typological similarities, but that new and better ones can be constructed about which no doubt exists as to their scholarly and ontological status.

Williams suggests, for example, the use of “Biblical Demiurgical Traditions” instead of “Gnosticism.” By “demiurgical,” Williams means traditions that hold that the creation and order of the cosmos is governed by a lesser entity or entities. By adding the adjective “biblical” the “demiurgical” is limited to the specificity of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

This categorization has, according to Williams, at least three advantages over the others: (1) it is specific and thus easy to distinguish; (2) the category is easily recognised as a modern construct and will thus help avoid confusion; and (3) the category will help avoid stereotypical clichés, characteristics, and generalizations.

Based on thorough research, Williams concludes that there never existed a Gnostic religion as popularly claimed. The term Gnosticism was simply composed of clichés, all of which obscure the reading of the actual

357 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, p. 31.
358 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, p. 51.
359 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, p. 51.
360 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, pp. 52-53.
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sources. There were multiple traditions and it is true some of them shared common phenomenological elements, but the term Gnosticism needs rethinking, as it no longer serves as a practical tool for furthering research. As an alternative, Williams proposes “Biblical Demiurgical Traditions” as just mentioned, but this is not just another name for the same thing. It is centred on the common motif of a demiurge and specified to the biblical tradition. Furthermore, it dismantles the clichés, as it excludes the idea of certain attitudes towards the cosmos. However, employing the new label should permanently change the field of Gnostic studies, as texts that once were classified as Gnostic might no longer fit the category and new ones might be added. Williams thus sounded the note for a new beginning in Gnostic studies by calling for a new designation.

Karen L. King is another important scholar who has argued along the same lines as Williams since the late 1980s. In King’s 2003 major study of Gnostic scholarship What is Gnosticism? she however points out that since

361 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, pp. 78, 264.
362 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, p. 77.
363 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, p. 265. This includes attitudes such as a negative view of the body or cosmos.
364 Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, pp. 263, 266.
365 Karen King, ‘Is there such a Thing as Gnosticism?’ [paper read at the Annual Meeting of the AAR/SBL in Washington D. C., Nov. 20–23, 1993] has been influential. See also King, What is Gnosticism?, p. ix for a list of other early studies by King related to Gnosticism.
Williams’s book appeared scholars now simply put quotation marks around the term (“Gnosticism”) to mark its constructed and problematic nature and continue to use the term as before.\textsuperscript{367} She argues that one of the reasons for this response is that no real alternative has been proposed. King finds problems with Williams’s proposal of the “Biblical Demiurgical Tradition”, as it seems to privilege one mythic element, such as the demiurgical, over others and has done little to stimulate an alternative classification and reading of the texts.\textsuperscript{368}

King’s work \textit{What is Gnosticism?} was the culmination of more than twenty years of work and represents a thoroughly researched companion-book to Williams’s book discussed above. As a part of the general postmodern trend, King calls for a revisionist history of Christianity, including so-called Gnosticism in order to liberate the sources or actual texts from pre-conceived assumptions and fruitless discourses.\textsuperscript{369}

Like Williams, King concludes that the concept Gnosticism or the Gnostics originally sprang from orthodox polemics in their battle for identity against heresy.\textsuperscript{370} This means that the term was originally a part of a religious group’s rhetorical and strategic process of identity formation. King furthermore argues that this polemical origin of the term has continued to foster assumptions and rhetorical categories in modern

\textsuperscript{367} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{368} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. 216-17.
\textsuperscript{369} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. vii, viii.
\textsuperscript{370} King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. vii-viii, 2-3.
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scholarship that still plays a part in modern religious normativity and identity politics. \(^{371}\)

In her book she traces and analyzes the origin of the term within the set parameters mentioned above and follows the use of this nomenclature in modern scholarship. \(^{372}\) As the present chapter has already been informed by King’s work, this is not the place to follow all of her analyses of former Gnostic scholarship. Suffice it to say that after having addressed the issues raised by the most prominent scholars, many of whom have been discussed above, King asks whether all of this means the end of Gnosticism?

King envisions either the eventual abandonment of “gnosticism” or a further specification, such as “sethian gnosticism” or “classical gnosticism.” She argues, however, that what is most important is to use the term correctly, free from the original discourses of orthodoxy and heresy. \(^{373}\) We need to rethink our methodology \(^{374}\) and historiography, \(^{375}\) by moving away from assumptions of an origin, essence and an original form of purity. Three terms that often are interrelated. King argues that we should make it clear that historical phenomena always are \textit{in media res}, that they change, are diversified, and are never pure or free from interrelations. \(^{376}\) She especially finds Michel Foucault’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical observations

\(^{371}\) King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, pp. viii, 4.
\(^{372}\) King’s analyses have been highly instructive to the present chapter.
\(^{373}\) King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 218.
\(^{374}\) King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 219.
\(^{375}\) King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 228.
\(^{376}\) King, \textit{What is Gnosticism?}, p. 220.
fruitful, as they can help demystify the rhetorical elements and underlying structures.377

1.8.5 Gnosticism and Western esotericism

Gnosticism and gnosis are words that have become an integral part of the field of Western esotericism. This is clearly attested by the inclusion of both words and the traditions or forms of knowledge they signify in recent histories and dictionaries of Western esotericism.

Antoine Faivre, for example, argued in *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994) that “Hellenistic Religiosity”, including Gnosticism, Stoicism, Hermetism, and Neo-Pythagoreanism, has been a vital source for modern esoteric currents. 378 He also speaks of the phenomenological (re)emergence of “neognostic cosmology” and “neognosis.”379

In *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (1992), which Faivre co-edited with Jacob Needleman, he wrote a chapter entitled “Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements”, which included a brief discussion of Gnosticism. Here Faivre primarily made a distinction between gnosis and Gnosticism. Gnosis is a form of knowledge and can be regarded as synonymous with esotericism, whereas Gnosticism is strictly to be regarded as the so-called gnosis from around the beginning of our

379 Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 275; for the term neognosis, see 291-96.
Gnosticism has, however, influenced modern esoteric traditions, especially in terms of taking myths seriously.381

In the more recent English edition of his work Western Esotericism: A Concise History (2010), he does not go into Gnosticism in any detail, but continues to regard it as a source of modern esoteric currents.382

Kocku von Stuckrad also included a brief discussion of gnosis and Gnosticism in his Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge (2005), thus continuing the practice of including it in the history of Western esotericism.383 Stuckrad’s discussion is informed by some of the problems, which have occurred in the field of Gnostic studies regarding the definition and specification of Gnosticism,384 but he does not try to separate the two terms in any strict manner, as Faivre and Versluis have done.

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke also regards Gnosticism as an “ancient Hellenistic source of Western esotericism” in his The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction

384 Stuckrad, Western Esotericism, p. 23.
In a brief section devoted to Gnosticism he gives a classic, typological presentation of Gnostic doctrines and emphasizes the gnosis or knowledge dimension in Gnosticism as a defining feature. Goodrick-Clarke regards Gnosticism’s rich variety of spiritual intermediaries as the chief influence on later Western esoteric traditions.

Arthur Versluis, much like the above-mentioned scholars of Western esotericism, clearly makes use of the words gnosia and Gnosticism in his works. In his *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (2004), for example, he makes use of the word gnosia in a general sense, signifying a form of experiential and transformative knowledge.

In his earlier study *Gnosis and Literature* (1996), he distinguished between Gnosticism and gnosia in line with Faivre’s distinction, but he also found that many later authors, in terms of typology, were naturally inclined towards the world-view of Gnosticism that emphasized either the rebellious spirit of Gnosticism or its more pessimistic anti-cosmic outlook.

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386 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, p. 27.
387 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, p. 29.
Towards Secular Studies of Gnosticism

In his more recent historical study *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (2007) he specified his distinctions between gnosis, gnostic, Gnostic, and Gnosticism. Gnostic (with a capital g) refers to a group or to an individual in antiquity who often was regarded as heretical (in other words, the classical notion of Gnostic). Gnosticism refers to the religious thought of the Gnostics. Gnosis, on the other hand, refers to a form of direct spiritual insight that can be found in any time period and gnostic (non-capitalized) refers to someone who possesses gnosis. According to Versluis, gnosis is essentially synonymous with esotericism, as it is the esoteric or hidden dimension in historical forms of esotericism. Using this categorization, Versluis naturally does not endorse Michael Williams’s desire to dismantle the category on Gnosticism entirely.

In addition to the question of definition, Versluis gives the most extensive treatment of Gnosticism as a part of Western esotericism of all the authors mentioned above. He argues that the foundation of the Western esoteric traditions is to be found in antiquity and, like Faivre and Goodrick-Clarke, includes Gnosticism among the roots of the Western esoteric traditions. Versluis identifies these primary roots as the ancient mystery traditions, the ancient Greek and Roman magical traditions, Plato and Platonism, Hermetism, Jewish mysticism, Christian gnosis, and

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Gnosticism. Versluis argues that Gnosticism continues to exist in Western esoteric traditions not through secret lineages as popularly argued but because the conceptual framework of a religious tradition contains a limited number of central ideas which means that, the same ideas will emerge from time to time.

The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western esotericism (2005) edited primarily by Wouter J. Hanegraaff includes “gnosis” in its title alongside “Western esotericism”, thus indicating the correlation between the two terms. Hanegraaff specifies in the introduction that the reason for including the word gnosis is to counter the false reification of certain words that has taken place since antiquity, as in the case of Gnosticism. Gnosis can, as a category, refer to a number of diverse traditions in antiquity and later times and is therefore included in the title. Hanegraaff finds it important, however, not to conclude that there exists one universal gnosis common to all the different people and systems of thought included in the dictionary.

The Dictionary also includes two comprehensive entries on Gnosticism by Roelof van den Broek entitled “Gnosticism 1: Gnostic Religion” and “Gnosticism 2: Gnostic Literature”. The first entry outlines the use of the word Gnosticism in modern scholarship and the second

396 Versluis, Magic and Mysticism, p. 11.
397 Versluis, Magic and Mysticism, p. 34.
the Gnostic texts. As a useful outline of Gnostic studies it does not include any new distinctions between gnosis and Gnosticism, but the inclusion of such an extensive treatment of Gnosticism shows just how closely related the fields of Western esotericism and Gnosticism have become. The slightly older standard dictionary of Western esotericism *Dictionnaire critique de L’Ésotérisme* (1998) edited by Jean Servier also included an entry on Judaic Gnosticism, an entry on Christian Gnosticism, an entry on ancient Christian gnosis, and one on modern gnosis.

This brief survey of recent scholarship in the field of Western esotericism illustrates that Gnosticism and gnosis are regarded as closely related. As mentioned earlier, the academic study of Western esotericism has adopted the term gnosis as one of its primary “tool-box concepts” and generally approaches Gnosticism as a part of the history of Western esotericism or at least recognises that it represents one of the primary sources of modern esoteric currents.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, like the academic study of Kabbalah, recent studies of Gnosticism such as those of Jonas, Layton, Williams, and King have all influenced the academic study of Western esotericism.

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Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in particular, has adopted some of the perspectives discussed by Williams and King in their attempt to either dismantle or transform the study of Gnosticism.402

1.8.6 Gnosticism in conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine what Gnosticism actually is. The terms relating to the field were defined and it was shown that Gnosticism is a modern coinage first used by Henry More in the seventeenth century largely adopting the Church father Irenaeus’s rhetoric use of the term gnōstikos. The term gnōstikos originally belonged to the Platonist tradition in antiquity as a designation for a spiritual-intellectual faculty but was later used by certain Jewish and Christian groups as a self-designation. Irenaeus used the word discursively to classify a large number of what he saw as Christian heresies, resulting in a reification of the term. It has, therefore, until recently been argued that there once was a Gnostic religion different from Christianity and often opposed to it. Modern studies of Gnosticism originating with the history of religions school in the nineteenth century thus sought to examine the origins of Gnosticism and how it was distinct from Christianity. In the twentieth century Hans Jonas famously defined Gnosticism in terms of a specific religion composed of various identifiable types, but lately, with the so-called post-modern study of Gnosticism, such an all-embracing set of types has been deconstructed. Layton has focused instead on the groups who actually called themselves Gnostics, and both

402 This will be discussed in more details in volume 2 of the present book series.
Williams and King have shown that it is impossible to classify all so-called Gnostic texts within the stereotypes constructed by earlier and contemporary scholars following the typological school. Gnosticism was once constructed as a concept in the rhetorical battle for religious truth and has now been dismantled in order to allow the texts to speak for themselves to the extent that that is possible. There has thus been a movement from religious to secular terminology in the study of Gnosticism. Scholars of Western esotericism have however adopted Gnosticism both as a concept and as a spiritual tradition and made ancient Gnosticism a part of the history of Western esotericism. Western esotericism has also largely embraced the term gnosis to designate a form of spiritual knowledge independent of ancient Gnosticism, which thus can be used to describe a form of knowledge found in a number of spiritual traditions. In the future Gnosticism will presumably be incorporated more extensively into the history of Western esotericism and be regarded as a sub-discipline within the field. It is important, however, that scholars of Western esotericism do not neglect the extensive research that has taken place within the field of Gnostic studies, as well as the other fields outlined in this book, in order to avoid the more or less popular and superficial second-hand accounts of the subject that have already occurred.