

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*

Michael Allen Williams, Princeton University Press. 1996. 335 pages. 0-691-00542-7

*Reviewed by Steven Armstrong Ph.D. (Cand)*

“Gnosticism” has fired the imagination of both scholars and the public for the better part of two centuries, yet the very term has become a matter of controversy. As the late scholar of Renaissance Magic, Ioan Culianu ironically quipped in his essay “The Gnostic Revenge”: “... all things and their opposite are equally gnostic,” commenting on the overuse and misuse of the term.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls in 1945, the majority of “Gnostic” and other “heretical” literature came from fragments preserved in the polemical writings of ancient heresiologists – those opposed to these traditions and communities. Together with the few “Gnostic” manuscripts that survived, the Nag Hammadi finds have opened this aspect of Late Antiquity to us in a new way. Scholars such as G.R.S. Mead and M.R. James to more recent George MacRae, James M. Robinson, Hans Jonas, Jean-Pierre Mahé, PHEME Perkins and Elaine Pagels, and the many others Williams acknowledges in his introduction have labored with great insight on both the older and more newly discovered texts.

Modern students of history have known for many years that in order to fully comprehend phenomena of a time and place as remote from us as Late Antique Egypt and the Mediterranean one must take the people, their beliefs and contemporary usages seriously. Scholars from various disciplines such as Notre Dame’s John Dunne, Princeton’s Peter Brown and Berkeley’s Susanna Elm and GTU’s Rebecca Lyman have all encouraged this “crossing over” into the lived reality of other times, other places, together with all of the modern tools of analysis at our disposal.

From this perspective, Michael Allen Williams, Chair of Comparative Religion and Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington, begins from the startling datum that “... when used for the modern category ‘Gnosticism,’ ‘Gnosis,’ or ‘the Gnostic religion,’ *none* of these terms has an ancient equivalent. Antiquity quite literally had no word for the persons who are the subject of the present study – that is, no single word. The category is a modern construction.”<sup>2</sup> If we are to take Late Antique peoples and cultures on their own terms, a rethinking is strongly indicated.

Carefully moving forward, Williams then surveys the history of scholarly uses and meanings of the word “Gnosticism,” and the categorizations of the diverse groups that are usually thought to be included from ancient times to the present. While he is thorough, he is also quite schematic, and provides extremely useful tables and charts cataloguing, for example, the Heresiological materials and the “heretical” groups they dealt with, and the judgment of modern scholarship on the “gnostic” or “non-gnostic” nature of the documents within the Nag Hammadi Library.

Once having demonstrated the difficulty of using “Gnosticism” as a category, and suggesting alternatives, Williams moves to consider the most common stereotypes concerning these various ancient religious movements. In a series of chapters, he discusses the available data from historical, textual, theological and social science perspectives to conclude that the typical descriptions of “Gnostics” are almost invariably improbable and often exactly the opposite of the truth.

For example, rather than practicing “protest exegesis” on the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, Williams suggests that they were “problem solving” universally difficult passages using a variety of hermeneutical approaches. He also points out the inconsistencies of the accusations that these groups both hated the body, and were libertines. His research indicates that rather than these attitudes, they may well have striven for the perfection of human person.

These chapters include a fascinating discussion of the sociology of emerging religious movements as they exhibit signs of being a “sect” (high degree of sociopolitical deviance) or a “church” (balance between cultural accommodation and counterculturalism) or fall into extinction when the group and the surrounding culture so closely approximate one another that there is no longer any need for a separate organization.

Williams concludes this section of chapters with a review of the scholarship on the origins of “Gnosticism,” once again concluding that such an attempt is flawed from the beginning by the misuse of a category. Rather, he argues that future scholarship will have a much better chance to determine the origin of specific movements (e.g. Valentinians, Sethians, et al.), freed from the mistaken need to find an origin for a whole (spurious) category of religious groups.

The final chapter provides a fascinating, novel and convincing argument that the Nag Hammadi Library is an intentional, catechetical collection. Based on paleography, literary, theological and philosophical analysis, he suggests that various codices may have conscious arrangements based on (1) history of revelation, (2) analogy with the canonical New Testament, (3) liturgical usage and (4) ascent and eschatology. His theory allows for a consistent understanding of the previously surprising diversity of the content of these philosophical, theological and speculative writings. All of this is demonstrated by very useful charts of the Nag Hammadi codices and the writings they contain.

His conclusion as to the nature of the community that compiled and employed this collection is equally bold, but after his painstaking argumentation, quite reasonable. According to Williams, they were most probably fourth century Egyptian Christian Monks who

“... seem to have been persons (1) who accepted the biblical demiurgical proposition that the cosmos was not created as a result of the initiative of highest God, (2) who were intensely interested in speculation about the true nature of divinity and the supracosmic

realms, (3) who were focused on the soul's eventual transcendence of the created order and on patterns of spirituality that would contribute to this goal, and (4) who saw nothing un-Christian in these views."<sup>3</sup>

I recommend this volume regularly to students and those who want a "first book" on the phenomenon usually called "Gnosticism." Among its benefits to the reader the following are outstanding:

- A thorough, systematic review of the primary and secondary sources;
- A succinct review of the literature, leading to a reading of other scholarship with renewed appreciation for its achievement, but also a critical eye toward the problems adduced;
- A schematic overview of the phenomena of these religious movements in late antiquity, employing analysis from all relevant disciplines;
- A foundation for a comprehensive (and transdisciplinary) theory for their emergence and decline, including approaches from many fields, including history of religions, sociology, literary analysis, paleography, secular history and theology;
- For the casual reader, an engaging style that takes what might be seen as a complex subject, and without oversimplification, allows non-specialists to see how conclusions are reached from the available evidence;
- For the researcher seeking to do further study, an extensive scholarly apparatus, including 17 pages of bibliography, 43 pages of textual notes, very useful analytic charts, etc.

Finally, this reviewer has only one minor quibble, one that Williams himself acknowledges. One alternative category that the author suggests is "Biblical-Demiurgical." This would denote the religious groups that had in common the heritage of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, but, as we have seen, who also accept the "proposition that the cosmos was not created as a result of the initiative of highest God."

Although the category of "Biblical-Demiurgical" is much more effective in discussing these diverse ancient movements, it has nowhere the romantic ring of "Gnosticism." While accepting Williams' thesis, the quest for a suitably poetic replacement still eludes us, and the cumbersome locution "groups formerly referred to as 'Gnostic'" must do for now.

A contemporary study of this same area, and one well worth reading in its own right, Karen L. King's, *What is Gnosticism?* suggests that even the category "Biblical Demiurgical" should be avoided, and the various groups be dealt with individually. In fact, Williams and King (Harvard Divinity School) have been in mutual dialogue for many years in their studies of Late Antiquity and the Nag Hammadi codices, and demonstrate the way in which scholarship is supposed to work, for the orderly and cooperative progress of knowledge.

As reviewer Nicola Denzey put it, “[t]hey each carefully and graciously acknowledge one another in their forewords; it is clear that their connections have fostered genuine respect and mutual fondness rather than competition.”<sup>4</sup>

Michael Allen Williams’ *Rethinking Gnosticism* is a work of thorough scholarship, an engaging read, and is already well on the way to becoming a “Prolegomena to any future studies” of this historical / religious phenomenon. Both academics and others who are seriously interested in beginning or deepening knowledge of this aspect of Late Antiquity – which has increased relevance for us today in an era of spiritual diversity – have a valuable resource in this volume.

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<sup>1</sup> Ioan Culianu, “The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature.” In Jacob Taubes, ed, *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie, Band 2: Gnosis und Politik*. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink / Ferdinand Schöningh, 1984), 290 – 306.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, c1996, 1999), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 262-262.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Denzey, “Review of Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*” in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, July 26, 2003. Webpage updated October 29, 2003. Accessed May 19, 2004. Available at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2003/2003-07-26.html>.