Journal of Religious History
Vol. 29, No. 2, June 2005

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A Complete History of Early Christianity: Taking the "Heretics" Seriously[1]

The heterodox have been treated unfairly within the histories of mainstream Christian tradition, whether by their ecclesiastical opponents or by recent and current scholarship. This article outlines the place of Christian Gnostic belief and practices in the processes of self-definition and institutionalization that took place within the early history of Christianity and makes a plea to reinstate the "heretics" to their rightful place in any academic discussion of the history and beliefs of Christianity.

The early history of most of the world's great founder religions is a murky affair. There are usually few, if any, records from the earliest days that survive without some elaboration and additional material, and the attempt to untangle the real events in any certain historical sense is enormously difficult, if not impossible. The passing on of stories of founders and early founding groups gathered about them and the detail of the revelation event that precedes the "career" of most founders go together with survival for any new religious movement in the early years. The movement must first deal with the crisis of the death of the founder, and then usually other crises in quick succession until some stability is found, generally not until well after the first few generations of believers. By the time records of the life of the founder and his revelation appear in written form, early crises have already permanently shaped and altered those records. Thus the "orthodox" texts which purport to record the life and words of the "founder"[2] and the early history of Christianity provide evidence of internal squabbles and external pressures — including internal clashes between different cultural groups (e.g., Acts 6:1–6), resistance from those opposed to movement beyond the religious boundaries of the founding

1. This article contains some material that has been reworked from my professorial inaugural lecture, M. Franzmann, *Heretics and Hermeneutics: Taking the Gnostic Jesus Seriously*, The 2001 Inaugural Public Lecture Series (Armidale: Publications Office, University of New England, 2002).
2. The term "founder" may only be used very loosely of Jesus of Nazareth, as Douglas Pratt, *Religion: A First Encounter* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1993), 43, indicates within a comparison of the activity of the founders, Muhammad, the Buddha Gotama, and Jesus of Nazareth: "The religion of Christianity emerged also after the death of the pivotal figure whose concern, arguably, was not so much to start a new faith as to fulfil, reform, and remake that which was already there. It may be contended that it was people like St Paul who actually 'founded' Christianity, although, undeniably, it is Jesus the Christ who is the *founder figure* in this case."

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community (e.g., Acts 15:1–29), early challenges to leadership or spiritual authority (e.g. Gal. 2:11–14; Jn 3:22–30), and external persecution (e.g., Mk 13:9–13; Acts 12:1–4).

With the second generation of believers, what was originally the Jesus movement within Judaism began to settle down within its various social and political environments and began the process of becoming a religion in its own right, as groups negotiated a place for themselves in both the religious and socio-political worlds. As the movement settled, and indeed to help it settle, groups became more or less concerned for organizational matters in relation to praxis and belief. Inevitably, as a religious movement moves from stories and simple sayings or statements of belief to more complex doctrines, the potential for disagreement among members and larger groupings increases. As more rules are made about behaviour and ritual, further room for disagreement arises. Rules are as much about defining what is left out as much as what should be kept in, and at this stage of settling down and increasing institutionalism, various Christian groups became more concerned about who was a member and who was not a member. At this stage, the labels of orthodoxy and heterodoxy become important for the purposes of making a clear distinction between groups.[3]

Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are terms applied to groups relative to where one stands. Thus Christian groups later identified as mainstream, labelled Christian Gnostic groups as heretical, and Christian Gnostic groups in turn labelled heretical those who had so labelled them.[4] Finding appropriate terms to cover the variety of these early Christian groups is difficult for any historian. The terms "mainstream" or "orthodox" can be used of one group, or a cluster of early Christian groups, only in retrospect, and even then the terms are somewhat misleading, since the group/s cannot be clearly delineated with any surety in those early years. Scholars who presume to do so are simply believing the rhetoric of the winners that "things were always thus from the beginning."

No straight line of development flows from the originating vision or foundation group through to what later becomes the mainstream group. A more realistic picture for early Christianity should show an originating vision that gave rise to multiple groups with multiple responses to the vision in behaviour

3. For general theory on the formation, development of identity, and survival of groups, see, for example, D. W. Johnson and F. P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991); and T. Douglas, *Survival in Groups: the Basics of Group Membership* (Buckingham, PA: Open University Press, 1995). In relation to religious groups, see K. A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), esp. ch. 7: "Emergence and Viability of Religious Movements: Charisma and Its Routinization," 147–64; see also R. Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model," in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. D. G. Bromley and P. E. Hammond (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–29.

4. The term "heretic" or "heresy" is derived from the Greek word ἁίρεσις, which means "a choice," taking by preference one thing rather than another. As used by religious groups, especially Christians, the term has come to be associated with groups or individuals who allegedly make a wrong choice or a bad choice, usually with reference to some aspect of belief. Over against heretics are the orthodox, who have allegedly made the right choice about what to believe.

and belief. As these multiple groups developed, and the lines were drawn increasingly clearly between the various responses, some groups compromised with others and merged (e.g., Petrine and Johannine churches), and some groups did not compromise.

Eventually within early Christianity, a cluster of groups managed to gain the upper hand in the internal and external struggles, partly through political alliance with the Roman state and the resulting social status that flowed from such an alliance. They became the bearers of Christian orthodoxy, the title of "orthodox" or "mainstream" as much about political and social success as about right belief. Having gained a position of supremacy, it was an easy step to use political power to persecute those in opposition. A good example of such supremacy in political, social and religious terms is provided by the "orthodox" bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria, who apparently could call on military troops when necessary to deal with opponents.[5] As Roger Bagnall writes in relation to him, he "made himself a symbol of embattled orthodoxy by casting his vicissitudes in terms of theological divisions."[6]

Standing against this large Christian group gaining increasing political power and social status, the "heretics" of the third and particularly the fourth centuries CE were excluded from those considered orthodox and were vilified and physically abused. Those opposed to, or not aligned with, the orthodox "winners" had no chance of fair treatment in the subsequent record of history. As Bagnall comments further:

> The perennial tendency to apply theological categories to disagreements over political power within the church only exacerbates the unreliability of ancient literature as a witness to contemporary realities.[7]

Christian Gnostic groups, as the major cluster of groups categorized as heretics within the histories of early Christianity, provide a good example of those who could not expect fair treatment.[8] Prior to the discoveries of the Nag Hammadi material, little was known of them at first hand, scholars needing to rely on information from early Christian apologists of the mainstream group such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Epiphanius of Salamis. From these writers come the names and characteristics of various Gnostic groups, and sometimes the writers include a snippet from Gnostic writings.

5. Edwin A. Judge and Stuart R. Pickering, "Papyrus Documentation of Church and Community in Egypt to the Mid-Fourth Century," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20, (1977): 47–71, include a letter addressed to a leader of the Meletian community in Egypt, documenting the maltreatment of Meletians in Alexandria by the supporters of Athanasius, which included the use of military troops (57).
6. R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 303–304.
7. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 305.
8. There is much disagreement among scholars about what the terms "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" mean. Although the debate has been going on for quite some time, especially since the international conference on Gnosticism in Messina in 1966, most people researching in the area continue to use the traditional terms. The latest label suggested by Michael Williams of "biblical demiurgical traditions," instead of "Gnosticism" understandably has been found to be too unwieldy; M. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 51–3.

A distinct disadvantage lies in having to depend on the apologists for information, since the nature of such writings is to describe opponents in some derogatory way, to construct them as the despised "other." On the simplest level one finds ridicule. For example, the Gnostic founder Mani and his followers, the Manichaeans, are ridiculed as maniacs, by a not-so-subtle play in Greek on the name of Mani (from the Greek μανία meaning madness, frenzy, or mania).[9] Most notably, Augustine denigrates his former coreligionists in his famous anti-Manichaean treatizes, constructing dialogues between himself and an inept Manichaean opponent, whose opposing statements he so easily counteracts or ridicules from the point of view of his own orthodox understanding.[10]

As expected, a great deal of slander appears against the heretics, a favourite theme being the supposed sexual exploitation of women followers by various Gnostic teachers. From such accusations, it seems a short step towards real demonization of Gnostic groups.[11] One of the most malicious of the apologists is the church father, Epiphanius who describes various Gnostic cultic rites, in one of which human semen and menstrual blood are used in a kind of eucharist (Panarion 26.4–5).[12] It seems the Gnostics themselves were aware of these denunciations, for one finds similar denunciations in their works. The *Pistis Sophia*, Book IV, chapter 147, for example, reports that Jesus calls this the "sin (that) surpasses every sin and every iniquity." Those who commit such a sin will be condemned to the outer darkness.[13] Worst of all from Epiphanius is the denunciation of Gnostic groups who use dismembered aborted fetuses as matter for the eucharist (Panarion 26.5). Most scholars would agree that Epiphanius has allowed his imagination free rein here, indulging in pornographic writings for his own and others' titillation. This scenario of eating fetuses is a quite common theme through history, typical of the worst type of religious sectarian polemic.

By deliberately provoking their stronger opponents, the Gnostics did not help their cause as minority groups in this tussle for the label of orthodoxy. As mainstream apologists held up Gnostics for ridicule, Christian Gnostics in turn held up various teachings and praxis of other Christian groups for ridicule. The writer of the Gospel of Philip, for example, ridicules the teaching that the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (55.23–27), in stating that no woman can impregnate another, a statement clearly influenced by the feminine gender of the original Aramaic word for Spirit, רוח (rûaḥ). The same gospel states that the Gnostic undergoes baptism with insight, while

9. See the helpful summary of this ridicule from various writers in S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd ed., Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 63 (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1992), 136.
10. R. Jolivet and M. Jourjon, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 17: Six traités antimanichéens*, 2nd series (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961).
11. For an overview of the accusations made by a variety of heresiologists, see K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1987), 9–25.
12. K. Holl, ed., *Epiphanius: Ancoratus und Panarion Haer. 1–33*, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 25 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1915).
13. C. Schmidt, ed., *Pistis Sophia*, Nag Hammadi Studies 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

baptism by other Christian groups is worthless (64.22–31).[14] However, while parts of the canonical gospels might have come under criticism by Christian Gnostics, nevertheless they still frequently used parts of the canonical gospels to support their own theological positions.[15]

Turning to the Gnostic writings for information about themselves reveals a very complex picture of many different groups with diverse mythologies or theologies and organization. However some degree of commonality can be identified within that diversity: the belief that matter, the world and human flesh, are evil or at best fatally flawed; that humans inhabit a dualistic universe, divided between light/goodness/the spirit and darkness/evil/matter; that believers are basically spiritual people who have been awakened to their inner insight, literally *gnosis* (hence the name "Gnostics"); and that believers are essentially strangers in the physical world (or "passers by"; Nag Hammadi Gospel of Thomas Log. 42),[16] trapped here in their human flesh,[17] awaiting their return to their place of origin in the world of light where the ineffable God or Father of Light exists, their salvation assured by the gift of insight which all equally possess.[18]

Just like its orthodox counterpart, Christian Gnosticism exhibits elements of its roots in Aramaic Judaism, Christian Gnostic texts reworking Jewish primary texts like the creation myths of Genesis, but diverging from orthodox Judaism by taking a negative attitude to the Jewish creator God. If the world is evil, then its creator must be evil. The Jewish creator God is presented as the Demiurge, the evil and ignorant creator, who together with dark cosmic powers under his command, the archons, creates an evil or flawed world and the first human beings.[19] This theme of the evil nature of creation and matter in general underpins the strong dualism running through the Gnostic writings: heaven over against earth, light against darkness, spirit against matter, the mind or spirit against the body.

14. B. Layton, ed. and W. W. Isenberg, trans., "The Gospel According to Philip," *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2*, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, ed. B. Layton, Vol. 1, Nag Hammadi Studies 20 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 142–215.

15. On the use of canonical Christian scripture in the Nag Hammadi texts, see C. A. Evans, R. L. Webb, R. A. Wiebe, eds, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: a Synopsis and Index* (Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1993). The canonical gospels are also well used by Manichaeans. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, is well documented in major texts like the Manichaean Psalm Book; see the index in C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book. Part II*, Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection, Vol. 2 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938), 47*–48*.

16. B. Layton, ed. and T. O. Lambdin, trans., "The Gospel According to Thomas," in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2*, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, ed. B. Layton, Vol. 1, Nag Hammadi Studies 20 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 52–93.

17. The Nag Hammadi text *Interpretation of Knowledge* 6.28–29 speaks of the spirit trapped in nets of flesh; E. H. Pagels and J. D. Turner, "NHC XI,1: The Interpretation of Knowledge," in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, Nag Hammadi Studies 28, ed. C. W. Hedrick, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 21–88.

18. For a detailed overview, see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 53–272.

19. On the Jewish creator god as Demiurge, see for example, the Nag Hammadi texts, Epistle of Peter to Philip 135.8–136.5, M. W. Meyer and F. Wisse, "NHC VIII,2: *Letter of Peter to Philip*", in *Nag Hammadi Codex VIII*, Nag Hammadi Studies 31, ed. J. H. Sieber (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 227–51; see also the Second Apocalypse of James 58.2–6, C. Hedrick, "NHC V,4: The (Second) Apocalypse of James," *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502,1 and 4*, Nag Hammadi Studies 11, ed. D. M. Parrott (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 105–49; and the Gospel of Philip 75.2–11 in Layton and Isenberg, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, 142–215.

The Christian Gnostics' particular understanding of the world and their place in it affects what they find valuable and worth celebrating and theologizing about in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Gnostic dissatisfaction with a world that is ugly and a flesh that is repugnant and a prison for the spirit produces a view of a saviour who can show them a way out of this ugliness by awakening the beauty and purity of the insight within them, and who can promise a place of purity after their escape from this physical world. The Gnostic Saviour, Jesus, does not come to the world to exorcise its evil or forgive sins, or to die for the sin of the world, but to awaken the Gnostics to the insight that they already possess, prepare the way and bring them home to the heavenly world of light.[20] In receiving insight, the Gnostics experience equality and union with him.[21] There is a lack of focus on strict hierarchies in this idea of equality with the Saviour. The Nag Hammadi Apocryphon of James goes so far as to imply that the Gnostic may even become better than Jesus. In this text, Jesus tells believers to become better than himself (6.19), to hasten to be saved and, if possible, to arrive even before him (7.10–15), for thus the Father will love them (7.15–16).[22]

That Gnostics emphasize Jesus as a saviour and revealer does not itself divide mainstream Christians from Gnostic Christians. Rather, the difference lies in the interpretation of what kind of saviour Jesus is and how he came to be in the world in order to carry out the revelation. In some cases, the differences in interpretation are not at all clear. An example of this can be found in a comparison of the Nag Hammadi Gospel of Truth and the New Testament Gospel of John. The Gospel of Truth describes itself as follows:

> The gospel of truth is a joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the gift of knowing him, through the power of the Word . . . the one who is the thought and the mind of the Father . . . the one who is addressed as the Saviour . . . This is the gospel of the one who is searched for, which was revealed to those who are perfect through the mercies of the Father — the hidden mystery, Jesus, the Christ. Through it he enlightened those who were in darkness. Out of oblivion he enlightened them, he showed (them) a way. And the way is the truth which he taught them. (16.31–38; 18.11–21)[23]

The Gospel of John 1:5 also presents this theme of the Word of God and relates the activity of the Word to the themes of light and darkness: "The light

20. For extensive studies of the Gnostic Jesus, see M. Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); and M. Franzmann, *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003).

21. As Burton Mack, "Lord of the Logia: Savior or Sage?," in *Gospel Origins and Christian Beginnings: In Honor of James M. Robinson*, ed. J. E. Goehring et al., Forum Fascicles 1 (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990), 3–18, esp. 11, writes concerning the Gospel of Thomas: Jesus is a supernatural revealer whose appearance in the world brought enlightenment to his true disciples. Enlightenment is understood as knowledge of one's self as belonging to an other-worldly order of divine origin and self-sufficiency. Thus the boundary erodes between Jesus as revealer figure and his true disciples as enlightened ones.

22. F. E. Williams, "The Apocryphon of James: I,2 : 1.1–16.30," *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex). Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, Nag Hammadi Studies 22, ed. H. W. Attridge (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 13–53.

23. M. L. Peel, "The Gospel of Truth: I,4 : 43.25–50.18," *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex). Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, Nag Hammadi Studies 22, ed. H. W. Attridge (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 137–215.

shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The concept of Jesus as a way which is the truth for believers is also found in Jn 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Thus both the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of John represent Jesus as the Word that came forth from the Father to bring light in the darkness, and as the truth and the way out of the darkness to the Father. The passages illustrate the difficulty, in some aspects at least, in separating Gnostic Christian ideas of Jesus from mainstream Christian ideas of Jesus, although it is easier to understand in this case since the Gospel of John stands on the very (theological) edge of the mainstream tradition.

Other Gnostic ideas of Jesus clearly differ from mainstream ideas. Most importantly perhaps, the view of the nature of Jesus and how he manages to come into the human world separates the mainstream Christian groups from Christian Gnostic groups. If, as the Gnostics say, the world and the flesh are evil or fatally flawed, and act as prisons for the Gnostic spirit, then the heavenly revealer cannot allow himself to be caught and imprisoned in the flesh. The more human-like the form that he chooses, the more he immerses himself in the world of the flesh, the more he will be in danger from the dark powers that rule there. Though the Gnostic texts themselves do not completely agree on an understanding of the nature of Jesus, generally, the idea of Jesus the Saviour having a real human birth in real human flesh and later a real death is abhorrent to all Gnostics.[24]

As with the concept of Jesus as Saviour, so with the ritual practices of the Gnostic and mainstream groups. While both groups practise many rituals of the same name and type, among them baptism and the eucharist, the difference between them lies in their interpretation rather than in the naming or carrying out of that ritual activity. The Gnostics do not accept a Saviour with real physical flesh, and yet the Gospel of Philip speaks of the eucharist as the flesh and blood of Jesus. However, the same gospel also states that Jesus' flesh is the Logos and his blood is the Holy Spirit (57.6–7). Thus, at least for this Gnostic gospel, the flesh and blood of Jesus in the eucharist is spiritual flesh and blood.

Again, for a system that cannot accept a real death for Jesus, baptism cannot be interpreted, as it is in the mainstream tradition, as a means of bringing the believer into association with the death and resurrection of the Saviour as Paul writes in Rom 6:3–4:

> You have been taught that when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life.

In what seems a deliberate denial of this teaching, the Gospel of Philip 77.7–12 states that Jesus emptied the baptismal waters of death so that the believer would not go down into death when entering the water.

24. For a detailed study of the nature of the Nag Hammadi Jesus, see Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings*, 71–98.

Not surprisingly, a religion that emphasizes salvation through individual insight, the equality of all believers, and a view of the world and the flesh as evil, also has little concern for hierarchical structures in the community. Ingvild Gilhus notes the spin-off from these ideas into Gnostic opposition to existing social structures and the Gnostic practice of status reversal within their own ranks.[25] The lack of concern for hierarchy follows through to a lack of structured ritual. The church father, Tertullian, later himself branded a heretic when he joined the Montanists, tends a little to hyperbole when attacking Gnostics on both points:

> To begin with, it is doubtful who is a catechumen, and who a believer; they have all access alike, they hear alike, they pray alike . . . Simplicity they will have to consist in the overthrow of discipline, attention to which on our part they call brotherly . . . All are puffed up, all offer you knowledge . . . The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures — it may be even to baptize . . . Nowhere is promotion easier than in the camp of the rebels, where the mere fact of being there is a foremost service. And so it comes to pass that today one man is their bishop, tomorrow another; today he is a deacon who tomorrow is a reader; today he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. (Praescr. 41)[26]

Any new religious group attempting to establish itself and settle down in the world has to set up the processes by which authority functions in the group. Tertullian's disgust with the lack of structure and ritual formality in Gnostic groups, the presence of women in what is a man's job, goes deep to the heart of the uneasy relations between his group and the Gnostic groups he knew. Tertullian is not just concerned for orthodox reflections on the founder. How a group stays together and its orthopraxis are as important as orthodoxy. However, prior to the strong push to institutionalization in early Christianity, a flexibility similar to that practised by the Gnostics is evident, especially in Paul's writings about the Church as the spiritual organism of the body of Christ, in which all members bring a variety of spiritual gifts to build up that body, and in which no distinction of race or class or gender distinguishes one from another. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes:

> All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourself in Christ, and there is no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

And again, in his first letter to the Corinthians he states:

> Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink. (1 Cor. 12:13)

25. I. S. Gilhus, "Gnosticism — A Study in Liminal Symbolism," *Numen* 31 (1984): 106–28, esp. 119.
26. Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, rev. ed., ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 243–267, esp. 263.

How quickly this teaching of Paul was forgotten in the institutionalization phase that followed, and how easily Tertullian let that basic Pauline Christology slip from view when considering the Gnostics and their flexible community that strove for the equality of all.

Gnostic groups too, in general, were not interested in compromise or alliances. They were interested in personal spiritual power, and their overriding goal was to escape from the world of material darkness in which they were strangers. A model was at hand that could compel them to act in this way. The canonical (but marginally orthodox) Gospel of John presents sayings from Jesus to his disciples concerning "the world" which hates him and them, a world to which they do not belong; rather they belong to another world and kingdom entirely (Jn 15:18–19; 18:36). In similar vein the canonical First Letter of John states that the world is to be equated with "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches," which are in opposition to the Father (1 Jn 2:15–16). Here are passages that would strengthen any resolve to put aside the things of the world, to shun worldly power and alliances. Here is compelling teaching for those, such as the Gnostics, who did not wish to deal and compromise with those they considered to be aligned with the powers of darkness in this world or with those who were ignorant of the truth. In the end, the Gnostics were hunted down by these opponents, went underground, or fled farther to the east of the Roman empire.[27]

Much unites but also much divides the interpretation of Jesus in mainstream and Gnostic groups and the spin-off from that into ritual and organization. The problem then for a fair hearing for the Gnostics and an honest historical view of earliest Christianity is that the effort of any religious group towards self-definition and the clear statement of identity occurs most intensely in those times of institutionalization when the focus is on what divides rather than unites groups, when the processes of defining and maintaining orthodoxy and orthopraxis are almost an obsession. Also at this stage any groups that are not in step with the mainstream group, for spiritual, dogmatic, social or political reasons, are labelled most strongly as heretics and most severely persecuted. In one sense, the real problem for the Gnostics was that they simply existed in the wrong place at the wrong time. By their very nature, groups that follow ideologies of personal salvation, such as the Gnostics, inevitably threaten the processes of institutionalization, when groups try hard to form a strong and well-defined religious identity. Gnostic emphasis on the spiritual power within the individual directly conflicts with a process that aims to place ultimate spiritual power in those at the top of a strict hierarchy.[28]

While Kurt Rudolph presents Gnostic groups culturally and geographically as marginal in the Graeco-Roman world — he describes Gnosticism as "a Hellenistic garment over an oriental-Jewish body," a politically and culturally

27. The largest Gnostic group to come under persecution from the fourth century onwards was Manichaeism. For the history of its movement east, see Lieu, *Manichaeism*, 106–15, 192–304, passim.

28. For a more thorough outline of these processes, see M. Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

marginal movement on the borderline between the East and Rome[29] — Ingvild Gilhus presents them in sociological terms as equally marginal. In her words, borrowing from the twentieth century social anthropologist Victor Turner, they are "permanent liminal groups,"[30] that is they are groups who exist constantly in an in-between state. They exist in the in-between of the physical world, because they have been separated from their heavenly homeland but have not yet returned to that land of light.[31] In this liminal state, the Gnostic receives *gnosis* (insight) and experiences *communitas*, a community of "equal individuals under the authority of the elders or the instructors."[32] But cultural or spiritual marginal status does not mean that these groups necessarily functioned only as small isolated groups on the edge of society, thereby deserving the kind of minority status they are frequently given within early Christian histories. If they had not shown reasonable success in gaining members, sometimes by "poaching" from opposing Christian groups,[33] the mainstream group would not have found them such a threat and taken such measures to overcome them.

That the threat was real is evident in the vehemence of the attack against the Gnostics by their orthodox contemporaries. However, the unfair treatment dealt to the heretics by their earliest opponents continues in contemporary scholarship. When theologians and church historians describe what was happening in those early centuries, they do not give the heterodox views of the Saviour any credence as part of the total Christian picture. The so-called heretics show up as little more than shadowy figures who lurk in the wings, rather than as people who have their own place on the stage of Christian history. Certainly no appreciation is demonstrated that heretics may actually have had a valid spiritual life centred on Jesus.

As one cluster of groups within early Christianity, Gnostic Christians have something to offer towards the total picture of early Christian belief and praxis, no matter how they are later judged by their opponents. The Gnostic view of the founder, for example, should be taken seriously in any study of early Christologies. Each Christian group presents their interpretation of the founder out of reflection on traditions and key scriptures handed down to them; each relies on their ongoing experience of Jesus to guide what they are saying and writing about him. Similar processes of reflection and interpretation operate in each group, and the sum of these reflections adds up to a total picture of

29. K. Rudolph, "Zur Soziologie, soziologischen 'Verortung' und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike," in *Studien zum Menschenbild in Gnosis und Manichäismus*, ed. P. Nagel, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge, Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg 39 (K 5) (Halle [Saale], 1979), 19–29, esp. 25 (my translation).

30. Gilhus, "Gnosticism," 106–28. Gilhus draws principally on Victor Turner's outline of the three phases of *rites de passage* as separation, *limen* (margin), and aggregation.

31. *Contra* Gilhus. While I accept Gilhus's basic outline and identification of key elements of Gnostic liminality, I disagree with her identification of the Gnostic's liminal stage as separation from the world prior to entrance into the heavenly region or fullness of salvation.

32. Gilhus, "Gnosticism," 119.

33. See, for example, Irenaeus's problem with the heretic Marcus who lures away to his own group both men and women members of Irenaeus's community; Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, rev. ed., ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 309–578, esp. 334–336.

what Christians, Gnostic or otherwise, thought about their Saviour in these early centuries.

Scholars must take seriously that heretics believed in their experiences of the heavenly Jesus and knew something of him from those experiences, just as orthodox groups believed in their own experiences of the risen Jesus and reflected on those experiences in subsequent generations. Yet, studies of Jesus still focus on canonical works, still treat the canonical gospels as the only real source for any kind of valid information about Jesus, as if these writings are historically guaranteed, rather than just one among many attempts at theological reflection from insiders about who this Jesus was. Moreover many scholars appear to know very little about the breadth of material available about Jesus, not just in New Testament apocrypha, but also in the so-called heretical works.[34] That the Christian churches today do not look at Jesus outside of canonical works is understandable. They want to protect their followers from hearing about the heresies and perhaps being led astray. But it is inexcusable for historians to limit the field of valid enquiry. While some of these scholars may belong to Christian churches or even may be religious professionals within these churches, within the scholarly world they are expected to be proper historians or exegetes.

Thus the first problem for study of the heretics may well be a scholar's personal belief. Every undergraduate student knows the problem or the opportunity that a personal believing stance can be for studying religious phenomena. They know that often the most difficult area for study is their own tradition, if they have one. The issue is not new, of course, and for anyone who studies hermeneutics, the idea that the self of the researcher intrudes in, or is actually the catalyst to, interpretation is self-evident. The old claims for the objectivity of academic study have long since been superceded by a strong awareness of the necessity to reflect upon the prejudices and presuppositions that influence even the very questions brought to research, let alone how conclusions and judgements about research are formed. However, the great debates about theory and method often pass by the work of day-to-day engagement with material.

Why is it so difficult for some scholars to take the Gnostics seriously as early Christian groups, including them in their own hermeneutics about Jesus? Apart from the issue of personal faith mentioned above, historians themselves may be influenced by their primary sources, by those who write history. It is a truism that official history is written by the winners, and stars the winners only. The history of Christianity reads as a long list of those religious professionals who either won in the debates over major doctrinal issues, or managed to consolidate positions of power through political alliance. History focuses on them as the ones who define and maintain orthodoxy. On the other hand, heretics are relegated to the edge of the histories; they are the opponents, the losers. Where they figure at all in the histories, they are fair game for ridicule or vilification.

34. See my overview of the problem in Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings*, 1–23.

When scholars accept the winners' view of Christianity as the whole story, or the only authentic story, they disregard not only the ordinary believer who very rarely appears of any importance in the process, but also disregard the so-called heretics. In a similar way up to the recent past, scholars often ignored anything non-Western in the history of Christianity. While there is some attempt now to unearth the early history of Christianity in countries like China or Africa, there is not the same impetus to add the heretics to their rightful place in the histories. It is difficult to believe that, as recently as 1990, the New Testament scholar Robert Grant could write:

> In spite of the exciting and valuable Gnostic documents recovered from Nag Hammadi in Egypt, the basic starting point for the study of the Gnostics has to lie in the earliest criticisms by Christians who wrote against heretics.[35]

Scholars believe the rhetoric, the propaganda of the winners that they have read for so long. They believe the history from the mainstream Christian group which holds only the canonical scriptures and their interpretation of them as the true basis of what historically a Christian and Christianity meant so that all other early systems or alternate systems must be judged in their light. Why should the paradigm of one Christian group be axiomatic for the history and analysis of the entire movement?

To allow minority heretical groups a voice that overwhelms the voice of the orthodox would present a similar lack of balance as pertains currently. But the heretics must be allowed a place and must be considered in any accurate historical presentation of Christianity. The Gnostics belong as much to the history of early Christianity as any so-called orthodox group. The spotlight on centre stage in the history of Christianity must be shared by all groups who have contributed to that history, heterodox or otherwise.

35. R. M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 41.