

GNOSIS: CONCEPT, ORIGIN AND CONTEXT OF THE “GNOSTIC MOVEMENT”

Jens SCHRÖTER

Adreça: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Theologische Fakultät
Seminar für Neues Testament
Sitz: Burgstraße 26
D-10099 BERLIN (Germany)
E-mail: schroetj@hu-berlin.de

Resum

L'article s'inicia amb una discussió sobre la utilitat dels termes “Gnosis” i “Gnosticisme” per explicar l'origen i el desenvolupament de certes conviccions teològiques dels grups en el cristianisme antic. S'ha proposat moltes vegades que aquests termes estan impregnats ideològicament, i per tant més aviat caldria deixar-los de banda entre els estudiosos. Contra això investiguem a fons el significat del terme “Gnosis” en els escrits cristians i filosòfics del segon i tercer segle. Va ser utilitzat com una denominació positiva per al “coneixement veritable”, diferent d'una falsa “anomenada Gnosis”, una expressió esmentada per primera vegada en la primera carta a Timoteu. Des de principis del segle segon dC en endavant “Gnosis” i “Gnostikoi” van ser també utilitzats —principalment en els textos cristians— per a identificar certs mestres i els grups que afirmaven tenir coneixements especials del món transcendent i dels seus misteris. A la tercera part de l'article plantejarem l'origen dels ensenyaments més tard anomenats “gnòstics”. Sembla que al principi hi va haver diversos mestres i sistemes que explicaven el missatge cristià amb l'ajuda dels motius filosòfics i mitològics. Això ho il·lustra una mirada més propera en els ensenyaments de Basilides d'Alexandria, Valentí Gnòstic i la seva escola, així com el anomenats “Sethians” un tipus de gnòstics. El “moviment gnòstic” apareix en el cristianisme antic com un intent de fer atractiu el missatge cristià als pagans, mitjançant l'ús d'idees filosòfiques i mitològiques, especialment des del bell mig del Platonisme.

Paraules clau: Justí, Ireneu, Valentí, Setians, Gnòstic Barbelo.

Abstract

The article starts with a discussion of the usefulness of the terms “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” for explaining the origin and development of certain theological convictions and groups in ancient Christianity. It was maintained several times that these terms are ideologically loaded and should therefore rather be abandoned in scholarship. Against this background the meanings of the term “Gnosis” in Christian and philosophical writings from the second and third century are investigated. It was used as a positive designation for “true knowledge”, distinguished from a false “so-called Gnosis”, an expression first mentioned in the First letter to Timothy. From the early second century C.E. onwards “Gnosis” and “Gnostikoi” were also used —mainly in Christian texts— to identify certain teachers and groups who claimed to have special knowledge of the transcendent world and its mysteries. The third part of the article asks for the origin of the teachings later called “gnostic”. It appears that at the beginning there were several teachers and systems explaining the Christian message with the help of philosophical and mythological motives. This is illustrated by a closer look at the teachings of Basilides, Valentinus and his school as well as the so-called “Sethian” kind of Gnosticism. The “Gnostic movement” appears as an attempt in ancient Christianity to make the Christian message attractive to pagans by using philosophical and mythological ideas, especially from Middle Platonism.

Keywords: Justin, Irenaeus, Valentinus, Sethians, Barbelo Gnostics:

1. WHAT IS “GNOSIS”? A SHORT LOOK AT THE FORSCHUNGSGESCHICHTE

The vagueness of the concept “Gnosis” as well as its attractiveness from ancient to modern times is not at least caused by a striking ambiguity of definition. The term covers a wide range of meanings and was applied, e.g., to ancient religious and philosophical ideas, Christian, Jewish and Islamic mystical perceptions in the Middle Ages up to religious views in the New Age movement and Gnostic churches in modern times.¹ Against the background of this extensive usage it comes as no surprise that the origin, character and sociological context of “Gnosis” in antiquity has been answered quite differently. The spectrum ranges from Hans Jonas’ broad definition of Gnosis as an existential experience of human alienation in late antiquity² to Adolf von Harnack who regarded Gnosis as “acute secularization (or: Hellenization) of Christianity”, namely as transformation of Christian faith into a mythological

1. Cf. e.g. the comprehensive collection of texts from late antiquity until the present by P. SLOTERDIJK – T. H. MACHO (ed.), *Weltrevolution der Seele. Ein Lese- und Arbeitsbuch der Gnosis von der Spätantike bis zur Gegenwart*, München and Zürich: Artemis & Winkler 1991.
2. H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Erster Teil: Die mythologische Gnosis. Mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung* (FRLANT 51), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht ³1964; K. RUDOLPH (ed.), *Zweiter Teil: Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie* (FRLANT 159), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1993.

system connected with an ascetic ethos, which was successfully fended off by the early church.³ A position somewhere in the middle is taken by Kurt Rudolph who considers Gnosis as a “religion of late antiquity” with roots in Jewish apocalypticism, Iranian religion, and Greek philosophy which influenced Christianity from its very beginning and generated various schools and systems.⁴ “Gnosis” could therefore be regarded as a general human mind-set, a Christian heresy, or an ancient syncretistic religion with pre-Christian roots and diverse shapes.

A further terminological confusion was caused by the English philosopher Henry More who in the 17th century introduced the term “Gnosticism” as a general designation of ancient Christian heresies. The difficulty with this proposal is that, unlike γνῶσις and γνωστικός, the term “Gnosticism” has no counterpart in the ancient sources — which is already excluded by morphological reasons in Greek language.⁵ As a consequence, the relationship between the designations “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” was blurred, and both terms are used today for the same phenomenon in German and English scholarship: Whereas in the English-speaking world “Gnosticism” usually describes groups at the periphery of ancient Christianity with a common set of philosophical and mythological ideas, in the German-speaking context scholars continue to use the term “Gnosis” for the same phenomenon.⁶

To solve this problem the Messina conference in 1966 made the well-known and widely discussed proposal to distinguish between “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” in that “Gnosis” should be regarded as “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an élite”, whereas “Gnosticism” should be used as designation of “a certain group of systems of the Second Century A.D. which everyone agrees are to be designated with this term”.⁷ The obvious disadvan-

3. A. v. HARNACK, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte in drei Bänden, 1. Bd.: Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas*, Tübingen 1909, 243-290. Cf. ID., *Das Wesen des Christentums. Sechzehn Vorlesungen vor Studierenden aller Fakultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin*, C.-D. OSTHÖVENER (ed.), Tübingen 2005, 121.
4. Cf. e.g. K. RUDOLPH, *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, Leipzig 1980; ID., «Randerscheinungen des Judentums und das Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus», in: ID., *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (NHMS XLII), Leiden et al.: Brill 1996, 144-169.
5. Cf. J. HOLZHAUSEN, «Gnostizismus, Gnosis, Gnostiker. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Terminologie», *JAC* 44 (2001), 58-74: 58.
6. Cf. the two books with a similar title published in more recent times: K. KING, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, Mass./London U.K.: Belknap and Harvard University 2003; B. ALAND, *Was ist Gnosis?*, (WUNT 239), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009.
7. Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 April 1966. Teste e Discussioni Pubblicati A Cura Di Ugo Bianchi, Leiden 1967. The “Documento finale” is published in Ita-

tage of this proposal was that the term “Gnosis”, which simply means “knowledge” according to this proposal, would be used in a very broad and unspecific way and could be applied to a great variety of ancient religious or philosophical schools which in one way or another aimed at insights into the transcendent sphere. Hence, the Messina solution by trying to solve one problem is in danger to create another.

In more recent scholarship the gradual development and diversity of systems subsumed under the umbrella-term “Gnosis” was frequently emphasized.⁸ This can be substantiated by the ancient sources themselves. In their polemical treatises already Christian theologians of the second and third century distinguished between different teachers, schools and mythological systems of Christian heresies, as e.g. Simon, Basilides, Karpokrates, Valentinus and his school, or the so-called Barbelo-Gnostics. This was corroborated in its own way by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices. These writings reveal a wide range of mythological and philosophical perceptions of Christian and non-Christian provenance demonstrating that ancient “Gnosis” was a multifaceted phenomenon with different doctrines, a complex sociological background and often smooth transitions to related philosophical and theological concepts.⁹ This provokes the quest of unifying characteristics of ancient “Gnosis” and its relationship to ancient philosophy and Christian theology. Should the “Gnostic movement” be regarded as a derivation from Christianity¹⁰ or as a competing religion of independent origin?¹¹ Can “Gnosis” be considered as a philosophy in its own right?

In the context of this debate it was even disputed whether the designations “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are useful categories at all or have to be regarded instead as polemical constructs in ancient sources and modern research and should therefore be abandoned completely. It was argued that it remains uncertain whether there was an ancient phenomenon with a distinct philosophical or mythological concept and a clear sociological basis. For example, in his book “Rethinking Gnosticism” Michael Allen Williams maintained that

lian, French, English and German language at the beginning of the volume (pp. XX-XXXII). The quotation above comes from p. XXVI.

8. R. Mc L. WILSON, «Gnosis/Gnostizismus», en *TRE* 13, 1984, 519-550, provides a helpful overview on the discussion from the perspective of the early eighties of the 20th century.
9. Cf. the collection of articles on the Nag Hammadi writings in: J. D. TURNER – A. MCGUIRE (eds.), *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years. Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, Leiden et al.: Brill 1997.
10. See e.g. C. MARKSCHIES, *Die Gnosis*, München: Beck 32010.
11. See J. LAHE, «Ist die Gnosis aus dem Christentum ableitbar? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit einem Ursprungsmodell der Gnosis», *Trames* 10 (60/55) 3 (2006) 220–231.

in the ancient sources there is no basis for the claim of a “Gnostic movement”.¹² The different groups treated polemically by the church fathers and partly discernible in the Nag Hammadi codices and similar texts can hardly be regarded as proofs for a common “movement”, not to mention that these groups did not use the self-designation *γνωστικοί* at all.

A few years later Karen King questioned the usefulness of the category “Gnosticism” as well, which according to her was invented to disqualify individual Christian groups as “heretics” and to describe the history of Christianity along the rather clear-cut lines of “Orthodoxy” versus “Heresy”. King’s prediction therefore is that the term “Gnosticism” at least in the way it was used for a long time in Christian tradition would be abandoned in future research. A historically appropriate way for its usage could instead be its application to certain groups of ancient Christianity and their writings, as e. g. “Sethian Gnosticism”, also called “Classical Gnosticism”.¹³

In dealing with “the Gnostic movement” one has to ask, therefore, what the contours of such a movement are and what kind of information the ancient sources provide about the beliefs and practices of the concerned groups and teachers. Only in this way it will be possible to avoid inadequate harmonisations and categorisations of early Christian groups and writings and instead to develop criteria of “Gnosis” appropriate to the ancient sources.

Closely related to this topic is the general question of the origin of “Gnosis”. As is well known, the so-called “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” in the early 20th century developed the concept of a pre-Christian Gnosis as a specific kind of religion centred on the myth of a “redeemed redeemer”. This construction was mainly established by Richard Reitzenstein and Wilhelm Bousset who combined different sources, mostly of Manichean and Mandaean origin to create such a myth which allegedly should go back to pre-Christian times. This view was influential for decades and led to the assumption that New Testament writings as e.g. the Gospel of John or the Deuteropauline letters to the Colossians and Ephesians were influenced by Gnostic thinking.

This construct was fundamentally criticized by Carsten Colpe already fifty years ago.¹⁴ Colpe called into question the alleged myth of a redeemed redeemer because it has no foundation in pre-Christian sources at all and is not even

12. M. A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking Gnosticism. An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996.

13. KING, *Gnosticism* (n. 6), 218.

14. C. COLPE, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösersmythos* (FRLANT N.F. 60), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck& Ruprecht 1961.

attested in the writings of the second and third century A.D. Colpe instead proposed an alternative model of the origin and development of ancient Gnosis.¹⁵ According to him, the development of Gnostic thought presupposed not only pre-Christian philosophical speculation but also the Christological idea of a divine redeemer coming into the world and revealing hidden knowledge about the upper world. As a consequence today only a few would defend the position of a completely non-Christian origin of Gnosis,¹⁶ although traces of pre-Christian philosophical and mythological thoughts as preconditions for the origin of Gnostic thinking are usually conceded.

The majority of New Testament and Patristic scholars, however, hold the view of Gnosis as a phenomenon which arose in the second and third century and was brought into a coherent system as the basis for a religious “movement” for the first time in the third century by Mani. Consequently, the New Testament writings would not have been influenced by Gnostic thinking as such but were used together with other texts and traditions to develop philosophical and mythological views from the second century onwards which were later called “Gnosis”.¹⁷ Thereby, the distinction between “orthodox” and “heretical” writings was sometimes rather vague.

This can be illustrated by a look at the Gospel of Thomas. This enigmatic writing was first composed somewhere in the second century. Although this Gospel from the earliest references onwards always occurs among the rejected, apocryphal writings, this is only in part substantiated by its content. In the Gospel of Thomas there are many sayings and parables ascribed to Jesus which appear in a similar form in the canonical Gospels as well and were sometimes probably taken over from them. Moreover, in several sayings the Platonic idea of a heavenly image of humankind seems to be presupposed, but there is no account of an elaborated “Gnostic” myth and also no clear evidence that such a myth is presupposed. If a date of the original Gospel of Thomas around the middle of the second century would be justified, this would support the thesis of a gradual development of the complex mytho-

15. C. COLPE, «Gnosis II (Gnostizismus)», *RAC* XI (1981) 537-659.

16. As a more recent advocate is H.-F. WEISS, *Frühes Christentum und Gnosis. Eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie* (WUNT 225), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008, takes the position of “Gnosis” as an ancient syncretistic religion with a —not necessarily pre-Christian but at least:— non-Christian origin.

17. Cf. e.g. B. ALAND, «Was ist Gnosis? Wie wurde sie überwunden?», en: Id., *Was ist Gnosis?* (n. 6), 241-255; C. MARKSCHIES, «Christliche Religionsphilosophie oder vorchristliche antike Religion: Was ist Gnosis?» en: Id., *Gnosis und Christentum*, Berlin 2009, 23-52; Id. *Die Gnosis* (n. 10).

logical systems in the course of the second century mentioned above. Against this background in the next paragraph I will take a closer look at those schools and teachers designated as “Gnostic” in external witnesses.

2. GNOSTIC TEACHERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS ACCORDING TO EXTERNAL WITNESSES

At the outset it seems appropriate to look shortly at the use of the terms γνῶσις and γινώσκειν in religious and philosophical contexts. Here the Greek terms usually refer to the comprehension of the Gods —or the one God— the world and the true nature of humankind. In this way in Platonic philosophy and ethics,¹⁸ but also in Hellenistic Judaism the process of gaining knowledge could also mean to come closer to the truth of God (ἀλήθεια τοῦ θεοῦ).¹⁹ This general perception can also be detected in early Christian writings. One has to distinguish, therefore, between the usage of terms like γνῶσις or σοφία as descriptions of a religious or philosophical endeavour on the one hand and “Gnosis” as designation for a certain intellectual approach or philosophical system on the other.

With regard to the former it was a general conviction in early Christianity that true knowledge can only be achieved through Jesus Christ, although the ways in which this knowledge was related to philosophical thought differed considerably. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses the terms σοφία and γνῶσις to develop a specific concept of “wisdom” as the “message of the cross”. The background for this debate are Jewish-Hellenistic philosophical discourses about wisdom and knowledge as they can be found e.g. in Philo of Alexandria and were introduced in the Corinthian community perhaps by Apollos of Alexandria. Paul himself criticises an attitude towards σοφία and γνῶσις which is not orientated on the “foolishness of the cross”, and at the same time he uses these terms in a positive way to emphasize that “true” wisdom and knowledge can only be found in God’s subversion of wisdom and foolishness of the world. Hence, Paul ridicules a perception of wisdom and knowledge which does not take into account the specific revelation of God’s wisdom in the crucified Jesus Christ. This concept is, therefore, the most radical and subversive approach to wisdom and knowledge within Christian theology and became very influential as the basis for a specific Christian approach to these phenomena. That Paul thereby does not dismiss wisdom and knowledge as such

18. Plat., Resp. 5:477d; 6:508e.

19. Cf. e.g. Wisd. 2:13; 14:22.

becomes clear in 2:6-16 where he can speak of “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.” (NRSV)

Another treatment of the term γνῶσις in early Christianity can be discerned in the Epistle of Barnabas where “perfect knowledge” (ἡ τελεία γνῶσις) is described as a complement to faith which the author wants to provide in his letter.²⁰ In both of these usages γνῶσις describes an attitude linked to the faith in Jesus Christ without referring to specific philosophical convictions. Rather, γνῶσις is understood as the Christian message itself, which in Paul’s case stands in strong opposition to the wisdom of the world.

Of special importance for the understanding of “Gnosis” in Christian theology is the use of the terms γνῶσις and γνωστικός in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. He describes the Christian teaching as γνωστικὴ παράδοσις,²¹ refers to a complementary relationship of γνῶσις and πίστις²² and can even designate the Christian believer as the true γνωστικός.²³ However, Clement is well aware that also the heretics—in particular he refers to the followers of Prodikos—claim to possess knowledge, but, according to Clement, this is a “false knowledge”.²⁴ Unlike Paul, Clement does not confront a specific Christian concept of γνῶσις with the foolishness of the world, but rather claims that Christian faith is the consummation of γνῶσις because it enables to live according to God’s will. In Clemens’ usage the term γνῶσις is therefore not at least characterized by an ethical dimension.

The expression “falsely called knowledge”, used twice by Clement at the end of the third book of the “Miscellanies”,²⁵ refers back to 1Timothy 6:20. In this pseudo-Pauline letter the term γνῶσις is used for the first time as characterization of a position refuted by an author who for himself claims continuity with Pauline tradition. This passage is therefore the natural starting point for an investigation of γνῶσις as a controversial concept within Christianity in the second and third century.²⁶ The author of 1Timothy opposes a “falsely called knowledge” (ψευδώνυμος γνῶσις) to the “treasure” (παραθήκη) that has been entrusted to Timothy, i.e. the teaching of the apostle Paul. If 1Timothy (or the Pastoral letters in general) were written in the first decades of the se-

20. *Barn* 1:5; cf. 6:9; 9:8; 13:7.

21. *Strom.* I 1:15:2.

22. *Strom.* V 1:1:3.

23. *Clem. Al., Strom.* VI 10:83:1; VII 1:3:1-5; 9:52:1-3; 12:69:1; 12:74:1 et al.

24. Cf. e.g. *Strom.* III 4:30:1.

25. *Strom.* III 18:109:2; 18:110:3.

26. M. HENGEL, «Die Ursprünge der Gnosis und das Urchristentum», en: Id., *Studien zum Urchristentum* (Kleine Schriften VI; WUNT 234), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008, 549-593: 549-551.

cond century—a date that would be corroborated by the tendency to strengthen the position of the bishop on costs of the elders in a similar way as in the letters of Ignatius—the remark in 1 Timothy 6:20 shows that the term γνῶσις could be used not only to refer to the knowledge about the revelation in Jesus Christ but was also used as designation of a *specific kind* of knowledge to which a certain group within or at the periphery of the Christian community claims to have access.

The precise content of this “knowledge”, however, remains uncertain and can be reconstructed only tentatively from the polemical remarks in the letter.²⁷ In the immediate context it is characterized as “profane chatter and antitheses” (βέβηλος κενοφωνία καὶ ἀντιθέσεις). Whereas the former expression is just a polemical depreciation, the designation “antitheses” could perhaps refer to the rhetorical technique of the members of the concerned group. In 1:4 the author refers to “myths and endless genealogies” (μῦθοι καὶ γενεαλογίαὶ ἀπέραντοι), which could hint to the use of the genealogies in the book of Genesis and the lists of divine emanations, which, according to Irenaeus, were part of the teaching of groups called Ophites and Sethians.²⁸ Among the Nag Hammadi writings we find at least two texts, consecutively arranged in Codex II, which would fit such a characterization: the “Hypostasis of the Archons” (NHC II,4), a mythological interpretation of Genesis 1-6²⁹ and the writing without title about the origin of the world (NHC II,5). The γνῶσις mentioned in 1 Timothy could therefore refer to such divine mysteries about the origin of the world and the mythological interpretation of genealogies in biblical writings.

One has to be careful, however, not to read too much from the much more elaborated mythological systems in later writings into the short remark in 1 Timothy. Nevertheless, the peculiar use of the term γνῶσις shows that it is understood as a distinct characteristic of a certain group within the Christian community. This does not imply, of course, that the members of this group understood themselves as a movement called γνῶσις—which would be a strange designation for a group anyway—or called themselves γνωστικοί. It means, however, that a certain group within the community claimed to pos-

27. See G. HAUFE, «Gnostische Irrlehre und ihre Abwehr in den Pastoralbriefen», en K.-W. TRÖGER (ed.), *Gnosis und Neues Testament. Studien aus Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*, Berlin 1973, 325-339; J. ROLOFF, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus* (EKK XV), Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 1988, 228-239.

28. *Her.* 1:30:1-14.

29. See U. U. KAISER, *Die Hypostase der Archonten* (Nag-Hammadi-Codex II,4). *Neu herausgegeben, übersetzt und erklärt* (TU 156), Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2006.

sess knowledge which was contested by the author of 1Timothy. Obviously, then, this controversy has a different context than that in 1Corinthians and the Epistle of Barnabas because γνῶσις is not used here for a general attitude towards the Christian message but as designation of a specific teaching within the community. This is corroborated by other remarks in the Pastorals —given that they refer to the same opponents— as e.g. 2Tim 2:18 (the resurrection has already taken place) or the ascetic ethos expressed in 1Tim 4:3.³⁰ Hence, at the beginning of the second century —if the Pastorals can roughly be dated in that time— one can detect traces of a teaching within a Christian community which was criticized as “falsely called knowledge” and, hence, reveals the starting-point of a specific kind of doctrine closely related to Christian faith and perhaps characterized by a mythological interpretation of genealogies.

This observation can be specified by remarks of Justin martyr from the middle of the second century. In his *First Apology*, after a report on the heretical teachings of Simon, Menander and Markion, Justin writes that their followers are called “Christians” (χριστιανοί). He compares this phenomenon to philosophical doctrines which, regardless to their variety, are called “philosophy”.³¹ In a comparable way in his *Dialogue with Trypho* he writes that various heretical groups which call themselves “Christians” bear the names of their founders as e.g. Markianits, Valentinians, Basilidians or Saturnilians, as it is usual also among philosophical schools named after the “father of the doctrine”.³² Thus, according to Justin, the self-designation of these heretical groups is not “Gnostics”, but “Christians”.

Another important witness is Irenaeus of Lyon who at the end of the second century wrote a comprehensive refutation of Christian heresies whose title “On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis”³³ relies on 1Timothy 6:20 to which Irenaeus refers occasionally throughout his treatise.³⁴ Right at the beginning of the first book he relates at length the system of Ptolemaios,

30. “They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

31. *1 Apol.* 26:6: πάντες οἱ ἀπὸ τούτων ὀρμώμενοι, ὡς ἔφημεν, Χριστιανοὶ καλοῦνται, ὃν τρόπον καὶ οἱ οὐ κοινωνοῦντες τῶν αὐτῶν δογμάτων τοῖς φιλοσόφοις τὸ ἐπικατηγορούμενον ὄνομα τῆς φιλοσοφίας κοινὸν ἔχουσιν.

32. *Dial.* 35:6: Χριστιανούς ἑαυτοὺς λέγουσιν... καὶ εἰσιν αὐτῶν οἰμέντινες καλούμενοι Μαρκιανοί, οἰδὲ Οὐαλεντινιανοί, οἱ δὲ Βασιλειδιανοί, οἱ δὲ Σατορνιλιανοί, καὶ ἄλλοι ἄλλῳ ὀνόματι ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρχηγέτου τῆς γνώμης ἕκαστος ὀνομαζόμενος ...

33. Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως.

34. *Her. Praef.* 1; 1:23:4; 2:14:7; 3:11:1.

an offshoot of the school of Valentinus.³⁵ At a later place he calls Valentinus “the first one of the so-called Gnostic heresy”.³⁶ A few sentences later Irenaeus reports that Valentinus’ teaching resembles those of the “falsely called Gnostics”.³⁷ Another teacher of this circle, Irenaeus ironically reports, outstretches himself to the superior and the “more Gnostic” (γνωστικώτερον),³⁸ and Markos the Magician can even be called “the most Gnostic” (γνωστικώτατος).³⁹

In another passage Irenaeus states that some teachers of the school of Karpokrates⁴⁰ earmark their disciples with a stigma as e.g. Marcellina. And Irenaeus adds: “They call themselves Gnostics”.⁴¹ Finally, Irenaeus mentions a great number of so-called “Barbelo-Gnostics” with a teaching about a specific Aeon called Barbelo, a nameless father and a begotten light called “Christ” and other emanations as e.g. an “Autogenes”.⁴²

Irenaeus is therefore the first one to subsume several teachers and their schools under the category “Gnostic heresy”, although only with regard to the school of Karpokrates he explicitly reports that they call themselves “Gnostics”. It is rather unlikely that this should be understood as a proper name, because Irenaeus, like Justin, distinguishes the different schools according to the names of teachers and followers, whereas the designation “Gnostics” is an equivalent to “Perfects” used for the followers of Mark the magician.⁴³ With regard to the so-called “Barbelo-Gnostics” this means that this designation has to be translated as “those who know Barbelo”.⁴⁴ Irenaeus is also the first one who speaks of “a so-called Gnostic direction” with regard to Valentinus and his predecessors. As the other passages show, it remains at least doubtful whether it is reliable information that Valentinus or even earlier teachers used γνωστικός as a self-designation. It is more probable that Irenaeus employed the term to create the image of a “heresy” which goes back as early as to Simon Magus mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.⁴⁵

35. *Her.* 1:1-7.

36. *Her.* 1:11:1: ὁ μὲν γὰρ πρῶτος ἀπὸ τῆς λεγομένης Γνωστικῆς αἵρέσεως ...

37. *Her.* 1:11:1: ὁμοίως τοῖς... ψευδωνύμοις Γνωστικοῖς.

38. *Her.* 1:11:3: ἄλλος δέ τις... διδάσκαλος αὐτῶν, ἐπὶ τὸ ὑψηλότερον καὶ γνωστικώτερον ἐπεκτεινόμενος.

39. *Her.* 1:13:1.

40. Cf. W. LÖHR, «Karpokratianisches», *VigChr* 49 (1995) 23-48.

41. *Her.* 1:25:6. In the Latin translation: *Gnosticos se autem vocant*. For the Greek text the noun γνωστικοί can be assumed.

42. *Her.* 1:29:1.

43. *Her.* 1:13:6.

44. Unfortunately the passage is preserved only in Latin as «multitudo Gnosticorum Barbelo» (1:29:1). For the Greek it has to be presupposed presumably γνωστικοὶ Βαρβηλώ.

45. Cf. HOLZHAUSEN, *Gnostizismus* (n. 5), 67f.

A similar statement can be found in Hippolytus of Rome. In his *Refutatio omnium haeresium* Hippolytus reports that the Naassens —named after the Hebrew word for “serpent”— called themselves later “Gnostics” because they claimed that they alone would know the depths of knowledge.⁴⁶ According to Hippolytus’ these “Gnostics” are the origin of many other heretic movements with different names which grew out of them.

A non-Christian external witness for ancient Gnostics is the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus who wrote a polemical treatise which was published under the title Πρὸς τοὺς γνωστικούς (“Against the Gnostics”) as the ninth discourse of the second book in the collection of his writings edited by his student Porphyry under the title *Enneads*.⁴⁷ It is striking that the term “Gnostics” does not appear in the text of the discourse at all. Obviously, the title does not go back to Plotinus himself but was chosen by his biographer Porphyry who mentions it in the biography of his teacher.⁴⁸ Plotinus criticizes that his opponents introduce other entities (ὑποστάσεις) besides the only one and true being⁴⁹ and regard the world as a bad creation which, in his view, is a misinterpretation of Plato’s philosophy.⁵⁰

If we include the Nag Hammadi codices and related writings, as e.g. the Papyrus Berolinensis Gnosticus, the Askew codex with the Pistis Sophia, the Bruce codex with the books of Jeû⁵¹ or the recently published Codex Tchacos in this survey, it is striking that the designation “Gnostics” never occurs in these writings. This again corroborates the assumption that “Gnostics” was a general designation used by early Christian theologians to earmark those who claim to possess special knowledge as heretics, but that the concerned teachers and their followers themselves did not use it as a self-designation.

46. Ref. 5:6:4: μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐπεκάλεσαν ἑαυτοὺς γνωστικούς, φάσκοντες μόνοιτὰ βάθη γινώσκειν.

47. *Πρὸς τοὺς Γνωστικούς* (Enneades 2:9): Plotini Opera. Tomus I: Porphyrii Vita Plotini. Enneades I-III (Museum Lessianum Series Philosophica XXXIII), ed. P. HENRY et H.-R. SCHWYZER, Paris – Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer – L’Édition Universelle 1951, 223-253.

48. *Vit. Plot.* 16, *Ibid.*, 21.

49. *Enn.* 2:9:6: τὰς δὲ ἄλλας ὑποστάσεις τίχρη λέγειν ἄς εἰσάγουσι...

50. Cf. C. TORNAU, «Die neuplatonische Kritik an den Gnostikern und das theologische Profil des Thomasevangeliums», en: J. SCHRÖTER – J. FREY – E. E. POPKES (eds.), *Das Thomasevangelium. Entstehung Rezeption Theologie* (BZNW 157), Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008, 326-359; K. ALT, *Philosophie gegen Gnosis. Plotins Polemik in seiner Schrift II 9* (AAWLM.G 1990.7), Mainz / Stuttgart: Steiner; A. H. ARMSTRONG, «Gnosis and Greek Philosophy», en: *Gnosis* (FS Hans Jonas; ed. B. ALAND), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1978, 87-124, esp. 109-123; B. ALAND, «Die frühe Gnosis zwischen platonischem und christlichem Glauben», en: *Id.*, *Was ist Gnosis* (n. 9), 103-124, esp. 111-120.

51. *Pistis Sophia*. Text edited by C. SCHMIDT. Translation and Notes by V. Macdermot (NHS IX), Leiden 1978.

It can be summarized, therefore, that in ordinary usage the terms γνῶσις and γνωστικοί were used to describe an attitude towards knowledge. From the early second century C.E. onwards they were also used —mainly in Christian texts— to identify certain teachers and groups who claimed to have special knowledge of the transcendent world and its mysteries. Part of this polemical usage was the negative characterization as “falsely called knowledge” taught by heretics. Presumably these teachers and their followers used the terms γνῶσις and γνωστικός not as a self-designation but as description of their enterprise to gain insight into the heavenly world and for their interpretation of biblical writings and philosophical traditions. This would explain why early Christian theologians applied the name γνωστικοί to different groups and eventually used it as an overall designation for Christian heresies.⁵² A comparable development can be observed with the application of the term “apocryphal” to certain writings used by such groups. This term could be used as characterization of hidden teachings transmitted in writings as e.g. the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas or the Apocryphon of John, but was later used by Christian theologians in order to disqualify such writings as heretical.

Hence, the real bone of contention between these teachers and their schools on the one hand and their critics on the other were the true meaning of the Christian message and the presupposition for an access to knowledge about the nature of the heavenly world and the origin of humankind. It would therefore neither be helpful to abandon the designations “Gnosticism” and “Gnostics” completely nor to distinguish between “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism”. Rather, one has to be aware that “Gnosis” refers to a specific attitude of teachers and groups within the development of Christianity in the second and third century. The term therefore covers a wide range of groups and concepts with a broad sociological background in early Christianity. This should be kept in mind in order to avoid the problematic idea of a unified heresy with a distinct canon of writings and convictions.

3. ORIGIN AND CHARACTERISTICS OF “GNOSTICISM”

According to Irenaeus the origin of all heresies dates with Simon of Samaria the disciple and companion of the apostles, whose teachings are reported by

52. Cf. N. BROX, «Γνωστικοί als häresiologischer Terminus», *ZNW* 57 (1966) 105-114.

Luke.⁵³ Relying on the expression in 1 Timothy, at the end of his discourse about Simon⁵⁴ Irenaeus states that the group of the Simonians (lat.: *Simoniani*), named after Simon, was the beginning of the “falsely called knowledge”. As followers of Simon he mentions a certain Menander from Samaria as well, a Saturninus from Antioch and Basilides.⁵⁵ From the latter he reports his teachings in more detail.⁵⁶ Other heretical teachers mentioned by Irenaeus are Karpokrates, Kerinth, the Barbelo-Gnostics, and Mark the Magician.⁵⁷

For his information Irenaeus partly relies on Justin, who, some decades earlier in his *Apology*, already mentions Simon of Samaria and Menander and in the *Dialogue* knows of the Basilidians and Satornilians.⁵⁸ It is striking, though, that Irenaeus depicts a much more detailed system allegedly taught by Simon than Justin does. And even the report of Justin considerably exceeds the information given by Luke in Acts 8:9-10. Whereas Luke only mentions that Simon regarded himself as “someone great” and was called “the power of God that is called Great”, Justin knows of a statue in Rome devoted to “Simoni Deo Sancto” where Simon allegedly was venerated, and a former prostitute Helena who is called his first idea (ἔννοια). The background of this information which was taken over by Irenaeus and Tertullian⁵⁹ is probably a confusion with the cult of the Sabinian god *Semo Sancus* venerated on the Quirinal. Some decades later Irenaeus, relying on Justin, also mentions this statue knows of the teachings of Simon about angels and powers that hold down Helena, the first idea of Simon, in the lower world.⁶⁰ Also Hippolytus gives a comprehensive report about doctrines taught by Simon about the Law of Moses and the origin of the world.⁶¹

It is not quite clear how the details about the doctrines allegedly taught by Simon emerged and were elaborated. It can be inferred, though, that there was at least a development from rather unspectacular beginnings of a Simon

53. *Her.* 1:23:2 (lat.): Simon autem Samaritanus, ex quo universae haereses substiterunt...

54. Irenaeus introduces Simon and the system allegedly taught by him in *Her.* 1:23:1-4.

55. *Her.* 1: 23:5-24:1.

56. *Her.* 1: 24:1-7.

57. Cf. N. FÖRSTER, *Markus Magus. Kult. Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergruppe. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (WUNT 114), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1999; Id., «Mark the Magician and Valentinian Syncretism», en: *Studia Patristica XXXV*, Leuven 2001, 227-233.

58. *1Apol.* 26:2-4; *Dial* 35:6.

59. Irenaeus, *Her.*, 1:23:1; Tertullian, *Apol.* 13.

60. *Her.* 1:23:1-4.

61. *Ref.* 6:9:3-10:1; 6:12:1-13; 6:17:1-3.

who claimed to act with divine power and authority to the elaborated systems about divine emanations and the origin of the world reported by Irenaeus. Perhaps it was Irenaeus himself who linked the teachings of Simon and his supposed followers to a continuous line of Christian heresies. Such a development would also be supported by more recent investigations of the teachings of Basilides and Valentinus. Winrich Löhr and Christoph Marksches argued that the systems of these teachers have to be distinguished from the doctrines of their followers and their portraits of Irenaeus. Perhaps it is possible, then, to reconstruct a development of Gnostic systems from rather ordinary philosophical thinking to more elaborated mythological speculations about genealogies and divine emanations.

The thoughts of Basilides and his son Isidor, discernible in the fragments mainly preserved in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus and Hippolytus,⁶² are characterized by the idea of a good and righteous God who has to be distinguished from the “archon”.⁶³ Clement relates that the followers of Basilides (unlike those of Valentinus) regard faith as a “natural” (φυσική) precondition to achieve knowledge without proof through mental comprehension.⁶⁴ In another fragment Basilides and Isidor argue for a dualistic anthropology. The soul would consist of several parts of which one is determined by reason whereas others are affected by the natures of wild animals.⁶⁵ The human being is therefore challenged to demonstrate its superiority about the subordinate creation. God is not the origin of evil, rather the human being is responsible to overcome the affects. Obviously, then, Basilides and his son are on the way to interpret the Christian message with the help of philosophical (Platonic) ideas of God, the world and the human being, whereas a developed mythological system cannot be discerned from the fragments.

With regard to Valentinianism the sources in a comparable way reveal the doctrine of a teacher later elaborated in his school. Accordingly, Valentinus himself was an influential teacher in Rome in the middle of the second century who founded a philosophical school.⁶⁶ His teachings were developed further by his followers, as e.g. Ptolemaeus and Herakleon who wrote the first

62. Cf. W. LÖHR, *Basilides und seine Schule* (WUNT 83), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1996.

63. *Strom.* II 8:36:1.

64. *Strom.* II 3:10:1-11:2.

65. *Strom.* II 20:112:1-114:2.

66. Cf. E. THOMASSEN, *The Spiritual Seed. The Church of the Valentinians* (NHMS 60), Leiden / Boston: Brill 2006; C. MARKSCHIES, «Valentinian Gnosticism: Toward the Anatomy of a School», in: TURNER – MCGUIRE, *Nag Hammadi Library* (n. 9), 401-438.

commentary on the Gospel of John,⁶⁷ which obviously was especially attractive for the Valentinians.

From Valentinus himself several fragments are preserved in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus.⁶⁸ Moreover, Irenaeus reports at length on the school of Valentinus, and seven of the Nag Hammadi writings are regarded as documents of “Valentinianism”.⁶⁹ In another text from Nag Hammadi, the “Testimony of Truth” (NHC 9,3), a critical dispute with the Valentinians is preserved.

In the Valentinian doctrine the highest God is called “Origin”, “Forefather” or “Deepness” (Προαρχή, Προπάτορ or Βύθος). His female companion is called Ἐννοια, Χάρις or Σιγή. They generate Νοῦς and Ἀλήθεια with whom they form the first Τετρακτύς (Four-ness). The lower world instead originated as a consequence of the fall of Sophia and was created by the Demiurg. In Valentinian anthropology there are three classes of human beings: Pneumatics, Psychics and earthly ones. The first group will be saved, the last one will get lost whereas the Psychics have the possibility to be saved if they follow the doctrine of the savior about the eternal world.

In Valentinianism we can therefore observe the formation of a distinct religious movement with its own communities, called ἐκκλησία. This is supported by the Valentinian writings from Nag Hammadi to which belong liturgical texts as e.g. prayers revealing a distinct character of a religious movement.

In recent scholarship another group of writings was subsumed under the category “Sethian Gnosticism” because of the prominent role of Seth, offspring of Adam and Eve, in the mythological accounts. A heretical group called “Sethians” is also mentioned by Hippolytus and Epiphanius, although the doctrines reported by them have only superficial relations to the “Sethian” writings from Nag Hammadi. Hans-Martin Schenke, who introduced the hypothesis of “Sethian Gnosticism” in modern research,⁷⁰ regarded it as a

67. Cf. A. WUCHERPFENNIG, *Heracleon Philologus. Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (WUNT 142), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002.

68. Cf. C. MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (WUNT 65), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1992.

69. These are: The Prayer of the Apostle Paul (NHC 1,1); The Gospel of Truth (1,3); The Treatise on the Resurrection (1,4); The Tripartite Tractate (1,5); The Gospel of Philip (2,3); The First Apocalypse of James (5,3) and A Valentinian Exposition (11,2).

70. Cf. H.-M. SCHENKE, «The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism», en: B. LAYTON (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism. Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978. Volume Two: Sethian Gnosticism*, Leiden: Brill 1981, 588-616.

system with pre-Christian roots because most of the “Sethian” writings contain no Christian elements at all.⁷¹ For him in the Sethian documents the decisive elements of Gnostic thinking are discernible and influenced also other Gnostic communities and authors.⁷² Bentley Layton developed this hypothesis further with the proposal to restrict ancient Gnosticism to the *haireisis* called “Gnostics” —γνωστικοί— in ancient sources.⁷³ In Layton’s view this *haireisis* has to be identified with the Sethian system, discovered by Schenke. Other scholars, however, contested that a Sethian system did exist at all because the reports of the church fathers about the Sethians and the elements of the so-called “Sethian” writings included in this category would not allow identifying a certain doctrine and a group relying on it. It is indeed rather improbable that “Sethianism” can be regarded as a system or school with teachers and communities comparable to Valentinianism. However, the writings mentioned by Schenke and others share a specific kind of ideas and terminology with each other, and also rituals as e.g. baptism is mentioned pointing to a liturgical practice. Therefore, many scholars today would assume that there was a “Sethian system” with a rather broad spectrum of ideas and practices.

The most prominent writing of this direction is the *Apocryphon of John* (AJ) which stands at the beginning of three Nag Hammadi codices, whereas a fourth copy appears as the second writing on the Papyrus Berolinensis Gnosticus. The manuscripts can be grouped in a probably older short version and a younger long version. The myth reported in the AJ has close affinities to the system reported by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* 1:29 as doctrine of the Barbelo-Gnostics. This group has therefore also been regarded as the sociological formation called “Sethians”. Other “Sethian” writings are “The Hypostasis of the Archons” (NHC 2:4), “The Gospel of the Egyptians” (NHC 3:2; 4:2), “The Apocalypse of Adam” (NHC 5:5), “The Three Steles of Seth” (NHC 7:5) and some others. These writings do not presuppose a common “myth”, but rather rely on comparable mythological elements and a specific terminology referring to a common milieu. To the figures of the “Sethian” system belong the “Highest invisible Spirit”, also called “Father”, his female companion “Barbelo” and their offspring “Autogenes”. Jaldabaoth is the figure which originates from the fall of Sophia. He is the creator of the lower world and does

71. SCHENKE, *Ibid.*, 607.

72. SCHENKE, *Ibid.*, 595.

73. B. LAYTON, «Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism», en: L. Michael WHITE – O. Larry YARBROUGH (ed.), *The Social World of the First Christians. Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress 1995, 334-350.

not know his real origin. The true human being is the heavenly Adamas. His offspring Seth in some writings is the redeemer who brings the human beings on earth the knowledge about their true nature and can therefore even be identified with Christ. In some writings he is also ancestor of a “generation that does not waver”.

With Basilides, the school of Valentinus and the “Sethian” teachers, different writings and communities of what might be called “Gnosticism” in the second and third century come into focus. Common characteristics are the distinction between the highest God and the creator of the world, a system of emanations within the upper world, the fall of the Sophia as the presupposition for the origin of the lower world and the idea of salvation of humankind as return to their heavenly derivation. Within this mythological drama the figure of a redeemer has to fulfil the task to mediate between the upper and the lower world and to bring the knowledge about the divine origin of humankind necessary for their salvation to the human beings. A specific presupposition for salvation according to Gnostic thinking is the knowledge about the upper world, its emanations and the true nature and origin of humankind as revealed in “Gnostic” writings. This is a decisive difference to the “ordinary” Christian way of salvation, which is in principle open to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as God’s revelation.

The origin of the doctrines subsumed under the label “Gnosticism” can therefore be explained at least in part as specific interpretations of Christian faith with the help of mythological and philosophical (Platonic) categories. The sociological background presumably was the expansion of Christianity in the pagan world that made it necessary to explain the Christian message with the help of terms and concepts comprehensible in such a context. The most plausible explanation how the non-Christian texts from Nag Hammadi can be integrated in such a model seems to be that philosophical speculations like those in “Gnostic” systems were not confined to these circles but also spread beyond Christian groups.

4. CONCLUSION

From the remarks above the following conclusions can be drawn. First, with regard to the terminological problem one has to be aware that there was no unified “Gnostic movement” but rather a multiplicity of approaches to explain the origin of the world and the alienation of humankind within such a world. From the second century onwards such attempts were regard-

ed as “heretical” doctrines by Christian theologians who used the term “Gnostics” as a common designation for the concerned teachers and groups. However, these groups themselves presumably never used this designation. Rather, they called themselves Markionits, Valentinians or perhaps even “Christians”.

Closer investigation shows that “Gnosticism” existed in different systems beginning with teachers who developed a specific interpretation of the Christian message not on the basis of elements taken from middle Platonism and used to interpret the scriptures of Israel as well as the role of Christ within the process of redemption of humankind. These concepts were therefore the earliest attempts to reconcile the Christian message with philosophical thinking, a way that theologians like Justin, Clement, Tertullian and Irenaeus took in an analogous but less speculative way. The result of this process was a parting of the ways of “Christianity” and “Gnosis” with the result that the “Gnostic” systems were able to adopt more “pagan” elements, e.g. the idea of more than one God and several redeemer figures.

Second, concerning the development of these systems there are no sources which would justify the assumption of a pre-Christian origin. Rather, the philosophical interpretations mentioned above probably arose at the beginning of the second century and were developed into much more complex mythological systems in the course of the second and third century. In this process obviously analogous non-Christian systems emerged as well. This is not to deny that pre-Christian philosophical and mythological elements were used to develop Gnostic thinking. But one can probably agree with Carsten Colpe that the Christian idea of redemption was itself a presupposition for Gnostic thinking, not vice versa.

Third, the teachers and their schools subsumed under the label “Gnostics” reveal a multifaceted development in early Christianity of the second and third century. The systems developed here are attempts to make the Christian message attractive in the pagan world. Therefore, Gnostic thinking was a specific “missionary enterprise” which was nevertheless not as successful as the message of the “orthodox” Christian churches.