In the spring of 2006, a group of scholars captured headlines across the globe by publishing a new early Christian work, *The Gospel of Judas*. Although it was originally composed in Greek, it survives now only in a Coptic translation found in a fragmentary manuscript probably from the fourth century CE. Some of the text is now lost, but what remains surprised and fascinated millions of people. According to this gospel, the original disciples of Jesus and their followers were deluded worshippers of a false god; their primary ritual, the Eucharist, far from a solemn commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ, in fact was leading Christians to their own spiritual deaths. Only Judas knew the true nature of the divine, the real mission of Jesus, and the origin and fate of this world—for Jesus revealed these matters to him alone. As the original publishers of the gospel interpreted it, Judas was not a wicked traitor, but the only disciple who truly understood Jesus and who advanced his mission by facilitating his arrest and crucifixion. Even if scholars would later question this positive view of Judas’s character in the *Gospel of Judas*, the contents of this work appeared remarkably different from expected Christian teachings. As one prominent scholar put it, the *Gospel of Judas* represents “Christianity turned on its head.”

The earliest Christian author to mention the *Gospel of Judas* agreed with this assessment. He was Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul (France), who wrote his famous *Detection and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely So-Called* (or *Against the Heresies*) around the year 180. Irenaeus had read or at least heard about the *Gospel of Judas*, and he called it the fabrication of a group of false Christians, the Gnostics. The Gnostics and others like them, Irenaeus said, composed “miserable fables” that were foreign to true doctrine. In Irenaeus’s view there was only one
authentic way of being Christian, and so an alternative view of Christian faith must be false, not really Christianity at all. In fact, he argued that Jesus had taught the single authentic Christian doctrine to his disciples, who then transmitted it to their successors, bishops like Irenaeus, who led communities of true Christians throughout the world. People and groups who followed other forms of Christian teaching had deviated from this one true Christianity in diabolically diverse ways.

And yet, Irenaeus said, all these false versions of Christianity, however different they were, stemmed from a single demonic teacher, Simon Magus. Simon appears in the Acts of the Apostles as a magician who offered the apostles money for the power to bestow the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9–24). Moreover, Irenaeus argued that all these teachers and groups manifested false gnōsis or knowledge, which St. Paul had warned against in one of his letters to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:20). The Gospel of Judas, then, indeed turned Christianity on its head, for it was not Christianity at all, rather yet another demonically inspired example of false gnōsis.

As a bishop, Irenaeus saw it as his job to enforce proper Christian belief, and in fact many elements of Irenaeus’s version of Christianity eventually became key features of later Christian orthodoxy. When modern scholars say that a work like the Gospel of Judas turns Christianity on its head, they are probably not trying to enforce proper Christian belief as Bishop Irenaeus was, but they are working with a way of understanding the development of early Christianity that is similar to Irenaeus’s. That is, they know what “Christianity” is, and they know that the Gospel of Judas subverts that. On the one hand, there is a lot of truth to this way of seeing things. The vast majority of Christians, both in antiquity and today, do not share the views of the Gospel of Judas. The Christianity that came to dominate the Roman world and to shape the present-day varieties of the faith looked a lot more like Irenaeus’s religion than that of Judas. On the other hand, that Christianity—the Christianity of Irenaeus—was not the Christianity when the Gospel of Judas first appeared. The Christians who produced and read Judas were doubtless sincere in their beliefs and considered themselves the true Christians. They did not know that they were turning Christianity on its head; they thought they were teaching true Christianity, and they severely criticized other Christians as hopelessly deceived. The failure to include Judas in the eventual canon of the New Testament was neither historically inevitable nor (the historian would say) the result of divine intervention.

Rather, it was the result of a complex process in which differing forms of Christianity competed with, influenced, borrowed from, and rejected each other.

One of the challenges facing those of us who study ancient Christianity—or who study any religion in any period—is how to understand both the coherence and the diversity of a religious tradition. With early Christianity this challenge is particularly acute because eventually Christianity did establish an orthodoxy, albeit never completely and not without challenge, and thus it seems natural now to think of something like the Gospel of Judas as not true Christianity. How can we imagine early Christianity in a way that does justice to both of these factors—great diversity and yet an eventual orthodoxy?

In this effort, the legacy of Irenaeus has continued to affect how historians think in at least two important ways. First, his view that Christianity started out as a single, fairly uniform religion and then became more diverse, whether for good or for ill, has remained influential. Scholars may not share Irenaeus’s confidence that Jesus himself taught a true Christian doctrine that later bishops faithfully preserved, but they have at times reproduced his basic story in their own ways. For example, the great nineteenth-century German theologian Adolf von Harnack argued that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the original preaching of Christ, but this essential Gospel developed into orthodoxy dogma through a process of adaptation to Greek culture (or “Hellenization”) that was both necessary and tragic. On the one hand, Christian teaching needed to become more sophisticated and explain itself in philosophical terms acceptable to learned Greek speakers. On the other hand, various Christian groups went off course and became “heretics” when they adopted too many Greek ideas, like the Gnostics, or when they stuck too closely to their Jewish roots, like the so-called Ebionites. Or, trying to move beyond Harnack and yet to explain why Christianity changed in the first few centuries, we historians of today depict the early Christians as needing to establish their identity by differentiating themselves from Greco-Roman paganism on the one hand and from Judaism on the other—and sometimes there is a third alternative, Gnosticism. Diversity resulted as Christians responded to these challenges in different ways. That there is a single thing called “Christianity,” however diverse, is not really questioned. Irenaeus would not be happy with even this rather benign notion of development, but he would be familiar with the concept of a single
original Christian message that later diversified (wrongly, to his mind) as it carried its message into the pluralistic culture of the Roman Empire.

Irenaeus continues to shape how historians think in a second way. He argued that the various “heretical” Christian groups that he condemned, such as the Gnostics and the Valentinians and the Marcionites, were all manifestations of a single erroneous phenomenon, false gnōsis, or, as we call it today, “Gnosticism.” It is noteworthy that Irenaeus’s true and false versions of Christianity to some extent mirror one another. Both originated in a single person, whether Jesus or Simon Magus, and both were handed down through a chain of successive leaders, whether orthodox bishops or heretical teachers. But there is a crucial difference: the bishops who transmitted Christian truth did not alter it in any way, although they may have further developed certain teachings in defense of the faith and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But the heretical teachers who transmitted the false gnōsis of Simon constantly changed and elaborated on their teachings. So it is not Christianity that is diverse, but false gnōsis. Irenaeus and his fellow orthodox Christians are all the same, while the heretics differ widely in their teachings and go by all sorts of names: Gnostics, Sethians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Carpocratians, and so on. But this heretical diversity is somewhat illusory; in actual fact, all these heresies are a manifestation of false gnōsis.

When modern scholars depict many different ancient groups as belonging to the same category—Gnosticism—they replicate Irenaeus’s notion of false gnōsis but neglect his careful delineation of its diversity. Indeed, historians today sometimes go beyond even what Irenaeus claimed and assert that Gnosticism was an independent religion of its own that existed before Christianity and later included Manicheism and Mandacism, religions that did not appear until the third and perhaps fifth centuries, respectively. Just as Irenaeus believed that, despite their surface diversity, all the heresies shared similar features of false gnōsis, so, too, modern scholars make lists of the features that characterize all the diverse movements that they say represent Gnosticism. And just as Irenaeus believed that all the heresies had a single origin in Simon Magus, scholars try to discern precisely when and where Gnosticism originated, with Greek-speaking Judaism now the most popular hypothesis. To be fair, the motives of these scholars are benign: they want to see Gnosticism not as a Christian heresy, as Irenaeus did, but as a substantive religion or worldview in its own right. Still, their basic approach to ancient beliefs about Jesus that did not turn out to be orthodox reflects that of Irenaeus.

Contemporary scholars face the challenge of moving beyond the picture of early Christianity and “Gnosticism” that Irenaeus presents, even while we must still depend on him for much crucial information about the Christianity of his day. In the rest of this chapter I address both problematic facets of Irenaeus’s vision—a single, original orthodoxy and a single, multifaceted Gnosticism. In each case I argue for an approach that neither replicates that of Irenaeus nor matches completely that of his severest modern critics. In my view, we must endeavor as fully as possible to recognize the difference between the categories and typologies that modern scholars create in order to make sense of disparate yet related phenomena, on the one hand, and the communities and traditions that ancient Christians sought to create (not always successfully) to worship God and share their teachings, on the other. The problem is, of course, that even when we are delineating and describing ancient groups, we are also imagining and elaborating our own categories.

The “Varieties” of Early Christianity and Their Limits

As we imagine how Christianity (or Christianities) developed in the first three centuries, we need to account for two things. On the one hand, Christians were strikingly diverse and disagreed about nearly everything. Although some Christian leaders sought to control this diversity and create unity and uniformity, they were not able to do so. On the other hand, when in the early fourth century Constantine became the first Roman emperor who not only tolerated but also actively supported Christianity, the idea that Christians should form a single, worldwide “orthodox” Church took hold quickly. The diverse Christian groups of the earliest period often attempted to create unified organizations that spanned the Mediterranean. In the fourth and subsequent centuries, bishops and emperors made great progress in establishing a single Church, although they never did so with complete success. Any model for Christian diversity in the pre-Constantinian era must recognize not only the persistence of diversity but also the rise of orthodoxy, not only the hybridity and fluidity of early Christian writings and movements but also the unity and bounded character of many of them.

Irenaeus’s model of a single true Christianity from which heretics diverged readily accounts for both of these factors. According to this view, there always was a single true orthodox faith, and any Christian “diversity” simply reflects demonically inspired heretical movements.
versions of this model allow that “mainstream” Christianity may have changed and developed over the centuries, but they still insist that a core set of Christian beliefs persisted within this mainstream and that groups like the Montanists and the Valentinians strayed from these basic beliefs in various ways. One feature that both Irenaeus and his modern successors share is the idea of the priority of orthodoxy and the subsequent nature of heresy, both chronologically and intellectually. The North African theologian Tertullian was the first to clearly articulate this idea, which claims that “heretics” always reject or distort orthodoxy, mainstream, or widely shared Christian ideas and practices. And so orthodoxy precedes heresy, both in time—orthodoxy came first, with the original apostles—and in logic—heretical teachings distort or oppose orthodox ones. Or, in its less orthodox modern version, most Christians shared a set of core beliefs, which other groups either dissented from or took to unfortunate extremes.

Walter Bauer took a major step in dismantling the Irenaean model of early Christianity when he published his landmark 1934 book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.* Examining earliest Christianity in selected regions, Bauer argued that in some locations, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, forms of Christianity that would later be deemed heretical actually predated what would later emerge as orthodox. Orthodoxy did not in fact always precede heresy, Bauer argued that in the first few centuries, a wide variety of early Christian groups competed with each other for converts and argued about their beliefs. No overall power structure existed that could enforce one single point of view. The idea of a single orthodoxy arose in the city of Rome, whose cultural elite often liked conformity and dominance, and then spread to other regions. Real enforcement of orthodoxy across the Mediterranean came in the fourth century, when Constantine converted to Christianity and put the power of the imperial state behind it.

Subsequent studies have called into question nearly all of Bauer’s specific historical reconstructions. For example, while Bauer thought that the earliest Christians in Egypt were Gnostics, evidence now suggests that they were Jews from Palestine who did not hold beliefs that anyone would call Gnostic. Still, Bauer’s central insights—that Christianity was diverse from the get-go, that it developed in different ways in different regions, and that the emergence of orthodoxy was the result of real struggle—are now accepted as the basis for understanding Christianity in the early centuries. These ideas form the fundamental principles of a new model of early Christian development, the “varieties of early Christianity” model. In this view, there never was a single Christianity; rather, a variety of Christian groups competed with one another in the early years. One form of Christianity eventually came to dominate in several regions of the ancient Mediterranean world, but only after a period of struggle. Although it became the basis for what later Christians would understand to be orthodox Christianity, before the fourth century its eventual triumph was not ensured, and so it is best to call it “proto-orthodoxy” during the period before Constantine.

To explore this model’s virtues and shortcomings, we can use an analogy that Church historian Philip Rousseau briefly offers as a way to understand how scholars approach the diversity of early Christian Egypt. When we construct narratives of how proto-orthodoxy competed with and overcame its rival Christian groups, the result, Rousseau writes, is “like watching the rerun of a race while fixing your eyes confidently on the outsider you know to have won as he inches unexpectedly forward along the fence.” Rousseau goes on to offer his own helpful critique of this way of thinking. Following his lead, we can think of the varieties-of-early-Christianity model as something like a horse race. In this model, we cannot really see the starting gate, but around the year 100 CE, numerous independent Christian communities come into view, none with a fully convincing claim to exclusive authenticity as “true Christianity.” They jostle for position and argue with one another about which of them are the true Christians. In hindsight we can identify the “horse” that will emerge as the dominant orthodoxy by the end of the third century: it is represented by Irenaeus and other early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian (before he “became a Montanist”), and others. We call this form of Christianity “proto-orthodoxy,” because there is not yet an orthodoxy, but it will grow into it. We watch proto-orthodoxy as it competes with and overcomes its rivals, setting itself up as the horse that Constantine will ride, so to speak.

Another metaphor for this way of viewing early Christianity is warfare, which appears in the title of Bart Ehrman’s recent book, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.* Here the Gnostics, the Marcionites, and others are “lost Christianities” in two senses. First, they have become lost to later Christians because most of their writings were destroyed and their teachings forgotten; thanks to recent discoveries of some of their texts, however, contemporary scholars
can recover them. The most important of these discoveries was a set of Coptic books found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945; the Nag Hammadi works represented an astonishing variety of “lost Christianities,” including “Gnostic” ones. Second, these alternate forms of Christianity (not “heresies”) were literal losers: they lost the battle for Christianity to proto-orthodoxy. The proto-orthodox Christians won their victory with an “arsenal” of “weapons,” including apostolic succession, the rule of faith, the biblical canon, and the like. Here the metaphor is a battle, not a horse race, but the basic idea remains competition and struggle among diverse early Christian groups, with proto-orthodoxy emerging as the winner.

Whether we think of it as a horse race or as a battle, the varieties-of-early-Christianity model marks a real improvement over the Irenaeus paradigm and its modern successors. It recognizes diversity and tries not to privilege the proto-orthodox horse, which is just one of several competitors in the race. It does not have any single origin for either orthodoxy or heresy. There are many horses in the race when it starts, and some join the race later. It not only admits that early Christians seriously disagreed about fundamental aspects of the faith; it highlights these disagreements as the central factor that shaped the form of Christianity that later emerged as orthodoxy. For all these reasons, this model is a very useful one that we must not discard completely.

But scholars increasingly see the flaws in this approach and are trying to construct a more dynamic picture. We can start with the metaphor of competition itself: even if the model does not privilege the proto-orthodox horse, that horse does win the race. And, as with all competitions, this result invites analysis: Why did this variety of Christianity win out? It must not be due solely to Constantine’s choice of it. Surely, scholars muse, there must have been features of proto-orthodoxy that enabled it to prevail over its rivals or even guaranteed its success, and surely the Gnostics and Valentinians and Marcionites must have had flaws that prevented them from winning—elitism, lack of moral clarity, or whatever. Karen King has described how even historical projects that have endeavored to give the Gnostics their say and not to view them through the lens of their enemies turn out to have been efforts to discover the normative center of legitimate Christian identity. That is, scholars have asked: How can we differentiate the Gnostics from those we now know are the winning Christians and so see what made proto-orthodox Christianity successful and—dare we say it?—more legitimate and even true? The winning side is usually the “better” side.

Normative theological reflection on the development of Christianity is not necessarily a bad thing, but when we seek to define one stream of Christian tradition and discover its legitimating essence, not only what made it what it was but also what other forms of Christianity ought to have been, then we inevitably distort its competitors as they fail to measure up or as they contain some good features at the cost of others. For example, we may note that the Montanists differed from the proto-orthodox by allowing women to hold leadership positions in their churches—good thing!—but to do so they relied on a highly charismatic and therefore poorly organized mode of church structure—bad thing!

Another problematic feature of the horse-race model is that horses are—thank goodness—discrete bounded entities, clearly distinct from one another. Racing horses do not really change through their competition with each other. We might say that a horse develops its abilities or the jockey adjusts his strategies through interaction with their competitors, but we often think of this as sharpening or improving an already set identity. So, too, the predominant way of imagining the varieties of Christianity depicts them as discrete bounded groups: here is Pauline Christianity, there is Johannine Christianity, and then come the Gnostics, the Valentinians, the Montanists, the Marcionites, the Encratites, Jewish Christianity, the proto-orthodox, and so on. In the laudable effort to emphasize the diversity of early Christian groups and movements, we tend to create stable “name brands,” which interact and compete with each other like so many brands of breakfast cereal on a grocery store shelf. The characteristics that we have assigned to each group determine its success or failure. Proto-orthodoxy itself, the real object of our interest, may clarify or sharpen its characteristics or beliefs through competition with its rivals, but it does not change in any fundamental way. The proto-orthodox always knew, for example, that the God of the Hebrew Bible and the Father of Jesus Christ were the same God, but it was pressure from the Gnostics, the Valentinians, and the Marcionites that helped the proto-orthodox to clarify and articulate that belief. Or, to shift the metaphor, Marcion may have been the first Christian to establish a clear canon of Scriptures, and the proto-orthodox may have done so in response to him and to other groups, but the idea of a Bible with both Old and New Testaments was a natural development of the proto-orthodox
commitment to both the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospel, helped along by interaction with other groups.

Increasingly, however, scholars are less inclined to see religious groups as so distinct and well defined. The boundaries between groups are not clear: people and ideas travel back and forth and all around socially and intellectually. As Robert Campany has put it, religions are neither “fully integrated systems” nor “containers into which persons, ideas, practices, and texts may be fit without remainder.” Religious people do not settle neatly into our groups, and groups in antiquity (which did exist, of course) created their identities through interaction with others in a dynamic process. We will need to return to this point.

Finally, any conception of “the varieties of early Christianity” that places a single proto-orthodoxy within a plurality of “other groups” retains one key aspect of the Irenaean view: that proto-orthodoxy was single and consistent wherever it was found, while other forms of Christianity were multiple and diverse. But, as we shall see, in several important ways such proto-orthodox teachers as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria had more in common with, say, Valentinus than they did with Bishop Irenaeus. There was no single and uniform proto-orthodoxy, but multiple modes of piety, authority, and theology that later orthodoxy represents as its forerunners. The Church and critical scholarship depict as “proto-orthodox” people and groups who might well have initiated trajectories that would not have culminated in Nicene orthodoxy and who might be surprised to find themselves depicted as “the same.” Clement and Irenaeus may have agreed that the Gnostics were wrong about the character of the God of Genesis, but Clement was skeptical of bishops and claimed that Christ taught a secret gnōsis to his apostles, who then passed it down to learned teachers like himself. Valentinus would have agreed with this idea, while Irenaeus would not. But even Irenaeus himself was more similar to the Gnostics he hated than he would care to admit. He condemned the Gnostics for creating an elaborate series of divinities and heavenly realms and for tracing salvation genealogically through the sons of Adam. But Irenaeus himself described a series of seven heavens ruled by various powers, and he, too, traced the blessings of God genealogically through the sons of Noah. So there was no single proto-orthodox horse in the race, nor was there a single proto-orthodox army in the war: proto-orthodoxy itself was highly diverse and, in many respects, not very orthodox.

So we have now seen two basic and influential models for imagining the diversity of early Christianity and the emergence of orthodoxy: the Irenaean model of a single Christianity that develops and diversifies, and the horse-race model of a number of Christianities that compete with one another until a winner emerges. The second model is far preferable to the first, but it, too, has shortcomings that fail to do justice to the complexity of the ancient situation. Is a new model emerging that will guide how we think about early Christianity? I think not if we seek a model as clear and straightforward as the two that we have examined, but several scholars advocate an approach that focuses on “identity formation.” Karen King describes this approach in this way:

It aims to understand the discursive strategies and processes by which early Christians developed notions of themselves as distinct from others within the Mediterranean world (and were recognized as such by others), including the multiple ways in which Christians produced various constructions of what it means to be Christian. Methodologically, it is oriented toward the critical analysis of practices, such as producing texts; constructing shared history through memory, selective appropriation, negotiation, and invention of tradition; developing ritual performances such as baptism and meals; writing and selectively privileging certain theological forms (e.g., creeds) and canons; forming bodies and gender; making place and marking time; assigning nomenclature and establishing categories; defining “others” and so on.

This fruitful perspective shifts our focus away from discrete groups, the “varieties” of early Christianity, to the strategies by which individuals and groups sought to define themselves. The historian does not take for granted the existence of defined groups, but instead interrogates how ancient people sought to create, transform, and challenge religious communities and practices. “We should,” Robert Campany argues, “think of the coherence of such imagined communities as something repeatedly claimed, constructed, portrayed, or posited in texts, rituals, and other artifacts and activities, rather than as simply given.”

Three key themes characterize this new work on early Christian diversity: hybridity, rhetoric, and ethnicity. All of these themes reflect the growing influence of cultural studies, especially postcolonial perspectives, in the fields of early Christianity in particular and of religious studies in general. By investigating how new cultural forms are created and continually revised in an imperial context, postcolonial studies in particular
has much to offer the study of early Christianity in the Roman Empire. Let me say a bit about the utility of the concepts of hybridity, rhetoric, and ethnicity, and why I think that, despite all that I have said, we need still to retain something from our earlier ways of approaching early Christian diversity.

First, hybridity. Within religious studies the term “hybridity” functions something like the old “syncretism.” It marks the mixing, combining, and grafting of disparate cultural elements. But, while syncretism tended to work as the opposite of purity and so seemed to have a negative value, hybridity highlights cultural inequality within an empire and the ways that dominant and subordinate cultures mutually interact and create new cultural forms that are never pure or completely distinct. Hybridity suggests a process that is both inevitable and creative, indeed the only process by which subcultures flourish and grow. For those of us in religious studies, the notion of hybridity complicates our reliance on such highly productive theoretical concepts as “worldview” or “system of symbols.” In its most popular version, the result of reading such theorists as Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz, “worldview” and related concepts have helped us to see how religious symbols and social practices combine to form integrated subcultures in which people find meaning. But this perspective has also led us to see stability, harmony, and holism where there is usually contestation, conflict, and continual reinterpretation of cultural materials. Within early Christian studies, an emphasis on hybridity as the norm challenges traditional characterizations of Gnostics and other early Christians as particularly syncretistic and highlights the creative combination of cultural elements in proto-orthodox figures such as Irenaeus. The boundedness, continuity, and natural evolution of incipient beliefs and doctrines that we have attributed to early Christian groups were not in fact there in social life, but were invoked rhetorically in the multilateral process of identity formation and boundary setting in which all early Christians were engaged.

Rebecca Lyman, for example, draws on the notion of hybridity to approach one of proto-orthodoxy’s star architects, Justin Martyr. She places Justin’s invention of the idea of heresy (which I shall discuss in Chapter 4) in the context of a wider discussion of universalism and multiple traditions occurring in the second century, a time when numerous Greek-speaking authors, like Justin, were attempting to find a place for varieties of Hellenism within Roman imperial domination. Justin’s idea of heresy does not reflect an already formed and essentially intolerant Christian proto-orthodoxy, but rather represents one of a range of attempts by Hellenistic thinkers (mostly not Christian) to relate notions of universal truth and local beliefs. Lyman contests a picture of Christianity as inherently less tolerant and prone to impose an orthodoxy than other ancient religious movements, although she admits that Christians are often “more extreme” than others. And, indeed, I would observe that we do not find too many other ancient religions with bishops. But Lyman’s important move is to dislodge our notion of some essential orthodoxy that Justin defends or even creates and to situate Christian discussions of plurality and universal truth within a wider cultural setting. Justin fully participates in dominant Hellenistic and Roman cultures even as he contests them—the condition of hybridity.

The role of rhetoric is the second feature of recent attention to early Christian diversity. If Christians like Justin were not easily differentiated from other ancient religious people and in fact shared even in the cultures that they claimed to reject, then they faced the challenge of asserting such a difference in their rhetoric. “It may be that some imagined ‘others’ are strictly necessary for the claiming of an ‘own’ identity and coherence.” Here the most important scholar is the French theologian Alain Le Boulluec. His 1985 book on the idea of heresy in Greek literature of the first three centuries argued that, for all his virtues, Walter Bauer had still seen “orthodoxy” and “heresy” as actual things, whether those things are ideas or social groups. Bauer may have highlighted struggle and diversity, but he knew orthodoxy and heresy when he saw them. Instead, Le Boulluec studied “heresy” as a representation, constructed diversely by various authors, and thus as a product of discourse, as was indeed “orthodoxy.” It functioned as a way to imagine “others” against whom one can claim one’s legitimate identity. Recent scholars often claim that Le Boulluec himself did not go far enough, but they are all indebted to his claim that “orthodoxy”/”heresy” was a discourse designed to construct boundaries and create identity. Thus, scholars increasingly follow Le Boulluec’s example by studying how authors such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian created different notions of heresy in their projects of intellectual and social formation.

Finally, the language of ethnicity and citizenship played an important role in the rhetorics of self-differentiation. Here early Christian studies participate in a renewed discussion of ethnicity, especially Greekness, that is taking place in classical studies and ancient history. Christians called themselves a “third race” (in addition to “Jews” and “Gentiles” or
“Greeks” and “barbarians”), and among them the Gnostics identified themselves as “the seed of Seth” or “the immovable race.” Thus, Denise Buell explores in her recent book how various Christian authors used ethnic or racial language to establish identity and to construct boundaries between themselves, non-Christians, and other Christians. In each case Buell treats Christian identity not as something given, but as something constructed, challenged, and legitimated. To claim “orthodoxy” emerges as one strategy in such identity formation. Similarly Benjamin Dunning examines how Christians used the language of foreignness and civic belonging to express and shape their identities. As much as these studies contribute to a wider conversation about ethnicity in antiquity, they represent also a belated recognition among scholars of early Christianity of the inextricable connection between religion and ethnic identity in ancient culture. The recognition of the fundamental tie between the gods and ethnicity or genealogy can shed better light on such Gnostic self-identifications as “the seed of Seth.”

All of these themes—hybridity, rhetoric, and ethnicity—make problematic the reigning paradigm of “varieties of Christianity” or, as I have called it, the horse-race model, because they emphasize the difficulty of delineating clear boundaries between the brands of Christianity that we see as in competition. They tend to dissolve the distinctions that both ancient Christians and modern scholars have made among early Christian groups and movements not only by dissolving boundaries but also by highlighting diversity among sources that we have grouped together as representing “Gnosticism” or “proto-orthodoxy.” If such distinctions are mainly rhetorical categories that served to create difference more than they simply reflected it, then such groups lose their place in what we would call the real world of ancient society, and scholars are encouraged to engage primarily in microstudies, examinations of how individual texts or authors draw on a wide range of cultural resources to create their diverse visions of “Christianity.” We should instead explore each “novel way cultural elements are now put to work, by means of such complex and ad hoc relational processes as resistance, appropriation, subversion, and compromise.” A good example of this is Karen King’s recent book on The Secret Book According to John, which examines this text not as a representative of “Gnosticism,” but on its own as the creative combination of different traditions into a new Christian story.

Advocates of these new approaches often criticize any attempts to make larger claims about differing modes of religious authority or to delineate and describe particular forms of or groups within Christianity. They maintain that we must not “reify” either our categories or those of the ancients, but we should maintain a constant appreciation for the fluidity of boundaries and the hybridity of identities. In a moment, I shall examine how scholars in the study of “Gnosticism” have taken a bundle of characteristics, unevenly distributed across a variety of ancient sources, and created a religious entity that had no actual existence in the ancient world.

Scholarly anxiety about reification of categories and the rigidity of boundaries is justified, but I argue it need not cripple efforts to describe real social and religious distinctions among ancient Christians. For example, perspectives that emphasize rhetoric and discourse too often neglect the importance of social practice. Heresy was indeed an invention, but not one created through rhetoric alone. Rather, it was created also through practices such as excommunication, ritualized condemnation, and silencing of texts. Cohesion of religious groups was not just a function of shared ideas; it was also the effect of such practices as repeated rituals, exchange of letters and gifts, and patronage. For example, Irenaeus did not just write books that labeled others as heretics; he and his fellow bishops could fire priests who had “heretical” views, suppress certain theological writings, and exchange gifts only with other bishops with similar doctrines. Such practices had real social effects. Boundaries among early Christian groups may have been porous and in constant need of reassertion, but sometimes they did exist. Our goal should be to see neither how a single Christianity expressed itself in diverse ways, nor how one group of Christians emerged as the winner in a struggle, but how multiple Christian identities and communities were continually created and transformed.

Certainly historians of early Christianity must absorb as fully as we can the rhetorical, representational, and hybrid character of our sources, but if we are to appreciate truly the diversity of early Christianity and not dissolve that diversity into a soup of hybridity, we still need to make distinctions among forms of Christian life. And if we are to account for the rapid and aggressive emergence of the totalizing discourse of Nicene Christianity in the fourth century, we must recognize not only that pre-Nicene Christians were trying to construct boundaries that were not there, but also that sometimes they managed to do so successfully. We cannot and should not return to Irenaeus’s vision of a clear orthodoxy marching to an inevitable triumph over heresy, but neither can we ignore
a seemingly persistent feature of Christianity: its drive to create in social reality the single “body of Christ”—a body composed of many and diverse members, to be sure—but one body nonetheless.

In this effort, it is important to distinguish between at least two kinds of categories in the study of ancient Christianity. On the one hand, modern scholars sometimes develop interpretive categories in order to analyze and label modes of religious thought and practice for a variety of purposes. For example, we speak of “apocalyptic Judaism” or “apocalyptic eschatology” in order to group together and highlight religious works, people, and movements that differed in many ways but shared certain broad characteristics. Calling the thought of both, say, Paul and the Qumran community “apocalyptic Judaism” need not suggest either that Paul and the Jews of Qumran belonged to the same Jewish group or that they shared all the same views and practices, but it does legitimately identify them as sharing a similar approach to issues of revelatory knowledge about God’s plans, the restoration of Israel, the interpretation of Scripture, the injustice of the current world order, and the like. In this respect they differed from a Jew such as Philo of Alexandria, who interpreted Jewish traditions through more philosophical categories and did not show much interest in an imminent end-time.

The category “apocalyptic Judaism” is heuristic or interpretive: it functions as a tool for comparison and allows us to signal certain aspects of Paul’s thought without having to explain them in full. It helps us to place Paul within a recognizable stream of Jewish theology. Paul and the Jews of Qumran would not describe themselves as belonging to this category, and they might even deny that they share elements of the same worldview at all, but that is not the point: the category helps modern people to understand. It is hard to imagine being able to carry out the work of history without such interpretive categories as “apocalyptic Judaism” or “Platonism.”

On the other hand, scholars develop social categories that they believe correspond, usually imperfectly, to how ancient people actually saw and organized themselves. For example, scholars of early Christianity routinely speak of “Johannine Christianity,” by which they mean a tradition associated with the Gospel of John and the three Letters of John in the New Testament. These four works share a distinctive vocabulary and pattern of thought that set them apart from other texts in the New Testament and from early Christianity generally, and they seem to reflect the peculiar history and experience of a specific group of Christians. Scholars argue about the particular characteristics of this hypothetical group (for example, where to locate it geographically), and certainly no member of the group would have identified herself as a “Johannine Christian.” But many, if not most, scholars believe that the hypothesis of such a group best accounts for the surviving literary evidence, and it enables us to describe more precisely how the Christianity of even the earliest period was not a single movement, but a collection of diverse groups with distinctive beliefs and practices. Obviously the detection and description of such groups, traditions, and movements among early Christians function as essential tools of the “varieties of early Christianity” (or horse-race) model.

Although we can distinguish these two kinds of categories, in actual practice nearly all the categories that scholars of religion use are a hybrid of these kinds. Or, better, even our social categories are also interpretive ones. Consider, for example, “Christianity.” On the one hand, it is surely a social category that reflects accurately how numerous people throughout history have identified themselves and organized their religious communities. When, however, we include the apostle Paul and his followers in “Christianity,” the category becomes more interpretive or heuristic. To be sure, Paul worshipped Jesus Christ, and his writings now make up a significant part of the Christian Bible. But Paul did not use the term “Christian” for himself or “Christianity” for what he taught—these words had not yet been invented, as far as we can tell. He understood himself to be a Jew, preaching the fulfillment of the Jewish tradition. Paul, then, belongs firmly to the history of Judaism, and it is somewhat misleading to use the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” in discussing him. And yet we do use such terms—and rightly so, for Paul and his churches belong just as firmly to the history of Christianity as well, even if they did not see themselves in this way. It would distort understanding of Christianity to deny this. We see, then, that even a category that appears “simply” to reflect social reality, that identifies a tradition that truly existed and saw itself so, in fact functions also interpretively, including data that scholars assign to it apart from the self-understanding of religious people. Scholars are inventing and shaping whatever categories they use.

Work on early Christian history falls into confusion when scholars fail to distinguish our two kinds of categories, both of which (we must
always remember) we ourselves have created, or even more so, when we fail to attend to how our necessarily hybrid categories are functioning. Certainly interpretive categories like “apocalyptic Judaism” can be misapplied or poorly conceived, can obscure rather than enhance understanding, and so forth—and in such cases they need to be discarded or reformed. And certainly social categories like “Johannine Christianity” can be misapplied or poorly conceived, can obscure rather than enhance understanding, and so forth—and in such cases they need to be discarded or reformed. Scholars are engaged in this kind of activity all the time, and it does not call into question the utility of having such categories, just the utility of the ones under critique and reform.24

The confusion of category types or inattention to how categories function can indeed lead scholars to question the use of any kind of categories. Karen King, for example, has effectively and persuasively demonstrated that the category “Jewish Christianity” has little heuristic value because it means different things to different scholars. Sometimes it functions purely interpretively to include different groups that share similar features (as does “apocalyptic”), and sometimes it functions socially to circumscribe certain groups (as does “Johannine Christianity”). The term has been applied to Christian groups that have too little in common and differ too much in their relationship to Judaism to be included in the same category. It does not truly map onto any Christian group for which we have reliable (rather than merely polemical) evidence. A major problem that her analysis uncovers is that many scholars appear not to have considered whether “Jewish Christianity” functioned as an interpretive category (like “apocalyptic”) or a social one (like “Johannine Christianity”), or they slip between these two functions without seeing that they are doing so.25 It does not follow from King’s excellent critique, however, that, because this confused category does not work, scholars should not still try to discern how early Christians themselves coalesced into social groups. That is, the failure of a particular interpretive or social category, no matter how spectacular, need not call into question the utility and viability of such categories. To be sure, we need to avoid “a fixed and essentialized categorization of early Christian multiplicity,”26 but we need not abandon the quest to discern the actual groups, traditions, and movements that made up the jumble of “ancient Christianity.” And, in fact, I believe that this lesson is the one that we can apply to scholarly constructions of “Gnosticism” as well.

“Gnosticism” and Its Limits

“Gnosticism” is an outstanding example of a scholarly category that, thanks to confusion about what it is supposed to do, has lost its utility and must be either abandoned or reformed. “Gnosticism,” as we have seen, is a legacy of Irenaeus, who characterized all of the Christian groups that he opposed as examples of false gnōsis and as originating in Simon Magus. Still, even Irenaeus recognized that the several groups that he described were in fact not the same group and disagreed strongly with one another. Indeed, he emphasized this point as an indication that such groups therefore could not have the single truth of Christian faith. His descriptions, as polemical and distorted as they are, make real distinctions between various teachers and schools and their doctrines. Irenaeus provides unwitting testimony to the great variety of the Christianity of his day.

The story of how modern scholarship has developed the idea of Gnosticism has been told several times, and its details need not detain us here.27 Suffice it to say that in the seventeenth century Henry More (1614–1687) invented the term “Gnosticism” for all the heresies that Irenaeus and his heresiological successors attacked. In the centuries that followed, scholars developed, refined, and debated theories of how Gnosticism arose and interacted with Christianity. During this period historians included in “Gnosticism” a variety of movements that were dualistic, that is, ones that sharply differentiated spiritual reality from material existence and the soul from the body, valuing the soul and the spiritual and deprecating the body and the material. Such groups also distinguished between the god who created this material world and the ultimate God: a lower, inferior god created this universe, not the utterly transcendent spiritual God, who is too remote to have done so. Dualism and a lower creator god have remained key, even defining, features of Gnosticism for most scholars. Before the late nineteenth century, historians had only the accounts of authors like Irenaeus to work with, and so they were eager to embrace potential new sources for Gnostic beliefs when they began to appear around the turn of the twentieth century. Some “new sources,” like the literature of the Mandaean, led scholars down ultimately unproductive paths, but not so the many newly discovered Coptic manuscripts, especially those found at Nag Hammadi in 1945. These Coptic texts included works that undeniably came from or were related
to the “Gnostics” that Irenaeus described, although exact correspondences were very few.

Two examples of “Gnosticism” from the late twentieth century exemplify the result of this process of combining long-known heresiological reports with an abundance of new evidence. First, a 1966 conference in Messina took as one of its goals the construction of a definition of Gnosticism that a wide range of scholars could accept. The participants decided that “Gnosis” should be taken to refer to the general idea of knowledge reserved for an elite group and thus is a widespread phenomenon in the history of religions. True Gnosticism, however, was to be found in the seemingly Christian systems of the second century, and they defined it by “a coherent series of characteristics,” primarily the ideas of (1) “a divine spark” in humanity that came from the spiritual realm and to which people must be awakened and (2) “a downward movement of the divine” (often called Wisdom) into the realm of fate to recover lost divine energy. Gnosticism features “a dualistic conception on a monistic background, expressed in a double movement of devolution and integration.” Gnosticism’s notion of divine “devolution” means that it cannot belong to “the same historical and religious type as Judaism or the Christianity of the New Testament and the Grosskirche [i.e., the Great Church] or ‘proto-orthodoxy’.” From this the participants constructed a Gnosticism that was neither Judaism nor Christianity, but could be linked with the Upanishads of ancient India and the Cathars of medieval Europe. 28

The second example is Kurt Rudolph’s important book Gnosis, which appeared in German in 1977 and in English translation in 1983. It rapidly became the book that graduate students in ancient Christianity had to read to get up to speed on Gnosticism. Rudolph’s Gnosticism was “a dualistic religion, consisting of several schools and movements,” which took “a negative attitude toward the world and the society of the time” and “proclaimed a deliverance” from “the constraints of earthly existence through ‘insight’.” 29 Making full use of the Nag Hammadi documents, Rudolph told a story of breathtaking scope and diversity: Gnosticism was an independent religion, which originated in Simon Magus (as Irenaeus had said) and then diversified to include Basilides, Valentinus, Marcion, The Gospel According to Thomas, and other texts and persons, eventually blossoming into Manichaeism, Mandaeism, and the Bogomils of medieval Europe. Here, indeed, it seems that an interpretative category based on certain characteristics (dualism, negativity about the

world and society, deliverance, “insight”) had somehow, with or without the scholar’s cognizance, morphed into a social category, an actual religion that survived for centuries. This Gnosticism is a religion in which probably few adherents would recognize the others as in fact belonging to the same religion as they do. Its different schools and movements could teach strikingly different ideas, tell myths with completely different casts of characters, and consider different books to be scriptures—and yet they are all “Gnosticism.”

As Gnosticism became a religion seemingly without boundaries, the people and texts that scholars assigned to it assumed the characteristics of that religion, even if they did not display them. That is, scholars knew—from this or that “Gnostic” text, or from this or that report from a Church Father—that Gnostics were dualists, that they believed in a lower creator god, that they hated the world and society, that they did not believe that Christ was truly human, and that their disdain for the body led them either to adopt extreme asceticism or to live as wanton libertines. No matter if a text from Nag Hammadi did not contain such ideas or even seemed to contradict them; that text still belonged to Gnosticism and must somehow reflect its characteristics.

Understandably, the bloated and distorting nature of “Gnosticism” has led some scholars to argue that the entire category should simply be abandoned. Michael Williams’s 1996 book Rethinking “Gnosticism” presents a devastating critique of the category “Gnosticism.” 30 By comparing the mythologies and teachings of four persons or documents that scholars usually have called “Gnostic”—The Secret Book According to John, Proleny the Valentinian, Justin’s Baruch (not Justin Martyr), and Marcion of Sinope—Williams exposes the distortion that is required to imagine that they all belonged to any movement more restricted than “Christianity.” “Gnosticism,” Williams persuasively argues, has become meaningless by saying both too much and too little. It includes under its umbrella people and texts that are far too many and far too diverse, and therefore it provides no real understanding of them. He goes on to deconstruct many of the clichés that have come to be associated with “Gnostics”—for example, that their interpretations of the Bible constitute a dramatic “reversal” of biblical narrative, that they are religious “parasites” who attach their anticosmic worldview to already existing traditions, and that they are either sexually licentious or strictly ascetic. Instead, Williams shows that the surviving works that scholars have assigned to “Gnosticism” both display considerable variety and
take positions that are not outrageously radical within their historical contexts.

Williams grants that some of the people and texts of traditional “Gnosticism” share some features and concerns that make it fruitful for them sometimes to be studied together. He proposes a new interpretive category, “biblical demiurgical traditions,” which would include “all those that ascribe the creation and management of the cosmos to some lower entity or entities, distinct from the highest God,” as they “also incorporate or adapt traditions from Jewish or Christian Scripture.” Such a category would function more like “apocalyptic”; it highlights certain shared characteristics and provides a convenient grouping for study, but does not imply that all the included traditions share all the same features or form a distinct religion or movement. As welcome as this turn to an explicitly interpretive rather than social category is, “biblical demiurgical traditions” has its own problem: namely, it is hard to imagine a Jew or Christian of the first few centuries CE who would not belong to it. As we shall see, all Jews and Christians with any philosophical interests ascribed the creation of this world (in full or in part) to a deity lower than the highest God and also interpreted and adapted Jewish or Christian Scriptures. As the Gospel of John put it, God did not create the world directly; rather, “all things came into being” through God’s Word (John 1:3). Thus, even “biblical demiurgical traditions” may be too large a category (larger even than “Gnosticism”?!) to be truly useful. More helpful is Williams’s complementary proposal to delineate smaller and more distinct sociohistorical traditions, such as Valentinianism, from the people and texts that used to belong to “Gnosticism.”

Karen King offers a more ethically and theologically oriented critique of “Gnosticism.” If Williams argues that the category distorts our knowledge of early Christian persons and groups, King claims that scholars have followed Irenaeus and the other ancient heresiologists by using it to define normative Christianity and to render certain forms of Christianity illegitimate. The modern category “Gnosticism,” she argues, “reinscribes and reproduces the ancient discourse of orthodoxy and heresy.” In so doing, modern historians create a false picture of Christian groups in the second and third centuries, which in fact lacked a defined orthodoxy. They tend to reify and essentialize the polemical categories of ancient persons like Irenaeus and the scholarly categories that they themselves create. In my terms, they turn interpretive categories into social ones, whether unwittingly or not. But even more importantly, the category “Gnosticism” tends to undermine liberating theological reflection in the present by reaffirming so-called “orthodoxy” and branding alternative Christian possibilities as “Gnostic.” Instead, historians should seek “not to destroy tradition but to open up space for alternative or marginalized voices to be heard within it. A fuller historical portrait of religious piety can enrich the funds of religious tradition, providing more complex theological resources to attend to the complex issues of our own day.” In this way “faith” can be “strengthened and enriched.”

Unlike Williams, King does not offer an alternative interpretive category; moreover, she appears to resist most attempts to delineate actual movements, schools, or subcultures within the umbrella of Christianity. In line with the recent trends of thought concerning early Christianity that I discussed above, she fears that such attempts create groups that are too tidy and thus fail to capture the hybrid and fluid situation among early Christianities. She criticizes the “essentializing” of persons and groups into social things that have stable and fixed characters. Instead, she advocates careful attention to and sustained self-awareness of our use of any categories, and she believes in the close reading of individual texts for their distinctive attempts to articulate visions of Christian salvation.

Williams and King are the most prominent advocates of a complete dismantling of “Gnosticism” and the eschewing of the term “Gnostic.” In response to their views, defenders of “Gnosticism” have made a range of counterproposals. These suggestions differ in the extent to which they imagine Gnosticism to be an actual religion, but they do rely on a typological approach in which a set of characteristics gathers together similar people and texts. For example, several scholars suggest that a category “Gnosticism” or “Gnosis” that includes several different and even socially and historically unrelated groups can be useful for scholarly purposes. Christoph Marksches argues that “typological constructs . . . help to see phenomena with related content.” As the basis for a model of “Gnosis,” he proposes a set of eight characteristics, which includes the distinction between a lower creator god and an “other-worldly, distant, supreme God”; an experience of alienation from the world; the notion of a divine spark within the human being; and a tendency toward dualism. On the one hand, Marksches argues that some of the ancient movements that are gathered together by his model were closely connected and that “some of their influence extends to the present.” On the other hand, he cautions that the connections among the movements may range from
“direct historical” ones to a “common cultural climate” to simple “agreement in content.” For him, then, Gnosis is not a single religion. Rather, the teachings of some early “forerunners” of Gnosis, such as Valentinus, paved the way for true systems of Gnosis, such as Valentinianism and “Sethianism,” which culminated in Manichaeanism, in which Gnosis does indeed take the form of its own religion.

Other scholars propose less elaborate typologies. Antti Marjanen reduces the defining characteristics of Gnosticism to two ideas: that there is or are “(an) evil or ignorant world creator(s) separate from the highest divinity” and that “the human soul or spirit originates from a transcendent world and, having become aware of that, has the potential of returning there after life in this world.” Like Marksches, Marjanen does not claim that his Gnosticism was a single religion in antiquity: it is “a heuristic scholarly construct” or “a typologically defined category . . . by which one can group ancient religious texts and thinkers for closer analysis and comparison.” At the center of Marjanen’s Gnosticism lie Valentinian and “Sethian” works, with a variety of texts, especially from Nag Hammadi, that cannot be classified beyond being “Gnostic.”

Marvin Meyer offers a definition of “Gnostic religion” that is also simpler than Marksches’s but goes in a different direction from that of Marjanen. “Gnostic religion,” he argues, “is a religious tradition that emphasizes the primary place of gnosis, or mystical knowledge, understood through aspects of wisdom, often personified wisdom, presented in creation stories, particularly stories based on the Genesis accounts, and interpreted by means of a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, including Platonism, in order to proclaim a radically enlightened way and life of knowledge.” Meyer’s definition lacks both of Marjanen’s two elements (evil or ignorant creator god and the soul’s transcendent origin and goal) and instead emphasizes mysticism, wisdom, and creation stories. Meyer concedes that not all Gnostic texts will fully conform to his definition, and it is not clear how committed he is to imaging a single “religious tradition” as a continuous social entity. For him, “Gnostic religion” appears to mean “a Gnostic type of religion or spirituality,” not a single religious tradition that developed over decades or centuries like Christianity or Judaism. His difference with Marjanen can be seen in how each treats The Gospel According to Thomas. For Meyer, it has “Gnostic tendencies” because of its emphasis on mystical knowledge, but for Marjanen, it is simply not Gnostic because it lacks an evil or ignorant creator god.

As different as their individual proposals are, Marksches, Marjanen, and Meyer all seek to retain a typologically constructed “Gnosticism” (or “Gnostic religion” in Meyer’s case) that scholars understand to be an interpretive or heuristically useful category, not a single ancient religion. In contrast, Birger Pearson argues vigorously that Gnosticism was a religion in its own right. He notes that Ninian Smart had argued that a religion has seven dimensions: doctrinal/philosophical, mythic/narrative, practical/ritual, experiential/emotional, ethical/legal, social/institutional, and material. Pearson examines the Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi, especially The Secret Book According to John, and finds that, collectively, they provide evidence for all seven of these dimensions, and thus the Gnosticism that they represent qualifies as a religion. The seven dimensions provide the framework for Pearson’s typological construction of Gnosticism: for example, under the doctrinal/philosophical dimension, he includes the split between the supreme God and the lower creator god. Pearson includes even the Mandaean in his Gnostic religion. Gnosticism, in his view, was a religion distinct from Christianity, although, to be sure, it appears at times to Christianize. Certain Nag Hammadi texts suggest that Gnosticism originated apart from Christianity, and the Mandaeans represent a persistent branch of non-Christian Gnosticism. The Valentinians may have claimed to be Christians, but the “central core” of their message was an “emphasis on gnosis as the basis for salvation”—hence, they, too, belong to Gnosticism.

Of these recent typologically oriented proposals, Pearson’s is the easiest to criticize because it so faithfully reproduces all the problems of previous scholarship. To be sure, when he argues that Gnosticism is its own religion, distinct from Christianity, he seeks to avoid the reductionism and denigration that attends viewing it as simply an aberration from “orthodox” or “mainstream” Christianity. Pearson wishes to give Gnostic religion the respect that it deserves. Still, his case is not persuasive. By showing that Nag Hammadi and Mandaeen texts evince all seven of Smart’s dimensions of a religion, Pearson has shown only that these materials can be analyzed as being religious, that is, as coming from a religion or religions, not that they therefore constitute a single independent religion. As the Valentinian case makes clear, Pearson relies heavily on an emphasis on gnōsis as the means of salvation to distinguish Christian- looking Gnosticism from Christianity proper, which emphasizes faith (and Jewish-looking Gnosticism from Judaism proper, which emphasizes observance of Torah) (202). But surely an emphasis like this cannot serve
to define one religion in distinction from another; rather, it represents a choice among various ways of explaining salvation that might be found within a large number of religious traditions, including Christianity.

Finally, Pearson's argument that the "exotic" Mandaean represent a continuation of Gnosticism must elide very significant differences between the Mandaean myth and those of the Sethians and the Valentinians (223). Mandaean authors may have drawn on earlier Gnostic and Valentinian writings in their mythmaking, but so, too, did they draw from other traditions, such as Islam. If we return to Smart's seven dimensions of a religion, Valentinian and Mandaean sources may both exhibit practical/ritual dimensions, but they do not share the same rituals; they may both evoke social/institutional dimensions, but no one has demonstrated continuity between their social institutions. But Pearson's bar for establishing that two sources come from the same religion is, in the case of Gnosticism, quite low. He considers Manichaeanism "a special instance of the larger religious phenomenon called Gnosticism or the Gnostic religion," but the only link between Mani and earlier Gnostics that he adduces is that "the prophet, highly educated as he was, had access to Gnostic literature of a Sethian stamp" (282). In other words, Mani read earlier Gnostic texts and used them. But Mani read and used a variety of religious texts, including the New Testament.

The typological proposals of Markschies and the others avoid Pearson's problem of positing an independent religion without convincing continuity in mythology, ritual, or social institutions, but these proposals are nonetheless unsatisfactory as well. Consider Marjansen's attractively simple reduction of a typology to only two elements: (an) evil or ignorant creator god(s), and the soul's transcendent origin and ultimate goal. It may indeed be intellectually fruitful to study together the people and texts that this definition collects, but why call them "Gnosticism"? For one thing, it is not clear how the term "Gnosticism" follows from the two elements named, neither of which has a necessary connection to gnōsis. As we shall see, even ancient heresiologists did not call all of the people and myths that they opposed "Gnostics," and ancient Christians who would not be included in this category made the term "Gnostic" a major feature of their teachings (Clement of Alexandria and Evagrius of Pontus, for example). Moreover, by placing people and texts in such a weighty category based on these two elements, this model exaggerates the importance of these features, singling them out as somehow central to the religious identities of the authors. Surely, however, if one asked the Valentinian teacher Ptolemy or the author of The Secret Book According to John what the heart of their teachings were, they would not attribute the creator god or the soul's origin and fate. Rather, they would more likely point to their proclamation of salvation in Jesus and the new way of life this salvation makes possible.

In the end, the problem with any typological method of defining Gnosticism is that it extracts and isolates doctrinal points or general characteristics from complex and often strikingly different mythologies. An evil or ignorant creator god can appear in any number of different creation narratives, with quite different meanings. A scholar may have good reason to study how such a motif functions in different myths, but to create an entire category of religious traditions from such fragmentary and isolated motifs or concepts does not do justice to how people combine myths, rituals, and social institutions to create unique religious subcultures. The proponents of recent typologies may insist that they are creating only a heuristic category and not claiming to define a distinct religion, but the label "Gnosticism" nonetheless lends itself to the kind of reification against which especially King rightly warns. Instead, it would be far better if historians gave up using "Gnosticism" as an interpretive or heuristic category. If we are interested in ancient Christians (or non-Christians) of any stripe who aspire to "mystical knowledge" or who believe that the human soul originated in a transcendent realm or who think that the creator of this world is evil or ignorant, then we should seek out those Christians and simply call them what they were: for example, ancient religious people interested in "mystical knowledge."

But the rejection of the typological approach does not mean that we have to jettison the adjective "Gnostic" altogether: a third group of scholars believes that it is possible to identify an early Christian movement whose members were known properly as "the Gnostics" and who share a distinct mythology and ritual. That is, the "Gnostics" (and perhaps, if we dare, "Gnostic"") can be retrieved as a social category, one that corresponds to a group that recognized itself as such—and was so recognized by others. I believe that it is possible to identify and describe such a Gnostic movement without succumbing to the dangers of rigid boundaries, essentializing, and reification that concern scholars today. To fail to explore and reconstruct (as far as we can) the actual religious communities in which ancient Christians arranged themselves would be to neglect the texture of their religious lives and to atomize early Christianity into a series of individual theological projects. That is, even if we
must not imagine religious communities as firmly bounded and integrated systems, there remains merit in attempting to explore the subcultures in which religious people found meaning. If we start at the ground level, we can recover something of the myth and rituals of the ancient Gnostics, unburdened by the clichés and stereotypes that have coalesced around “Gnosticism.” We can try to get beyond Irenaeus’s vision of false gnōsis—ironically enough, with his own unwitting help.