

Eugene Afonasin

## RELIGIOUS MIND: GNOSTIC ETHOS

### IN THE PERIOD OF THE CULTURAL TRANSITION

#### Introductory remarks

The Mediterranean world in the second century AD underwent a profound change in ethical attitude towards the *kosmos* and human society, and the change is especially well reflected in one of the most controversial intellectual movement of the Late Antiquity, the so-called Gnostic tradition. Although attempts to draw a coherent picture of Gnosis which have been undertaken so far have yielded no satisfactory result, the basic patterns of thought, commonly labeled as 'Gnostic', are reasonably well known. Taken in the broadest sense of the word, Gnosticism is a specific world attitude. In the framework of Judeo-Christian world-view the Gnostics contemplated the world affairs from a global prospective, put them in the context of world history and developed a specific form of eschatology.

In this paper I have undertaken to interpret selected historical evidence, which can throw the light upon the development of this quite diverse and controversial tradition.

#### I. The *Gnosticoi*

Despite important discoveries of new documents, mainly the Coptic Gnostic Library, the question of the origin of Gnosticism is still obscure, and the Patristic evidence is still important in this respect. The *opinio communis* of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement and other early Christian authors of the second and the beginning of the third centuries consists in a remarkable claim that the roots of Gnosis are found in an ancient doctrine of certain *gnosticoi* (the references and quotes cf. below).

Possibly the name can be traced back to the "gnosis falsely so called" of the early Christian literature, which could, in this respect, be a valuable source for the Gnostic studies.<sup>1</sup> The problem is, however, that the information, which can be discerned from our earliest sources, is too

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rudolph, 1995:34–52, esp. 50–52. A general overview: Robinson, 1983:1–18. Cf. also detailed studies by Koester, 1980 and 1990 (where, for the first time, the Gnostic texts are given due attention).

fragmentary and cannot be interpreted without additional material. Besides, the 'canonical' texts are quite heterogeneous and have undergone a serious corruption in the course of centuries.<sup>2</sup> This makes it impossible to speak of a before-Christian, Christian and post-Christian (or Christianized) gnosis, since we cannot say what we should label as the Christian in the beginning of the second century, when the first distinctive Gnostic schools came to stage.

Our understanding of the Gnostic religion depends on those institutional settings in which we are prepared to place it. Based upon the statements of Irenaeus, Justin, Celsus, Hegysippus, Clement and others we can, with a degree of certainty, state that, at least from the first part of the second century, in Rome, Alexandria, Judea and other big centers of education and learning there existed certain informal societies, which accepted various types of teaching with pro-Christian and anti-Judaic stanza.

Moreover they possessed books and even the whole collections of writings, concerned to such metaphysical and ethical questions of primary significance as the origins of the world, the place human beings are supposed to occupy within the structure of the universe, etc. The answers given were shrouded in a complicated myth and presented either in a form of oracles or as collections of sayings, or both.<sup>3</sup> Authority of the literature of this sort is based on its anonymity and, most often, on its alleged antiquity. On the contrary, the works by such authors as Basilides or Valentinus did not have and could not pretend to have a similar status. At most they were accepted as skillful commentaries of the revealed oracles, authoritative in certain circles.<sup>4</sup> But activity of this sort can only be successful in a social framework – already structured and organized.

We don't know how these peoples called themselves, but their opponents quite reasonably labeled them 'gnostics' since their teachings were focused on *gnosis*, a secret knowledge, revealed to an elite, regardless the content of the revelation and the method the elite was chosen.<sup>5</sup> Among the highest heavenly deities they always placed an intellectual entity, usually Nous or Ennoia; the perfect man, Adamas, was associated with perfect knowledge; Christ came to reveal

---

<sup>2</sup> The texts which later formed the canon were constantly corrected in accordance with the current doctrinal changes. Therefore they can serve as a good source for the history of Gnosticism, not visa versa. Consult the book by Ehrman, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> For the structure and nature of the collection of this sort cf., for instance: Turner, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The fact is supported by the evidence. Cf., for instance, Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 7, 6–8.

<sup>5</sup> The latter was actually a matter of hot debate even among the Gnostics. A rare example of this polemics is the *Testimony of Truth* (NH IX, 55, 29).

knowledge<sup>6</sup>; the tree of knowledge also played a central role in the myth<sup>7</sup>, etc. It is quite possible, as Alastair Logan notes,<sup>8</sup> that among them there was a group, especially adherent to a specific type of myth, finally materialized in the *Apocryphon of John*. This hypothesis would explain the fact that the heresiologists are unanimously talking about certain Gnostics, saying that the rest are derived from them (which is not necessary true). I shall illustrate this matter in more details in the second part of my paper.

Now. Can we, with any degree of certainty, say that Gnostic ‘schools’ or ‘sects’ physically existed as identified social institutes? Did certain schools (philosophic or religious) exist in this time, and, if we answer ‘Yes’, how they were organized, according to which principles functioned, and how the everyday life of these schools looked like?

This question has recently received much attention. John Whittaker suggested that Gnosis could hardly be found in an institutionalized form similar to a philosophic school.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary Barbara Aland, despite obvious difference between gnosis and philosophy, insisted on analogy between the philosophic schools and the school of Valentinus.<sup>10</sup> On the question of the ‘School of Valentinus’ we now have a valuable study by Christoph Marksches.<sup>11</sup> His diagnosis is the following: firstly, the very fact of existence of the school must remain hypothetical, because of the lack of *reliable* historical evidence; and, secondly, there is a reason to doubt that any Gnostic school ever existed due to a special non-institutional character of Gnosis. I had also discussed the problem a few years ago.<sup>12</sup> My diagnosis is closer to this by Ch. Marksches. Indeed, if we look at the evidence closely we will, almost immediately, realize that all the informants are both suspect and dependent on each other. The story about two different schools, founded by Valentinus, told by Hippolytus and others is certainly an anachronistic attempt to present Gnosticism as an organized movement. The minor differences in the doctrine would hardly become a basis for the division, although a relative isolation could lead to divergences in the original teaching of Valentinus.<sup>13</sup> But these differences are not necessarily related to Western and Oriental ‘schools’. For instance, Heracleon, the most important follower of Valentinus, whom Hippolytus connects

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the *Gospel of Truth* (NH 1, 3, 18, 1–11), *Iren.*, AH I 21, 4; 29, 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NH V 5, 64, 6–19).

<sup>8</sup> Logan, 1996:10.

<sup>9</sup> In the discussion of the paper by Stead in Layton, 1981:96.

<sup>10</sup> Aland, 1977:34–73.

<sup>11</sup> Marksches, 1997:401–438.

<sup>12</sup> Afonasin, 2003:112–163.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kaestli, in Layton, 1981:391–403.

with the Western school, is known exclusively from the polemical works by Clement and Origen, both of Alexandria.<sup>14</sup> Still Hippolytus' wording (Ref. VI 35, 5) as well as a sarcastic expression by Tertullian (Adv. Val. 11, 2: *duae scholae, duae cathedrae*<sup>15</sup>) could mean that the followers of Valentinus and other Gnostics established certain institutions, possibly with the purpose of instruction for money (Mark the Magician in Irenaeus). This certainly resembles a school, rather than a 'sect'.<sup>16</sup>

In this situation any additional information or a cross-reference concerned the origins of Gnosticism and its possible institutional settings is valuable. In addition to a number of doxographic statements by Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Epiphanius and others, we possess an evidence by Clement of Alexandria, who, they say, also was a head of a 'school'. I doubt the historicity of the latter, but still, it is interesting that, in the contrast with the others, Clement speaks about Gnostic schools very rarely: once a 'school' of Carpocrates is mentioned and several times the followers of Valentinus and Basilides (or 'those around Valentinus', 'those around Basilides', etc.) are accused of misinterpreting the original teaching of their masters.

---

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the most prominent theories 'traveled' quickly in the Ancient world. For contacts between Rome and Alexandria cf., for instance, a story in Cicero, *Academica Priora*, 11 sq., where the reaction of Antiochus on a new book by Philo of Larissa is vividly described. Philo's attempted to prove the idea of essential unity of the Academic tradition, while Antiochus approach was diametrically opposed to this, which made the conflict inevitable (for details cf. Dillon, 1996:53 ff.). Let us imagine that Axionicus, according to Tertullian (Adv. Val. 4, 3), the most jealous follower of Valentinus, received a book by Heracleon from Alexandria. His reaction would be quite similar (cf. Hipp. Ref. VI 35, 7).

<sup>15</sup> As the editor of the treatise, J.-C. Fredouille (1980/2:258–259), notes in his commentary ad loc., Tertullian speaks of the philosophic cathedras, a cathedra of Moses, but never of the cathedras, established by heretics. This could only mean, he believes, that the Valentinians organized something similar to the philosophic cathedras, established approximately in this time by the emperor's decree.

<sup>16</sup> Markschies (1997:438) acutely notes: «Whether the Valentinian writings from Nag Hammadi are a popular philosophical variant of Valentianism or rather a documentation of its development away from its philosophical origins needs to be investigated in its own right. If all this is correct, one must say that the highly gifted teachers Valentinus and Ptolemaeus simply did not have the right students, that is – at least in the sense of professional philosophy – not sufficiently educated students. And no one, unfortunately, is entirely immune from this misery».

## II. A neglected piece of evidence

Since the roots of later “philosophical” Gnosis are expected to be found in an ancient doctrine of certain *gnosticoi*, it is appropriate to assemble the relevant passages <sup>17</sup>:

1. ...Qui enim est primus ab ea quae dicitur gnostica haeresis antiquas in suum characterem doctrinas transferens Valentinus (ἀπὸ τῆς λεγομένης γνωστικῆς αἰρέσεως τὰς ἀρχὰς εἰς ἴδιον χαρακτήρα διδασκαλείου μεταρμόσας Οὐαλεντίνος)... – ...Valentinus transferred the older doctrines from what is called the Gnostic sect and adapted them for his own school... (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I 11,1; ap. Epiphanius, Panarion XXXI, 32, 2).
2. ...necessarium arbitrati sumus prius referre fontem et radicem eorum, uti sublimissimum ipsorum Bythum cognoscens, intellegas arborem de qua defluerunt tales fructus. – ...we have considered it necessary first of all to make known their source and root, so that when you know their most sublime Abyss you may know the tree from which such fruits have flowed forth (Iren. I 22, 2).
3. Super hos autem ex his qui praedicti sunt Simoniani multitudo Gnosticorum [Barbelo] exsurrexit, et velut a terra fungi manifestati sunt. – Beyond these peoples, a multitude of Gnostics has arisen out of the Simonians already mentioned, just as mushrooms come up from the earth (Iren. I 29, 1).
4. Tales quidem secundum eos sententiae sunt, a quibus velut Lernaea hydra, multiplex capitibus fera [de] Valentini schola generata est – Such are doctrines of these peoples, from which, like the Lernaean hydra, a beast with multiple heads, is generated the school of Valentinus (Iren. I 30, 15).<sup>18</sup>
5. A talibus matribus et partibus et proavis eos qui a Valentino sint, sicut ipsae sententiae et regulae ostendunt eos... – from such mothers and fathers and grandparents have come Valentinus and his disciples, and their own doctrines and systems show them to be... (Iren. I 31, 3, the last section of the 1<sup>st</sup> book).
6. ...Ad expugnandam conversus veritatem et cuiusdam veteris opinionis semen nactus *colubro suo*<sup>19</sup> viam delineavit. – ...he conceived the seed of an ancient doctrine and outlined in bold strokes a trajectory for this serpent (Tertullian, Adversus Valentinianos 4, 2).

Working upon a translation of the *Stromateis* by Clement of Alexandria into Russian I came across a passage which seemed to confirm and further our evidence for relation of Valentinus and the *gnosticoi*. Of course, the passage is well known, but, surprisingly enough, it was not treated in this context. The text reads as follows (Strom. III 29, 1–2 St):

7. Ἐρρῆ δὲ αὐτοῖς τὸ δόγμα ἔκ τινος ἀποκρύφου, καὶ δὴ παραθήσομαι τὴν λέξιν τὴν τῆς τούτων ἀσελγείας μητέρα· καὶ εἴτε αὐτοὶ τῆς βίβλου συγγραφεῖς (ὄρα τὴν ἀπόνοιαν, εἰ καὶ θεοῦ διαψεύδονται δι' ἀκρασίαν), εἴτε ἄλλοις περιτυχόντες τὸ καλὸν τοῦτο ἐνόησαν δόγμα διεστραμμένως ἀκηκοότες· ἔχει δὲ οὕτως τὰ τῆς λέξεως· «ἔν ἦν τὰ πάντα· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἔδοξεν αὐτοῦ τῇ ἐνότητι μὴ εἶναι μόνη, ἐξῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐπίπνοια, καὶ ἐκοινώνησεν αὐτῇ καὶ ἐποίησεν τὸν ἀγαπητόν· ἐκ δὲ τούτου ἐξῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐπίπνοια, ἣ κοινωνήσας ἐποίησεν δυνάμεις μῆτε ὄραθῆναι μῆτε ἀκουσθῆναι δυναμένας» ἕως «ἐπ' ὀνόματος ἰδίου ἐκάστην.»

<sup>17</sup> Text: Rousseau–Doutreleau 1979; ET by R. Grant, slightly adopted. A more ‘elaborated’ translation by Lundström and comments on the passage cf. Quispel 1996a:2. If we preserve “de” of the manuscript, the meaning of the text will slightly change: “...from whom the many headed serpent, just like the Lernaean hydra, was generated that arose from the school of Valentinus”. I will not enter in the details here. The article by Quispel and further remarks on this by Marksches, 1997:180f. sufficiently discuss the matter.

<sup>18</sup> The text could be reconstructed thus: τὸ πολυκεφαλαῖον θηρίον τῆς τοῦ Οὐαλεντίνου σχολῆς. Cf. Logan, 1996:7, note. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Kroymann (1906). MS: semini nactus colubroso; Fredouille (1980): semen nactus, Colorbaso. Corrections proposed: ‘Ad expugnandam conversus veritatem et cuiusdam veteris opinionis semen nactus, *Colorbaso* viam delineavit’, are not necessary. Cf. Quispel, 1996a:3, who rightly suggests the origin the phrase: ‘...denique quid Cretae taurus Lernaeeque pestis/ hydra venenatis posset vallata colubris?’ (Lucretius, De rerum natura V 26–27). I reproduce his translation of the phrase.

The passage can be rendered in English thus <sup>20</sup>:

Their doctrine flows [or is derived] from an apocryphal [treatise], and I will quote verbatim an appropriate passage, the womb [that conceived] their impropriety. [I know not] whether the authors of the book themselves are responsible for all this (in this case behold their madness [senselessness] if in their licentiousness they falsely impugn God!), or whether they encountered some others and, having heard a well conceived doctrine, created a distortion of it, but the text runs as following: “[In the beginning] all things were One. Since for the Unity it is appropriate not to remain alone, it emanated a Breath. Having intercourse with this it produced the Beloved, who, in its turn, also emanated a Breath. Having copulated with this it produced Powers, invisible and inaudible” (and so on) down to “each by her own name”.

We have no idea who are these Gnostics, but it is important that in the next sentence they are compared with the followers of Valentinus (III 29, 3) <sup>21</sup>:

...εἰ γὰρ καὶ οὗτοι καθάπερ οἱ ἀπὸ Οὐαλεντίνου πνευματικὰς ἐτίθεντο κοινωνίας, ἴσως τις αὐτῶν τὴν ὑπόληψιν ἐπεδέξατ' <ἀν>. – If they, like the *followers of Valentinus* <sup>22</sup>, consider sexual intercourse as spiritual (union), their opinion can be accepted [or “understood” by means of this explanation, because in effect Clement does not accept this view]”.

Then Clement juxtaposes them with *the followers of Prodicus* (οἱ ἀπὸ Προδίκου) “who falsely claim the name of Gnostics for themselves, calling themselves the real sons of the primal God”, and describes ethical habits they adopt and mentions their usage of obscene language,<sup>23</sup> which is reminiscent of Cainites of Irenaeus or Epiphanius (Adv.Haer. 31,2; Pan. XXXVIII 2–5).<sup>24</sup> A bit earlier (25, 5) Clement also mentions the followers of Nicolas, and then refers to a doctrine, similar to this of a Gnostic Severus (34, 1), and a doctrine of certain Ἀντιτάκτας. We don't know if the Alexandrian intellectual relied here on an earlier “syntagma” (a summary of Gnostic doctrines) or was lucky to possess an independent source of information. At any rate, it is interesting that in VII 41, 3, in the context of his discussion of Gnostic prayer, referring to the ‘heresy of those around Prodicus’ Clement charges them with the same false claim of gnosis for themselves again:

Ἐνταῦθα γενόμενος ὑπεμνήσθην τῶν περὶ τοῦ μὴ δεῖν εὐχεσθαι πρὸς τινῶν ἑτεροδόξων, τουτέστιν τῶν ἀμφὶ τὴν Προδίκου αἵρεσιν, παρεισαγομένων δογμάτων. ἵνα οὖν μηδὲ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ αὐτῶν τῇ ἀθέῳ σοφίᾳ ὡς ξένη ὀγκύλλωνται αἵρεσει, μαθέτωσαν προειληφθαι μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν Κυρηναϊκῶν λεγομένων φιλοσόφων· ἀντιρρήσεως δ' ὅμως τεύξεται κατὰ καιρὸν ἢ τῶν ψευδωνύμων τούτων ἀνόσιος γνῶσις...

---

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson's ET was consulted.

<sup>21</sup> In his article ‘The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic’ Gilles Quispel (1996b:334) emphasizes importance of this phrase and interpret it in some details.

<sup>22</sup> Whether this is taken in inclusive sense or not it is irrelevant at the moment. Although the case (III, 1) mentioned is unique and therefore important. Cf. infra.

<sup>23</sup> ...τοιαῦτα καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ Προδίκου ψευδωνύμως γνωστικούς σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἀναγορεύοντες δογματίζουσιν, υἱοὺς μὲν φύσει τοῦ πρώτου θεοῦ λέγοντες αὐτούς.

<sup>24</sup> G. Quispel refers to this place in his article in Layton, 1981.

What strikes us is that in the beginning of the third book (Strom. III 1, 1) Valentinus and his followers are credited with *absolutely* the same view about the nature of marriage as the Gnostics in 29, 3 (quoted above):

Οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀμφὶ τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου ἄνωθεν ἐκ τῶν θείων προβολῶν τὰς συζυγίας καταγαγόντες εὐαρεστοῦνται γάμῳ, οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ Βασιλείδου «πυθομένων» φασὶ «τῶν ἀποστόλων μὴ ποτε ἄμεινόν ἐστι τὸ μὴ γαμεῖν» ἀποκρίνασθαι λέγουσι τὸν κύριον· «οὐ πάντες χωροῦσι τὸν λόγον τοῦτον· εἰσὶ γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι, οἱ μὲν ἐκ γενετῆς, οἱ δὲ ἐξ ἀνάγκης». – While Valentinus and his followers derive couples from the divine emanations above and for this reason take a delight in marriage, the followers of Basilides..., etc.

It is true, however, that the expressions, which Clement uses in these two cases are different (οἱ ἀπὸ X, not οἱ ἀμφὶ X). But is this important? Does he mean to say something specific? To my mind – hardly; for absolutely in the same way the school (or heresy) of Prodicus in a similar context is variously referred to as τῶν ἀμφὶ τὴν Προδίκου αἴρεσιν and οἱ ἀπὸ Προδίκου. So should we suppose that in the first case Clement is speaking about Prodicus and his close associates only, while in the second case about his followers, but not Prodicus himself? I do not think so. Probably the question, whether somebody belongs to the circle of his and other similar geometrical associations are inappropriate in the case of idiomatic expressions like the above, because they have already lost their original meaning and (collectively) designate a ‘school’ in quite a vague sense of the word.<sup>25</sup>

Let us look at a number of other relevant cases: Strom. II, 36,1: οἱ ἀμφὶ τὸν Βασιλείδην; Strom. II 52, 1: οἱ δὲ ἀμφὶ τὸν Σίμωνα τῷ Ἐστῶτι; Prot. 26, 4: οἱ ἀμφὶ τὴν σκηπὴν ποιηταί; Strom. II 54, 5: οὐ μόνον οἱ ἀπὸ Πλάτωνος, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς; Strom. VI 59, 4: οἱ ἀπὸ φιλοσοφίας διὰ τῆς τοῦ κυρίου διδασκαλίας...

Two first cases are concerned with the schools of Basilides and Simon the Magician respectively and the expression is quite usual, although, generally speaking (as a simple calculation of occurrences shows), for some reasons Clement prefers the *apo*-construction to these with *amphi*-. The third case is about the ‘school’ of scenic poets.<sup>26</sup> The fourth and the fifth instances illustrate his use of the *apo*-construction. In both of these cases he mentions philosophical schools. While references to Platonic and Stoic schools, taken in a doxographical context, are typical, the latter case is quite unusual: the adherents of philosophy (the “school of philosophy”) are contrasted with the teaching (not school!) of Christ, despite the fact that the term διδασκαλία quite often designates a ‘school’, even in the physical sense of this word. It is

---

<sup>25</sup> Glucker (1978) discusses the usage of these and similar expressions in details.

<sup>26</sup> Whatever it means; Clement speaks of Homer in this way, and calls Euripides the scenic philosopher, which is a usual title, to be sure.

said here that, having deserted philosophy (i.e. a philosophical school) for Lord's teaching (i.e. following him or metaphorically becoming his student) one will reach the real philosophy.

My final example concerns instances where Valentinus and Basilides are mentioned by name, not accompanied by any references to their followers. In Strom. III 102, 1 it is said: ...ναὶ μὴν καὶ Οὐαλεντίνω τὸ σῶμα τὸ ψυχικόν...; and, in the Strom. V 2,5–3,4: ...ὡς Βασιλείδης οἶεται... ὡς Οὐαλεντίνος βούλεται, τινὸς καὶ φύσει πιστοῦ καὶ ἐκλεκτοῦ ὄντος, ὡς Βασιλείδης νομίζει...

Shall we attribute these statements directly to Basilides and Valentinus or rather collectively to them and their schools? The context suggests the latter.

These observations seem to confirm, that speaking about a 'school' Clement usually means adherence to certain tradition or even a style of thought (for instance philosophical tradition as contrasted with the Christian). Therefore, speaking of a school of Valentinus he does not necessarily mean that Valentinus did not share this view (if he meant this he would most probably have stated this directly). On the other hand, speaking about 'Valentinus' or 'Basilides' he quite often means the Valentinian or Basilidian teachings in general. The only exception to this rule are of course the exact quotes from Valentinus, Basilides, Isidorus and other Gnostics. In these cases he acknowledges the source carefully and we have no reasons to doubt this information.

Now let us return to the original issue. In my initial quote (Strom. III 29) it is said that the later (philosophizing and Christian) Gnostics derive their doctrine from certain *gnostikoi*. And although Clement does not say explicitly that this is also true in case of the Valentinians, he *does refer* to Valentinus and his school immediately afterwards, presumably, considering this comparison relevant. If my assumption that Clement's usage here is somewhat generalizing is correct<sup>27</sup>, this evidence works in favor of the similar statements by Irenaeus and Tertullian. The way in which he puts it ('...the womb that conceived', etc.) is also suggestive.<sup>28</sup> But the textual evidences are never conclusive. After all, the whole polemic between the Gnostics and the Orthodox Christians arose from their attempts to reinterpret a number of scriptural "key-passages". And we know how far this has ultimately led them. Apparently, the considerations of historical probability and intellectual plausibility must be given a priority.

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf., for instance, his statement in Strom. I 37, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Well known and much discussed passages in question are Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 30, 15 and Tertullian, Adv. Val. 4, 2 (quoted above). Cf. a detailed discussion of the problem in: Quispel, 1996a, with subsequent criticism by Marksches, 1997.

### III. Conclusions

Which preliminary conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these observations? Despite many doubts risen by eminent scholars, our evidence seems to support the view that at least some Gnostic communities functioned as philosophic schools rather than religious sects. Carpocrates, Basilides, Valentinus and others despised Jewish religion and ritual and tried to rethink the basic Gnostic ideas in terms of popular Platonism and Pythagoreanism. They willingly vested the most theoretical Jewish and Christian books (the *Book of Wisdom* and the *Gospel of John*, first of all) in Platonic dresses. At the same time it is clear that Gnosis as a social phenomenon cannot be described in terms of numerous 'sects', constantly disputed with the Christians and each other, as the heresiologists wanted us to believe. Much rather, the differences between various teachers of Gnosis and their 'schools' should be appreciated as steps towards creation of a new type of world attitude. The tracts found in the Coptic Gnostic Library are good witnesses to this process. No wonder therefore that these texts stay in unsolvable contradiction with the classification found in the heresiologists. Shall we classify the *Paraphrase of Shem* as a 'Sethian' work and the *Gospel of Truth* as a 'Valentinian' treatise, because the former is probably mentioned by Hippolytus while the latter could be identified with an *euangelium veritatis*, which, according to Irenaeus, the Valentinians used? How shall we explain numerous features of these treatises, not found in the standard 'Valentinian' or 'Sethian' schemas? Shall we rule them out as hypothetical differences between Gnostic 'schools', explain away as 'secondary Christianization', 'Sethization', and 'Valentinization', or appeal to notorious syncretism of the Hellenistic mind?<sup>29</sup> Should not we better admit that our (and the heresiologists') categories are not adequate for comprehending such phenomenon as Gnosticism in all its instable complexity? Tertullian has rightly said that the Gnostics admit no uniformity and constantly change dress (*Adv. Val.* 4, 3). It is quite possible that our authors did not see any contradiction where we are ready to find one, judging on the basis of our categorical scheme.

---

<sup>29</sup> This controversial matter is discussed, for instance, in: Böhlig-Wisse, 1975 ("Die griechische Schule und die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi", S. 9–54) and Böhlig, 1989.

## Bibliography

- Afonasin E. V., *Antichnyj Gnosticism: Fragmenty i svidetel'stva [Ancient Gnosticism. Fragments and Testimonia]*, St. Petersburg, 2003.
- Aland B., "Gnosis und Philosophie", *Proceeding of International Colloquium on Gnosticism*, ed. by G. Widergren, Stockholm, 1977, p. 34–73.
- Böhlig A., Wisse F., *Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi*. Wiesbaden, 1975.
- Böhlig A., *Gnosis und Synkretismus*, Teil 1–2. Tübingen, 1989.
- Dillon J., *The Middle Platonists*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1996<sup>2</sup>.
- Ehrman B., *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford, 1993.
- Fredouille, J.-C., ed. *Tertullien. Contre les Valentiniens*, SCh 280, Paris, 1980.
- Glucker J., *Antiochus and the Late Academy*, Göttingen, 1978.
- Kaestli J.-D., "Valentinisme Italien et Valentinisme oriental: Leurs divergences à propos de la nature du corps de Jésus", in: Layton, 1981:391–403.
- Koester H., *Ancient Christian Gospels*, Philadelphia, 1990.
- Koester H., *Einführung in das Neue Testament im Rahmen der Religionsgeschichte und Kulturgeschichte der hellenistischen und römischen Zeit*, Bd. 1–2, Berlin, 1980 (ET: Philadelphia, 1982).
- Layton B., ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, in two vols., Leiden, 1981, vol. 1.
- Logan A. H. B., *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy*, Edinburgh, 1996.
- Markschies Ch. "Nochmals: Valentinus und die Gnostikoi", *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997) 179–187.
- Markschies Ch., "Valentinian Gnosticism: Toward the Anatomy of a School", John Turner and Anne McGuire, eds., *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, Leiden, 1997, pp. 401–438.
- Quispel G., "Valentinus and the Gnostikoi", *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996a) 1–4.
- Quispel G., "The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic", *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996b) 327–352.
- Robinson J. M., "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Study of the New Testament", A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn, eds. *The New Testament and Gnosis*, Edinburgh, 1983, pp. 1–18.

Rousseau A., Doutreleau L., eds., *Irénee de Lyon. Contre les hérésies I*, vols. 1–2, SCh 263–264, Paris, 1979.

Rudolph K., “Gnosis and Gnosticism – the Problem of their Definition and their Relation to the Writings of the New Testament”, *Gnosis und Spätantike Religionsgeschichte. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Leiden, 1995, pp. 34–52.

Turner M., *The Gospel according to Philip: The Source and Coherence of an Early Christian Collection*, Leiden, 1997.

Eugene V. Afonasin  
Centre for Ancient philosophy and  
the Classical Tradition,  
Novosibirsk State University,  
Russia, [www.nsu.ru/classics/](http://www.nsu.ru/classics/)  
[afonasin@post.nsu.ru](mailto:afonasin@post.nsu.ru)