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## **From Ancient Gnostics to Modern Scholars – Issues in Defining the Concept of “Gnosticism”**

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## From Ancient Gnostics to Modern Scholars – Issues in Defining the Concept of “Gnosticism”

Victor-Alexandru PRICOPI<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Nowadays, the category of „Gnosticism” has become very ambiguous and problematic. There are different paradigms in defining the concept of „Gnosticism” and because of this, there still are controversies between the most prominent scholars. In recent decades were made valuable research on this topic, but a consensus is far to achieve. In this paper my aim is to show how this concept changed from ancient heresiologists to modern scholars as Hans Jonas, Ioan Petru Culianu or Michael Allen Williams. In one of the late papers of Ioan Petru Culianu, „Gnosticism” was seen as a „sick sign”. From this observation, Michael A. Williams came to dismantle the concept of „Gnosticism” and to replace this concept with the one of „biblical demiurgical traditions”. Nevertheless, criticism cannot be applied only to the modern concept of „Gnosticism”, but also to Williams’ suggestions. Indeed, the category in debate is hard to define, but we also will propose in this paper an answer to this question.*

### Keywords:

*Gnostics, Gnosticism, Heretics, Knowledge, Gnosis, Demiurge*

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### Introduction

If for more than a century researchers were concerned about the origins of Gnosticism, in the last decade we will encounter a rollover situation. Nowadays, the most discussed issue on this topic is that of defining the concept of Gnosticism. In the recent years, and particularly, from the publication of the work of Michael Allen Williams - *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a dubious Category*, the question is "What is Gnosticism?", or more than that, "Can we talk about Gnosticism?". These questions did not give us a single answer, and the road to consensus seems pretty long.

The American scholar starts his research from some observations made by Ioan Petru Culianu in one of his works, entitled *The Gnostic Revenge*. The Romanian researcher is ironic in the beginning of this study, saying:

*Once I thought that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon, which is belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity. I was, of course, ready to accept the idea that there are various prolongations of ancient Gnosis and even that of a spontaneous generation of views of the world in which, at different times, the distinctive features of Gnosticism occur again. I was to find quickly that I was really a naïf. ( ... ) From authoritative interpreters of Gnosis I learned that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic; power, counter-power, and lack of power are gnostic; left is gnostic and right is gnostic (Culianu, 2006, pp.163-164).*

After that, the Romanian author will argue that the term *gnosis* is a "sick sign", it is a concept almost empty and without content or historical reality. This can adapt to different contexts, where it acquires different meanings. Williams agrees with the Romanian author with this point of view, but he will also underline the fact that what we can call now *gnosticism* is uncertain, especially for researchers involved in the study of early Christianity and the Religions of the Hellenistic Age (Williams, 1996, p.4). In order to give an answer to the question "What is *gnosticism*?", we must expose in the following pages the major attempts on this topic. This overview on the history of the research will be very helpful for us in order to understand which issues are raised today, when a certain definition is given to *Gnosticism*.

### The heresiological point of view on the Gnostics

Morton Smith claims that *gnōstikos* was not a very common term in the Greek language and that it is highly probable that it was coined by Plato (Smith, 1981, p.798).. The Late Greek uses this concept in *The Statesman* 258e, where *gnōstike technē* means the art of knowledge and where the ideal politician is defined as a master of this kind of art. The term *gnōsis* appears for the first time in a polemical context in one of the Pastoral Epistles (1 *Tim* 6 :20), where the author uses this term in order to refer to a false knowledge. It is used here the expression „**falsely called knowledge**”, an expression later used by the bishop of Lyon. The term *gnōsis* is used in the Greek language either in the daily activities or in religious discourse. The basic translation of the word *gnōsis* is *knowledge*, and for verb *to know* the term is *gignōskein*. Ancient Greek language distinguishes between two types of knowledge: namely propositional knowledge, for which Greek language uses words such as for example *eidenai*, and the other type of knowledge for which is used the term *gignōskein*, in order to refer to a personal kind of knowledge, of an object or a person (Layton, 1987, p. 9).

In the Pythagorean and Platonic philosophical language, *gnōsis* may appoint the knowledge of real beings or of God. It is opposed to approximate knowledge or delusive knowledge, also called *doxa*. For the Greek philosophical schools mentioned above, this term "always involves a dialectical and discursive quest of the spirit, an approach that can lead to an intuition that it is still based on speculation of human order" (Puech, 2007, p.206) . So, *gnōsis* means knowledge of God or of a property of it, but this knowledge is absolute and immediate, it is higher than simple faith. *Gnōsis*, says Henri-Charles Puech, is knowledge of Light and Life, and is light and life itself, is vision, revelation and absolute truth understood as mystical act (Puech, 2007, pp. 206-207). Hans Jonas noted that *gnōsis* is something that is naturally unknown, more precisely through it is possible to know the divine principle or higher realities (Jonas, 2001, p. 34).

We should mention from the very beginning that in the early centuries, Christian theologians do not use the term *Gnosticism*. As Karen King says, there was no religion called *Gnosticism* in Antiquity, the term was coined much later to help researchers when they had to establish the boundaries of Christianity (King, 2003, p. 2). This concept is modern and

was coined by Henry More (1614-1687), an English theologian who used this term to refer to all the ancient Christian heresies. (Layton, 1995, pp. 348-349).

For the heresiologists of the Church, the most notably were Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, and Epiphanius of Salamis, there were religious thinkers who were designated *gnostics*. In the testimonies of these Christian theologians we can find excerpts and testimonies about the doctrines and practices of a religious group that claimed to have a *gnosis* and, therefore, members of this group were called Gnostics. In the Second century, some of these thinkers were called or called themselves *gnōstikoi*, or those who hold the knowledge - *gnōsis*. This is the case of Clement of Alexandria for example.

The first systematic work written against the practices and doctrines that are considered false, was written by Irenaeus of Lyon somewhere around the year 180 of our era. Here we are in a difficult situation. It is quite difficult to talk about orthodoxy and heresy in the time of Irenaeus. As Ismo Dunderberg underlines, it is not very easy to know which Christian movement was the mainstream Christian group in second-century Rome (Dunderberg, 2008, pp. 19-20), this fact being also true for other major cities of the Roman Empire. The Bishop of Lyon certainly saw the Gnostics as heretics, but they did not think the same thing; a couple of them, at least, claimed that they are the true Christians. In the first Christian century, and probably in the second century as well, there wasn't a clear distinction between orthodox and heretical beliefs, and consequently, what Irenaeus thought to be heretic in his century, probably was not considered heretic in the first century (Wilson, 1978, p. 299).

The most extensive heresiological work is the one written by Epiphanius of Salamis, where he writes about a group of Christians who claim to have a „true knowledge“ (Williams, 2009, XXVI.2.1), after which he calls them Gnostics. In addition to this group, the author appoints Gnostics and other thinkers like Valentinus, Basilides, Ptolemy, Carpocrates etc. Epiphanius follows the pattern developed by Irenaeus and applies the Gnostic label to almost all heretics. We notice from the brief review above the fact that for the Christians heresiologists, Gnostics are heretics, so Christians who have strayed from the right faith and who claim to hold a secret knowledge of the divine mysteries.

Along with these Christian heresiologists, there are pagan authors who have a polemic against the Gnostics; Celsus, Porphyry and Plotinus are authors we refer to. Their testimonies are very useful because these philosophers do not present us the Gnostics from a Christian point of view, but from the Platonist one. Thus, we find out from Porphyry that the Gnostics claimed that „Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality” (Armstrong, 1966, p.45). In the same place we read that in the time of Plotinus were „Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy”, heretics against whom Plotinus wrote an entire book entitled *Against the Gnostics*.

In this treatise, Plotinus does not seem to present any Christian feature and the debate is shaped around the differences which separate the Gnostics from pure Platonic philosophy, from which they seem to inspire. We can notice now that in Late Antiquity, those persons who were called Gnostics were viewed as heretics or Christians heretics, or people who misinterpret the Platonic tradition. Even nowadays there are researchers who consider the Gnosticism as a form of Platonism. Among them, there is Charles Bigg who considers that *Gnosticism* is a „popular Platonism” (Bigg, 2008, p. 41), Simone Pétrement calls *Gnosticism* „un platonisme romantique” (Pétrement, 1947, p. 129), Arthur Darby Nock which uses designation „platonism run wild” (Nock, 1964, p. XVI) or John M. Dillon who speaks about the Gnostic and Hermetic schools as the „underworld of Platonism” (Dillon, 1996, p. 384). John D Turner made a brief history of theories about relation between Platonism and Gnosticism and notes that there are three main theories: Gnosticism is perceived either as Platonism, or the Platonism is an incipient Gnosticism, or the Gnosticism and the Late Platonism are interdependent (Turner, 2001, pp. 10-45).

### **Hans Jonas and the typological approach**

The first scientific studies about *gnosticism* have dealt in particular with the Gnostic origins question. Answers regarding the origin of Gnosticism were different, researchers are seeing in Gnosticism a movement inside Christianity or an extra-Christian movement, or even a non-Christian movement, that marked the Christian religion. Among all the theories proposed by researchers on the question of origins of Gnosticism, perhaps the most influential is that of Adolf von Harnack,

who characterizes Gnosticism as „the acute Hellenisation of Christianity”(Harnack, 1961, p. 231). Also the German historian considers the Gnostics to be the first Christian theologians. Gerard van Groningen says that after the Nag Hammadi discoveries, „Harnack’s position has been attacked more pointedly than ever. Beyond a doubt, Harnack overstated the case. Gnosticism is not Hellenism, nor it is Christian” (Groningen, 1967, p. 16). Antti Marjanen observes that all of these theories have made possible the development of a new approach, which marked the twentieth century, and we refer to typological approach Gnosticism (Marjanen, 2008, p. 206).

Such an approach considers *Gnosticism* as an independent religion or a religious movement with its own doctrine, holding stable and clearly defined social features. In the year 1934, German philosopher Hans Jonas published his first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*. This work proposes a systematic revision of both the origin and the meaning implied by the term *Gnosticism*. Antti Marjanen considers that Jonas's book was probably the most influential work about *Gnosticism* from the twentieth century (Marjanen, 2005, p. 40). As his predecessors, the author is interested to find origins of Gnosticism, but in a sense quite different from those before him. He is not interested in finding geographical area of the roots of *Gnosticism*, Jonas wants to find social and spiritual atmosphere where *Gnosticism* arised.

Being influenced by Heidegger's philosophy, Jonas argues that the gnostic man feels alien from the world, in the sense that he does not belongs to it. For him, Gnosticism is a unitary expression of Late Antiquity spirit, defined by acosmism. As Michael Waldstein noted, for Jonas, the Gnostic texts were an anticipation of existentialist philosophy (Waldstein, 2000, p. 344). Later, the German philosopher will criticize his early analysis, but he would not give up the idea that there is a link between ancient Gnosticism and modern existentialism. Also, in his best known work, Jonas says that *Gnostic* religion is a religion of a special kind of knowledge with „a certain conception of the world, of man’s alienness within it, and of the transmudane nature of the godhead” (Jonas, 2001, p. 101).

Going on the line opened by Jonas’ interpretation, Henri Charles Puech will emphasize that the Gnostic man becomes aware of the evil of this world, because he feels he is in it. If the Gnostic man reflects on this

problem, it means that he has a different nature and a different origin, other than the world itself. The authentic self and the world are two different realities that are in conflict one with each other. In this manner, the Gnostic makes the following assertion, which will be the basis of its entire system of thought: Gnostic is in the world, but not from this world (Puech, 2007, p. 244). Gnosis is the disclosure of a mystery that itself it is efficient. Through such a revelation is shown to gnostic man the essence of his origin, his fate and brings salvation.

In the text presented in 1966 at the Messina Conference (Jonas, 1970, pp. 90-104), event which we will treat more widely further on, Hans Jonas proposes a definition of Gnosticism and he will point out that Gnosticism has seven essential features:

1. the idea of a saving knowledge;
2. the dynamic emanative nature of the divine self;
3. the mythical character of the gnostic thought is presented in a story;
4. the world is seen through the light of ancient dualism, expressed by a differentiation between the real God which is transcendent and the founder of this world which is ignorant or bad;
5. an aggressive polemic against other religious tradition, as is the case of judaism;
6. the myths used are not genuine;
7. the syncretistic character of its religious doctrines.

This approach has been embraced by a number of researchers, but it is not unbeatable. Birger A. Pearson (2004, pp. 201-223; 2008, pp. 12-15) and Kurt Rudolph (1983, pp. 53-274) are some of the most significant names in this sense. The biggest issue is assumed by Jonas himself, he is aware that this model is an ideal construct and that it sums up the whole range of specific gnostic features. The proposed scheme brings together the specific features of almost all heresies, from Simon Magus to Mani and even the Mandaeans (Jonas, 1970, pp. 103-104). At the same time, the typological approach of Gnosticism consists in extraction of themes or doctrine from general characteristics of a large number of mythologies, which often are different from one another.

Some advocates of this approach can accept that a Gnostic text, a Gnostic group or a Gnostic thinker not necessarily need to have all these features highlighted by Hans Jonas. Thus, some definitions of Gnosticism may regard as gnostic the text of *Gospel of Thomas*, or Marcion, while others may exclude these texts or authors from what is

considered to be Gnostic (Marjanen, 2008, p. 207). This makes David Brakke to stress, in a recent work, that:

*As Gnosticism became a religion seemingly without boundaries, the people and texts that scholars assigned to it assumed the characteristics of that religion, even if they did not display them. That is, scholars knew— from this or that “Gnostic” text, or from this or that report from a Church Father—that Gnostics were dualists, that they believed in a lower creator god, that they hated the world and society, that they did not believe that Christ was truly human, and that their disdain for the body led them either to adopt extreme asceticism or to live as wanton libertines. No matter if a text from Nag Hammadi did not contain such ideas or even seemed to contradict them; that text still belonged to Gnosticism and must somehow reflect its characteristics (Brakke, 2010, p. 21).*

Along with the big change of perspective proposed by Jonas and once the translation of the Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi started, researchers felt the need to hold a conference about the origins of Gnosticism, in year 1966, at Messina, Italy. Researchers felt the need to establish clear lines of boundary in this religious system because until then the authors called Gnosticism a whole range of religious phenomena.

The terms gnostic and Gnosticism, noted in the year 1953 C. H. Dodd, have been used „by modern writers in a confusing variety of senses. If they refer, as by etymology they should refer, to the belief that salvation is by knowledge, then there is a sense in which orthodox Christian theologians like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, on the one hand, and Hellenistic Jews like Philo, and the pagan writers like Hermetists, on the other, should be called Gnostics” (Dodd, 1953, p. 97).

Thus, Henri Charles-Puech observed in the year 1952, that throughout the history of research of this religious phenomenon were considered as Gnostic different religious systems. In this way, Puech lists movements and religious systems that were considered Gnostic (Puech, 2007, p. 228): 1.Christian or less Christian Gnosticism, of a heterodox nature; 2.pagan Gnosis as Mandaicism, Hermeticism or doctrines arising from the Chaldean Oracles; 3.Manichaeism and other

sects, as Neo-Manichaeism, the Bogomils and the Paulicians; 4.some occult sciences like astrology, alchemy and magic; 5.Orthodox Christian Gnostics like Clement of Alexandria; 6.Kabbalah, along with other Jewish currents; 7.theosophical or esoteric systems emerged from Islam or from some philosophical thoughts of modern Europe. As we can see, is easy to understand why scholars organized the Messina Conference.

The Conference seems to have been dominated by the theoretical and historical views of Hans Jonas and Ugo Bianchi. As such, the results of the conference and an important part of the texts presented are influenced by the opinions of the two researchers above. On the last day of the event, an ad hoc committee produced a final document on the future use of the concepts of *gnōsis* and *Gnosticism*. The document suggested the dissociation of the concepts of *gnōsis* and *Gnosticism* in two different categories. Thus, the use of the term *gnōsis* designate a "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an élite". The concept of *Gnosticism*, after the same committee proposal, is recommended to be used in order to refer to a specific group of religious systems from the second century A.D. As a working hypothesis, the authors propose some major features of Gnosticism: inside man dwells a divine spark, which must be awakened, this idea of the divine ego is based on the concept of an ontological degradation of the divine, whose periphery (often called Sophia or Ennoia) produces the phenomenological world. On the other hand, not just any *gnōsis* is *gnosticism*, but only that "knowledge" which involves a divine identity between gnostic and what is known, but there is also important the way through which the divine message is known (gnosis is a result of the revelation).

This new paradigm proposed at Messina was influential for several decades, even if they didn't came up with a real consensus from the beginning. As professor Roelof van den Broek says in a very recent work „the Messina document failed to impose generally accepted definitions of ‘gnosis’ and ‘Gnosticism’; on the contrary, it triggered endless and fruitless discussions.” (Broek, 2013, p. 7). Michael Allen Williams showed in his book that the proposed definition of Messina Conference pulled out from Gnosticism a series of texts, thinkers and groups that were traditionally regarded to be Gnostic.

### **Bentley Layton and the self-designation approach**

Bentley Layton approaches Gnosticism from another point of view; the American scholar observed that some ancient religious groups identified themselves as being Gnostics. Layton suggests that in the first Christian centuries there wasn't only a religious movement whose members were appointed by adversaries as Gnostics, but they used themselves this term to characterize them. In order to identify these Gnostics, Bentley Layton started his research from an analysis of Christian and pagan witness. Therefore, he considered Gnostics those mentioned by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* I.11.1, the Carpocratians listed in the *Adversus Haereses* I.25.6 and the Barbelo-Gnostics listed in the same work I.29, the Gnostics covered by Porphyry in *Vita Plotinus* 16, those stated by Origen in *Against Celsus* V.61, and Prodicus mentioned by Clement in his *Stromata* II.117.5 (Layton, 1995, p. 338).

Based on these testimonies, Layton will use the mythological material found here, especially the Barbelo-Gnostics ones, to rebuild the main content of the Gnostic teachings. Bentley Layton considers that the myths and the texts belonging to Sethians or to the Barbelo-Gnostics are Gnostic in true sense. By extension, the author includes in its inventory 14 Gnostic texts considered as belonging to Sethians (pp. 342-343), the most significant text being the *Apocryphon of John*. Further, Bentley Layton supplements his list with Valentinus and the Valentinians, whom he considers a mutation, a reformed branch of the original Gnostics.

Stephen Emmel stresses that if the method suggested by Bentley Layton is correct, then the only ancient group whose members are self-defined as Gnostics are the Sethians (Emmel, 1997, p. 40), and in conclusion, they are the only "true" Gnostics. About Layton's method, Karen King asserts that such an approach provides some clarity, but nevertheless, it limits Gnosticism to a relatively small number of materials with which the researcher should work. The author rightly asks what happens now with the rest of the works if they cannot be considered Gnostic anymore, and King also notes, „the problem with variety is not variety itself; the problem is trying to force multiform, irregularly shaped objects into square essentialist definitional holes” (King, 2003, p. 168).

**Michael A. Williams and his critique to the modern concept of “Gnosticism”**

From the description above, we can deduce that heresiological approach cannot be sustained anymore. As Antti Marjanen pointed out, Christianity, on its road to orthodoxy, will denigrate others, calling them heretics, term which will become virtually synonymous with Gnostic (Marjanen, 2008, p. 208). Christian theologians do not treat problems inside the Church as modern historians of religion do, but they treated those issues in a subjective way; for them, treating this problem is a matter of the Church's survival. For this reason, we encounter many exaggerations about the heretical thinkers. For example, Epiphanius multiplies unnecessarily the number of sects, inventing new names for it and he gives even different names to the same heretical groups. While heresiological approach brings some valuable information, it cannot be used today, because modern criticism no longer sees these religious movements to be dependent on the Christian religion.

And the other approaches have been criticized. As we have seen, the book of Michael A. Williams aims to overturn the entire history of research of the phenomenon took in discussion. Williams's central idea is that we cannot talk about *Gnosticism*, this concept is a modern construction which does not have any historical reality. What seemed to be proper of *Gnosticism* is found in other religions or philosophies.

Michael Allen Williams is the first author who treats systematically this topic and dismantled each feature that was thought to be specific of Gnosticism. He says in his masterwork that „The modern category <<Gnosticism>> has come to depend on such clichés, as is attested by their constant repetition in both scholarly and popular literature on this subject. And yet these clichés have become more a burden than a true support, more a hindrance than an assistance in the understanding of the sources in question.” (Williams, 1996, p. 53) About Williams' book, Roelof van den Broek remarks „Williams's book is most certainly worth reading and offers a sound antidote to many popular views on Gnosticism, few have followed his radical outlook” (Broek, 2013, p. 7) and, continues van den Broek, the term Gnosticism is still used in modern scholarship, but now in a neutral sense.

About some of these criticisms we will talk in the next pages, but first of all we must say that the American scholar suggests replacing the

concept of *Gnosticism* with „biblical demiurgical traditions”( Williams, 1996, pp. 51-53) . Scholars believe that in *Gnosticism* the Demiurge plays a central role. The expression „biblical demiurgical traditions” in this case would designate those religious traditions that incorporate or adapt ideas from the Bible and assigns the cosmos creation to one or more lower entities, other than the supreme God. David Brakke considers that Michael A. Williams is one of the researchers who create their own terms to study this religious phenomenon, in order to get rid of modern the modern concept of Gnosticism (Brakke, 2006, pp. 248).

Against the typological approach, the author mentioned above brings several arguments. He believes that there is no truly consensus about the classification of the Gnostic thinkers and gnostic groups under the label of Gnosticism. Marcion is the most famous case in point, and researchers who embrace the typological approach are not committed to this classification, some do not see him as gnostic, while others consider him a special case of gnostic thought. Also a minus of this method, observes Williams, is that it doesn't take into account the diversity of data discovered at Nag Hammadi, and that researchers, conventionally, include it in the category of *Gnosticism*.

Objections are also made against the method of Bentley Layton. Williams points out that that the term gnōstikos used by gnostics in order to identify themselves with a particular religious group is met only in heresiological testimonies and it is not found in any other text from Nag Hammadi or other original source (Williams, 2005, p. 75). This indicates either that the name of Gnostic was not very widespread at that time, or that the Gnostics attributed the gnōstikos title, as Clement of Alexandria did. In addition, Epiphanius says in *Panarion* that Nicholas or the Valentinians, the Sethians and the Ophites called themselves Gnostics. Williams' question is legitimate: why Epiphanius, in his work, gives a section to a group called Gnostics (*Panarion*, XXVI), different from the Ophites or the Valentinians mentioned earlier? (Williams, 1996, p. 40).

Williams criticizes and what it was believed to be essential of Gnosticism. An example is the hermeneutical method used by Gnostics or the reverse exegesis. He approaches the problem of rejection of the body too, which is not unique to the Gnostics, but it can also be found in other philosophical schools from Antiquity (p. 117).

Nevertheless, Williams admits that despite the outstanding differences between these religious groups, there are common features between different texts and currents. A common item is the theme of the Demiurge. Another common feature of these texts is the idea that the human soul has its origins in a transcendent world and the human being became aware of this and it has now the potential to return to that perfect world (Williams, 2005, p. 78). Antti Marjanen suggests that by combining these two essential characteristics, the texts and the myths treated by us would be put under the same label as before (Marjanen, 2008, 210).

### **Conclusion:**

However, in his work Michael A. Williams proposes to replace the term of Gnosticism only with the „biblical demiurgical traditions”. We believe that this new concept further expands the spectrum of texts or religious movements in the Late Antiquity that would fall under this category. For example, if we follow the indication of Williams, Marcion would be treated the same as the Sethians or Valentinus. This is a statement difficult to accept, especially because Marcion was not seen as a Gnostic even by the heresiologists of the Church and rarely happened that some modern scholars to perceive him in this way. By adding to the concept of „biblical demiurgical traditions” and the idea of a knowledge capable of revealing the divine origin of the soul, the situation becomes much clearer. This is the definition proposed by Antti Marjanen in his study in 2008 (pp. 210-211). Roelof van den Broek on the other side states in his recent book that „the term ‘gnostic religion’ does not refer to an independent religion in its own right, but to a variety of myths, ideas and practices” in which the concept of *gnōsis* played a dominant role (Broek, 2013, p. 12). By using Marjanen’s definition, the Valentinian myth is Gnostic because it evokes the idea of an inferior demiurge that creates the world and the idea of a special knowledge. On the other hand, the *Gospel of Thomas* contains the idea of a secret message able to awake the soul, but it does not contain the myth of the Demiurge and, consequently, it is not a Gnostic text. Also, Marcion or Mani would not be considered as Gnostic. However, we can’t find in all the documents the idea of a demiurge together with the idea of human knowledge able to reveal to a human being its divine origin. It must be considered that

these texts assume these ideas and allude to them without naming it explicitly. To avoid further confusion, it seems appropriate that together with the term of Gnosticism we must mention the name of the Gnostic School to which we make reference.

Almost a century researchers have dealt with the problem of finding the origin of Gnosticism. Today the debate seems somehow abandoned. Nowadays the basic problem is that of defining Gnosticism and to establish boundaries of this concept. From the pages above we can see that the theme of Gnosticism is a difficult one. This concept should not be abandoned, but each researcher must say at the outset what he understands by it. Some old or new definitions can raise questions, but broadly Gnosticism is a religious movement of the second century A.D. which circulated the idea of a demiurge and the idea of a special kind of knowledge.

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