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Rhetoric and Resistance: The New School and Gnosticism

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1. The New School

The term 'New School' was coined by Darrell Bock in his book *The Missing Gospels*.[1] Bock intended the term to apply to those scholars who are interested in what Bart Ehrman has termed 'lost Christianities',[2] that is, expressions of Christianity which have disappeared from history. Scholars of the New School are interested in recovering these lost Christianities. In one of his more eloquent passages Ehrman argues that such a recovery is not merely of antiquarian interest. Rather, says Ehrman, there is a 'a sense that alternative understandings of Christianity from the past can be cherished yet again today, that they can provide insights even now for those of us who are concerned about the world and our place in it'.[3] Ehrman clearly implies that we need to become aware of these alternatives as they will help us become more tolerant and broad minded.

The godfather for the scholars of the New School is Walter Bauer. In his most famous book, *Rechtglaeubigkeit und Ketzerei im aeltesten Christentum* (1934),[4] Bauer attempted to debunk the notion that the terms orthodoxy and heresy could be applied in any meaningful way to earliest Christianity. He claimed that if we allowed the 'other side' to be heard, the side which had been silenced and eclipsed by what later became orthodox Christianity, we would see earliest Christianity very differently. We would see that the orthodox had ruthlessly suppressed genuine and authentic alternative forms of Christianity which had, in fact, been there at its very beginnings. Ehrman and others see themselves as carrying on the work of Bauer by bringing to light the full spectrum of the varieties of Christianity which can be found in its earliest period.

The interest in rediscovering former varieties of Christianity has been heightened by discovery of a Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi which has given us much more information about the Gnostic world view and the beliefs found within it. In fact, when most of the scholars in the New School speak of 'alternative Christianities' they are really speaking of Gnosticism. But in doing so, they not only redefine the nature of early Christianity, stressing variety and difference, but they also argue for a more nuanced approach to the diversity

within Gnosticism itself. The conventional understanding of Gnosticism has taken its point of departure from Hans Jonas' magisterial work *Gnosis und spaetantiker Geist*[5] first published in 1934, which was, by an odd coincidence, the same year that Walter Bauer published his book. Jonas' work was so brilliant and original that it shaped all subsequent discussions of Gnosticism. After Jonas there was general agreement on its essential characteristics. Gnosticism champions transcendence. But it champions transcendence at the expense of the physical world. The crucial characteristic of Gnosticism, claimed Jonas, was *entweltlichung*, that is, withdrawal from the physical world. For the Gnostics the physical world was a prison from which they sought escape. Salvation was to be sought through a rejection of this world.

It is this conventional understanding of Gnosticism with which scholars of the New School take issue. For them Gnosticism is the example *par excellence* of a movement which has been misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned. They particularly question the traditional understanding of Gnostic *entweltlichung*.

2. Karen King on *The Secret Revelation of John*

One of the leading critics of Jonas's construction of Gnosticism is Karen King. She claims that the principal defect of Jonas' construct is that it tends to misrepresent the actual history suggested by the Nag Hammadi texts. This criticism can be exemplified by an examination of *The Secret Revelation of John*, generally considered to be a paradigmatic Gnostic text. She claims its 'logic of salvation' requires people to reject unjust domination in order to be oriented ethically and spiritually towards God. She says—

> Its message clearly challenged the ruling order of its day, which claimed that the current arrangements of worldly power were divinely sanctioned and hence natural, just, and good. *The Secret Revelation of John* perceived instead a nearly unbridgeable gap between the utopian ideals of its age and the less-than-ideal realities of lived experience. By contrasting the perfection of ruling power in the Divine Realm, with the flawed violence and deception of the lower world rulers, the Secret Revelation of John launched a wide-ranging social critique of power relations in the world.[6]

King continues—

> Although this critique was couched in the language of cosmology and revelation, at least some people in antiquity understood this criticism of

> current social arrangements sufficiently well to be outraged, and they objected stridently to its portrait of the world ruled by ignorant and arrogant pretender-gods.[7]

King compares *The Secret Revelation of John* to the book of Revelation in the Bible and says that neither advise 'overt rebellion' or 'any action to improve conditions'.[8] But, she claims, *The Secret Revelation of John* does offer a critique of the Roman world by 'sharply contrasting the ideal realm of the divine with the mundane world'. This represents what she calls its 'Utopian commitments'.[9] King then expresses her indebtedness to James Scott who has argued that those who have bought into the system most heavily are ones who will feel most betrayed. This, claims King, is exactly the situation of *The Secret Revelation of John*. *The Secret Revelation of John* is, she says, 'a radical acceptance of ancient ideals of justice and an uncompromising belief in a vision of God's justice'.[10]

The argument so far is interesting, if somewhat theoretical and non-specific. In the next step of her argument, however, King steps into the realm of political theory and action. She obviously does not want to be perceived as advocating the notion that there is a kind of purity in powerlessness. She accordingly takes issue with the conventional wisdom that *The Secret Revelation of John* is apolitical or anti-political and claims that its re-conceptualizing of the cosmological framework for understanding power relations in the lower world is 'a practical activity with potential historical consequences'.[11] The use of the phrases 'practical activity' and 'potential historical consequences' is especially noteworthy here. By using such phrases King is clearly trying to blunt the charge that Gnosticism is acosmic. She concludes by claiming that *The Secret Revelation of John* offers an 'intellectual map' for the human condition that gives an orientation for ethical practice as well as providing a focus for spiritual development.[12] Gnosticism eventually disappears not because it was too unworldly but because it was too uncompromising in its critique of the world.

If King's argument fails in the end to convince, the fault does not lie with the advocate. She is certainly passionate in her attempt to rehabilitate Gnosticism. Yet her argument fails in the end to convince because it is at odds with the historical evidence. She claims that the orthodox church could not accept gnostic texts because they were too critical of the prevailing powers. Yet the book of Revelation, which she herself compares to the Secret Revelation of

John, with its strident call not to take part in the iniquities of Rome (Rev. 18:4) is very critical of the prevailing order, and it became part of the canon. She further speaks of *The Secret Revelation of John* as espousing 'practical activity'. Yet this 'practical activity' is nowhere to be found. What the evidence indicates is that the Gnostics sought cooperation with the worldly powers, and argued against resistance in the form of, say, martyrdom. It is interesting that Michael Williams who, like King, wishes to dispute that Gnosticism was apolitical and acosmic, concedes this point.[13]

3. Ethics and the Gnostics

What is lacking in King's work in particular is a clear differential framework when speaking of 'ethics'. Ethics is an umbrella term and all kinds of understandings shelter beneath it. But, in very broad terms, we can certainly distinguish between subjective ethics and social ethics. And although the two may be related, they are not necessarily so. The nuances of this distinction may be more clearly silhouetted for us if we seek light from Eastern philosophy, and especially from the Upanishads. As Swami Nikhilananda points out, 'One of the cardinal disciplines of the Knowledge of Atman is the practice of ethical virtues. Self-Knowledge is denied to him who 'has not first turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued, and whose mind is not at peace'. ...What is emphasized is the need of a healthy body, vigorous sense-organs, a strong mind, and an intellect which will choose only those material objects conducive to the spiritual life.'[14] So some of the ethical virtues especially extolled by Hindu philosophers are: truthfulness, non-injury, forgiveness, equanimity, and detachment from the world. Through the practice of such virtues the heart becomes pure and the mind tranquil, so that one can properly contemplate God. The emphasis is entirely inward looking. Gnostic texts such as *The Secret Revelation of John* similarly emphasize in-ward looking subjective ethics. But it is important to note that this kind of subjective ethical discourse is quite different from the kind found in, for example, the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46. There one's salvation is clearly tied to social action. One must feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prison inmate. Nothing like these injunctions is found in *The Secret Revelation of John*. Michael Waldstein criticizes Jonas' characterization of Gnosticism claiming that *entweltlichung*, upon which all the other aspects of Jonas' argument depend, is not present in *The Secret Revelation of John*. Waldstein says that, for example, Jonas' claim that the Gnostics were ethically indifferent is contradicted by 68.1-

73.2 in the *Secret Revelation*.[15] Yet an impartial observer can find nothing in this passage which suggests a socially active ethic.

The discussion about Gnostic ethics has far reaching implications. Many of these implications are buried deep in the rhetoric of the debate. At stake is not just a reconstruction the beliefs of some arcane religious group of the third century. What is at stake is the efficacy of religion in the modern world. For the New School Gnosticism is an authentic type of Christianity which has been suppressed but which is now, once again, a genuine religious option. In fact, and this is the important point, it is a preferred religious option, as the quotation from Bart Ehrman at the beginning of this article indicates. The New School essentially thinks that Gnosticism is a more appealing type of religiosity and one which is much more in accord with the modern spirit than traditional orthodox religion. Richard Smoley expresses this view well when he says:

> This liberation of the true "I" from the world does not make moral behaviour irrelevant; it makes it easier. Detachment from externalities makes it easier to love one's fellow humans, because then one is free from wanting things and nursing hidden agendas. Love becomes something more than a mere bargain or transaction. At the same time, the Gnostic is less preoccupied with moral rules and regulations, which are general guidelines only. This is what it means to be free of the Law.[16]

But behind the rhetoric of this passage lies the obscuring of an important distinction. As I have already said, while subjective ethics may lead to a desire for social reform, they do not necessarily do so. And the evidence we have about the Gnostics does not indicate that they were interested in reforming the world. While the orthodox were being thrown to the lions by the hundreds because of their resistance to an Empire which was repressive, cruel and exploitative, the Gnostics were counselling cooperation and subjugation.[17] In his effort to show that the Gnostics were not 'world-rejecters' but rather sought to reduce tension with the social, cultural, and even political environment, Michael Williams notes that the ancient heresiologists who criticized them are the real world-rejecters because they insisted on a much sharper self-definition over against Roman culture, society, and politics. In this attempt to reverse the conventional roles of the ancient heresiologists and the gnostics Williams has hit upon a central point. Similarly, in a revealing passage Ehrman says that we should understand why the orthodox were persecuted by the Empire: it was because

they were intolerant of its values. The Gnostics, on the other hand, wanted to live in peace with the Empire. Ehrman implies that this was a good thing. But the Gnostic stance implies being complicit with an Empire which proclaimed that the world was blessed by Rome's reign. Imperial theology declared that the gods, including Jupiter, had chosen Rome and its emperor to be the means by which the gods' will was accomplished among humans and their blessings revealed. Roman power, so it claimed, had divine sanction. Hierarchal Roman society, profoundly destructive for much of the population, reflected the gods' purposes. The evidence suggests that in the face of this the Gnostics retreated into a passive compliance, whereas the orthodox Christians did not.

Clearly understanding the nature of Gnostic ethics is important. If Gnosticism is now to be lauded as a genuine form of Christianity, long unjustly repressed but now brought to the light of day, then the true nature of its implications must be understood. What is at stake in this debate over the nature of Gnosticism? A great deal. Systems such as Platonism, Judaism and Christianity share two assumptions. The first is that there is an ecosystemic intelligence governing the universe. The universe was created by a good and intelligent cause. The second assumption can be called the anthropic principle. The universe is a proper fit for its occupants. To put it more simply and concretely, what is at stake in this debate is our whole attitude toward the social order and our collective life within it. If we reject the anthropic principle, then it follows that the social, political, and cultural contexts of life do not warrant active concern. And the evidence we have indicates that the Gnostics did reject the anthropic principle and showed no desire to change the social order for the better. In this Jonas seems to be absolutely right.

4. The Gods of the Modern World

Like the world of the Roman Empire the modern world has its gods. Unlike in the Roman Empire, however, the gods of the modern world are secular gods. In a popular article written for the *Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1999) Harvey Cox takes up this idea of secular gods and argues that today 'the Market'— with its honorific capital M— has come to function like a god. Around this market god have been built statements of faith and a rhetoric of salvation. William Greider has similarly written of the 'utopian vision of the marketplace' offering its followers 'an enthralling religion, a self-satisfied belief system'. Indeed, says Greider, we have come to 'worship' principles of the free market

economy as though they constituted a 'spiritual code' capable of solving all human problems. Greider says, 'Many who think of themselves as rational and urbane have put their faith in this idea of the self-regulating market as piously as others put their trust in God.'[18] It is interesting that even in times of economic difficulties the Market itself is never seen to be the problem. Rather, times of recession are attributed to human miscalculation and incompetence. It is only non-believers in the Market god who point out that it actually widens the gap between the rich and the poor, assaults the earth's life support systems, and jeopardizes cultural diversity.[19] And the most interesting part about Cox's article is that he argues that the belief systems of traditional religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because of their belief in the transcendent and a purpose beyond the human, remain the only impediment to the complete domination of the ideology of the market. To put it another way, the traditional religions, with their commitment to the anthropic principle, are the only forces left which can challenge the assumptions of modernity which have led to injustice and oppression.

The arguments of Cox and Greider should be considered seriously by those espousing the cause of Gnosticism. Ehrmann is ironically correct when he says that what the gnostics thought is not of mere antiquarian interest. It is not some quaint antiquated belief system which can be rehabilitated without consequences because in its abandonment of the anthropic principle it leaves a high price to pay for those who wish to improve their lot. One of Albert Schweitzer's great contributions was to show how hidden ideological assumptions drive historical critical inquiry. He was able to demonstrate how nineteenth century liberal assumptions had led to the creation of what he called a 'half-historical, half-modern Jesus'.[20] Similarly, the questers for so-called lost Christianities are driven by a neo-liberal pluralist agenda. They have created a half-historical, half-modern Gnosticism. They seek to inhabit the moral high ground through their claim that by embracing lost Christianities such as Gnosticism we will learn the value of tolerance and openness to the other. Yet I would venture to suggest that it lies within the historian's mandate to point out that the tolerance of the ancient Gnostics led to cooperation with the imperial gods of Rome. Those who advocate the revival of Gnosticism in the modern world would do well to acknowledge that it is a religiosity which, by simple extrapolation to the present, counsels compliance with the secular gods of this world.

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ENDNOTES

1. Darrell Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the truth behind alternative Christianities* (Toronto: Nelson, 2006).
2. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The battle for scripture and the faith we never knew* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).
3. Ehrman, p. 257.
4. English translation: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in earliest Christianity* (Phila: Fortress Press, 1971).
5. English translation: *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
6. Karen King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Boston: Harvard Uni. Press, 2006), p. 6.
7. King, p. 6.
8. King, p. 340.
9. King, p. 158.
10. King, p. 163.
11. King, p. 165.
12. King, p. 173.
13. See Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": an argument for dismantling a dubious category* (NY: Princeton University Press, 1996). Williams' strategy is, in fact, quite different from that of King's. He argues that we have no convincing evidence that the Gnostics were any more 'apolitical' than most of their contemporaries. In fact, he says, what we know about many of these people suggests that 'they were moving precisely in the direction of more social involvement and accommodation, and less tension with their social environment' (p. 97).
14. Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 61.
15. Michael Waldstein, "Hans Jonas' construct "Gnosticism": Analysis and Critique", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8:3 (2000): 371.
16. Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), p. 208.
17. The Marcionites seem to have been the exception. See Williams, pp. 105 and 112.
18. Wm. Greider, *One World, Ready or Not* (NY: Simon & Shuster, 1997), p. 473.
19. See Cynthia D. Moe Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).
20. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A & C Black 1910), p. 398.