

Gnostic Spirituality at the Crossroads of Christianity: Transgressing Boundaries and Creating Orthodoxy

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Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, is frustrated. He is tired of it all. The craziness. The lies. The blasphemy. Something must be done to stop the insubordination, to control the situation. Things have gotten out of hand. Marcus' church has appeal, this can't be denied. He is crafty, attracting Christians into his fold at an alarming rate. But oh, the agony of it all! The man is out of his mind. People are being deceived, dragged into the very depth of his madness, crossing the line of sanity and truth.

Irenaeus takes up his pen. He needs to draw the lines, to explain to his Christian companions how the "so-called" Gnostics have thwarted the borders, how they have transgressed the Christian truth. What are the lines that limit the truth, the borders that hedge in reality? According to Irenaeus, they hang on one fact: that the Christian god of worship is YHWH, the Creator and Ruler of the world, the God that the Jews also worship. The Gnostic conception of YHWH as an ignorant and evil deity is nothing less than blasphemy. This opinion is not Christian, but anti-Christian. The Gnostics drag people to an abyss of madness with their violation of the truth. At all costs, they must be stopped.¹

From the beginning of the modern study of Gnosticism, scholars have had various reactions to this image of Gnostics. Many scholars have embraced it, understanding the Gnostics to represent a perversion of a pure form of Christianity that Irenaeus (and thus eventually the Catholics and Orthodox) epitomized. In their minds, the Gnostics corrupted a good thing – THE Church – and Irenaeus and the other heresiologists saved it.

With the work of scholars like Elaine Pagels, this opinion has been intentionally challenged and inverted.² Gnostic sources external to Irenaeus

¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1 (ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies, Livre I* [vol. 2; SC 264; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1979], 18–21).

² This move to redefine the nature of early Christianity as a multiplex of competing Christianities began with the work of Walter Bauer and has continued to this day, where it is becoming the standard paradigm; see Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest*

suggest that the Gnostic communities represented alternative forms of Christianity that were competitive with the Apostolic-Catholic Christianity Irenaeus favored. Certain sociological and political factors promoted Apostolic-Catholic Christianity, while hindering the growth of Gnostic communities and eradicating them. Theology and truth had nothing to do with it. The Gnostics were reckoned deviant heretics in a mean discursive battle of power. As such, the Gnostic as deviant heretic is a fabrication of powerful Apostolic-Catholic leaders who constructed the Gnostic heresy largely in order to suppress alternative forms of Christianity in the second century.³ From this position an ancillary argument has developed, that the Gnostics and Gnosticism as categories reflect polemics that have been reified and thus should be dispensed with.⁴

This position has been very persuasive, and I operated roughly within its parameters for many years, although I could never quite bring myself to endorse the ancillary argument. For me, difference does not extinguish sameness, and the employment of a category to discuss the sameness does not mean that we are reifying constructs. Instead I have argued that the ancient evidence shows that Gnostics really did exist in antiquity, and that the groups and religions they formed developed out of a new metaphysical orientation, an emergent Gnostic spirituality that arose at the turn of the first millennium. While there is not a common Gnostic religion in antiquity, there were Gnostics who were religious people who operated out of this new metaphysical orientation or spirituality. This new orientation – their belief in action – inverted the way these people "did" religion.⁵

Christianity (ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krobel; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971; German original 1934). Elaine Pagels' work has contributed enormously to this dramatic paradigm shift, including her powerful statement in *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³ For a recent treatment of this position, see Karen L. King, "Social and Theological Effects of Heresiological Discourse," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin; TSAJ 119; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 28–49. This type of discursive analysis and push away from the "objectification" of heresy is foundational for many other papers in the latter volume.

⁴ While there have been a number of scholars who have adopted some variation of this viewpoint, it was developed most substantially by Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵ I have written at length about this in "Crafting Gnosis: Gnostic Spirituality in the Ancient New Age," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner* (ed. Kevin Corrigan and Tuomas Rasimus, in collaboration with Dylan M. Burns, Lance Jenott and Zeke Mazur; NHMS 82; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 285–305; DeConick, *The Ancient New Age: How Gnostic Spirituality Revolutionized Religion* (forthcoming).

This new type of spirituality spotlighted the perspective that human beings are more than mortal creatures fashioned by a god to do his bidding. The human being is perceived to be bigger and more powerful than the conventional gods, substantially connected to a divine source that transcends creation. Knowledge of this divine source – Gnosis – depends on a direct religious experience between the human and the transcendent God, the inspired re-reading of religious scriptures, and a pluralistic quest, where truth is discovered (or built) from a wide variety of religious traditions, philosophical wisdom and scientific understandings. When this new spirituality engaged different religious systems (pagan, Jewish, Samaritan, Christian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, etc.), it provided the impetus for the formation of all kinds of very different Gnostic movements and religions that had varying degrees of success in the ancient religious marketplace.⁶ In the present essay, I will be focused on trying to understand the interface between Gnostic spirituality and biblical scriptures that was taking place at the crossroads of Christianity in the second century.

As I work to try to understand these biblical Gnostics better, I find myself wondering whether these binaries are our only two alternatives, either Gnostics as anti-Christian perverts or Gnostics as fabricated Christian heretics? This is a real dilemma for me, triggered by a memory of a sociology course I took many years ago, where I learned that transgression and deviance is far more complex than either perversion or fabrication can account for. Transgression and deviance is about crossing boundaries and shifting territories. It is about limits that are ever on the move. Transgression is recognized by the reactions to behaviors and beliefs that are judged unacceptable by powerful groups. Transgression is known by the consequential creation of orthodoxy and heresy, when rightness and wrongness are inscribed, when value is placed on certain differences. If this is the case, then it looks like we have a third alternative. The Gnostics who interfaced with Christianity developed a variety of different biblically engaged movements. These Gnostics became real transgressors when their radically different metaphysical orientation met scripture and provoked the creation of Christian orthodoxy and heresy.

Breaching Norms

I recall being impressed by a simple breaching demonstration discussed by my college sociology professor (a demonstration which I went out and immediately tried myself). Breaching demonstrations are conducted by

⁶ DeConick, "Crafting Gnosis"; DeConick, *The Ancient New Age*.

sociologists like Harold Garfinkel in order to examine people's reactions to violations of behavior that we accept, without even being aware of it, as common and normal.⁷ His techniques, known as Garfinkeling, work to upset our underlying taken-for-granted assumptions in order to reveal how they shape social action.⁸

The example I recall my sociology professor impressing upon us that day was elevator etiquette. He explained that, in order to study the norms we all take for granted, the norms have to be broken first. The rupture allows us to see what norms are in place and where their boundaries are. Take an elevator for example. Walk into an elevator and turn around so that you directly face the other people riding the lift. You will immediately notice how uncomfortable the other people become. Why? Because you have violated elevator etiquette, which demands that all riders face the door. Breaking norms lets us see the norms in the first place, my sociology professor explained.

But there is more to it, he told us. If you push this demonstration further and let's say you begin to talk aloud to yourself while standing backwards in the elevator, the discomfort level of the other passengers will rise. They will think you are mentally ill or deranged. You are identified as a suspicious person not to be trusted. They will move away from you and try to exit the elevator. In other words, infractions and violations of the unstated norm are often viewed by others as a sign of untrustworthiness and mental instability.

Why is this the case? It is all about deviance. How we define it, recognize it, and react to it. Sociologists who study deviance describe transgressive behavior as a violation of a norm, a departure from accepted practices. Such violations or fractures will often draw disapproval and negative sanctions from the larger society because the transgression is perceived to be socially threatening. Depending on the threat level, the dominant group will pressure the transgressors to conform to the norms, remove them from society, or label them as mad.⁹

A person or group becomes deviant through a social process that identifies certain behaviors as a departure from the norms. Deviance is defined by the reaction of others to the behavior. It is others, not the deviant, who

⁷ Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967).

⁸ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 22.

⁹ Marshall B. Clinard and Robert F. Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior* (13th ed.; Belmont: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2008), 4–6, 79–80.

mark the behavior as annoying, disturbing, or even threatening.¹⁰ Because transgression rests on whether a particular action is noticed and marked by others as deviant, the deviant's intentionality remains an open question.¹¹

If, for a moment, we were to consider the Gnostic problem from this sociological angle and interrogate the perspective of the heresiologists who marked Gnostics as deviant heretics, what would we find? What do they identify as violations of commonly accepted practices and taken-for-granted assumptions when they discuss those they recognize as "so-called" Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity? The heresiologists identify violations in four areas of belief and behavior that concern theology, human nature, scripture, and ritual.

Violation of Theology

The heresiologists are very consistent in their recognition that the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity breach biblical theology on two related levels. According to the heresiologists, the most egregious aspect of their theology is their teaching that the God of worship is not YHWH, creator and ruler of the universe.¹² The biblical god is not and cannot be the supreme God.¹³ This allows Gnostics to turn away from the creator and speak against him.¹⁴ Gnostics go on to say that the creator was produced from a defect or came into his own by leading a revolt. This makes the biblical God flawed, deceitful and rebellious.¹⁵ This teaching is identified by the heresiologists as blasphemy against God that makes Gnostics far worse than pagans.¹⁶ It even gives Hippolytus reason to call them "atheists."¹⁷

The second layer of their violation of theology is related to their inverted view of YHWH. It consists of their teaching that they are able to con-

ceive of a God besides the creator.¹⁸ The "gnosis" that they seek is direct knowledge of the God who is more excellent and sublime than anything that exists.¹⁹ They claim that this advanced knowledge relies on initiation, when the supreme God is revealed or encountered.²⁰ The existence of this supreme God is not just experiential. It is proven by scripture too.²¹ Who is this superior God? He is a previously unknown hidden God who was proclaimed by Jesus to be the true Father God in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John.²²

The heresiologists express deep concern that this teaching, complemented by attractive esoteric rites, are drawing people away from worshipping YHWH.²³ Irenaeus understands this teaching to be so transgressive that it changes the very subject-matter of the Christian faith.²⁴ He identifies the search for a God other than YHWH "who really exists" as the greatest of impieties.²⁵

Violation of Anthropology

The heresiologists tell us that this view of God led Gnostics to take up an unusual view of human nature. Gnostics think that they are substantially related to the supreme God, because their true selves are uncreated spirit. They claim to be spiritual humans because they think that a particle of the Father has been deposited in their souls.²⁶ This seed was formless, shapeless and imperfect, until it was placed in the human soul. As the soul descends into the human body, this transcendent particle takes on form and magnitude. It goes through a process of maturation that prepares it to receive perfect rationality.²⁷ This spiritual aspect is the aspect of the human that allows us to receive revelation.²⁸ It is the "inner man" which Gnostics

¹⁰ Robert J. Franzese, *The Sociology of Deviance: Differences, Tradition, and Stigma* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, Ltd., 2009), 7.

¹¹ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 23; Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

¹² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 18–21).

¹³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.13.3 (ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies, Livre II* [vol. 2; SC 294; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1982], 114–17).

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.9.2; 2.26.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 84–87, 256–59); 4.pref.4 (ed. Adelin Rousseau, Bertrand Hemmerdinger, Louis Doutreleau, and Charles Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, Livre IV* [vol. 2; SC 100; Paris: Cerf, 1965], 386–90); Tertullian, *Val.* 3.1–2 (ed. A. Kroymann, *Tertulliani Opera, Pars II: Opera Montanistica* [CCSL 2; Turnholt: Brepols, 1954], 754–55).

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.16.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–65).

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.9.2, 2.26.1, 2.28.7, 4.pref.3–4 (Rousseau et al., 84–87, 256–59, 284–89, 384–90).

¹⁷ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.1 (ed. Miroslav Marcovich, *Hippolytus Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* [Patristische Texte und Studien 25; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986], 54).

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.16.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–65).

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 18–21).

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.3–4, 1.4.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 298–305, 68–69); Tertullian, *Val.* 1.1–4 (Kroymann, 753–54); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.1.4, 5.23.2–3 (Marcovich, 141, 198–199).

²¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1, 1.19.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 18–21, 284–89).

²² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.20.3, 2.26.1, 4.1.2, 4.20.5 (Rousseau et al., 292–95, 256–59, 394–96, 636–42); Tertullian, *Val.* 3.1–2 (Kroymann, 754–55).

²³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 18–21); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, 258–59).

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 160–67).

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.28.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 270–73).

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.19.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 188–89).

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.19.2, 4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 186–191).

²⁸ Tertullian, *Val.* 4.4 (Kroymann, 756–57).

identify with the intellectual organ of perception, the only aspect of the human that they think will ascend to "the Perfect."²⁹

If the "inner man" or the spirit is the essential human, then what did this mean about the body and the soul? Gnostics who interfaced with scripture attribute the creation of the body and soul to YHWH the creator god. Because they were the inferior handiwork of an inferior god, they were not substances that would be saved.³⁰ God does not impart immortality to what is mortal nor bestow incorruption on what is corruptible. All substances – material, psychic, and spiritual – will join a substance similar in nature to itself.³¹

What exactly is this third aspect of the human, the spirit or "inner man"? What Gnostics are talking about here is the human mind, the distinct intellectual organ that they believed could discern the truth through insight, intuition, and imagination. It is the aspect of the human being that can perceive what is bigger than us. It makes it possible for us to become aware of what is beyond our day-to-day mundane identities, to perceive what is universal about our existence, what is God. Because of its transcendent nature, it links humans to the supreme God.³²

This substantial connection to the transcendent God is what the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity thought made them superior to YHWH. These Gnostics thought that they achieved utter ascendancy over the biblical god through initiation rites.³³ In fact, they take Jesus' aphorism, "seek and you shall find," as an invitation to discover that they themselves are superior to the biblical creator god. They think that they are greater and better than YHWH, calling themselves "spiritual" and the creator "animal." For this reason they think that they fly above YHWH to the divine world.³⁴ They think that they have surpassed YHWH, and that they are exalted above him.³⁵

This substantial connection to the transcendent God is what made the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity feel that they were more advanced than those Christians who continued to serve YHWH. This connection with the supreme God, they said, provided them with an immensity of

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.19.2 (ed. Adelin Rousseau, Louis Doutreleau, and Charles Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, Livre V* [vol. 2; SC 153; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1960], 250–52).

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.pref.4 (Rousseau et al., 386–90).

³¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 136–37).

³² See DeConick, *The Ancient New Age*, ch. 2: "The Gnostic True Man."

³³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–63); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.2–3 (Marcovich, 54).

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.30.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 302–5).

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.19.1 (Rousseau et al., 614–16).

knowledge superior to what others had, including Peter, Paul and the other apostles.³⁶

The fallout from this radical perspective of the human being is immense. Gnostics perceive themselves to have an exclusive on knowledge. Alone they possess the greatness of the knowledge of the ineffable Power, which they attain through an initiation that includes ascension to the height of existence. Because of their substantive superiority over YHWH, Gnostics have nothing to fear from this god. His slavish laws are rubbish and his imperial powers are useless when pitted against the strength and natural supremacy of the human spirit. This leads them to conclude that humans are not bound by the laws of YHWH. Humans are not his servants, but are free to act without fear of YHWH's retribution.³⁷

Irenaeus says that their belief in the "nobility" (*generositas*) of their breeding allows them to engage in forbidden acts.³⁸ What are these acts? They eat meat offered in sacrifice to idols, imagining that they cannot contract defilement.³⁹ They are the first to assemble at heathen festivals celebrating the idols and attend gladiator games.⁴⁰ They have extreme sexual practices, either engaging in erotic marital sex which they consider sacred, or abstaining from sex and marriage which they consider abhorrent.⁴¹ Irenaeus is horrified by the fact that Gnostics who engage in these behaviors do so because they do not fear YHWH like he and the other Apostolic-Catholic Christians do.⁴²

These teachings lead the heresiologists to view Gnostics as arrogant, blasphemous and mad.⁴³ Irenaeus is outright shocked that Gnostics do not think that they are inferior to God in any way.⁴⁴ This concept of the human being is so monstrous that Irenaeus compares Gnostics to the Titans who are struck with thunder when they are inflated by "vain presumption."⁴⁵ Irenaeus marks this position as unnatural because they go against "the law of the human race" when they say that there is "no real distinction between

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.6 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 200–5).

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3, 1.13.6, 1.25.4–5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 94–97, 200–5, 338–43).

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 136–39).

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3, 1.28.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 94–97, 356–57).

⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 94–97).

⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3; 1.13.3, 5; 1.28.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 94–97, 192–97, 200–1, 354–57).

⁴² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 94–97).

⁴³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.31.3, 2.30.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 386–89, 300–3); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.2–3 (Marcovich, 54).

⁴⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–62).

⁴⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.30.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 300–3).

the uncreated God and the human" who, Irenaeus reminds us, is a created entity.⁴⁶

Scriptural Violation

The heresiologists identify the Gnostic interface with scripture to be highly problematic. Gnostics read scripture differently from the Apostolic-Catholic Christians, promoting interpretations of biblical passages that are unacceptable.

What makes their interpretations unacceptable? In the first place, they understand certain biblical passages to reveal the existence of the supreme God. The Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity look for ambiguities in the scripture, for disjuncture and for fault lines, which they then press into service, understanding them to reveal the hidden supreme God beneath the surface of the text. Irenaeus notes a few instances in the scriptures that some Gnostics interpret in this way.⁴⁷ Irenaeus says these testimonies are very convincing to people who have little previous knowledge of how scripture is read. So Gnostics are able to use these scriptures effectively to lead gullible people away from the truth that the biblical God is the one almighty Father and Creator.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.38.4 (Rousseau et al., 956–60).

⁴⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.3.6, 1.19.1–2, 1.20.2, 3.6.5, 3.7.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 60–63, 284–89, 290–93). On Gnostic use of John, see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.1 (ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irenée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, Livre III* [vol. 2; SC 211; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1974], 138–42); 4.41.1–3 (Rousseau et al., 982–92). On the use and interpretation of John 8:44 in Gnostic literature, see April D. DeConick, "Why are the Heavens Closed? Johannine Revelation of the Father in the Catholic-Gnostic Debate," in *John's Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic Thought* (ed. Christopher Rowland and Catrin H. Williams; London: T&T Clark, 2013). On Gnosticism and John more generally see Elaine Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1973); Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172–293; John D. Turner, "Sethian Gnosticism and Johannine Christianity," in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar* (ed. Gilbert van Belle, J. G. Van der Watt, and P. J. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 399–433; Tuomas Rasimus, ed., *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (NovTSup 132; Leiden: Brill, 2010); DeConick, "Who is Hiding in the Gospel of John? Reconceptualizing Johannine Theology and the Roots of Gnosticism," in *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions* (ed. by April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson; Gnostica Series; Durham: Acumen, 2013), 13–29. On Gnostic use of Paul, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1975).

⁴⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 90–93).

Second, Gnostics adapt and accommodate anything they can from biblical texts as evidence of their own complex systems underlying scripture.⁴⁹ This goes for the gospels and the letters of Paul, as well as the Law and the Prophets.⁵⁰ They are known to provide elaborate allegorical interpretations of Jesus' parables that coincide with their idiosyncratic mythologies and religious narratives, explaining that they point to their own wonderful unspeakable mysteries.⁵¹ They also tend to disregard the sequence of passages, rearranging verses to suit their version of truth. Irenaeus compares this hermeneutical practice to a person who takes a portrait of a king and breaks it into pieces. The person rearranges the pieces into a picture of a dog, and then says that this was the original intention of the artist. When they do this, they deceive many people who had no prior knowledge of the king's portrait.⁵²

Irenaeus maintains that Gnostics do not read scripture as the original author intended it, and he is particularly worried about this in terms of the Gospel of John which seems to be on the chopping block. Irenaeus insists that the original author proclaims that there is only one God, the Almighty, and one Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten, by whom all things were made. Gnostics like Cerinthus and also the Valentinians transgress the text, reading it as if it pointed to a Father beyond YHWH and to multiple Sons.⁵³

Because of their high regard for ongoing revelation, the heresiologists report that Gnostic leaders forge transgressive scriptures for their communities. These writings contain fables about Jesus. They are completely different from the scriptures that the Apostolic-Catholic Christians believe were handed down to them from the apostles. The Valentinians even have a text called the *Gospel of Truth*, as if indeed they knew the truth.⁵⁴

The heresiologists criticize them for their expansive pluralism, remarking that they use any authority they can to validate their systems. They authoritatively use Homer's texts.⁵⁵ They also rely on the opinions of the heroes of Greek philosophy, astrologers who study the stars, and physicians who autopsy bodies and teach about human physiology.⁵⁶ Gnostics take great satisfaction in adapting medical knowledge of the brain to their understanding of human nature and mind, as if the brain's anatomy proved the veracity of their claims about the spirit.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.3, 1.3.6, 1.20.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 32–35, 60–63, 290–93).

⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.3.6, 1.8.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 60–63, 112–17).

⁵¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 32–35).

⁵² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 90–93).

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 136–39).

⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.20.1, 3.11.9 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 288–89, 170–76).

⁵⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 146–51).

⁵⁶ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.52.1–2 (Marcovich, 272).

⁵⁷ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 4.51.10–14, 5.9.14–20 (Marcovich, 139, 168–70).

The heresiologists consider their use of biblical scripture and other authorities to be perverse, wicked, and blasphemous.⁵⁸ Irenaeus characterizes their hermeneutic as deceitful because it twists and mutilates scripture, altering it from its natural shape to something perverse and unnatural.⁵⁹ Even their use of Homer is demonstrative of their transgressive style. Homer's original meaning is twisted and reframed to reflect Gnostic interests. With this trick of hermeneutics Gnostics convince people who do not know Homer's work into thinking that their interpretation is actually what Homer meant.⁶⁰

The heresiologists have identified Gnostic hermeneutics as a transgressive reading of scripture because it responds to the normal codes or traces of language in a text in ways that recognize but reverse them. The words as the heresiologists understand them are acknowledged and denied at the same time by the Gnostic reader.⁶¹ The signification of the text and the right to exegesis are contested by Gnostic and heresiologist.⁶² In the recognition of the words, the Gnostic acknowledges what is embedded within the text, while simultaneously taking it apart through a reverse interpretation that transgresses the limits of previous hermeneutics.⁶³ The cultural rules and cues are inverted by the Gnostic.⁶⁴ The dissonant oscillations within the text are engaged.⁶⁵

Such transgressive reading crosses the line of authority that has given the text its governed identity up until then, what the heresiologists understand to be the original intent of the author.⁶⁶ The heart of Gnostic transgressive reading is the transgression of ontology or meaning that makes possible the impossible that they see signaled simultaneously in the text.⁶⁷ Gnostic transgression then makes the received truth of the text nonsensical through a revelation that questions the logical limits of that truth and its

⁵⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.3.6, 1.9.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 60–63, 146–51).

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 146–51).

⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 146–51).

⁶¹ Cf. Roland Barthes, "On the Fashion System and the Structural Analysis of Narratives: Interview with Raymond Bellour," in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980* (trans. Linda Coverdale; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; repr. 1991), 43–55.

⁶² Cf. Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 13.

⁶³ Cf. Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 12–13.

⁶⁴ Cf. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

⁶⁵ Cf. Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 13.

⁶⁶ Cf. Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 13.

⁶⁷ Cf. Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 16.

world of meaning. It links the established world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning.⁶⁸ As Irenaeus remarked, it turns the king into a dog.

Ritual Violation

The heresiologists spend an inordinate amount of time describing a wide variety of variant Gnostic rituals and identifying them as worthless and crazy. For the heresiologists, Gnostic transgression of ritual involves two violations. First, their ritual practices are done in secret rather than in public. The heresiologists suggest that the public face of their movements looks very similar to the Apostolic-Catholic church. But behind closed doors, something else is going on when privately the Gnostic leaders divulge their mysteries to their followers during secret initiation ceremonies.⁶⁹

Their activities are compared to the Eleusinian mysteries and described as initiations conducted in private by a teacher and paid for by the initiate.⁷⁰ Irenaeus remarks that initiation among the Valentinians is so costly that "people expend all they possess to learn about the tears of Sophia."⁷¹ A long initiation process takes place before the initiate can enroll as a member of the group. People are well-tested before the first secrets are revealed to them. Once the initiate is tested, only then do they initiate the person into perfection. Beforehand, they bind the person with an oath of secrecy never to divulge the mysteries, nor to talk to anyone about them unless they too are initiated.⁷²

During the process, the initiate is exposed to tormenting conditions as well as greater and greater mysteries, making the process emotionally suspenseful. Tertullian remarks that it takes five years of instruction to become a perfect Valentinian, when the deity is revealed at last to the fully initiated. The anticipation of this final revelation makes initiation really attractive. Tertullian says that people crave it.⁷³ Hippolytus comments on the attractiveness of reserving the final revelation of secret knowledge for a future date, like death itself when the highest mystery is whispered into the ear of the dying person during a last rites ceremony. This type of esotericism keeps people committed to the movement.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Cf. Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 16; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass; London: Routledge, 1978), 274–75.

⁶⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.15.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 278–82).

⁷⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.4.3, 1.21.3–4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 68–69, 298–303); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.2–5 (Marcovich, 54–55).

⁷¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.4.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 68–69).

⁷² Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.preface.3–4 (Marcovich, 54).

⁷³ Tertullian, *Val.* 1.2 (Kroymann, 753).

⁷⁴ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, 258–59).

The second violation of ritual is that Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity offer rituals that are marketed as advanced ceremonies for advanced Christians. Sometimes these rituals reflect idiosyncratic activities such as the Ophian-Christian ascent ceremony of the Seal or the popular last rites of the Marcosians.⁷⁵

According to the heresiologists, Gnostic rituals are frequently specialized versions of rituals that the Apostolic-Catholic Christians were doing. For instance, some were performing a second baptism, which they call "Redemption."⁷⁶ Baptism within Apostolic-Catholic circles is marked with inferior tags. It is called the "first" and "animal" baptism for the "remission of sins." It is associated with John the Baptist, while "Redemption" is Jesus' gift. It is the admission ticket into the divine world.⁷⁷ Other Gnostics augmented the Apostolic-Catholic rituals by adding to them an additional ceremonial element or invoking a unique set of liturgical words during the ritual performance.⁷⁸

What really troubled Irenaeus were the rituals that Gnostics and Apostolic-Catholic Christians shared. He is thoroughly frustrated with Valentines who openly confess the creed like Apostolic-Catholics: "there is one God the Father and everything comes from him, and one Lord Jesus Christ." But in their hearts, Irenaeus knows that they have transgressed the liturgy by cueing the meaning of the liturgy with their own secret codes. In their twisted minds, the "one God the Father" is not the creator YHWH, but their hidden supreme God, while the "one Jesus" is not a single entity but a multitude of entities that merge to form Jesus.⁷⁹

While the heresiologists cannot find a common practice among Gnostics – indeed they remark that every Gnostic leader relies on his own variety of rituals – they do consider Gnostic rites to be divergent from what is done in the Apostolic-Catholic Church. They remark that Apostolic-Catholic rites with contingent grace were transmitted from the apostles to their successors, who are now the high-priests and guardians of the Church.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 304–9). On Ophians, see DeConick, "The Road for the Souls is through the Planets: The Mysteries of the Ophians Mapped," in *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy, and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson* (ed. April D. DeConick, Gregory Shaw, and John D. Turner; NHMS 85; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 37–74.

⁷⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 294–99); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, 258–59).

⁷⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 294–99).

⁷⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 298–303).

⁷⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.3 (Rousseau et al., 808–10).

⁸⁰ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.6 (Marcovich, 55).

Common Assumptions and Practices

As we move on in our interrogation of the heresiological testimonies, we are finally able to assess exactly what they felt the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity had transgressed. What were the assumptions and practices of the Apostolic-Catholic community that Gnostic violations had brought into focus? What had a large number of Christians in the Apostolic-Catholic congregations been taking for granted by the time Irenaeus writes?

First, the Christians in Apostolic-Catholic congregations had been assuming that there is only one God, the creator YHWH.⁸¹ Or put another way, they had taken for granted that the biblical God is the supreme God.⁸² They recognize this as the first and most important truth of Christian teaching.⁸³ They view it as blasphemy to conjure into existence a God who does not exist or to even try to figure out if there is a God above God.⁸⁴ To wrench themselves from the manifest biblical God to worship a hidden God is to offend their faith on its very threshold.⁸⁵

Second, they had been assuming that humans are inferior to YHWH their God.⁸⁶ They have taken for granted that YHWH cannot be surpassed by humans because YHWH, the immortal uncreated God, is wholly other than the human being, a mortal creature.⁸⁷ Irenaeus wrestles with this assumption when he asks, "How shall he be God who has not as yet been made human? Or how can he be perfect who was but lately created? How can he be immortal who in his mortal nature did not obey his creator? For it must be that you, from the outset, should hold the rank of human. And then afterwards partake of the glory of God. For you did not make God, but God made you."⁸⁸ Consequently, the Apostolic-Catholic community is taking for granted that they are YHWH's servants who must obey his laws as set forth in the Decalogue. They assume that salvation is based on their piety and righteousness as YHWH's subordinates.⁸⁹

Third, the Apostolic-Catholic community had assumed that their way of reading the scripture is the natural one. They had taken for granted that their interpretation of the scripture reflects a straightforward literal mean-

⁸¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.20.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 292–95); 2.pref.1.

⁸² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 114–17).

⁸³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.1.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 26–27).

⁸⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.9.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 84–87); 4.26.2.

⁸⁵ Tertullian, *Val.* 3.3 (Kroymann, 755).

⁸⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–63).

⁸⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.25.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 254–57).

⁸⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.39.2, 4.38.4 (Rousseau et al., 964–68, 956–60).

⁸⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.29.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 294–97).

ing and that this reading was the author's intent.⁹⁰ Because of these assumptions, they had consequently taken it for granted that this meaning is authoritative.⁹¹

Fourth, they assumed that Christian rituals were public affairs, open to all and free to all. There were no expectations on their part that baptism or the Eucharist needed ritual augmentation to be effective, or that advanced learning is necessary to reap the benefits of salvation. Once people were baptized and reoriented their lives as obedient servants of YHWH, they belonged to the church community, the body of Christ that was saved.

Judging Difference

Sociologists identify difference and judgment as the hallmarks of deviance. Deviance only exists in differentiated societies, where some differences are more valued than others. Emilé Durkheim argued that it is through deviance and defining difference that a society comes to create shared standards in the first place.⁹² It has also been shown that as conditions in a society increasingly promote differentiation, this likewise promotes a rise in the acts of transgression. The more diverse the society, the more deviance comes into play.⁹³

Why? Part of the reason for this has to do with what a differentiated society values. Diversification in a society increases the degree of stratification and difference among people. Consequently, some of the ranks, distinctions and characteristics that mark the emerging difference become more highly valued than others. If a society values education, then it disvalues under-education. If a society values occupations with high prestige, it disvalues occupations with little or no prestige. Difference, then, promotes the creation and maintenance of norms and the attachment of the moral qualities, "good" or "bad," to behaviors that ought to be done or avoided. This is how judgments about "better" and "worse" begin to influence the definition of transgression in societies and the negative classifications that make up the structure of deviance.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 146–51).

⁹¹ Cf. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.52.1–2 (Marcovich, 272).

⁹² Emilé Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (ed. Steven Lukes; New York: Free Press, 1982). Cf. Jenks, *Transgression*, 16–32.

⁹³ Robert F. Meier, "Deviance and Differentiation," in *Theoretical Integration in the Study of Deviance and Crime: Problems and Prospects* (ed. Steven F. Messner, Marvin D. Krohn, and Allen E. Liska; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 199–212.

⁹⁴ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 11.

What is fascinating is that societies do not fix these judgments in stone. They are relative because they are dependent upon societal standards that are not constant but dynamic. As the standards shift or the group changes, so do the forms of deviance and the amount of disapproval.⁹⁵ Our judgments about what is deviant or not is limited by the particular group involved, its geographical location, and its time frame. This makes deviance a relative phenomenon, dependent upon the conditions and circumstances of a particular group of people.⁹⁶

These insights have led sociologists to conclude that nothing is inherently deviant. Rather transgression requires a judgment that must refer to a norm.⁹⁷ Transgression is not transgression unless it is marked as such by the surrounding group. What is transgressive to one group may not be marked as transgressive by another group. This makes it a relative notion, dependent on the ways that the group maps its norms.⁹⁸

When we interrogate the heresiological testimonies we discover what the Apostolic-Catholic Christians living in a Roman society valued. In this highly structured and stratified society, certain differences were more highly valued than others. These value markers helped to frame the beliefs and behaviors of the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity as less valuable, as those things which ought to be avoided. This judgment of value is what set into place the negative classifications that made up the structure of deviance in their society and placed the Gnostic squarely within that structure.

The Value of Knowledge

The conflict between the Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity and the Apostolic-Catholic Christians was largely a fight over knowledge: what and whose knowledge is the most valuable. Gnostics claim superior knowledge that is at once mystical and revelatory. Gnostics think that "truth" is not really delivered by means of a written document or even an established religious tradition.⁹⁹ Rather the essence of truth is imparted by the "living voice."¹⁰⁰ Because of this, they were occupied with questions that others were not asking, and believed that they were able to discover answers to these questions even though other people could not.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 11.

⁹⁶ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 15.

⁹⁷ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 16.

⁹⁸ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 8.

⁹⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 26–28).

¹⁰⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 24–26).

¹⁰¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–63).

The knowledge that is most prized by them is direct experience of God revealed through shamanic-like initiations.¹⁰² It is viewed by them as a kind of omniscience, as perfect knowledge of everything.¹⁰³ This is the most valuable knowledge, and it draws people away from the creator YHWH.¹⁰⁴ Because they so highly value their extreme religious experience of the transcendent God, they imagine that they, on their own, have discovered more than the apostles of the church. In fact, they are convinced given what they know about God that the apostles must have preached the Gospel while still under the influence of Jewish opinions.¹⁰⁵

This type of mystical knowledge, then, is not so much something to be acquired through book-learning as it is attained through religious experience. Its accomplishment is perceived by Gnostics to be the achievement of perfection, literally raising them above everyone else.¹⁰⁶ They are convinced that their discovery of knowledge is the discovery of unadulterated truth that leaves them wiser than the elders of the Apostolic-Catholic church and even the apostles themselves.¹⁰⁷ This stratification structured their world into two levels. They were the knowledge-holders, the spiritual people, while everybody else were ignorant animal people. The Apostolic-Catholics were tagged as people of "faith and works," rather than people of "knowledge."¹⁰⁸

Irenaeus discounts revelatory knowledge in favor of publicly shared knowledge learned from old reliable sources like scriptures, officially-sanctioned teachers, and long-standing religious tradition. He considers the mystical quest for God to be the greatest of impieties.¹⁰⁹ Those people who highly value revelatory knowledge are considered by him to be insane, foolish, and thunderstruck for their arrogance.¹¹⁰ Mystical knowledge is a pretense in the minds of the heresiologists. And it is dangerous. Because it has no external controls, no prescribed restraints, the devil is free to inspire, which he does. In the judgment of Irenaeus, mystical knowledge such as Gnostics prescribe is evil knowledge from the devil, making Gnostics apostates and blasphemers against YHWH.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 90–93); Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.1–4, 5.23.2–3 (Marcovich, 141, 198–99).

¹⁰³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.9.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 84–87).

¹⁰⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 18–21).

¹⁰⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.26.2 (Rousseau et al., 718–20).

¹⁰⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.8.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 112–17); Tertullian, *Val.* 2.1 (Kroymann, 754).

¹⁰⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1, 3.2.2, 3.12.7 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 20–24, 26–28, 204–12).

¹⁰⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–63).

¹⁰⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.28.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 270–73).

¹¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–63).

¹¹¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.pref.4 (Rousseau et al., 386–90).

The heresiologists value knowledge that they consider old or traditional, including scriptures like the Law and the Prophets, the Gospels and Paul's letters, and the doctrine that the bishops in their churches have been teaching for decades. They consider the inspired writings of Gnostics to be forged documents that contain a hodge-podge of sullied information.¹¹² These new-fangled Gnostic writings are not real scriptures and they do not contain real knowledge. True knowledge is, in their minds, the long-standing doctrine of the apostles and universal church, known to its bishops who represent the body of Christ.¹¹³

The Value of Appearance

The second judgment that is being made has to do with the appearance of religion, whether public or private, whether exoteric or esoteric religion is better or worse. The Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity place high value on private and esoteric religion, religion that appeared similar to Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery religions. They consider truth to consist of secrets and mysteries that are progressively revealed to members of their groups, as the members individually advance in their ecstatic initiation journeys and reap personal therapeutic benefits. Instruction and rites are private and can be expensive to undergo. But the secrecy, exclusivity and the cost make membership in the group all the more valuable to them.

The opposite is the case for the heresiologists who place extreme value on public religion with open access, religion that looks like the civic religion performed in Roman circles or in Jewish synagogues. They view private religion very negatively, characterizing it as clandestine, fixed on debauchery and orgies. The secrecy that characterized Gnostic movements brings with it accusations of magic and trickery.¹¹⁴ It also brings with it accusations of elitism, superiority and snobbery.

The Value of Hermeneutics

Clearly hermeneutics was the battleground, the Gnostics valuing inverse reading of scripture that focused on understanding the fault lines and dissonances within the texts. They look for different oscillations of meaning, for ruptures. They revel in reverse meanings, as if they have exposed a secret, a hidden truth that no one saw previously. They also read analogically and allegorically to reveal the secret spiritual level of the text. They value this esoteric inverse hermeneutic more highly than the plain reading of the words.

¹¹² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 132–35).

¹¹³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.8 (Rousseau et al., 818–20).

¹¹⁴ Cf. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.; 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, 258–59).

The heresiologists value a different hermeneutic. Set aside obscure interpretations, they say.¹¹⁵ Proper hermeneutics reflects what they call a “straightforward” or “natural” reading of scripture. How is this done? Christians, Irenaeus believes, should make a “plain reading” of the scripture based on “simple reading” and “daily study.” This will reflect the clear and unambiguous observation of what the words say.¹¹⁶

How do we know that our reading is right? Irenaeus says that it is right when many people read it and agree that this is what it says.¹¹⁷ Here he is not referring to popularity or the notion that majority rules. Rather if you were to distribute the text to a number of people separately and then ask them what it means, most will report back a similar answer, which will reflect a literal reading of the words. It is this reading that they understand to be the natural reading, and furthermore, to reflect the author’s original intent. They think that the author’s original intent is worth more than interpretations of subsequent readers, which are secondary and concocted to reflect later interests. The right reading is also the harmonious reading, the one that perceives the scripture as a whole. At the heart of this hermeneutic is the assumption that the prophets and the gospels are congruent and have a unified message that everyone can see: they proclaim one God, who created through the Word, one being who made and governs the world.¹¹⁸ So, in the end, according to Irenaeus, the rightness of an interpretation means that it agrees with the Apostolic-Catholic doctrines and rule of truth.¹¹⁹

The Value of Judaism

The value of Christianity’s connection to Judaism is on the line. The Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity do not place a high value on maintaining this connection. While some Gnostics will devalue this connection more than others, there are moves in Gnostic circles to devalue and transcend Judaism in ways that we would identify today as anti-Semitic.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 266–69).

¹¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 264–67).

¹¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 264–67).

¹¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 266–69).

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1, 5.18.2 (Rousseau et al. 264–67, 238–44).

¹²⁰ The relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism is highly contested. Much of the discussion focuses on whether or not Gnosticism originated from within Judaism, and whether or not references to Jewish scriptures are indicative of Jewish origins. For a recent summary of this discussion, see Carl A. Smith, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004); Jaan Lahe, *Gnosis und Judentum: alttestamentliche und jüdische Motive in der gnostischen Literatur und das Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis* (NHMS 75; Leiden: Brill, 2012). I would prefer to move this discussion beyond this impasse to a more complex question, specifically: What kind of reli-

While they still maintain a connection to the Jewish scripture, they invert its meaning and its authority within their own communities. YHWH is perceived to be a defective, rebellious, ignorant, arrogant god at odds with the supreme transcendent God. In some cases, he is considered to be demonic. Irenaeus remarks that Gnostics are against the Mosaic Law because they have judged it to be dissimilar and contrary to the Gospel. The prophets were inspired by YHWH and his commanders, not the supreme God. The Lord Jesus came from another Father and preached a different message from the one found in Jewish scriptures.¹²¹

That being said, even the Christian scriptures do not reflect the entirety of truth in their minds. Why? Because Gnostics at the crossroads of Christianity believe that at least some of the apostles who preached the gospel were still under the influence of Judaism when they taught and wrote. The Gnostics, who are privy to revealed knowledge, think of themselves as purer and more intelligent.¹²²

How do Gnostic circles devalue Christianity’s connection to Judaism? By judging Apostolic-Catholic Christians to be phony Christians who never gave up Judaism. This is why Gnostics perceive them still to be “Hebrews.”¹²³ Apostolic-Catholics, they thought, maintain certain questionable connections with Judaism including their belief that the Jewish god YHWH is the supreme God. They continue to worship YHWH as his slaves, perpetually sacrificing Jesus to YHWH whenever the Eucharist is performed in their churches.

The Apostolic-Catholic Christians certainly did not see things from this angle. The heresiologists, while recognizing the subordination of Judaism to Christianity in terms equally anti-Semitic, place high value on maintaining a connection to Jewish scriptures and the Jewish god. On the one hand, the interpretation of Jewish scriptures is usurped by them in ways that the Jewish community did not support, and the heresiologists’ picture of YHWH did not correspond to Jewish understandings of their own God. On the other hand, the Apostolic-Catholic Christians insist that a connection with Judaism must be maintained. They did so by devaluing Judaism as a slavish religion of disobedient followers of YHWH who were being punished for their sins. Judaism had been superseded by Apostolic-Catholic Christianity. These Christians saw themselves as followers correctly obey-

gious movements develop when Gnostic spirituality engages the Jewish (and Christian) scripture?

¹²¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.34.5, 4.35.1 (Rousseau et al., 860, 862).

¹²² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.12.12 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 230–34).

¹²³ *Gos. Phil.* 51.29–32. Cf. Eduard Iricinschi, “If You Got It, Flaunt It: Religious Advertising in the *Gospel of Philip*,” in Iricinschi and Zellentin, *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, 253–72.

ing YHWH and his son Jesus. At the same time that they supplanted Judaism, the Apostolic-Catholic Christians used Judaism to link themselves to an ancestral religious past.

Irenaeus assumes that the imposition of the Law on the Jews was a course of servile discipline. YHWH made the Jews build a temple with a sacrificial cult, even though he did not need or want sacrifices. He instituted the Jewish cult so that the Jews would learn to fear God and serve him.¹²⁴

But, according to Irenaeus, they never did learn. They never did get it right. In Irenaeus' mind, it is only the Apostolic-Catholic Christians who got it right.¹²⁵ He makes a marked distinction between Jewish and Christian sacrifice, judging the Christian ceremony to be "good" while the Jewish to be "bad." Both the kind of sacrifice and the kind of people making the sacrifice differ. The sacrifices of the Jews are considered substandard fare offered by slaves, while the sacrifice made by the Church of free people is pure. While he asserts that the Lord YHWH whom the Jews and Christians serve is one and the same God, Irenaeus values differently the offering that each of these communities makes to YHWH. The Jewish sacrifice is viewed as "servile," while the Christian is viewed as "liberating."¹²⁶

Irenaeus insists that the Church single-mindedly offers her gift as a pure sacrifice to God, as thanksgiving to the creator. The offering is made without hypocrisy, but with a pure mind, in faith, in hope, in fervent love.¹²⁷ While it is true that Christians inherited bondage to YHWH when the disobedience of the first parents, Adam and Eve, made humans mortal, by means of the new man, Jesus, who cleansed the feet and sanctified the body, "the filth of Zion" was washed away and humans were rendered clean.¹²⁸ Irenaeus values his church's connection with Judaism and their mutual God YHWH, while, at the same time, debasing the Jewish cult.

The Value of the Human Being

The human being is another battleground. Gnostics value the superiority and natural divinity of humans. They prioritize human need over the needs of the conventional gods and their worldly representatives. They understand the human predicament to be forced enslavement to the powers that control this world, both cosmic and political. Resolving the human plight involves resistance to authorities and rulers, and, at the very least reform,

¹²⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.14.3 (Rousseau et al., 546–48).

¹²⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.15.1 (Rousseau et al., 548–54).

¹²⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.18.4 (Rousseau et al., 606–10).

¹²⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.18.4 (Rousseau et al., 606–10).

¹²⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.22.1 (Rousseau et al., 684–88).

if not outright revolution and takeover. They believe in the power of the free human to transform themselves and their world. They refuse to remain slaves to gods in religions that demanded appeasement, obedience and fearful submission to ruling deities and kings.

Not so with the heresiologists who value human subordination and citizenship in a community with laws and regulations that are imposed in order to control our disobedient human nature. Irenaeus tries to convince his reader that Christians are not slaves to the biblical God, but are really free. He says that the biblical God had laws in place for the benefit of his people. YHWH restrained his people so that they might obtain the gift of salvation through obeying the Decalogue. His restraints and laws should not push us now to rebel against him as apostates. Despite the fact that YHWH has limited humans with laws so that he has a basis for fair judgment and can honor the obedient with immortality, he has always preserved freedom, and the power of self-government, Irenaeus asserts.¹²⁹

The most prized mode of human existence, what Irenaeus calls the "glory of the human," is to remain permanently and obediently in YHWH's service. Why? He reasons that God created the human being and this fact alone makes us his servants. While it is true that God put into effect certain laws including the requirement to offer him sacrifices, this does not mean that God wanted or needed anything from us in the form of offerings.¹³⁰ To the contrary, he did so for the benefit of human beings who were blind and needed to see what true sacrifice is. It was necessary for them to make offerings to God so that, through their obedience, they might receive life from YHWH.¹³¹

Christians do this by participating in the Eucharist performed in the Apostolic-Catholic churches. It functions as a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving that sanctifies creation.¹³² While God does not need our offerings, he wants to teach humans that they must be grateful for creation.¹³³ Jesus gave instructions for how to offer this sacrifice to God. It is a pure sacrifice, and the only one that is acceptable to YHWH. Just as we bring gifts to our kings to show our honor and affection, so too we bring our gifts and offer them to YHWH. By showing our obedience and gratitude, we receive respect and salvation from him.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.5 (Rousseau et al., 570–74).

¹³⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.14.1 (Rousseau et al., 538–42).

¹³¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.17.1–2, 4 (Rousseau et al., 574–82, 590).

¹³² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.18.6 (Rousseau et al., 612–14).

¹³³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.17.5 (Rousseau et al., 590–94).

¹³⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.18.1 (Rousseau et al., 596).

Countering Culture

Different groups standardize different norms, and, because of this, deviance can be defined by each of them differently. Sociologists call these variations "subcultural differences." These differences emerge when a group shares a set of values and meanings that are not shared by the larger society to which they belong. A subculture emerges within the dominant culture as a result of this normative difference. While the members of the subculture share and participate in the larger dominant culture, they also maintain some norms that are peculiar to them and can be viewed as deviant by outsiders. The maintenance of alternative norms is what separates and distinguishes them from their neighbors.¹³⁵ If these alternative norms cause the subculture to oppose the larger culture, they represent counter-cultural movements that transgress the mainstream.¹³⁶

When we take a closer look at Roman society and what it valued, it quickly becomes apparent that the Apostolic-Catholic Christians approached their religion from a network that interfaced with the traditional norms of the Romans. The Romans prized long-standing tradition, what they called the "way of the elders" (*mos maiorum*). The old ways of their ancestors were the good ways. The ancestors had taught people uprightness (*virtus*), faithfulness (*fides*), and respectfulness (*pietas*), and these values maintained the highly structured Roman society, with its strict hierarchies built on patron-client relationships and status. Status or displays of respect (*dignitas*) was the social reward that a Roman earned who embodied these traditional values.¹³⁷

Romans prized public religion and considered it their civic duty to support the official set of sacrifices, prayers, and rituals that the state sanctioned in the temples. Ancestral religion was valued most highly for fear that altering the customary honors paid to the gods might offend the deities and provoke their anger. Honoring the gods with customary gifts and prayers of gratitude upheld the human-god relationship. It was this sanctioned cultic behavior that guaranteed that the city would be protected by the gods and its populace would be cared for. In this relationship, humans were viewed as inferior clients whose patrons and guardians were the superior gods. Showing respect to the gods as their superiors, honoring the authority of the ancestors, and fulfilling their moral obligations to each other were

¹³⁵ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 12.

¹³⁶ J. Milton Yinger, *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Free Press, 1982).

¹³⁷ Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Rome: From Romulus to Justinian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 22.

extremely important values that regulated their family and social lives and staved off disaster.¹³⁸

To the Romans, "new" signified "suspect" and "dangerous." In fact "new things" (*res novae*) meant "revolution," since the Romans feared that new things had the potential to be destructive, to lead to social disorder.¹³⁹ This resulted in an uneasiness, even xenophobia, when it came to the worship of imported or "foreign" gods. The Romans made a distinction between authentic state religion (*religio*) and superstition (*superstitio*), which was anything that deviated from the traditional cult taught by their ancestors. Particularly suspect were ecstatic practices like prophecy, direct contact with the gods, and other unmediated and unregulated activities.¹⁴⁰ These were counter-cultural practices that messed up the fine-tuned traditional relationship between the gods and the Romans in ways that could be revolutionary and disastrous.

Given these values, what Gnostics prized was nothing less than counter-cultural. Unlike the Apostolic-Catholics, Gnostics valued the new, the revelatory, the unmediated experience of God. They made little claim to an ancestral past, preferring to sever the tie with Judaism and market religion that promoted a new previously unknown god who wanted nothing whatsoever to do with traditional sacrifices and other public ceremonies. For Gnostics, the practice of religion was not about civic duty and moral obligation, but personal therapy and triumph. The human being and its needs surpassed the old gods, and indeed, overturned them and their earthly representatives.

The emergence of Gnostic countercultural groups was likely a reaction to a social and political landscape that had been unkind to them, that had marginalized them.¹⁴¹ Sociological studies of counter-cultural movements

¹³⁸ Martin, *Ancient Rome*, 34–40.

¹³⁹ Martin, *Ancient Rome*, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (trans. Antonia Nevill; Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 10–12.

¹⁴¹ Several possibilities have been suggested: unrest in first-century Palestine and Syria (Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* [trans. R. McL. Wilson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983], 282–92); the Jewish Revolt of 66–74 CE (Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* [rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1966], 33–37, 118); unrest from 70–135 CE (Nils Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978* [vol. 2; ed. Bentley Layton; SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1980–1981], 689–712); Roman suppression of Jews in Egypt in 115–117 CE (Smith, *No Longer Jews*); the Bar Kokhba revolt (Edwin Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 [1978]: 169–74; Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170 CE* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 206; Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Chris-*

show that transgression can become for some people a flagship, a way to mobilize and revolutionize an environment that has left them powerless. In these cases, the deviance is used to achieve progressive social change to overcome perceived inequality and injustice.¹⁴² It can be used to shock, to violate, to repulse and to offend in deliberate acts of defiance or rebellion.¹⁴³ Transgression can be an intentional act of resistance that brings about social transformation, when people question the way things are and re-appropriate what already exists for their cause. In this case, transgression is a source of power that relies on established boundaries that it subverts.¹⁴⁴

According to ancient Gnostics, the human displaced the gods. The human had crossed over the boundary that had so long separated the gods from the human. Now the human was out of place, a divine being no longer afraid of the gods, the ancestors, or the obligations of traditional rank. Gnostics were free of social and political restraints that their gods and ancestors had imposed upon them for centuries. The Romans were right. This was revolutionary and dangerous.

Constructing Identities

At all levels, personal as well as social, deviance is a dynamic and relative process of definition and identification. The importance of the interplay of personal identity-construction and deviant group labeling or tagging cannot be stressed enough. My concern here is not so much a chicken-or-egg question – that is, whether the behavior or the label came first. It is the fact that behaviors only become deviant when they get labeled as such. The label simultaneously identifies and constructs.

Sociologists have observed that once a group is labeled or tagged transgressive, the people within the group often begin to understand their roles to be organized around that transgression. The role of the deviant, however it has been defined, can become the master role that the individuals in the group assume.¹⁴⁵

tianity and Gnosticism [SJLA 25; Leiden: Brill, 1977], 262–65); disaffected Jewish intellectuals (Birger A. Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997], 120); alienated Egyptian Jews in the first century CE (Henry A. Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism* [SBLDS 77; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985]).

¹⁴² Franzese, *Sociology of Deviance*, 30–31.

¹⁴³ Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 163–76.

¹⁴⁵ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 47–48.

This role-playing can become so powerful that individuals actually may develop a deviant self-conception, which then becomes the central feature of other people's perceptions of them. Other people interact with the individuals by interpreting everything they do as part of the deviant role the individuals have assumed. This results in the perpetuation of the individuals' identities with deviance, even at the times when the individuals may resist this identification.¹⁴⁶ In other words, we rarely treat a person as one who commits a single act of transgression. Rather we see that person as a general deviant and this sets in motion several social and psychological mechanisms that help to shape the person in the deviant image that people have of him or her.¹⁴⁷

We make deviants when we label them such, by defining, classifying, depicting, accentuating, making aware and self-aware.¹⁴⁸ According to sociologist Frank Tannenbaum, "It becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that are complained of. . . . The person becomes the thing he is described as being."¹⁴⁹

What we are talking about here is the power of stigma and shame. We label to stigmatize, to shame, to punish the group and to rehabilitate them if possible.¹⁵⁰ As a negative sanction, the stigma works to maintain the boundaries, to reaffirm the rules, to confirm the conformists, and to separate off the wrongdoer.¹⁵¹ Transgressive groups try to lessen stigmas by managing the knowledge of the group. A favorite technique is to operate behind a cloak of secrecy. Hide. Don't advertise what you are doing. If people outside the group do not know what goes on inside the group, stigmas are less likely to be produced in the first place.¹⁵²

Along similar lines, some transgressive groups will create false façades, legitimate appearances, regardless of what is really going on. While not completely concealing their activities, these groups will try to operate under a more legitimate guise so that doubt is created about the extent of

¹⁴⁶ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 47–48.

¹⁴⁷ Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

¹⁴⁸ Franzese, *Sociology of Deviance*, 68–87.

¹⁴⁹ Frank Tannenbaum, *Crime and the Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 19–20.

¹⁵⁰ Franzese, *Sociology of Deviance*, 75–78. Cf. John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Braithwaite, "Restorative Justice," in *The Handbook of Crime and Punishment* (ed. M. Tonry; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 323–44.

¹⁵¹ Christopher Harding and Richard W. Ireland, *Punishment: Rhetoric, Rule, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989), 105.

¹⁵² Edward Sagarin, *Deviants and Deviance: An Introduction to the Study of Devalued People and Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 268.

their deviance and stigmas are avoided.¹⁵³ Transgressive groups sometimes will try to neutralize their actions with rationalizations. This technique is interesting because it weakens the strength of the norm that is being transgressed and places the transgression into a more acceptable framework.¹⁵⁴

Other groups will attempt to shift their behaviors in such ways that they will begin to conform to the standards of the dominant group.¹⁵⁵ Although there is no false façade here, this type of reconfiguration is extremely difficult to achieve because once the stigma is applied, it penetrates deep so that, like a tattoo, removal is difficult if not impossible.

The testimonies of the heresiologists demonstrate the power of tagging. Those who deviated from the beliefs and behaviors of the Apostolic-Catholic Christians were labeled pejoratively with tags that seared shame like a scarlet 'A.' Difference was viewed as "crazy" and "mad."¹⁵⁶ Difference was attributed to demonic possession and Satanic agency.¹⁵⁷ Gnostics became "apostates" who rebelled like Satan, the apostate angel, against the state of submission before YHWH. Rebellious angels and rebellious people were confined together to the punishment of everlasting fire for their transgression.¹⁵⁸

What were Gnostics doing behind closed doors anyway? The heresiologists used Gnostic esotericism against them. What could Gnostics be saying or doing that they felt it necessary to hide? Did their nocturnal rites include orgies? Most certainly, Hippolytus concludes.¹⁵⁹ Irenaeus complains that some Gnostics hide behind a false Christian façade, abusing the name "Christ" to conceal their impious doctrines and deeds.¹⁶⁰ Why are their teachings and practices kept secret? Because what persons would want to admit that they participated in such shameful deeds to begin with?¹⁶¹ They are wolves in sheep's clothing.¹⁶² To make matters worse, they invent novel things by recycling bits and pieces of junk.¹⁶³ They are

¹⁵³ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 53; Robert Prus and Stylianoss Irini, *Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks* (Toronto: Gage, 1980), 65–68.

¹⁵⁴ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 54; William E. Thompson and Jackie L. Harred, "Topless Dancers: Managing Stigma in a Deviant Occupation," in *Social Deviance: Readings in Theory and Research* (2nd ed.; ed. Henry N. Pontell; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002), 268–78.

¹⁵⁵ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 54–55.

¹⁵⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 338–41).

¹⁵⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.1, 3; 1.15.6; 1.16.3; 1.25.3; 5.26.2 (Rousseau et al., 188–97, 250–53, 260–65, 336–39, 330–38).

¹⁵⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.1, 2.28.7 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 154–59, 284–89).

¹⁵⁹ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.5 (Marcovich, 55).

¹⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 336–39).

¹⁶¹ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 1.pref.3–4 (Marcovich, 54).

¹⁶² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.2, 3.16.8 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 20–25, 318–20).

¹⁶³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.28.1, 1.8.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 354–57, 112–113).

Sophists, talking to hear themselves.¹⁶⁴ They are crafty conmen and phonies, not really religious at all.¹⁶⁵ They blaspheme against God and draw the unsuspecting into impiety.¹⁶⁶ They are wild beasts like hyenas that must be exposed, wounded and slayed.¹⁶⁷ They are monsters like Hydra that must be exterminated.¹⁶⁸

Wielding Power

To understand deviance then is to understand whose norms are being violated and which behaviors the violated group defines as transgressive. And this is how we get to the heart of it: power. Deviance is always about power and its inequalities. By virtue of their influence, people in societies who have power – people who access and control political, economic, or social resources – are more successful at defining standards for deviance than those who are less powerful. And it is most often the case that those with power will find those with less power to be deviant and demand harsh sanctions for their deviant actions.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.5, 2.17.9–10, 5.20.2 (Rousseau et al., 178–81, 168–69, 256–60).

¹⁶⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 132–35).

¹⁶⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 20–25).

¹⁶⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.31.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 388–91).

¹⁶⁸ Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.11.1 (Marcovich, 173).

¹⁶⁹ This view of deviance is called conflict theory. Sociologists who endorse it usually identify themselves as Marxists because they view deviance as emerging in some way from class conflict between powerful and less powerful groups. For an overview, see Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 11–12, 76–83; Franzese, *Sociology of Deviance*, 88–101. Conflict theorists in sociology include George B. Vold, *Theoretical Criminology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958); Willem Bongers, *Criminality and Economic Conditions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Bongers, *Race and Crime* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969); Austin Turk, *Criminality and Legal Order* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969); Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young, *The New Criminology: For A Social Theory of Deviance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); Tony Platt, "Prospects for a Radical Criminology in the United States," *Crime and Criminal Justice* 1 (1974): 2–10; Paul Takagi, "A Garrison State in a 'Democratic' Society," *Crime and Social Justice* 1 (1974): 27–33; Richard Quinney, *Criminology: Analysis and Critique of Crime in America* (2nd ed.; Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); Quinney, *Class, State, and Crime* (2nd ed.; New York: Longman, 1980); William J. Chambliss, *Power, Politics and Crime* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). For studies of conflict theory and religious groups, see Christie Davies, "Sexual Taboos and Social Boundaries," *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1982): 1032–63; David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Peter McWilliams, *Ain't Nobody's Business If You Do* (Los Angeles: Prelude Press, 1993).

The identification of transgression is dependent upon the amount of power certain groups have to enforce their norms upon other groups of people in the same society.¹⁷⁰ Systems of social control that sanction deviance tend to support the interests of the people in power, rather than the people who are marginal or powerless in the society. Since this is the case, then, deviance becomes deviance because the behavior violates the standards of the powerful in society who are able to enforce negative sanctions that discourage future violations.

Deviance is a socially created condition dependent on the exertion of power and influence, although it is usually framed in symbolic or moral terms that persuade the public of the legitimacy of the priorities of the powerful and to internalize them.¹⁷¹ In other words, those standards that are linked to persuasive cognitive frames – whether symbolic, moral, or otherwise – are more likely to alter the normative landscape than others.

For this type of persuasion to be effective and change the normative landscape, it is best promoted via publication and campaign.¹⁷² So those with access and control of a society's media resources are much more likely to secure legitimacy for their standards and promote them successfully in the larger society, than those who are not able to widely distribute their views. Deviance hinges on groups with power and influence, which control the normative process to a large extent.

When we look at the ancient religious landscape, it is clear that it was a highly competitive marketplace.¹⁷³ The testimonies of the heresiologists reveal that the competition between Gnostic communities at the crossroads of Christianity and Apostolic-Catholic churches was fierce. On the most basic level, the fight was over parishioners. Who had them. Who could take them away. And who could keep them. Gnostics of different stripes were accused of successfully persuading many from the Apostolic-Catholic Church to join their communities.¹⁷⁴ Specific charismatics are identified as

¹⁷⁰ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 16.

¹⁷¹ Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 16–17, 28–29; Nachman Ben-Yahuda, *The Politics and Morality of Deviance: Moral Panics, Drug Abuse, Deviant Science, and Reverse Discrimination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

¹⁷² Clinard and Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 19.

¹⁷³ Cf. Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 2000); Judith M. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 69–79; David Brakke, “Self-Differentiation Among Christian Groups: The Gnostics and Their Opponents,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1: *Origins to Constantine* (ed. Margaret Mitchell and Frances M. Young; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 245–60.

¹⁷⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.16.3, 3.15.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 260–65, 278–84).

most successful, like Marcus who drew away members from other churches in Rhone.¹⁷⁵

What strategies did Gnostics rely on to bring in new parishioners and keep them?¹⁷⁶ Some took a more liberal stance on women's roles within their communities, opening up leadership opportunities that had been closed to women attending Apostolic-Catholic congregations.¹⁷⁷ Marcus was particularly successful in this effort, winning over wealthy women who found positions of power as prophets in his Gnostic church.¹⁷⁸ Gnostic groups also had more extreme views of marriage. Some saw marriage as sacred and erotic intercourse with one's spouse as redemptive. This was attractive to some Christians who found themselves in Apostolic-Catholic churches advocating chaste sex as a procreative necessity. Other Gnostic groups appeared to be the philosophical champions of the passion-free life, attracting Christians who did not want to be bothered with marriage and the family at all.¹⁷⁹

Gnostics also relied on eloquence and superior philosophical knowledge to persuade people to join their groups.¹⁸⁰ Irenaeus remarks that men were persuaded to convert by the excellent speeches delivered by Gnostic leaders.¹⁸¹ Because their interpretations relied on ancient philosophy, they impressed others as highly intellectual. They marketed their ideas as novelties

¹⁷⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 188–91).

¹⁷⁶ Kendra Eshleman, “Becoming Heretical: Affection and Ideology in Recruitment to Early Christianities,” *HTR* 104.2 (2001): 191–216 has argued that the primary factor in conversion to any Christian group in the late second and early third centuries were social networks and affiliations to family, friends, and patrons already inside the group. I wish to emphasize that such social networks, while playing a role in recruitment, are only one factor in the overall picture of conversion. Different groups appealed cognitively to different individuals, and the groups used differentiated marketing strategies to recruit and maintain members.

¹⁷⁷ April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: What the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2011). See also Madeleine Scopello, *Femme, gnose et manichéisme: De l'espace mythique au territoire du réel* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 175–77.

¹⁷⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 192–97).

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 336–39). I have discussed Valentinian sexual practices at length in other publications; see DeConick, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the *Gospel of Philip*,” *VC* 55 (2001): 225–61; DeConick, “The Great Mystery of Marriage: Sex and Conception in Ancient Valentinian Traditions,” *VC* 57 (2003): 307–42; DeConick, “Conceiving Spirits: The Mystery of Valentinian Sex,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in Western Esotericism* (ed. W. Hanegraaff and J. Kripal; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 23–48.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Niclas Förster, *Marcus Magus: Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergruppe. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 410–16.

¹⁸¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 336–39).

to people who did not know the difference, or did not care.¹⁸² Tertullian remarks that Valentinus was so eloquent, a genius, that he expected to be appointed the next Bishop of Rome. When that did not happen, Valentinus left the Apostolic-Catholic church and opened his own doors, taking with him a number of equally talented students.¹⁸³ They promoted their brand of knowledge as intellectually superior, running down the Apostolic-Catholics for their ignorance.¹⁸⁴

Gnostic groups were also keenly aware that unique and secretive practices are a powerful draw. Once inducted into their groups, people tended to stay. They felt that they possessed something of great value that others did not. For those Gnostic groups that charged for initiation, the members were financially committed as well. In most, if not all Gnostic groups, they were promised more and more perfect knowledge with each passing year. In some really shrewd groups, this promise continued to unfold until the deathbed, when the last words of hidden wisdom were whispered into the ears of the dying person.

One of the strategies that most bothered Irenaeus was the willingness of some Gnostic groups to appear to be Apostolic-Catholic by using the same phraseology in their rituals and doctrinal instruction.¹⁸⁵ Converts were confused. They wanted to know why the Apostolic-Catholics shunned other groups that promoted similar stuff.¹⁸⁶ Celsus actually interacted with the Ophite-Christians who told him they were Christians. Celsus accepted this at face value and Origen had to turn himself inside out to convince his reader otherwise.¹⁸⁷

So with all of these successful marketing techniques, why is it that the competition played into the hands of Apostolic-Catholic Christians? Here we come to the crux of it again: power. The heresiologists remark that Gnostics were grassroots organizations, run by various charismatic teachers who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. When the different teachers published their books, they did so for their own communities. Their esoteric publications were insulated, never enjoying widespread distribution. While their books were respected within their own groups, they rarely were embraced outside the walled gardens of Gnostics. Gnostic secrecy, one of the main attractions of Gnostic groups, was also its greatest weakness.

¹⁸² Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.6.1–2 (Marcovich, 141).

¹⁸³ Tertullian, *Val.* 4.1–4 (Kroymann, 755–56).

¹⁸⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 98–101).

¹⁸⁵ Cf. George V. Zito, "Toward a Sociology of Heresy," *Sociological Analysis* 44.2 (1983): 123–30, at 126.

¹⁸⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.15.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 278–84).

¹⁸⁷ DeConick, "The Road for the Souls."

In the second century, there was no agreement among Gnostic leaders, no formal ties or connections, and no official mode to transmit leadership from one generation to the next within their groups.¹⁸⁸ Tertullian says that each teacher put forward his own opinions or interpretations of scripture, with none of them agreeing on anything. Some teachers would say, "This is not so," while others would remark, "I take this in a different sense," or "I don't admit that."¹⁸⁹ This vapid diversity and leadership vacuum resulted in decentralized power structures that were unable to sustain their communities intra-generationally.

In the third century, the Gnostic Mani realized this problem. He established a centralized Gnostic church, which was so attractive and powerful that it became the first world religion. It is the only Gnostic church that was able to compete successfully with Catholic and Orthodox churches and remain powerful and vibrant over centuries.

But the Apostolic-Catholic Christians realized this problem long before Mani organized his church. He was not the innovator but the imitator on this front. By the middle of the second century, the Apostolic-Catholic Christians had started to build a network of churches across the Mediterranean that connected their congregations to each other in terms of leadership, doctrine and ritual.¹⁹⁰ They even began centralizing control around the Roman see, which traced its authority back to the teachings of both Peter and Paul.¹⁹¹

They understood their beliefs and procedures to have a history – a tradition – that connected them directly to Jesus and the apostles. They began promoting their tradition as "apostolic" and "scriptural" in their publications, and they distributed these publicly, writing to Roman politicians as well as fellow Christians. This meant that in their widely distributed print media, they grounded themselves in a Jewish past of piety and scripture, something which gave their "new" religion an aura of ancestry and merit, along with a built-in set of assumptions about YHWH and the human being. This helped to ease the Roman suspicion that Christianity was an exotic superstition.

Internally, the Apostolic-Catholic Christians developed and distributed to their network of churches short confessions of belief or creeds which parishioners memorized and repeatedly performed. They refer to this as the "Rule of Faith" or "Standard of Truth" and promoted it as "apostolic."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.20.1 (Rousseau et al., 252–56).

¹⁸⁹ Tertullian, *Val.* 4.4 (Kroymann, 756).

¹⁹⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.2–3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 158–67).

¹⁹¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.1–3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 30–44).

¹⁹² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9.5, 1.10.1, 2.9.1, 3.3.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 150–53, 154–59, 82–84, 30).

This creed worked to provide a simple mental frame for their beliefs so that they could be easily internalized by congregants and recognized as legitimate. This worked to solidify the group's mentality and identify it as uniform and positional, as "normal" and "natural." Norms of belief and behavior emerged across this vast network, norms which the leaders and parishioners took for granted and assumed were markers of Christian identity worldwide. In kind, they began identifying themselves as the worldwide church, calling themselves the "catholic" or "universal" Church.¹⁹³

Finally there was shame and punishment, deterrents that Apostolic-Catholics used in their congregations to avoid loss of members. Irenaeus accuses former parishioners of transgression when they cross over and join Gnostic communities, leaving behind their previous belief in YHWH. They are labeled "sinners" of the worse kind.¹⁹⁴ Those who come back into the Apostolic-Catholic fold are subjected to public confession and humiliation in front of the congregation. Irenaeus understands this movement of congregants back and forth to be a pervasive problem. He states that there were frequent readmissions to the Apostolic-Catholic church. In order to be readmitted, the reconverted Christians were required to publicly confess how they had been shamed and corrupted within the Gnostic churches they had been attending.¹⁹⁵

Irenaeus cites an example of a deacon he personally knew who invited Marcus for dinner at his house. The deacon's wife was persuaded by Marcus to leave the Apostolic-Catholic church of her husband and join Marcus' Gnostic church. Several men from her husband's Apostolic-Catholic church were enlisted to try to get her back. They worked for a long time and "with no small difficulty" and finally they were successful in converting her back. She had to make a public confession before the congregation, during which she wept and lamented how she had been defiled in Marcus' church.¹⁹⁶

The success that the Apostolic-Catholic Christians had in wielding power to socially enforce negative sanctions for beliefs and behaviors they identified as deviant worked to reinforce the normalcy and rightness of their opinions. The more their creeds were collectively chanted, the more the borders of transgression were imprinted. The more people were humiliated and shamed in public confessions, the more future deviance was avoided. This was the stuff of social power. And ultimately it was the stuff that defined the boundaries of "right" and "wrong."

¹⁹³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.2-3, 4.33.8 (Rousseau et al., 158-67, 818-20).

¹⁹⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.27.3 (Rousseau et al., 744-46).

¹⁹⁵ The longevity of this strategy is discussed by Eshleman, "Becoming Heretical," 193 and 211-12.

¹⁹⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 200-1).

Creating Orthodoxy

Transgression, then, is the act of breaching a norm recognized by groups in society, whether secular or religious, as a prescription, law, standard or custom. It is the act of crossing a line, stepping over a boundary, moving beyond convention, straying from the straight and narrow, overstepping a limit. It has to do with a passage of some kind, an infringement that moves a person from one place to another. The passage is not neutral. It represents going from what is standard and authorized to what is illicit and outlawed.¹⁹⁷

For there to be transgression, there must first be some sort of standard or custom by which a powerful group in society asserts, defines, and qualifies its identity and its borders.¹⁹⁸ The tagging of the deviant is evidence that there already exists a normative landscape in the society, although not yet necessarily orthodoxy. It is the act of breaching that creates the orthodoxy. The transgressive act provides the opportunity for those in power to clarify the previously commonplace categories and produce official categories with official boundaries.¹⁹⁹

How does this work? Reactions to certain behaviors as transgressive reveal what was previously considered natural or commonsense or taken-for-granted. Often people are not even aware of this existing geography of the normal. The act of transgression raises awareness and suddenly orients people to the normative landscape. It is the moment when the lines are drawn, when what was "taken-for-granted" becomes "the right way" or "orthodox" and the transgression becomes "the wrong way" or "heretical." When the different values of groups clash, the normative landscape is defined by those who have the power to do so. This constant process of reaction to deviance and (re)definition is what creates the official orthodoxy in societies, the judgment of rightness and wrongness of certain behaviors.²⁰⁰

It is important to keep in mind that the inscription and maintenance of the official orthodoxy is not something that a dominant group simply imposes. Others have to be convinced that the ideas of the dominant group are beneficial. So domination largely occurs by appealing to what is taken-for-granted, natural, reasonable or commonsense.²⁰¹ The dominant group

¹⁹⁷ As described by Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Wolfreys, *Transgression*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 20. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 480.

²⁰⁰ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 10.

²⁰¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973); Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*

must take what was previously unquestioned and defend it as the order of things against those who would say otherwise.²⁰² The group must produce “the naturalization of its own arbitrariness,” according to Pierre Bourdieu, for it to be successful in this endeavor.²⁰³ Because of this, transgressions appear to be against nature, disrupting the patterns we associate with normalcy and offending the invisible myths of consensus in any given society.²⁰⁴

While transgressions can be confusing and disorienting, they also reveal “the way things are.” We need transgression before we can see the center or even realize that a boundary exists in the first place. By studying people on the margins, we learn where the center is, how the core of what the society considers proper and right is aligned.²⁰⁵

In the case of second-century Christianity, Gnostic transgressions showed up the assumptions of the more centrally organized Apostolic-Catholic Christians. As we have seen, these Christians were positioned to exploit social power more advantageously than the decentralized, esoteric Gnostic groups. What the Apostolic-Catholics had to do was convince other people, both Christian and non-Christian, that their assumptions and norms were natural, reasonable, and commonsense. They had to defend their order of things against Gnostics who said otherwise. Since the values of the Apostolic-Catholics aligned with the norms of Roman society, while the values of Gnostics were counter-cultural, convincing people of the rightness and naturalness of the Apostolic-Catholic positions was made that much easier.

With protracted reasoning supported by constant reference to scriptural passages and their “natural” interpretation, the Apostolic-Catholic Christians set out to prove the rightness of their assumptions and the wrongness of Gnostic beliefs and behaviors, and publish them widely. The foundation of this enterprise is grounded in their constant appeal to historical continuity between Judaism and Christianity. By maintaining this Jewish connection, Christians like Irenaeus made reasonable the claim that the Christian scriptures are harmonious with the Jewish scriptures, that the one ought to support rather than oppose the other. It was self-evident then that the Christian scriptures, like the Jewish scriptures, must be acknowledging one God, the world creator, rather than two oppositional deities.²⁰⁶

of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 164; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 468.

²⁰² Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 21.

²⁰³ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164.

²⁰⁴ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 26.

²⁰⁵ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 9–27; Jenks, *Transgression*, 6.

²⁰⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1–2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 20–24).

Their high regard for their connection with Judaism and its supersession by Christianity allowed them also to establish certain conventional Jewish assumptions as “the way things are.” This began with the institutionalization of the worship of YHWH, the god of the Jews. The connection with Judaism allowed them to establish as commonsense that YHWH the creator is the supreme God of Christian worship, that he is neither a defective creature nor an apostate.²⁰⁷ Similarly, they were able to naturalize for Christians the traditional Jewish assumption that because humans were created by YHWH, they are lesser in status than YHWH and are his servile people.²⁰⁸ Likewise, the Jewish assumption that salvation was dependent on the observance of YHWH’s rules, on righteousness and piety, was established as a self-evident Christian norm, although the rules that applied to them were reduced to the Decalogue.²⁰⁹ Resurrection of the body also appears to have been a Jewish assumption that is validated as natural for Christians to believe.²¹⁰

Validating Jewish assumptions, however, was dicey business for these Christians, since the Apostolic-Catholic Christians had also to build a natural platform for their own scriptures, beliefs, and practices. This platform had to elevate their scriptures, beliefs, and practices so that they superseded Judaism, while not replacing the Law and the Prophets outright. They did this by imprinting the insignia “apostolic” on the Christian scriptures and traditions that their churches relied on.²¹¹ This helped them persuade others that their churches did not use “forged” scriptures and new-fangled traditions, but relied on scriptures and traditions that legitimately continued YHWH’s revelation through his son Jesus and the first apostles.²¹²

In the end, Christian “rightness” or orthodoxy was aligned with the naturalized assumptions of the Apostolic-Catholic rule of faith because of powerful sociological forces that were in play in Roman society. The correlation between Roman values and the values of the Apostolic-Catholics helped to legitimate and naturalize their “ancestral” positions over and against those of innovative Gnostic groups. Orthodoxy came to mean obedience to the way of the elders of the Apostolic-Catholic churches, leaders who were known to be the successors of the apostles. The elders were the ones who possessed the “gift of truth” which they passed on to their successors in the Apostolic-Catholic churches. They were to be obeyed. Chris-

²⁰⁷ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.pref.1, 2.2.5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 22–25, 40–41).

²⁰⁸ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.22–2.28; 2.26.1; 2.30.2; 4.38.1, 3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 212–93, 256–59, 302–5, 942–48, 952–56).

²⁰⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.29.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 294–97).

²¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.pref.4, 2.29.2 (Rousseau et al., 386–90, 296–99).

²¹¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, 20–24).

²¹² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.8 (Rousseau et al., 818–20).

tians were warned to be suspicious of any group that did not belong to this succession of bishops, or any congregation that assembled in places not sanctioned by these bishops. Such divergent and innovative people can only be revolutionaries, they thought. They can only be threatening transgressors who will be incinerated by the fire of God's judgment.²¹³

Ritual and Myth

²¹³ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.26.2 (Rousseau et al., 718–20).

Beyond the Gnostic Gospels

Studies Building on the Work
of Elaine Pagels

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