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The End of Gnosticism?

Lost texts of Christianity have created scholarly excitement and news-media buzz. So why do some researchers say we're using the wrong name for them?

By RICHARD BYRNE

Boston

From the moment that Karen L. King entered Brown University's graduate program in religion, in the 1970s, she wanted to study Gnosticism. She was one of several religious-studies students of that era whose interest in the Gnostics was sparked by increased access to a treasure trove of ancient writings that had been discovered in 1945 near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi.

The brittle papyri found in Egypt were filled with lost sayings attributed to Jesus and provocative notions about his death and resurrection and the creation of the cosmos. Such writings had been labeled "heretical" by influential second- and third-century Christian bishops, and most of them were destroyed. People who adhered to such beliefs were eventually hounded out of mainstream Christianity and became a footnote in its history.

Now a professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard University's Divinity School, Ms. King is one of the foremost experts in a field that has received immense popular attention since the publication of Dan Brown's best-selling 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday) and the April news blitz surrounding the Gospel of Judas — a newly unveiled lost text of early Christianity.

Yet the buzz around Gnosticism has drowned out an energetic and fundamental debate among scholars of early Christianity: Does Gnosticism even exist?

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Ms. King has not lost her relish for the study of the texts that fall under that rubric. But she and other scholars — most notably Michael Allen Williams, a professor of comparative religion at the University of Washington — are asking hard questions about a definition of Gnosticism accepted for nearly 1,500 years.

Is the term imprecise — or even useless? Has its continued use by scholars stymied new breakthroughs in research on the Nag Hammadi texts?

Ms. King says that her work on texts such as the Apocryphon of John and the Gospel of Mary led her to the conclusion that "Gnosticism" is a bankrupt term for the Nag Hammadi writings and those whose beliefs they reflected. "With both texts," she says, "I kept trying to get them to fit into the mold, and they kept slipping out."

Both Ms. King and Mr. Williams have written trenchant book-length critiques of the term in the last decade. But many other scholars in the field, while agreeing that the term must be used with precision, argue that "Gnosticism" is still useful and necessary.

Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, sees the campaign to scrap the term altogether as a bit over the top. "I think it's a knee-jerk reaction," he says.

Sitting in the living room of her home in suburban Boston, Ms. King passionately insists that "Gnosticism" needs to go if scholars want to paint a more diverse and authentic picture of early Christianity. Yet she acknowledges the strength of the current against which she and others are swimming.

"It's extremely difficult to change a master narrative," she says. "And we've had this master narrative of Christianity since at least the fourth century. ... It's become entrenched."

History's Mysteries

That "master narrative" of Christianity traditionally sets those it calls Gnostics — a word derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, or "knowledge" — against the Christian orthodoxy from which they deviated.

In this narrative, the dividing lines are sharp. Where Christians embraced the God of the Old Testament as part of a new Trinity, Gnostics rejected that God as the Supreme Being. (Some of them believed the Old Testament God who created earth was a lower spirit, or "demiurge," and argued that his lesser status explained the manifold imperfections of his creation.) Christians believed that Jesus was crucified, died, and physically rose from the dead, while Gnostics held a variety of opinions about Jesus' death and resurrection, including the possibility that it was symbolic. Christians relied on a shared knowledge of scripture as interpreted by bishops, but Gnostics held that "secret" teachings of Christ and his apostles also existed.

This definition of Gnosticism was formulated mostly by its enemies. Until the 1940s, almost everything scholars knew about Gnostics came from the writings of early Christian bishops such

as Irenaeus of Lyon, who in the second century attacked the theology and the ethics of Gnostics and declared them to be heretics. In refuting the Gnostics, however, the bishops did preserve some accounts of their beliefs — and even their writings.

Until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, those ancient polemics were the primary sources for most scholarly explorations about the Gnostics. In her 2003 book, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Belknap/Harvard University Press), Ms. King devotes three chapters to tracing how scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries approached Gnosticism before that scholarly windfall. She argues that the lack of new evidence about Gnosticism forced researchers to work creatively within the definition written by the enemies of Gnostics more than 15 centuries before.

Elaine H. Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton University and author of a number of important books on early Christianity, points to the German scholar Hans Jonas's influential 1934 work, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist (Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity)*, as a good example of how that dynamic played out. Sifting the ancient evidence with psychology and existential philosophy, she observes, Jonas described the Gnostics as essentially alienated from the world. From that sense of separation, they fashioned a theology that emphasized a duality between body and spirit — and extended that duality to create new myths about the cosmos.

"His book was so compelling," says Ms. Pagels, "that it became the framework in which people saw the discoveries made 10 years later. His scheme was so persuasive that it was taken by many people to be the underlying structure."

Doubting Dualism

The discovery of 45 lost texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945 gave scholars a new perspective on Gnosticism. They now could read "gospels" and "revelations" by believers the early Church fathers had labeled heretics. The papyri even contained attacks against orthodox Christians that accused *them* of heresy. (A Nag Hammadi text called the Apocalypse of Peter, for instance, assails "those outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons. ... They are dry canals.")

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts "shows that the Gnostics sincerely and reverently held these beliefs," says Mr. Ehrman. "Their attacks on the proto-orthodox as heretical were one of the most illuminating things for me."

The impact of the discovery in scholarly circles was by no means immediate, however. Dissemination of the texts was slowed by academic turf wars. Few scholars were proficient in Coptic, the language in which the newly discovered papyri were inscribed.

By the 1970s, however, scholars were working on the texts in earnest. The publication in 1978 of *The Nag Hammadi Library* (HarperCollins), edited by James M. Robinson, a professor emeritus of religion at Claremont Graduate University, provided English translations of all the texts found in 1945 and two additional texts found in 1896.

In 1979, Ms. Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House) was a popular success that brought the Nag Hammadi texts — and the theological, social, and political issues they raised — to a wider audience.

But as the notoriety of Gnostic writings grew, some scholars — including Ms. Pagels and Ms. King — grew dissatisfied with what they saw as the outdated interpretive framework that had attached itself to the texts like a barnacle.

In *What Is Gnosticism?*, Ms. King argued that the promise of "a new chapter in the history of Christianity" offered by the Nag Hammadi discoveries had not materialized. "The new riches did not provide quick or easy solutions," she wrote. "Indeed, the surprise is that for decades little has changed."

But Ms. King was not the first scholar to fashion a book-length critique of Gnosticism as it had been defined. In 1996 Mr. Williams, of the University of Washington, wrote a book bluntly titled *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press). In that book, he crafted a comprehensive analysis of the ways that the Gnostic texts themselves rejected many of the assumptions generally held about them. Mr. Williams concluded that the texts varied so greatly in outlook and substance that the overall term made little sense.

For instance, he asked, did the myths created by Gnostics about the creation of the world by lower powers ("demiurges") really mean that Gnostics rejected the world? "In fact," writes Mr. Williams, "demiurgical myth seems in many instances to have been associated with greater involvement with the larger society, not less."

Reflecting on his book a decade later, Mr. Williams says that "at least as problematic as the term 'Gnosticism' were the categories used to describe it. ... People seemed to have open avenues to go to any certain text with a category in mind, and a set of expectations, and, of course, you find what you're looking for."

Scary Similarities

In *What Is Gnosticism?*, Ms. King undermined the term by tracing the history of its use to the present day. In essence, she says, she intended the book to "clean the slate" for a radical rethinking of how to interpret the writings and the beliefs of those who wrote and read them.

One provocative notion she sets forth is that to view Gnosticism solely in terms of its opposition to normative Christianity — heresy versus orthodoxy, public confession versus private teaching — impedes an understanding that it was the *similarities* between the Gnostics and their orthodox opponents, and not the differences, that fueled intense conflict in the early church.

Early in *What is Gnosticism?*, Ms. King observes that anti-Gnostic polemicists "took their rivals so seriously and denounced them so emphatically precisely because their views were in many respects so similar to the polemicists' own."

In an interview, Ms. King expands on her theory. "When you

map out the similarities rather than the differences between the two sides — or what Irenaeus says are the differences — the territory of similarity is huge," she says. "Both work with this notion of humanity created in the image and likeness of God — and the need for a restoration of that. They both see Christ as the revealer figure, with the body as the place where the struggle takes place. They both have views at the end where humanity is divided into three groups depending on how you do."

Ms. Pagels agrees that "if we drop the invented terms, what we have is many different types of early Christianity. When I used the title *The Gnostic Gospels*, I assumed that they were all Gnostic. Now I would say that these are other Christianities. ... It's difficult for all of us who were raised the way we were to get rid of the assumptions. The act of shedding assumptions is only done one by one, and with great difficulty."

In *What is Gnosticism?*, Ms. King also took issue with Mr. Williams's decision to propose "biblical demiurgical myth" as a replacement term for Gnosticism. She argued that the new term retained assumptions that should be discarded in its favoring of "one mythic element over all others as the determinant characteristic" to define the texts.

"The result of Mr. Williams's study," she quipped, "has been merely to lead scholars to put Gnosticism in quotation marks and use it in more or less as always."

In conversation, Ms. King says that Mr. Williams's book was "a necessary step. Because what he's doing is working inside the box to critique it. He takes those typological definitions of Gnosticism and says 'Asceticism or libertinism? This or that?' And he shows us that this-or-that model of Gnosticism moves us in a different direction, and that there are other ways of seeing it, and also that the old stereotypes don't work.

"But then," she continues, "once you see that the old stereotypes don't work, and there's more going on there, what he comes up with at the end is a new term: 'biblical demiurgical myth.' It does not slip off the lips very easily. And one has to say, 'What does that mean?'"

Defenders of the Faith

Mr. Williams acknowledges the awkwardness of his term, but says many of his critics have been misguided.

"People thought I was just swapping names," he says. "Maybe there could have been something more eloquent, but I was suggesting that it might be good — as we looked at this diversity of texts — to also look at the things that group them together."

Indeed, the difficulty in talking about the Nag Hammadi texts and other writings as a group prods some scholars to defend the terms Gnostic and Gnosticism as necessary.

"I truly see the point that Karen makes about this," says Marvin W. Meyer, a professor of Bible and Christian studies at Chapman University. "That these terms are polemical terms, rhetorical terms. They define the Other. But what always makes me pause before abandoning 'Gnostic' is the fact that Irenaeus says that there are certain people who refer to themselves as 'Gnostikoi.' If

they think of themselves as Gnostikois, it gives me a certain confidence."

Mr. Meyer adds that he does "try to avoid the term Gnosticism. I think it's a neologism that has come into existence over the past century to cover a lot of different things."

Mr. Ehrman, of North Carolina, also believes the term is useful. "We talk about 'Christianity,' 'Judaism,' and 'apocalypticism,'" he points out, "even though there are many varieties of each."

While he does not agree with Mr. Williams's critique of the term, Mr. Ehrman does share his colleague's desire to plot out what links these texts together. "One of the things historians do in trying to understand the past is to try to find and understand commonalities," says Mr. Ehrman. "Religious historians group things together based on shared beliefs and practices. When we say 'Jew,' we mean something by it. ... A lot of these terms are slippery, but when there are enough similarities, they are shared enough that you can label them."

Doing away with "Gnosticism" entirely, he concludes, "would be to fragment our knowledge to such an extent that we can't know what we're talking about."

In some ways, Mr. Ehrman says, the skirmishes over definition are "old battles." He also worries that efforts to disentangle the Gnostics from their defeat in early Christianity's battles over heresy may simply be swapping the losing side's black hat for a white hat.

"There's a feeling that the Gnostics have to be the good guys," he says.

Mr. Williams says that Ms. King's work in particular is a step toward "breaking away from the way in which these old categories end up privileging the mainstream model of Christianity.

"But," he continues, "my approach is different. ... I think it is important to approach them from a historical perspective, and not always to judge them theologically against normative Christianity." The various strands of belief that are labeled as Gnostic, says Mr. Williams, "were attempts at religious innovation that did not enjoy majority success. What came to be orthodox Christianity did. I treat them sociologically to understand why they were minority movements."

Back to the Future

A question that *What Is Gnosticism?* left open is just what the book's author proposes to replace "Gnosticism." After taking a wrecking ball to the concept, Ms. King offered only the haziest of ways forward at the conclusion of her study.

So what should replace it? "What if we write the history of Christian identity creation," she says, "and instead of having our already-established categories of orthodoxy and heresy, with all of their diversity, we start asking, Where do Christians draw lines? Who did it? What was at stake? Using what tools?"

Ms. King says that her latest works — *The Gospel of Mary of*

Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle (Polebridge Press, 2003) and *The Secret Revelation of John* (Harvard University Press, 2006) — are attempts to write new chapters in that history of early Christian identity, one historical text at a time. Both of Ms. King's studies closely examine one text often defined as Gnostic, and include a translation of the work.

Many of the scholars in the field see such close readings as a strong trend in current scholarship.

"What's going on now is close work on individual texts or groups of texts, asking specific sets of questions," says Mr. Williams.

But how does Ms. King's theoretical approach make her studies different? For one thing, her rejection of "Gnosticism" leads her to place both the Gospel of Mary and the Apocryphon of John at a distance from the classic Gnostic definition.

In *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, for instance, she concludes that the text contains few elements that scholars define as Gnostic. Rather, she observes, it was that gospel's arguments "that the resurrection is spiritual, not physical" and its affirmation "that women can serve as teachers and preachers" that led it to be branded later as a heretical text.

Ms. King's latest book, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Harvard University Press), transforms a text often used to define Gnosticism, the Apocryphon of John, into a wrestling match among Plato, the Pentateuch, the New Testament Gospel of John, and other ancient spiritualities. She argues that while some parts of this particular writing possess classic Gnostic characteristics (the God of the Old Testament, for example, is cast as a renegade and ignorant child of the embodiment of Wisdom), other parts of the text argue against the classic definition.

In an interview, Ms. King points to a lengthy litany of demons that the Apocryphon of John associates with various parts of the body. Previous scholars have taken this passage to represent a Gnostic rejection of the body as evil, she says. But Ms. King reads it as exactly the opposite: a blueprint for healing. "It is said that Gnostics had no valuation of the body," she says, "but then you have this text — more than half of which is a description of the body."

The Nag Hammadi texts reveal many new things about early Christianity, scholars say. But they do so in dribs and drabs. The texts are fragmentary. They are complex. They offer no smooth avenues or easy interpretations.

"Any time you have new texts of this complexity," says Ms. King, "it requires living with them for awhile, and working with them and working with them, until you gain that kind of understanding. It's partly a matter of research and partly a matter of rethinking. I think this is a big challenge not just for the broader public but for scholars: to be able to reimagine the history of Christianity and to make these texts a part of that history. Right now, they're still off to the edge."

NAVIGATING GNOSTICISM

So you have read *The Da Vinci Code* and heard about the Gospel of Judas. Where do you go from there? Not surprisingly, there are plenty of works written by scholars about how the Nag Hammadi texts and other ancient Coptic writings have altered our understanding of early Christianity.

- One place to start is with the texts themselves. The *Nag Hammadi Library* (HarperSanFrancisco), edited by James M. Robinson, provides an English translation and brief commentaries on all the texts found in Egypt in 1945 and two additional texts unearthed in 1896.
- Two introductions for general readers are Marvin W. Meyer's *The Gnostic Discoveries* (HarperSanFrancisco) and Bart D. Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* (Oxford University Press). The latter volume places the Nag Hammadi texts in the wider spectrum of early Christian writings.
- Four books written by Elaine H. Pagels — *The Gnostic Gospels*; *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*; *The Origin of Satan*; and *Beyond Belief* (all published in paperback by Vintage) — are classic examples of scholarly writing for a general audience that artfully weave the Nag Hammadi writings back into Old and New Testament texts.
- The trend toward studies of individual texts has produced such works as Karen L. King's study of the Apocryphon of John (*The Secret Revelation of John*, Harvard University Press) and a study of the Gospel of Mary (*The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, Polebridge Press). Mr. Meyer has published two such studies — *The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, the Companion of Jesus*; and *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco).
- Ms. King's 2003 book *What Is Gnosticism?* (Belknap/Harvard University Press) is a strong attack on this particular strata of scholarship on early Christianity. The other classic assault on the definition of Gnosticism is Michael Allen Williams's 1996 book, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press).
- And, yes, Judas Iscariot. There are two competing accounts of the fractious behind-the-scenes scramble to purchase and translate the Gospel of Judas: Mr. Robinson's *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (HarperSanFrancisco) and *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (National Geographic Society), by Herbert Krosney, a freelance writer. Neither book contains the actual text of the gospel, available only in *The Gospel of Judas* (National Geographic), which also contains commentary on the text by Mr. Meyer and Mr. Ehrman.

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