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# GNOSIS

An Introduction

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I

## *Introduction*

Given the difficulties posed by the term 'gnosis' which I have already indicated, anyone who writes a short book on the subject first of all has to give the reader some guidance about what he thinks that the term really refers to. For there is no usage of this term on which there is a consensus in every respect and which is accepted everywhere. Nor, things being as they are, can there be, since any definition remains somewhat arbitrary.

### 1. The term 'gnosis'

The word 'gnosis' derives from the Greek and means 'knowledge'. It was used predominantly in philosophical and religious contexts and did not denote 'knowing' a person as a particular individual. Of course there are exceptions: particular forms of the tradition of the Hellenistic Alexander Romance use the word to describe someone realizing that a particular person is Alexander the Great (Version A, III 22, 15).

Sure knowledge, as distinct from mere perception, was extremely important for Greek culture, which was strongly orientated on rationality. The central position of knowledge can be recognized in the philosophy of the Athenian philosopher Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) and

takes the form of a strict philosophical system; according to the philosopher's definition, the real being of things is appropriated in knowledge. So there can be knowledge in the primary sense only of the structures of all reality which underlie the world of appearances, structures which Plato calls 'ideas'. Right knowledge is the presupposition for right action. Plato is convinced that such knowledge is recollection, the restoration of a view that a person originally had. The original knowledge has been lost and is partially restored in a successful life through the understanding of what is seen. In Plato's school this apparently highly abstract notion is translated into a concrete philosophical training programme. In the context of a community in which people live and learn together there are exercises in 'turning the soul round', i.e. recognizing individual things that can be perceived as representations of elementary structures, which can be expressed as mathematical formulae. Thus in the end even the constitutive principle of the structures is itself described mathematically as the relationship between the original unity and the subordinate multiplicity. In principle all human beings have the capacity to see through the world perceived by the senses in such a way: those who penetrate to a deeper knowledge of the structures of reality are as like God as it is possible for human beings to be (Plato, *Republic* 613c).

Of course such a significance of 'gnosis' is not limited to Platonic philosophy. Aristotle described as the ideal of successful life a life of 'theoretical contemplation', in other words a life of reflection, without manual work, a '*bios theoretikos*' wholly devoted to knowledge. Thus gnosis becomes the goal of the whole of life, in the political sphere as well as in religion and piety. Philosophy is a methodically ordered form for attaining such 'gnosis'. According to the Aristotelian philosophical teacher Alexander of Aphrodisias (c. AD 200), too, 'Philosophy promises knowledge of being' (*Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* I, 307, 27).

This general striving for knowledge does not have any specifically religious character, especially as it leads to very

varied results; the results among Aristotelians differ from those among Epicureans, Stoics or Platonists. For example, the Epicureans saw the imitation of the blissful life of the gods, who in their view had no direct influence on the nature of this world, as 'knowledge of the gods'. From the Hellenistic period onwards, the notion begins to spread in Greece that knowledge is not only the consequence of a committed activity of the human mind, or, more precisely, of the reason which indwells the world, the Logos, but a gift of grace by a God who would remain unknowable without this gift. It is already clear for the philosophy of Plato that the strict modern demarcations between philosophy and religion or theology do not hold at this point: someone who calls regaining original knowledge 'becoming like God' and seeks to attain it in a life in community with others of a like mind does not make a distinction between a philosophy with a neutral world-view and a theology with a religious orientation. Since 'like is always known by like', the predicate 'divine' links the one who knows to what he knows and to the one who gives knowledge. From the Hellenistic period onwards the religious connotations of the term 'gnosis' became more marked. Thus around AD 110 the writer Plutarch from Boeotia derived the name *Iseion*, Isis sanctuary, from 'coming to know being', and remarked: 'The name of the sanctuary promises knowledge of being. It is called Iseion to show that we will come to know being if in a rational and holy disposition we enter the sanctuary of the god' (*De Iside et Osiride* 2, 352A).

There is also a comparably high valuation of 'gnosis', 'knowledge', in the Jewish tradition, especially in the writings of Greek-speaking Jews. Above all the Greek translation of the so-called Jewish 'wisdom writings', some of which in the later period of antiquity came to be included in the canon of the Bible of Judaism and then also of the Christian 'Old Testament', is stamped by a corresponding terminology: 'The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Prov. 2.60, and so the truly righteous man can boast that he 'has knowledge of God' (Wisd. 2.13). But this 'gnosis' has considerable

importance for the life of the pious: 'To know you is perfect righteousness, and to know your power is the root of immortality' (Wisd. 15.3). This verse seeks to make it clear that the knowledge of God allows right political action and is even a help beyond death. We get a comparable impression of the significance of 'knowledge' if we look for the Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents of the Greek term 'gnosis' in the writings of the Qumran community by the Dead Sea; while this represents a particular tendency of intertestamental Judaism, it is just as much concerned with religious knowledge as other currents of contemporary Judaism.

Both pagan and Jewish antiquity valued 'knowledge', but their particular concepts of 'gnosis' had élitist features. Knowledge was not open to everyone. The most varied tendencies and forms of cult in antiquity were agreed on this fact. However, this élite which was capable of knowledge was defined in very different ways, and these differences are important in a comparison. Platonism identified the élite of those who had the highest form of knowledge (namely knowledge of the divine which could be expressed in mathematical formulae) with the group of philosophers, or more precisely with that group of philosophers which philosophized in a Platonic way. A strict distinction was made between a public and a non-public dimension of philosophy; certain higher elements of philosophy were intended only for oral communication, and these might be heard only by specially selected pupils. In the ancient religious form of the so-called mystery cults, like the mysteries of Isis or Mithras, which were popular above all at the time of the Roman empire, those who were initiated into the cult and therefore knew the secret cultic formulae formed the élite, and thus had that secret knowledge which made it easy for them to cope with death and the transition to immortality. However, the term 'knowledge' does not seem to have played a specific role.

In Hellenistic Judaism it was above all the group of god-fearing wise men, those who strove for knowledge and observed God's commandments, that formed an élite.

From the beginning, the Christianity that was taking shape also knew an élite of those with knowledge. However, we must ask whether this is really comparable with the other conceptions of an élite mentioned above. Thus according to a narrative in the Gospel of Mark, those who heard the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth marvelled that here a carpenter – not a member of the élite of educated scribes who were traditionally associated with 'knowledge' – was giving teaching about wisdom (Mark 6.1–3). Of course Christians, too, like Jews and pagans, also strove for 'gnosis'; they were interested in what philosophers were seeking and what other religious groups promised. The letter of Paul to the Christian community in Corinth, which has been handed down in the New Testament, documents for the middle of the first century the fact that the members of the Christian community in the port were proud of certain higher insights into revelation. The apostle writes that these Christians 'have become rich ... in all knowledge' (1 Cor. 4). So it could be said that in this form of Christianity a particular group formed an élite on the basis of its 'knowledge'. But Paul's criticism is that 'knowledge puffs up' (1 Cor. 8.1) and he rejected the wisdom of the Corinthians, which was orientated on earthly criteria. For his own conception, which distinguished between Christians who had come of age and those who had not, quite a different orientation was necessary: he preached a crucified man as saviour of the world, 'to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks folly' (1 Cor. 1.23), and saw the criterion of true knowledge here. At the end of the first and beginning of the second century the unknown author of the New Testament 'Letter to Timothy', which was published under the pseudonym of the apostle Paul and which stands in the tradition of his school, engages in polemic against 'the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge' (1 Tim. 6.20f.). As the polemic continues, it becomes clear that certain people within the Christian community claimed 'knowledge', 'gnosis', for themselves and thus in the author's view 'miss the mark as regards the faith'.



Unfortunately we do not learn more, so this obscure passage has become a magnet for a long line of attempts at interpretation. Even in antiquity, within the framework of commentary on the Bible, the 'knowledge', 'gnosis', claimed by the opponents of the unknown author was connected with the expression *gnostikoi*, 'gnostics', or literally 'knowers' (Cramer VII, 51), and thus with the movement that is called 'gnosis'. So even now there is a tendency to assume that here we have a first piece of evidence for a religious movement designating itself as 'gnosis', 'knowledge'. But the passage only says that people within the Christian community were claiming for themselves what pagan philosophers and Jewish wisdom teachers were communicating, namely 'knowledge', and that their claim was disputed by the author of a writing which was later included in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Another passage in the letter contains polemic against 'myths and endless genealogies' (1 Tim. 1.4), which gives us at least rather more of an idea of the 'knowledge' of the group under attack. These were presumably mythological expansions, above all of the biblical stories of the creation of the world, and in addition of the genealogies reported in the first book of the Bible, which were also developed and retold by other groups in Judaism at the time of the Roman empire. However, at the beginning of the second century a far simpler form of Christian theorizing could be put under the same heading of 'knowledge': a theological dissertation from this time in the form of a letter, the so-called 'Letter of Barnabas', was written so that its readers would have 'perfect knowledge' (*gnosis*) in addition to their faith (Letter of Barnabas 1, 5). Now according to the author's view, 'perfect knowledge' merely means expounding the Bible of the Jews, the book that was later called the 'Old Testament', in the light of the person of Jesus Christ, and conversely expounding the person of Jesus Christ in the light of the Bible. At another point the unknown author says that the 'knowledge' given to the Christians helps them to take the way of life and to avoid the darkness (19,1). Thus there was no unitary

concept of 'knowledge' among Christians as early as the beginning of the second century.

The picture that we get of the importance of the key word 'knowledge' in early Christianity changes only for the last third of the second century. At the same time it becomes clearer. The Middle-Platonic philosopher Celsus from Alexandria attests in polemic against the Christians from this period that among them there are people 'who claim to be knowers', and his later Christian opponent expands the quotation, 'just as the Epicureans call themselves "philosophers"' (Origen, *Against Celsus* V, 61). Evidently at this time there were quite specific people who called themselves 'knowing' in the sense of the modern term 'intellectuals' and had a 'knowledge' to offer. But here too, it is not said either that a separate religion existed which called itself 'knowledge' or that a whole group of intellectual tendencies would use the term in question to describe themselves. Rather, the key term 'knowers' is the designation applied to itself by a quite specific group within early Christianity, which made it clear that it wanted to hand on in a superlative way the 'knowledge' that almost all contemporary offers of meaning claimed to have.

The Greek word which occurs here – *gnostikoi*, 'knowers' – is usually rendered 'gnostic' in English and not translated, although it is a word from philosophical technical terminology. We owe the term itself to Plato, who coined several hundred Greek terms with the ending *-ikos*. *Gnostikē epistēmē*, 'understanding connected with knowledge', denotes mathematical sciences as opposed to *praktikē epistēmē*, 'understanding connected with practice' (*Politics* 258E). The word was rarely used by philosophers and remained limited above all to the Platonic tradition: for example, Platonists call the cognitive element of the divine soul 'to *gnostikon*', the capacity to know. So the term did not refer to a person as a whole but to particular capacities of a person.

Of course even the self-designation 'knowers' for members of a group within the Christian community, which is also attested in Celsus and Origen, does not

represent any precise criterion for demarcation from other tendencies. Members of the most varied intellectual tendencies and forms of religion in antiquity wanted to be 'knowers', even if they did not give themselves this name, or precisely because they did not do so. Therefore the claim to knowledge made by the Christian groups of 'knowers' in question could also be disputed: a Christian theologian from Alexandria by the name of Titus Flavius Clemens (Clement), who is strongly influenced by contemporary Platonism and likewise writes at the end of the second and beginning of the third century, documents this. He stands wholly in the Platonic tradition, and for him 'knowledge', 'gnosis', is also the true goal of Christian life and thought. 'Gnosis' is a description of Christian faith, and as a 'true gnostic' the church Christian can be opposed to the adherents of a gnosis which is wrongly so-called: 'And I am also surprised that some dare to call themselves perfect and knowing (gnostic), puffing themselves up and elevating themselves ... above the apostle (Paul)' (*Tutor*, I, 52, 2). According to Clement, the false 'knowers' do not understand that strict philosophical criteria apply to correct knowledge and true knowing, and so their intellectual weakness becomes evident in an ethic for which Clement has nothing but contempt: 'I recall encountering a sect, the leader of which claimed that he fought pleasure with pleasure. This worthy knower (gnostic) – in fact he really said that he was also a knower – advanced on pleasure in feigned combat' (*Carpets* II, 117, 5). Clement also accuses 'the adherents of Prodicus' of such ethical libertinism: 'misusing the name, they call themselves knowers (gnostics) and claim that by nature they are sons of the first God; but they misuse ... their freedom and live as they want' (*Carpets* III, 30, 1). By contrast, according to Clement the 'perfect knower' is a philosopher who is constantly occupied, first with the theoretical contemplation of things in the framework of a Christianized Platonic picture of the world; secondly with fulfilling the commandments laid down in the two testaments of the Bible; and – likewise continuing the communal life and learning of the Platonic

tradition – thirdly with the training of competent men: 'The combination of all three makes the perfect knower' (*Carpets* II, 46, 1).

Because members of particular groups of Christians designated themselves 'knowers' in this way and thus made clear their special claim to 'knowledge', from the end of the second century Christian theologians could sum up the concern of further groups with a similar make-up under the term 'knowledge' in ever cruder caricatures. A pioneer in this indiscriminating extension of the designation in the interests of polemic was a Greek theologian named Irenaeus, who lived in Lyons. Around AD 180 he composed a five-volume work under the title 'Disproof and Refutation of Knowledge Wrongly So-Called', and in so doing summed up the concern of a large number of groups and persons under the one keyword 'knowledge'. However, interestingly he did not apply the term 'knowers', i.e. 'gnostics', to all representatives of 'gnosis', 'knowledge', but differentiated between them by heads of schools, a practice customary in his time in designating philosophical schools. Only of one particular group does Irenaeus say: 'And they call themselves "gnostics"' (*Refutation* I, 25, 6; cf. I, 11, 1). Unfortunately we do not know how this group relates to the groups of knowers mentioned in Celsus and Clement. But it is not very probable that they are identical, so that we can assume that at the end of the second century a variety of groups of Christians called themselves 'knowers'. It is no longer possible to shed more light on why they gave themselves this name, since, as I have remarked, to have 'knowledge' is not a specific characteristic, but 'absolute banality' (cf. Bentley Layton, 'Prolegomena', 339).

Alongside the 'knowers' Irenaeus describes the whole series of further groups; with polemical undertones he attributes 'knowledge' to them, but their members evidently did not describe themselves as 'knowers'. Whereas since the eighteenth century scholars have not only included them within 'gnosis' but have also termed their members 'gnostics', by contrast Irenaeus still reports conflict between them and the 'gnostics' (II, 13, 9).

Furthermore, just how problematical it is to follow the tradition of modern European scholarship in bringing together a wealth of ancient groups under the one keyword 'knowledge' and calling their members 'gnostics' is evident from a look at the mass of self-designations which have been handed down in the texts usually assigned to 'gnosis'. 'They call themselves Christians,' wrote the theologian Justin in Rome in the middle of the second century with admirable openness, thus indirectly conceding that the designations of groups of 'gnosis' by heads of schools ('Marcians, Valentinians, Basilidians, or Satornilians') which is still customary today were names given by critics of the whole trend (*Dialogue with Trypho* 35, 6).

Other self-designations were more specific, and give first indications of a self-understanding: for example, one group calls itself 'the perfect', 'since in their view no one approaches the greatness of their knowledge' (Irenaeus, *Refutation* I, 13, 6). The relevant term 'knowers', 'gnostikoi', does not occur in the great library discovered at Nag Hammadi, but there is evidence of a large number of such self-designations, some of which do not seem very specific, and some of which already refer to particular points of the teaching of this individual group: 'Sons of God' (EpJac, NHC I, 2, 11, 1, etc.); 'the elect' (TractTrip, NHC, I, 5, 135, 5, etc.) or 'the solitary' (EvThom, NHC II, 2, sayings 16, 49), and also 'the descendants of Seth' (EvEg, NHC III, 2, 56, 3 and 17, etc.); 'children of the bridal chamber' (EvPhil, NHC II, 3, saying 87 [72, 21f.]) and 'the fourth, kingless and perfect race' (OW, NHC II, 5, 125, 6). With the name 'Seth', borne in the Bible by Adam's son (Gen. 4.25), an image of God (Gen. 5.3), a writer put himself in the tradition of a figure to whom, according to ancient Jewish views, Adam had entrusted special heavenly mysteries (Life of Adam and Eve 25-9), and who in rabbinic Judaism can also symbolize the 'king Messiah' (Midrash Bereshith Rabba on Genesis 4.26). 'Children of the bridal chamber' alludes to a 'sacrament of the bridal chamber' which will be discussed later (p. 114.). The last-mentioned self-designation, 'the fourth, kingless and

perfect race', surpasses the self-designation 'the third race', which was widespread among Christians: just as the normal church Christians felt superior as the third race to the two other races, the Jews and the Gentiles, so these perfect Christians felt superior to ordinary Christians.

To sum up, then, we must maintain that to bring together a great variety of ancient groups or even intellectual currents under the terms 'gnosis' and 'gnosticism' in modern Europe is to follow a strategy adopted by Christian theologians in antiquity, who sum up under the everyday word 'knowledge' diverse movements to which knowledge was as important as it was to many other intellectual currents and forms of religion of the time. Here the self-designation 'knower', which in antiquity was used by quite specific groups of Christians, was extended to all members of a movement going by the name of 'knowledge', the existence of which, following certain theologians of antiquity, was presupposed unquestioningly.

Since the eighteenth century the term 'gnosis' has increasingly moved away from its origins. It has been used more and more markedly as an interpretative category for contemporary philosophical and religious movements; a few examples can demonstrate this. In 1835 a book by the Tübingen New Testament scholar Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) was published under the title *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religions-Philosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* ('Christian Gnosis or the Historical Development of the Christian Philosophy of Religion'), in which 'gnosis' was understood against the background of an idealistic approach as a form of mediation between God and the world transcending time, which, it was claimed, was the constant element in all philosophy of religion. Baur reconstructed a development of 'gnosis' which culminated in the Berlin philosopher Hegel's philosophy of religion: elements of the three religions, Judaism, Christianity and paganism - like the Jewish notion of a creator of the world, the Christian notion of the figure of Christ and the pagan notion of matter - were organically combined into a philosophy of religion and



communicated by principles like that of 'evolution', development (*Die christliche Gnosis*, 25–9). Thus 'gnosis' presupposed an awareness of both the unity and the diversity of religions (*ibid.*, 67); the various doctrinal systems could be classified by their relationship to the three religions (*ibid.*, 108). Consequently Baur saw between gnosticism and Christianity 'a contradiction extending to the great and general, an intellectual attitude which diverges in the whole' (*Das manichäische Religionssystem*, 1831, 1). On the other hand he claimed an 'ongoing identity and continuity of the direction once taken' between ancient 'gnosis' and the 'more recent philosophy of religion' of a Schelling or Hegel (*Die christliche Gnosis*, 736). The Berlin philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) also designated part of the Protestant theology of his time 'gnosticism' (*Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, Werke VII, 1845, 101–3). However, by that he understood a 'system in Christianity' which followed the maxim 'that the concept is judge' (101). Fichte dismissed this position on the grounds that the Bible or the oral tradition had this function of judge in the dispute between theologians. Whereas the great theologians at the time of the Reformation had still insisted that the Bible was the sole criterion and pointed out to their opponents the connection between scripture and tradition, in the bosom of Protestantism 'a new gnosticism soon came into being... establishing the principle that the Bible had to be explained rationally'. Fichte's polemic was directed against the Protestant theology of the eighteenth century: 'This was said to be as rational as these gnostics were themselves: but they were as rational as the worst philosophical system of all' (103). The extreme extension of the sphere which for two centuries has been designated 'gnosis' becomes particularly clear if we look at the theosophical movement and anthroposophy. Parts of this movement spoke of themselves as a 'gnostic church'. Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) used the term 'gnosis' to denote a higher mode of knowledge standing above philosophy, and was therefore seen by some as the very model of a 'modern

gnostic'. Above all most recently, people have been fond of talking about a 'revival of gnosis' to characterize diverse movements connected with esotericism and the New Age. Such extensions of the use of the term do not help towards a precise understanding of what early Christian theologians designated 'gnosis'.

## 2. 'Gnosis' or 'gnosticism'?

As the ancient term 'gnosis' is only of very limited use for focusing precisely on the phenomenon of the history of ideas and the history of religion which since antiquity has been labelled 'knowledge', time and again attempts have been made to determine or even define the phenomenon in another way. The most influential definition was attempted in the twentieth century at one of the first great scholarly conferences to devote itself to the topic.

In order to end the terminological confusion associated with the term 'gnosis' since the nineteenth century, more than 30 years ago a proposal was developed which for a time shaped the discussion but could not win through and was controversial from the very beginning. On 18 April 1966, the last day of the great Gnosis Congress in Messina, the participants approved a concluding document cautiously entitled 'Proposal', which was prefaced to the proceedings in various European languages. It had been prepared by an international commission made up of experts in religious studies, theologians and philosophers of religion. In this concluding document of Messina the proposal was 'by the simultaneous application of historical and typological methods' to designate 'a particular group of systems of the second century after Christ' as 'gnosticism', and to use 'gnosis' to define a conception of knowledge transcending the times which was described as 'knowledge of divine mysteries for an élite'. So the conference distinguished those ancient movements which were called 'knowledge', 'gnosis', by their opponents, from 'gnosis' proper by using a new designation ('gnosticism').

An attempt was made in Messina to reduce conceptual confusion, but this caused new uncertainty, because something was being called 'gnosticism' that the ancient theologians had called 'gnosis'.

Moreover the term 'gnosticism', which the Messina conference proposed should be applied to the ancient movement, is not an ancient word. The 'knowers' did not in fact call themselves 'gnosticists' but 'gnostics'. The expression is quite modern in origin and derives from the English philosopher and theologian Henry More (1614–87), who was fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, and one of the 'Cambridge Platonists', the advocates of a philosophical theology stamped by Platonism and Neoplatonism. However, the terminological proposal of Messina was diametrically opposed to the way in which the English philosopher used the term 'gnosticism': Henry More was following an earlier English tradition in summing up under the name 'gnosticks' not only the adherents of quite specific groups assigned to 'knowledge' in antiquity but all Christian heresies. Diverging from previous practice, More now designated these as 'gnosticisms', and thus gave the name 'gnosticism' to that particular form which was superior to 'gnosis' in the real sense, whereas the conference in Messina in 1966 proposed the opposite course – evidently in ignorance of the history of the term. Whereas for More 'gnosticism' denoted the primal Christian heresy, which stems from intellectual overconfidence and ethical forgetfulness of the self, those who took part in the Messina conference around 300 years later had a more positive understanding of their overarching concept, now called 'gnosis', as 'a knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for an élite'. Here the Messina concept of 'gnosis' no longer stands in a specific relationship to Christianity, at any rate in a relationship comparable to More's definition of 'gnosis' as a 'primal Christian heresy', but describes a general attitude of mind and form of existence. But what precisely has to be imagined by this is left quite unclear in the Messina document. The proposal of the conference on the essence and characteristics of

'gnosis' does not say very much more than the formula quoted above about 'knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for an élite'. According to the Messina proposal, is classical Platonism 'gnosis'? In a sense it is, since here knowledge of the divine mysteries is reserved for an élite. Are Freemasons 'gnostics'? In a sense they are, since they reserve the knowledge of the divine mysteries for an élite.

So on the one hand by separating the term 'gnosis' from 'gnosticism' and on the other hand by its relatively brief characterization of 'gnosis', the Messina proposal led to quite a wide and general concept of gnosis which is almost unusable for the historian. For we saw that in antiquity almost everyone was agreed that 'knowledge', 'gnosis', was particularly valuable, but on the other hand there was a vigorous dispute about the form of true knowledge and how it was to be distinguished from pseudo-knowledge. There was as yet no unitary conception of 'knowledge' in antiquity. This fact was evidently not noted in Messina. On the other hand, in view of the subsequent meteoric career of the term 'gnosis' at the end of the twentieth century, we have to say that in attempting a terminological shift the conference was in fact merely describing the actual use of the term in the years after the Second World War and drawing conclusions from it.

Since, as the previous paragraphs have shown, to bring together specific ancient groups and intellectual currents into a movement under the name of 'gnosis' and to designate their representatives 'gnostics' represents a modern development of an ancient Christian polemic, 'gnosis' in the strict sense remains what Michael Allen Williams has called a 'typological construct' of modern scholarship. However, in historical study it can make sense to work with such typological constructs if they also help to see phenomena with related content. In the end it is not only hard to dispute that some of the ancient movements usually brought together under the heading 'gnosis' are actually very closely connected both in content and in outward form, but also necessary to recognize that some of their influence extends to the present. In an account we



need only distinguish carefully between those phenomena which are associated through direct historical connections, those which are connected more indirectly through a common cultural climate, and those between which a typological connection can be made through agreements in content.

In the next section I shall present a model which is the basis for the present book and which builds on a certain consensus in research into gnosis. In this way, of course, I am initially postulating no more than how various phenomena belong together in terms of content; only in the course of the discussion will it be possible to demonstrate whether the phenomena themselves in fact belong together. Here I shall use the term 'typological', which is comparatively rare in German scholarly theory, to bring out the continuity with the discussion which led to the attempt at a definition in Messina.

### 3. 'Gnosis' – a typological model

In what follows, by 'gnosis' I understand those movements which express their particular interest in the rational comprehension of the state of things by insight ('knowledge') in theological systems that as a rule are characterized by a particular collection of ideas or motives in the texts.

1. The experience of a completely other-worldly, distant, supreme God;
2. the introduction, which among other things is conditioned by this, of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures that are closer to human beings than the remote supreme God';
3. the estimation of the world and matter as evil creation and an experience, conditioned by this, of the alienation of the gnostic in the world;
4. the introduction of a distinct creator God or

assistant: within the Platonic tradition he is called 'craftsman' – Greek *demiurgos* – and is sometimes described as merely ignorant, but sometimes also as evil;

5. the explanation of this state of affairs by a mythological drama in which a divine element that falls from its sphere into an evil world slumbers in human beings of one class as a divine spark and can be freed from this;
6. knowledge ('gnosis') about this state, which, however, can be gained only through a redeemer figure from the other world who descends from a higher sphere and ascends to it again;
7. the redemption of human beings through the knowledge of 'that God (or the spark) in them' (TestVer, NHC IX, 3, 56, 15–20), and finally
8. a tendency towards dualism in different types which can express itself in the concept of God, in the opposition of spirit and matter, and in anthropology.

This typological model, which is used as a basis here, corresponds, moreover, to the concept of 'gnosis' depicted by many ancient Christian theologians and non-Christian thinkers.

Before we reconstruct a history of the development of 'gnostic' movements in antiquity using this model, it is necessary also to take a brief look at the main problems of recent research into gnosis. Here it will become clear what factors in addition to those already mentioned shape the various pictures of the phenomenon of 'gnosis'.

### 4. The main problems in recent discussion

Even before the application of a constructivist hermeneutic to the problem in the 1990s, there was a wide-ranging consensus that talk of 'gnosis' in antiquity and in the present to a large degree represents a modern typological

construction. It was also agreed that the typological construction leaves a very marked stamp on the mass of historical phenomena covered by such a model.

These connections can be made clear by means of a prominent example which at the same time brings out the close connection between the course of more recent research into gnosis and the general history of ideas and culture. In his epoch-making work *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist* ('Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity'), which began to appear in 1934 and then initially was discontinued because of the author's emigration, the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–93) initially attempted to work out the basic character of gnosis with the aid of an existentialist analysis indebted to Martin Heidegger. Like Ferdinand Christian Baur around a century previously (see above, p. 11), Jonas set out to describe the historical evidence in terms of its internal composition and not to put it in purely chronological order. He included in 'gnosis' both the Jewish-Hellenistic theologian Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Paul, and Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism in the third century AD, because he saw them both as being likewise stamped by the existential starting point which also governed those Christian thinkers who are traditionally reckoned to be in the movement: 'an oppressed existence made itself known there, anxious about its riddle and concerned to find an answer' (Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis*, 1987, 17). Jonas described the basic make-up of gnosis as being the experience of solitude, of being exposed in an inhospitable foreign land. The true homeland of human beings lay in an other-worldly realm of light, while the world was experienced as a realm of darkness remote from God. For Jonas, the most distinctive gnostic attitude to existence therefore consists in a revolutionary anti-cosmic orientation of life and thought which he regards as so characteristic of the time of the Roman empire that he sees the 'spirit of late antiquity' defined by a 'gnostic age'. In this way research into gnosticism may have been freed from the ghetto of the specialists, but at the price of a very radical extension

of the phenomena relevant to an account under the heading of 'gnosis'. Later Jonas also compared the extreme separation of human beings and the world in 'gnosis' with 'modern existentialism and its nihilistic aspects' (*Gnosis II*, 363), in essence making structurally impossible a really strict chronological demarcation of the phenomenon by the perspective chosen. These problems seem to have become clear to Jonas himself: more than 30 years later, at the 1966 Messina Conference, which has already been mentioned, he departed from his first scheme in attempting a typological and historical demarcation of the phenomenon of 'gnosis' in which, for example, there was no explicit mention of the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, so that one could assume that he had made his typological model more precise and in this way reduced the mass of historical phenomena to which he applied it.

However, the extremely diverse picture of 'gnosis' in many more recent accounts stems not only from the fact that in such a construction, in other words in the definition of a phenomenon by means of a catalogue of motifs, the scope can become either narrower or wider, but also from a series of further factors and prior judgements. These have an effect on the extent of such a catalogue of gnostic motifs and thus on the typological model, but they are not determined in a strict sense by the model.

The most important prior judgement is whether one merely wants to assign the phenomenon of 'gnosis' to a religion or regards it as a movement which goes beyond the limits of a single religion.

In the first instance 'gnosis' is understood as a movement within the Christian religion, and occasionally also interpreted as a form of the philosophy of religion which already had its foundation in, or came into being in, Judaism. This understanding already emerged in antiquity, was applied by Christian theologians, but likewise was championed by pagan philosophers. That did not and does not of course exclude the fact that a wealth of stimuli from other religions and philosophical contexts influenced 'gnosis'. This suggests an interpretation of gnosis as a

particular philosophical interpretation of Christianity of the kind put forward by ancient theologians like Hippolytus of Rome (beginning of the third century), and also the German church historian and scientific organizer Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). The interpretation resulted in, and still results in, the value judgement that the whole of 'gnosis' is the result of a failed attempt at a 'higher' interpretation of the theologoumena of the majority church, which was therefore rejected by the majority church.

In the second instance 'gnosis' is understood as a world-view or religion which can adapt to various religions but nevertheless always remains different from them. The gist of this interpretation was prepared for by the extension of the range of subject-matter to which the term was applied from the eighteenth century onwards, and basically followed systematically from the 'gnosis' interpretations of German idealistic philosophy and existentialist ontology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It became dominant from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. This interpretation was formulated programmatically by the Dutch scholar Gilles Quispel (born 1916) with the title of his book *Gnosis als Weltreligion* ('Gnosis as a World Religion') (1951). The metaphor chosen to describe this perspective is not unproblematical, because it is really rather unfriendly: 'gnosis' is said to nest in a parasitical way in a 'host religion' and is compared – usually unintentionally – with a pest. The kind of Christian gnosis constitutive of the other picture would then ultimately be a contradiction in terms, as Karl Wolfgang Tröger pointed out.

Thus the directions of both interpretations differ in their view of the relations between 'gnosis' and Christianity. In the first instance 'gnosis' is possibly originally a pre-Christian movement, but at all events over long stretches is shaped by people who claimed to be Christians. The judgement as to whether this claim is appropriate has therefore for some time now been made more cautiously than in antiquity and early modernity,

because it is becoming increasingly clear that Christianity took shape only in the second and third centuries and defined its limits by both linking up with its environment and opposing it. In the other instance, gnosis is a priori a movement outside Christianity and a non-Christian movement which for a time assimilated to Christianity. Each of these two interpretations is connected with a thesis about the historical development of 'gnosis': anyone who assumes that the movement originally came into being in Judaism and Christianity will either attribute to a pre-Christian Jewish gnosis those non-Christian texts which occur in the ancient material and on the basis of a typological affinity can be assigned to 'gnosis', or regard them as texts the authors of which covered up or deleted the reference to an original spiritual home in the course of an increasing demonization of 'gnosis' within Christianity. By contrast, those who regard 'gnosis' a priori as a non-Christian movement or a movement outside Christianity will regard non-Christian gnostic texts as admirable evidence for their point of view. There is also considerable dispute as to whether 'gnosis' in essence represents a religion – in other words is an independent attempt in the face of the experience of contingency to depict with the help of myth and cult a category of meaning which transcends this world – or rather an attempt to understand the Jewish-Christian religion better, orientated on the philosophical standards of antiquity. Whereas in the first model texts orientated on philosophical standards are the really characteristic texts of the movement, for the second model they are merely a form in which the 'gnostics' speak about their religion. Of course at this point much depends on how one reconstructs standards of philosophical argumentation (and communal living) in antiquity.

Thus above all the beginnings are a matter of dispute in more recent research into gnosis. The situation looks different from the end of antiquity: both interpretative approaches agree that at any rate ancient gnosis culminated and in a certain sense also ended in the foundation of a separate religion, Manichaeism, named after the



Persian thinker Mani. Ferdinand Christian Baur already saw this in his 1831 account of the Manichaean system of religion, *Das manichäische Religionssystem*, which interpreted Manichaeism as 'an implementation of the gnostic principle carried through with great consistency' and explained 'an even sharper opposition to Christianity' from this (*Religionssystem*, 2). Mani (AD 216–77) attempted to bring together three great world religions of antiquity, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, and in this way to offer a single common religion to the land in which he lived, the Persian Sassanid empire. To this end he began intensive missionary work among adherents of these three religions. There can be no doubt at all that in the course of the missionary preaching the Manichaean religious system could be expressed more strongly against a Christian, Zoroastrian or Buddhist background – the extant sources show that clearly. Moreover, the most famous early Latin theologian, the North African Augustine, could become a Manichaean for a while in the firm conviction that he could remain a Christian and was merely learning a deeper understanding of Christianity (this was in the years 373–82). To this degree it is true at least for Manichaeism that this 'gnostic system' adapted itself to existing forms of religion – here representatives of the two interpretative approaches could use the image of a parasitical form of religion, were it not intrinsically problematical because of the value judgement contained in it.

As well as the prior judgement already mentioned, further factors were and are responsible for the various pictures of 'gnosis'. Here I shall mention just the two most important. First, there is the general history of the scholarly disciplines which have taken part in investigating the phenomenon; and secondly, there is a specific situation which has been defined, and time and again changed, by a number of striking textual discoveries.

The history of research into Manichaeism in particular shows how closely the development of more recent research is bound up with the history of the disciplines involved in it. If we are to understand the amazingly rapid

dissemination of the image of gnosis as an independent world religion, we must be clear that from the late nineteenth century onwards an autonomous study of religion increasingly came to be established at the universities, independent of theology, and that there was great interest in recognizing the premises of particular pictures of the history of religion and isolating them from the phenomena. A formula from the last major comprehensive German account which draws a distinction between the 'narrowness of church history' and the 'free air of the history of religion' (Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 37) is significant for such perspectives.

Moreover, the history of research shows particularly clearly that the historical picture of 'gnosis' has changed markedly by contrast with the schemes of antiquity and early modernity, above all following the major discoveries of texts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But here research was dependent on the one hand on the particular state of philological and editorial efforts and on the other hand on the competence of an individual scholar who had been occupied with this field: knowledge of Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Turkish (Ugrian) and Chinese texts, along with texts in four Persian dialects, is necessary for researching into Manichaeism; and by no means all the texts discovered in the twentieth century are available in critical editions. Here texts which were purchased in the 1930s and which presumably came from a library in Medinet Madi, a military colony in the south of the Fayum, are particularly remarkable. In recent years, important finds have also come to light in a desert oasis on the west of Egypt by the name of Dakleh, interestingly in an archaeological context which indicates 'gnostics'. The exploration of these finds is still in its infancy.

The discovery of texts at Nag Hammadi, which has already been mentioned, also required great philological efforts, because the tractates, originally written in Greek, were discovered in forms of Coptic dialect for which there were no reliable grammars or lexica at the time of the discovery. In this way much attention had to be paid to

opening up the language of the text, and a remarkably refined philology of Persian and Coptic dialects came into being. Because of that, however, the investigation of the tradition history of the writing and their historical context took a back place: in other words, the initially great philological problems of the texts and the special situation of the discipline of the study of religion meant that 'gnosis' was more markedly perceived as an independent movement and religion than it would perhaps have been in other circumstances.

Whereas for the reasons mentioned the second model, that of understanding 'gnosis' as an independent, non-Christian religion, was the most far-reaching consensus among scholars, above all in the second half of the twentieth century, this unity has been shattered in recent years, and as in many other areas the present situation is characterized by a new diversity of models. The discovery that there is no single 'gnostic myth' but a variety of myths which cannot be derived from a single original myth was also essentially responsible for this – we can already find a similar observation in various Christian authors of antiquity. However, it is expressed in a polemical form, as when the various outlines of systems are compared with the Hydra, a mythological monster with nine heads which, as often as one head was cut off, grew two new ones (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Refutation* I, 30, 15; Hippolytus, *Refutation* V, 11). This at the same time led to the collapse of the central thesis of research, namely that a non-Christian myth was at the core of 'gnosis', the so-called myth of the 'redeemed redeemer'. Leading representatives of the 'history-of-religions school', a friendly alliance of the theologians and experts on religion at the beginning of the twentieth century, had postulated that 'gnosis' had taken over such a 'primordial man' myth in an altered form from the earliest sources of Zoroastrian, ancient Persian religion. Above all the New Testament scholar Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) and the history-of-religions expert Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931), both for a time active in Göttingen, should be mentioned here. Bousset described the myth like this:

'There was an age-old myth which reported that the world came about through the sacrifice of the primal man, was formed from his body ... This myth then took a new turn to the degree that the Greek world of ideas consorted with oriental fantasies. The primal man sacrificed at the beginning of the creation of the world now becomes the *proanthropos* (Greek for the 'pre-man'), the firstborn of the supreme deity ... who at the beginning of the development of the world sinks down into matter or is seduced into matter and so provides the impetus for the creation of the world ... The primal man who descends into matter and is defeated here, and is liberated only laboriously and with the loss of his equipment of light, is clearly a cosmogonic potency. The whole development of the world is derived from the mixing of the parts of the light from the primal man with the elements of darkness' (Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, 1907, 215–17). According to Reitzenstein, a mythical notion had already existed in Iran 'which regards the soul or the inner person as a divine being sent down into matter from the light world and again freed from it and recalled to it' (Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, 1921, V). This 'primordial man' was the first to be redeemed and at the same time the redeemer for the rest of humankind, hence also the myth of the 'redeemed redeemer'.

The background to such constructions at the beginning of the twentieth century was enthusiasm about the discovery of new hitherto completely unknown ancient texts: on the expeditions of the Berlin Museum on the Silk Road and especially at the Chinese oasis of Turfan in the years between 1902 and 1914, a large number of larger or smaller fragments were collected containing texts in a great variety of oriental languages. At the time when Reitzenstein wrote about them, however, they had by no means been completely published. So the construct of a myth of the 'redeemed redeemer' and the derivation of ancient 'gnosis' from early Persian mythology that was built on it was on very shaky ground. Later, after the critical edition of the relevant passages, it proved, for example, that a central

piece of Reitzenstein's evidence was not part of an ancient Zoroastrian text at all, but came from a cycle of Manichaean hymns. Because of this, among other things the derivation of a 'gnostic' myth of the 'primordial man' from the Zoroastrian religion had to be given up at the beginning of the 1960s. Two Berlin scholars, Carsten Colpe and Hans-Martin Schenke, dealt the death-blow to the old hypothesis of the 'history-of-religions school' with their dissertations of 1961 and 1962. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that a myth of the man which resembles the scheme once developed by Reitzenstein is attested in certain texts traditionally assigned to 'gnosis', though not in all. Relevant examples can be found above all in the texts found at Nag Hammadi: 'For this one, Adamas, is a light which radiated from the light; he is the eye of the light. For this is the first man, he through whom and to whom everything became ... He came down from above, for the annulment of the deficiency' (EvEg, NHC III, 2, 49, 8-16; cf. *ibid.*, IV 2, 61, 8-18). Our example shows how complicated the situation has become after the collapse of the great hypotheses. Individual explanations must now be sought for a wealth of different texts from very different groups. That of course makes the question of the historical derivation and dissemination of individual ideas all the more urgent. Are they characteristically 'gnostic' at all? Or are they a combination of various Jewish and Christian speculations about biblical texts to which there is a clear allusion in our example (e.g. John 1.3: 'All things were made through him', or John 1.9, 'He [i.e. the incarnate word of God] was the true light')?

At the end of this brief section on the problems of more recent research into gnosis I return to an observation that I made in the section on the term 'gnosis'. The unity of a phenomenon named since antiquity with the Greek term of 'knowledge' is a comparatively loose one; it has existed for centuries above all on the basis of the typological constructions of scholars concerned to provide a clear ordering of things, whether for motives of 'combating heresy' or in the interest of a general history of ideas,

religion and culture. The more strongly this evidence is perceived, the easier it is to explain the *de facto* plurality of the approaches and use them creatively to understand 'gnosis'. In other words, the plurality of approaches in recent years is appropriate in so far as it takes account of the fact that the unitary phenomenon of 'gnosis' to which all reconstructions relate exists only in the form of various typological constructions. The historical chapters which follow will, however, attempt to demonstrate that it makes sense to consider particular phenomena by means of such a model. At the end of the book we shall return once again to the question of what effects what we have subsumed in antiquity under the term 'gnosis' have had up to European modernity and finally even up to the immediate present (pp. 119-22).