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Gnosticism and the New Testament 2

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In the first part of this article (TSF Bulletin *68, Spring 1974, pp. 6–13) the author considered two possible origins of Gnosticism: the Old Testament and Judaism and the Greek world. Here he continues the discussion.*

3. The Orient: Iranian dualism and Gnosticism

The suggestion that Iranian religion was somehow connected with the rise of Gnosticism was classically formulated by the partnership of Bousset and Reitzenstein, and since their time very little original work has been done in this field.[35] In his book *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*,[36] W. Bousset argued that three of the main Gnostic themes can be directly derived from Iranian sources: the Gnostic dualism, the Gnostic redeemer, and the ascent of the *pneuma*. Bousset combined the Iranian evidence with material from Philo, the *Hermetica*, and the Chaldean oracles to prove his contention that Gnosticism was a pre-Christian phenomenon, and that the statements of the Church Fathers, which describe it as a distinctly Christian phenomenon, were based not on reliable evidence, but on their own tendentious presuppositions, aided by a peculiar concoction of ill-digested Oriental mythology and Hellenistic philosophy. We shall come to the question of pre-Christian Gnosticism in a moment. So far as Iranian influence is concerned, almost all scholars have rejected Bousset's conclusions and, so far as I know, only one scholar at the present time supports an Iranian origin for Gnosticism. Even he has admitted the flimsy character of most of Bousset's evidence, and has argued that only the Gnostic dualism can be directly derived from Iranian sources.[37] Reitzenstein turned to Iranian religion mainly because of his inability to distil evidence for a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth from the other materials which he had investigated. In his book *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*,[38] he pointed out the fortuitous combination in Iranian religion of a dualistic doctrine of sorts with a belief in some kind of divine redeemer.

One of the difficulties in making any assessment of the Iranian contribution to Hellenistic thought in general is the relative obscurity of our sources of information. There can be little doubt that it exercised some influence on the paganism of the Roman Empire (especially perhaps on Mithraism, which arose towards the end of the first century AD as a rival to Christianity), and also probably on later Gnosticism. Its significance for Judaism and Christianity is very difficult to estimate. There is no sign of its influence in Judaism before the second century BC, while the question of a direct influence on Christianity is closely bound up with the problem of its influence on Gnosticism.

Though there is a certain obscurity about much of our information on Persian religion, the main outlines of the beliefs of Mazdayasnianism, the religion founded by Zoroaster, are fairly clear.[39] Two principles could be discerned in the universe, the principle of good, personified as Ahura-mazda, 'the wise lord', and the principle of evil, personified by Angra-mainyu (Ahriman), with man having a free choice as to which force he would support. At death, a grand reckoning would be made, and in the end the forces of good led by Ahura-mazda would emerge victorious, each man would be judged by his deeds and allocated a place according to the kind of life he had lived, with the good going to paradise and the evil to a place of fire and torment.

There is a superficial resemblance between this doctrine and the basic beliefs of the Gnostics, but the differences are more significant. They far outweigh the similarities, and are also of a very far-reaching and fundamental character. Iranian religion was dualistic in so far as it postulated the existence of two forces at work in the destiny of mankind, but both the sphere and mode of operation of these forces were different from that of Gnostic dualism. In Persian religion both these forces operated within the world itself, with the material world being an impartial and, to a large extent, uninvolved battlefield on which the two could wage their eternal warfare. This is completely different from Gnostic dualism, where the world is not only a part of the forces of evil, but the most formidable weapon of all in the arsenal of the Demiurge and his allies. There is no suggestion in Iranian beliefs that the world, or matter, is evil in itself, and the dualism found there is essentially an ethical dualism, as opposed to the material dualism of the Gnostics. The radically anti-cosmic character of Gnostic dualism is completely lacking in its Iranian counterpart. Bousset seems to have realized this, for he argued that the concrete mythological dualism of Iranian religion had become in its Gnostic environment more the antithesis between the good spiritual and the evil material worlds[40] — but

35 *Cf.* E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London, 1973), pp. 73–83.

36 Göttingen, 1907; FRLANT 10.

37 G. Widengren in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 28–60. Abbreviated below as *OG*.

38 Bonn, 1921.

39 Zoroaster himself (*c.* 628–551 BC) reformed the old Iranian polytheism, though the religion he founded reached its classical dualistic form (on which Bousset and Reitzenstein based their investigations) under the Sassanid dynasty (AD 226–752). The state of Persian religion in the preceding Parthian dynasty (250 BC–AD 226) is, unfortunately, uncertain.

40 *Hauptprobleme*, p. 118.

to admit as much is tacitly to admit that the Gnostic dualism was of an altogether different type. The prevalent dualism of Hellenistic philosophy was very much closer to Gnostic dualism and appears to be a more likely source than Iranian religion. A further point of contrast between Gnostic and Iranian ideas is that between the rigid fatalism of Gnostic speculation and the emphasis laid on human free will in Mazdayasnianism, where every man was judged according to his deeds rather than on his (inborn) capacity for receiving *gnōsis*.

G. Widengren is the only modern scholar who remains convinced by this Iranian hypothesis, and he has argued for some considerable Iranian influence in several areas of contemporary study, in the Gnostic *Hymn of the Pearl*, in Mandaeism, in Qumran and in the Coptic Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi.[41] Others, however, have weighed the evidence and found it wanting.[42]

4. The New Testament

Over the last seventy years or so, three main positions have been taken up on the question of Gnosticism and the New Testament, and we deal with them in turn.

a. The classical theory: '*Gnosticism was a Christian heresy*'. The Church Fathers, engaged as they were in the battle to keep the catholic church of the early centuries free from heresy, had assumed that the catholic faith as they knew it must have been the original form of Christianity. Any deviation must have come in later, and therefore was based on a perversion of orthodox Christian belief. From this standpoint, it was self-evident that Gnosticism was based on catholic Christianity, and constituted a departure from the true faith. From the time of the Fathers until the rise of scientific biblical criticism towards the end of the nineteenth century, interpreters had more or less assumed that Gnosticism was a perversion of the true Christian gospel, originating sometime in the second century AD, and that a fairly distinct line of development could be traced from those elements of Docetic teaching opposed in such New Testament writings as 1 John to the developed Gnostic heresies. The advent of a scientific approach to biblical history dealt what must be regarded as a death-blow to this theory of Gnostic origins, though it was not without a counter-attack that this was achieved.

One of the most influential advocates of the classical theory of Gnostic origins was A. von Harnack (1851–1930), who was generally unwilling to see any resemblance at all between Christianity and its pagan contemporaries, and argued that 'essential Christianity', regarded as a given body of religious and ethical teaching originating from Jesus himself, was completely free from all such possible 'corruption'. The essence which he found in the message of Jesus was a declaration of the spiritual freedom of mankind. Harnack, like many another German Protestant before and after his time, differentiated sharply between the early, apostolic church and the catholic church; and, correspondingly, he also distinguished between what he called 'historical' and 'essential' Christianity, the latter being an immutable body of ethical teachings, while the former was subject to the usual processes of historical growth and development.[43] By making this distinction, Harnack was able to postulate any number of extraneous influences on the Christian church, yet with no direct effect on the basic content of the Christian faith. He viewed the entire history of the church from the apostolic period to the emergence of the catholic church as a process of assimilation of Greek ways of thinking to Christian doctrine. Thus Gnosticism was only a more extreme form of a process that was already taking place in the mainstream of the church.[44]

We need go no further with Harnack's views for our purpose here. Though by his distinction between the essence of Christianity and its outward historical form he did at least attempt to relieve the tension created by the view of the Church Fathers of Gnosticism as a purely Christian heresy, he still accepted their basic outlook. Nor was he alone in this. Among English-speaking scholars of the time, F.C. Burkitt mounted a sharp offensive against the view that Gnosticism was anything other than a Christian heresy.[45] Other notable defenders of this position have included R. P. Casey[46] and J. Munck, who has made the strongest attack of all on the methodology of those who argue for a pre-Christian Gnosticism.[47] The most important contemporary advocate of this view is S. Pétrement, who also has contended that Gnosticism developed from Christianity, and that nothing in the New Testament can be held to support the existence of a developed Gnosticism at that period.[48]

b. Pre-Christian Gnosticism: '*Gnosticism existed in a developed form before the rise of the church, and the New Testament represents a form of Christianized Gnosis*'. Once scholars began to investigate the New

[41] *Art. cit.* in note 37 above.

[42] A. Closs has pointed out that the Gnostic ideas of a saving *gnōsis* cannot be traced to Iranian sources, and even in Manichaeanism (the only form of Gnosis which can be directly claimed as Iranian) the doctrine of salvation is not Iranian (*cf. OG*, pp. 265–279). In other papers in *OG*, G. Gnoli and A. Bausani both argue that Iranian influence can be discovered only to a very limited extent, and then in no fundamental elements (pp. 281–290 and 251–264).

[43] A. Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig, 1900).

[44] 'The Gnostic systems represent the acute secularising or hellenising of Christianity, . . . while the Catholic system . . . represents a gradual process of the same kind . . .' (A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, ET London/Edinburgh, 1894, vol. I, pp. 226f.).

[45] *Church and Gnosis* (Cambridge, 1932).

[46] 'Gnosis, Gnosticism & the New Testament', in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (C. H. Dodd *Festschrift*), eds. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 52–80.

[47] See his article, 'The New Testament & Gnosticism', in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (*Festschrift* for O. A. Piper), eds. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (London, 1962), pp. 224–238.

[48] S. Pétrement, in *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* 65 (1960), pp. 385–421.

Testament as a historical document, seeking to understand it in the context of its own time, it was soon realized that here was no homogeneous theological treatise, but a document embracing a wide variety of religious ideas and intepretations. It was clear to everyone that the different authors were all Christians, and were at one in discerning the basis of the Christian faith in the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, but when they tried to understand the details of this Christian belief, many scholars found not only minor deviations in approach, but even what one contemporary scholar has called 'irreconcilable theological contradictions'.[49]

In the attempt to elucidate the relationship between the various strands of the New Testament, different approaches have been made, with some scholars declaring the solution to lie in a closer study of contemporary Judaism,[50] while others have sought the answer elsewhere in the Hellenistic and Oriental *milieu* which was the birthplace of the church. The fact that supporters of widely divergent theories can present their case with more or less equal persuasion suggests that such a simple distinction between Jewish and Gentile elements in New Testament thought will never provide a complete or satisfactory explanation. It is now generally recognized that, on the one hand, much that was once thought to be exclusively Gentile may well have been Jewish [51] and on the other hand that by the first century AD Judaism itself, even in Palestine, was probably more Hellenized than had previously been supposed.[52]

The first scholar to suggest that the key to an understanding of the New Testament against its environment was to be found in the hypothesis of a pre-Christian Gnosticism was W. Anz, in 1897.[53] His suggestion was soon taken up and developed by W. Bousset (1865–1920) and R. Reitzenstein (1861–1931). In the book to which we have already referred,[54] Bousset argued that Gnosticism was principally a pre- and non-Christian phenomenon, which nevertheless embraced Christianity itself. In general it should be seen as an Oriental religious movement, inspired mainly by Iranian religion. Gnostic theology was simply a rationalization of widespread Oriental myths which, though of diverse origins, had certain common features: a dualistic view of the universe, a depreciation of matter and the material world, and a degrading descent of the soul into the material world, with its subsequent redemption by release from all material ties. By an exhaustive exposition of these Gnostic themes in a wide variety of literature from the Near East to India, Bousset argued that the outline of the Gnostic myth had an independent existence long before the rise of Christianity, and that a major feature of it was the appearance of a divine redeemer, who subsequently became the prototype for New Testament Christology.

Meanwhile, Reitzenstein had directed his attention to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which he saw the end phase of a development which had begun long before the Christian era, and so the Hermetic texts could be used as reliable sources in the interpretation of various aspects of early Christian belief. Reitzenstein traced the *Hermetica* back to Necheppo and Petos-iris, who were astrologers of the second century BC. But this dating of the material is now seen to be false. The *Hermetica* as a body can scarcely be dated earlier than the rise of neo-Platonism in the middle of the second century AD. In its present form, it cannot therefore be considered as a possible source of Christianity. By combining the evidence of the tractate *Poimandres* (the most significant part of the Hermetic writings), in which can be found the 'Gnostic' doctrine of the ascent of the soul, with evidence taken from other sources, *viz.* the Naassene sermon preserved by Hippolytus,[55] the book Omega of the alchemist Zosimos, and book viii of the neo-Platonist Iamblichus, Reitzenstein claimed to be able to prove the pre-Christian existence of Gnosticism.[56] Unfortunately, none of these works could be dated earlier than about the third century AD, and so their value as direct evidence for the rise of Christianity is somewhat limited.

In his book, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*,[57] Reitzenstein turned his attention to Hellenistic thought, in which he found an emphasis on the concept of *gnōsis* not so much as an intellectual apprehension, but as including a mystical contact with the divine. He argued that in Paul's writings in particular we find a dualistic emphasis similar to that found in the Mystery-cults and in Gnosticism, which he thought sprang partly from them. Thus, Paul's statement in Galatians 2: 19f. can be seen as a case of 'double personality', such as was common in Gnosticism.[58]

A more fruitful line of approach became available to Reitzenstein with the publication of the Mandaean

[49] E. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1963), p. 100.

[50] An early example of this was H. A. A. Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions* (London, 1913), who argued that almost everything in Paul with a Hellenistic flavour could actually be accounted for by his Jewish background. More recently, see W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948); R. N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (New York, 1964).

[51] *E.g.* the dualism of the Fourth Gospel, which was thought to be Hellenistic or Iranian, or both, has now been compared to that of the Qumran Scrolls, and most scholars now regard this dualism as less Hellenistic than was previously thought, if not entirely Jewish. *Cf.* L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Exeter, 1969), pp. 321–358.

[52] *Cf.* S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962²; Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America XVIII).

[53] W. Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnosticismus* (Leipzig, 1897; Heft 4 in *TU* 15).

[54] *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis.*

[55] *Ref.* V.10.2ff. Conveniently translated into English, with brief introduction by W. Bauer, in *New Testament Apocrypha* II, pp. 807f.

[56] For all this, see Reitzenstein's *Poimandres* (Leipzig, 1904).

[57] Leipzig, 1910.

[58] *Die hell. Myster.*, pp. 84f., 369. Such an interpretation has little to recommend it: *cf.* W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 89ff.

literature by M. Lidzbarski between 1905 and 1925.[59] In his edition of these texts, Lidzbarski emphasized their great antiquity,[60] and Reitzenstein set himself to investigate the possible bearing of this literature on the New Testament. In the Right Ginza he discovered a 'little apocalypse', and concluded not only that the Mandaean Enosh-Uthra was a prototype for the 'son of man' of the Gospel tradition, but also that this Mandaean source, with its similarities to Mt. 23: 34–39, could have formed a suitable basis for the synoptic source Q.[61] R. Bultmann also turned his attention to the Mandaean literature at about the same time. Because of the prominence of John the Baptist in some Mandaean texts, Bultmann supposed that there must have been some direct connection between the Baptist and the Mandaeans, and the outcome of his thought on the subject was the suggestion that a Gnostic redeemer myth underlies much of the Fourth Gospel.[62] This conclusion was supported by Reitzenstein's book published in 1926,[63] in which he argued that Christianity emerged from a sacramental religion with a Gnostic theology, which had been represented by John and his disciples long before the appearance of Jesus. He also contended that the Fourth Gospel showed literary dependence on the Mandaean texts.

This left the way open for a thoroughgoing exegesis of the New Testament on the basis of Gnosticism and its supposed antecedents. The firstfruits of this came in 1925, with the publication of W. Bauer's commentary on the Fourth Gospel in its second edition, in which this approach was adopted. It has, of course, found its fullest expression in the *magnum opus* of Bultmann himself on the Fourth Gospel.[64] Other works which have been influenced by this approach to Gnosticism through the Mandaean literature include the exposition of Gnostic religion by Hans Jonas,[65] and several works on the Fourth Gospel emanating from the Bultmann school.[66] Of these, Walter Schmithals has been the most exhaustive, and he has traced Gnostic ideas throughout the New Testament.[67] E. Käsemann has defined a 'canon within the canon' by using the alleged 'Gnostic' content of each New Testament book as a criterion for allocating it either to the early, apostolic community (which accepted and utilized Gnostic ideas), or to the 'early catholic' community (which opposed the introduction of Gnostic ideas).[68]

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts naturally provoked speculation that new evidence may now be forthcoming for the existence of a pre- and non-Christian Gnosticism, which would support this theory. Three documents have been said to show traces of such a Gnostic system, the *Letter of Eugnostos*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, and the *Paraphrase of Shem*, but none of these texts is as yet sufficiently widely known for any consensus of opinion to be reached.[69]

The approach to the New Testament through pre-Christian Gnosticism has undoubtedly been a fruitful one, in the sense that it has led to the production of very many valuable exegetical works on the New Testament by those seeking to uphold this theory. But for the majority of scholars, this cannot be regarded as the real way ahead, and so we turn our attention to a third possible approach to the problem.

c. A simultaneous development: Christianity and Gnosticism developed alongside each other, often meeting, but with no real 'dependence' in either direction. There are several reasons why we cannot accept the theory of a widespread and fully developed pre-Christian Gnosticism as a basis for New Testament interpretation. One is the relatively uncritical use made of the sources by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Date and origin were accounted of little value, and concepts and ideas were taken out of context and placed alongside similarly isolated terms from the New Testament, to such an extent that Casey could say of Reitzenstein, with some justification, that he 'raised the subjective criticism of documents to a high imaginative art'.[70]

In addition, when we consider the theological bases of the New Testament and of Gnosticism it soon becomes clear that there are fundamental differences between the two outlooks. The dualism of Gnosticism is anti-cosmic, whereas that of the New Testament is essentially ethical and religious. This leads to a difference of belief in the realms of theology, for the Gnostic picture of an unknown 'Supreme God' and an inferior Demiurge cannot be fitted into the New Testament picture of a God who is both Creator and gracious Redeemer. Though it is stressed throughout the New Testament that there is a legitimate Christian *gnōsis*, this *gnōsis* has but little in common with the Gnostic theme, for it was available to all Christians, and not just to a spiritual élite.

Again, there are two major aspects in which Gnostic thought is completely opposed to the New Testament:

[59] M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Giessen, 1905 (Bd. I) and 1915 (Bd. II)); *Mandäische Liturgien* (Berlin, 1920); and *Ginza: Das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen, 1925).

[60] The actual dating of the Mandaean literature has been the subject of changing theories. The present consensus is to accept a fairly early Palestinian origin for Mandaeism. *Cf.* Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–142, and literature cited there.

[61] *ZNW* 20 (1921), p. 3.

[62] R. Bultmann, in *ZNW* 24 (1925), pp. 100–146.

[63] R. Reitzenstein/H. H. Schaeder, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Greichenland* (Leipzig, 1926), pp. 306–341.

[64] R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen, 1941: *KEK*). Now in ET.

[65] H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (Göttingen, 1934 (Bd. I) and 1954 (Bd. II); FRLANT NF 33 & 45); and *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963²).

[66] E. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi* (Göttingen, 1939; FRLANT NF 38); H. Becker, *Die Reden des Johannesevangeliums* (Göttingen, 1956; FRLANT NF 50).

[67] *Cf.* his *Paul & the Gnostics* (ET Nashville/New York, 1972); also *Gnosticism in Corinth* (ET Nashville/New York, 1971) and *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church* (ET London, 1971).

[68] In various essays, in ET as *Essays on New Testament Themes*, and *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, 1969).

[69] *Cf.* Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–116, for a summary of the present state of research.

[70] *Art. cit.*, p. 53; see above, n. 46.

the view of time and history, and the work and person of Christ. To the Gnostic, time and history were essentially meaningless, and in any case were of no interest, being phenomena of the material world, which was under the control of hostile spiritual powers. Reality for the Gnostic consisted in the understanding of the other, spiritual world, to which his *pneuma* would ultimately escape when its bodily existence ceased. The basis of the biblical view of time and history is, however, completely opposed to this, for it is a central contention of both Old Testament and New Testament that our hope of redemption is based on the fact that God himself, as both Creator *and* Redeemer, has intervened in the course of this world's history to provide salvation for his people. Even in what many think to be one of the most Hellenistic books of the New Testament, in its contrast of the real as against the shadow, we find the statement at the very outset that the centre of the Christian gospel is not that a divine messenger has revealed the secrets of the other world, but simply that God himself has intervened decisively in the historical experience of man (Heb. 1: 1ff.). In short, there is a fundamental contradiction here, for while to the Gnostic, God can only be known by the escape of the *pneuma* from historical existence, to the Christian, God can be known only by means of his intervention *in* history, specifically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When we look at the various explanations given of the work and person of Christ in this intervention, we again find a fundamental difference between the Gnostic and the Christian view. The main issue here centres around the cross, which was to the Gnostics, as to Greeks in general, a *skandalon* (1 Cor. 1: 23). In contrast to Paul, who gloried in the cross as the instrument of salvation, most Gnostic theories erase the passion of Christ himself and replace it by some kind of Docetic teaching whereby the divine Christ left the human Jesus before the crucifixion. Here, salvation is not imparted by an atoning death, but through a mysterious *gnōsis*. This runs completely counter to the Christian view, where man's problem is not ignorance, but sin. The fact that Gnostic redemption is only for a few is likewise a great contrast to the universalism of the Christian gospel, with room for publicans and sinners, and the Christian God who 'is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish' (2 Pet. 3: 9). The central features of the early apostolic preaching, the death and resurrection of Christ, are completely absent from almost all Gnostic teaching.

In spite of this, however, we must recognize that there are certain clear Gnosticizing tendencies within the experience of the apostolic churches as recorded for us in the New Testament. Though Schmithals has grossly over-stated his case, many of the features to which he draws attention are real, and demand an explanation. The best solution is probably to assume that both Gnosticism and Christianity were developing simultaneously in the first century AD, and that there was an interplay and exchange of ideas between the two religions, with both of them finding their 'classical' form only after a fairly long history of more or less peaceful co-existence.

The foundation for this kind of approach was laid by one who had been deeply influenced by the theory of a pre-Christian Gnosticism, W. Bauer. But his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*,[71] marked a new departure in the study of heretical movements in the early church. Bauer argued that at the first, there was no distinction between what later became known as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy', but that both existed alongside each other, and that the character of any given church was largely dependent on the area in which it was situated. Thus, the original form of Christianity in Edessa and Egypt, as well as in many parts of Asia Minor, was what later ecclesiastical dogma would have regarded as 'heresy'.

Though Bauer's theory has not commanded anything like universal assent, there are certain indications within the New Testament itself that it points in the right direction.[72] Paul, for example, never spoke of his opponents as 'heretics',[73] and it is significant that the only instance when he recommends excommunication was not for false belief, but for immoral conduct (1 Cor. 5: 1ff.) — and that in a church where he faced some of his most vociferous opponents. I have suggested elsewhere[74] that one of the keys to an understanding of the intrusion of Gnostic thought into the early church lies in a proper appreciation of Paul's arguments in the Epistle to the Galatians, which I regard as the earliest Pauline Epistle. In dealing with Judaizing opponents in Galatia, Paul made certain statements intended to devalue the Old Testament and the Jewish Law (a perfectly legitimate course to adopt against Jewish opposition), but this gave an opportunity for Gnosticizing ideas to infiltrate the churches, an infiltration which was probably given active encouragement by Paul's Gentile converts after the decision of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The rest of Paul's ministry is a continuing story of how he

[71] ET edited and supplemented by R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia, 1971). This translation is an entirely fresh presentation of the original work (1934), incorporating material from the revision of 1964, and also some new materials. For a valuable examination of Bauer's theory, *cf.* H. D. Betz, in *Interpretation* 19 (1965), pp. 299–311.

[72] W. Schmithals has also followed Bauer's theory, but reaches different conclusions from most others, because he has hardly given a fair hearing to the actual evidence of the NT. He over-presses Bauer's theory, arguing that since Bauer found evidence to suggest that at the end of the first century there were as many Gnostics as there were orthodox Christians in Asia Minor, this must also have been the situation when Paul was writing. But one can infer this only by a complete disregard for the Pauline evidence, or by assuming that Paul was not fully informed of the real situation. Bauer has shown that there is no *a priori* reason why Gnosticism may not have existed alongside other kinds of Christianity, and his point is well taken here. But we must weigh the actual NT evidence objectively in order to decide whether this was in fact the case in any given situation.

[73] The nearest he comes to it is Gal. 1: 8f., though this is hardly comparable with the anti-heretical statements of the Church Fathers.

[74] *Paul and the Gnostics*, PhD dissertation (Manchester University, 1972).

tried to be 'all things to all men', both Gnosticizers and others, in the hope that eventually an all-embracing synthesis might be found.

III

Reitzenstein, and those who followed him, assumed that when Christianity made its first appearance on the world stage, its apostles found already in existence a basic world-view of some antiquity, combining elements of Greek and Oriental thought, and including the descent of a divine redeemer to save the souls of men. In introducing their message into this religious situation, the first Christian preachers simply took over this existing world-view more or less *in toto*, and identified Jesus of Nazareth with the heavenly redeemer in whom their hearers had already believed as pagans.

We have already noted some of the inadequacies of this approach, but the relative ease with which it was possible to assume the existence of such a widespread world-view, and to give it the name 'Gnosticism', draws our attention to what is probably the most difficult problem in the study of Gnostic thought, namely the problem of definition. Just what do we mean by 'Gnosticism'? The difficulty is enhanced by the fact that only a very few groups of people seem actually to have called themselves 'Gnostics',[75] and Irenaeus was probably the first to use the term with any particular historical reference. Since the Church Fathers thought of Gnosticism as a Christian heresy, they reserved the term for those who could in some sense be called Christians, and yet who laid undue stress on certain beliefs which were fundamentally opposed to the catholic understanding of the Christian gospel. All scholars are agreed that these second-century groups refuted by Irenaeus and others are to be called 'Gnostic', but the difficulty arises when we attempt to define the antecedents of such Gnostic thought. Since Gnosticism itself in its classical form appears to be a mixture of bits and pieces culled from almost every known religious system of the Hellenistic age, it is clearly a hazardous undertaking to give any very precise definition of Gnosticism in terms of other, better-known religious beliefs. At the same time, it is possible to trace what later became Gnostic ideas in their pre-history in other religious systems, and the question is: To what extent were these ideas 'Gnostic' in their original context? Or, to put it another way, Is it the terminology itself that is Gnostic, or is it the use made of it which stamps it as Gnostic?

Reitzenstein and those who followed him would argue that the ideas themselves had a Gnostic connotation long before the second century, and that Gnosticism was not so much a Christian heresy as a basically pagan outlook which manifested itself in varying degrees not only in Christianity, but also in Judaism and paganism. There are difficulties in accepting so wide a definition of Gnosticism. Although individual elements of Gnostic thought can be shown to have existed in pre-Christian times, there is no indisputable evidence to show that these ideas were fused together into any sort of comprehensive system before the rise of Christianity. In addition, by defining 'Gnosticism' quite so widely, we are in effect reducing the significance of the term to a point where it almost ceases to have any specific meaning at all, and simply denotes the lowest common denominator of Hellenistic thought. On this basis, one could call almost any religious idea of the Hellenistic world 'Gnostic'.

All scholars are well aware of this particular problem, but unfortunately it seems to be amenable to no simple solution. Since by nature Gnosticism in its classical (second-century) form was so very syncretistic, it is futile to attempt to define it ontologically. This means that any division between 'pre-Gnostic' and 'Gnostic' thought must be an artificial one imposed by the interpreter, which of course leaves the door wide open for a conflict of individual opinions on the matter. In his *Gnostic Problem*, Wilson suggested that we should see three main stages in the history of Gnostic thought:[76]

1. Pre-Gnostic. This would include the various trends of Hellenistic syncretism, Philo, and the Qumran Scrolls.
2. Real Gnosticism, *i.e.* the second-century Christian heresies.
3. Later developments: Manichaeism, Mandaeism, *etc.*

According to this classification, the first movements towards real Gnosticism appear in the heresies opposed in such New Testament writings as the Johannine literature.[77]

In a paper presented to the Messina Colloquium on Gnosticism (1966), Professor Wilson suggested a distinction be made between 'Gnosis' as the broader religious phenomenon in the Hellenistic world, and 'Gnosticism' as the developed systems of the second century.[78] On the same occasion, the Japanese scholar S. Arai made a similar distinction between the two stages in the development of Gnosticism.[79] He suggested that one could only call 'Gnostic' in the strict sense those systems in which three main doctrines are found together:

1. Self-knowledge as a means of salvation.
2. Material dualism.
3. Some kind of redeemer.

This would include the Christian systems of the second century, and to these Arai assigned the term 'Gnosis'. 'Gnosticism' for him, on the other hand, consisted of those systems where individual features of truly Gnostic thought could be traced, but not bound up together in a systematic fashion.

On the basis of such suggestions, the Colloquium eventually adopted a position very similar to that put

[75] Mainly the Ophites/Naassenes, *cf.* Hippolytus, *Ref.* V.6.

[76] *Gnostic Problem*, pp. 98ff.

[77] *Cf.* also C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 97–114.

[78] R. McL. Wilson, in *OG*, pp. 511–527. *Cf.* also his *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 1–30.

[79] S. Arai, in *OG*, pp. 181–187.

forward by Wilson, *viz.* that we should 'identify, by the combined use of the historical and typological methods, a concrete fact, "Gnosticism", beginning methodologically with a certain group of systems in the Second Century AD which everyone agrees are to be designated by this term. In distinction from this, *gnosis* is regarded as "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an élite".'[80] A distinction was also made between 'pre-Gnostic' and 'proto-Gnostic', though more for the purpose of clarifying the current use of the terms than with the intention of laying down any rules for their use. By 'pre-Gnostic' was meant certain themes and ideas which existed independently before their amalgamation into Gnosticism proper, and in this context 'one can investigate the pre-existence of different themes and motifs constituting such a "pre-" but not yet involving Gnosticism.' 'Proto-Gnostic', on the other hand, generally indicates that the essence of Gnosticism can already be found in other and earlier systems, notably Iranian and Oriental. Thus, on this premise, 'one can think to find the essence of Gnosticism already in the centuries preceding the second century AD, as well as outside the Christian Gnosticism of the Second Century.'

In most books on the subject by English writers, only the two basic expressions are usually employed: 'Gnosticism' and 'Gnosis'. By 'Gnosticism' is meant only the second-century systems as described by the Church Fathers and in certain Gnostic texts. Such systems are characterized by the combination of the various elements of Gnostic belief which we have enumerated above. The main distinguishing mark of such 'Gnosticism' is its radical cosmological dualism, since most of the other beliefs in the realms of theology, soteriology, *etc.* spring naturally from this. By 'Gnosis' is meant the individual elements of Gnostic belief, as they can be traced in the first century and earlier in the Hellenistic world. It was these individual elements that gained a foothold in the church of the first century, and the development of them alongside Christian theology led to the combination of all elements under a cosmological dualism to produce the great second century Gnostic systems.

The real crux of the problem of Gnosticism and the New Testament lies in the language used by both New Testament writers and Gnostics. Where we find similar terms and concepts being used by both, is the language itself 'Gnostic', or did it have a 'Gnostic' meaning only in the context of a developed Gnostic theory? The only way in which any definite pronouncement can be made in this difficult area is by a painstaking comparison of the evidence of each school of thought. To do so would involve not merely the observation of the occurrence of linguistic terminology, but also an analysis of the significance attached to it in every possible context.[81] Only on the basis of such an examination will we finally reach anything like a definitive answer to the question — and the complexity of such an operation suggests that, unless new and conclusive evidence comes to light from the Nag Hammadi texts, or some other unexplored source, we can hope for no easy solution in the immediate future.

[80] *OG*, p. xxvi.

[81] *Cf.* S. Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith* (London, 1965), pp. 15–93, for a valuable introductory study of the linguistic problems involved.