Remembering the Gnostics:  
The mnemohistorical incorporation of Ancient Gnosticism within Neo-Gnostic Churches  
Alberto Alfredo Winterberg

I. Introduction

Even though scholarly awareness of the phenomenon of Neo-Gnosticism has grown over the last few years, little research has been done to determine the relationship between the late ancient traditionally so-called Gnostic sources and the Neo-Gnostic modes and means of their reception and re-imagination. Indeed, some comprehensive volumes have been published in the past which were either concerned with the history and evolution of the Neo-Gnostic movement or its placement within the field of New Religious Movements. 1 Yet the elaboration of the process of reception of ancient Gnostic primary sources has been of subordinate importance in these volumes. One memorable exception from the recent past is Dillon’s dissertation “The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture”. 2 As for the subject of this article, his dissertation is especially concerned with the adaption of Homann’s theory of Symbolic Loss with respect to the Nag Hammadi Codices within the US-based Ecclesia Gnostica. Therein he illustrates how individuals who were primarily socialized within the confines of Christian orthodoxies and eventually experienced alienation from their upbringing could reconnect to Christianity through an altered perspective provided by their reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices. Even though ancient sources are an important part of this work, its general approach is deeply rooted within social studies and decidedly portrays contemporary American culture. Another comparably recent study about the reception of Gnosticism is Michael Pauen’s Dithyrambiker des Untergangs. Gnostizismus in Ästhetik und Philosophie der Moderne (1994) which examines traces of and overlaps with a supposed Gnostic worldview in modern art, literature and philosophy. However, Pauen does not investigate religious

groups or individuals who decidedly consider themselves to be Gnostics and directly drew on ancient sources or motifs. By contrast, this present article will be focusing on the treatment of ancient sources or motifs themselves, in order to comprehend how a memory of the ancient Gnostics is formed through the adaption and interpretation of ancient primary sources and motifs drawn from the Patristic heresiological discourse in modern religious movements.

By the end of the 19th century the Freemason and Spiritualist Jules Doinel (1842 – 1903) founded the Église Gnostique as the first self-determined Gnostic church. This proclaimed revival of ‘ancient’ Gnosticism was just the beginning of a series of Neo-Gnostic church foundations which continues until the present day. Due to the parallel evolution of the academic discourse about ancient Gnosticism, it should be a worthwhile endeavor to explore the modes and means of the reception of ancient sources within different stages of the Neo-Gnostic discourse. Therefore, this article’s aim lies not only in the determination of the ancient elements which were received by the two biggest self-styled Gnostic churches which exist today—the Ecclesia Gnostica (est. 1970) and the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (est. 1908). Moreover, it shall illustrate how ancient sources and elements were integrated within these churches’ particular mnemohistorical construction of “the Gnostics”.

II. Theoretical and methodological tenets

Before continuing to discuss the Neo-Gnostic churches themselves, we have to define what a Neo-Gnostic actually is. Certainly, theological concepts which reflected some typological features of ancient Gnosticism reappeared from time to time within occidental history: for example, in form of the supposed dualism between a transcendent God and a lesser or evil deity, as featured in Catharism. However, neither do such features necessarily indicate a genealogical link to late ancient ‘Gnostic’ groups, nor did the protagonists of such movements claim any succession from the latter. Contrary to such cases, Neo-Gnostics do indeed claim to continue ancient Gnosticism. Therefore, Neo-Gnostics shall be defined as dependent on their explicit self-avowal to and self-identification with ‘Gnosticism’ as a term for the following pages. An actual match in the sense of the historicity of their ideas about ancient Gnosticism is not mandatory: it is absolutely clear that these modern movements do not possess any traceability to their claimed ancient ancestry. Rather, the aspect of their self-designation and self-understanding is crucial.

3 Cf. Introvigne, Il ritorno dello gnostizmo, 87.
In order to comprehend the reception of ancient ‘Gnostic’ sources, a model used by historians of Classical antiquity in Germany shall serve as a basis for this current purpose. It consists of reception base, objects of reception, method of reception and interest of reception.5

The reception base is the totality of all available information about a topic that enables the process of reception itself.6 In the case of Gnosticism, this would not only include the primary sources from late ancient times and the Patristic discourse, but also the whole set of academic research and in turn its reception in art, music, literature and so on. It is self-explanatory that the reception base is no static entity, but dynamic and dependent on the spatio-temporal conditions in which a topic is received. As for the objects of reception, these are the elements and motifs adapted and derived from or inspired by Gnosticism.7 The method and interest of reception represent the subsequent questions of “how” and “why” Gnostic material is integrated within a modern religious movement.8

A complementary aspect to enhance the understanding of these processes would be the antipodes of archaeology and mnemohistory as defined by Jan Assmann in his discussion of the occidental mnemohistory of Ancient Egypt. First it should be emphasized that both categories here are to be understood as specific modes of access towards history and historicity. Archaeology should not be understood as the subject itself at this point, but as a scientific view which aims towards the reconstruction of the beginning or an original state–ideally the past as it was.9 In this context, Assmann refers to the birth of Egyptology as a discipline which was intended to correct the fantastic images of Ancient Egypt in later periods, likening it to the act of the removal of rubble or sediment.10 On the other hand, the mnemohistorical approach is not interested in the reconstruction of an original state, but deals with the sediment as it is and appears—an image or memory as it is remembered at a certain point of time, from a certain now. While, as Assmann admits, this approach does not serve to gain insights about the remembered past, he emphasizes that it illuminates the respective present in which the past is remembered.11 Mnemohistory, therefore, does explicitly not wish to trace the historical truth of traditions, but studies traditions themselves as part of the collective or cultural memory.12 On the following pages the archaeological and the mnemohistorical approach shall be

10 Ibid.
12 Assmann, Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011), 27.
combined for the analysis of two Neo-Gnostic churches: on the one hand in the sense of elaborating their mnemohistorical image of ancient Gnosticism, on the other hand in the sense of tracing the archaeological genesis of the latter. This shall be effected by exemplarily investigating relevant testimonials pertaining to the respective groups.13

Before concluding this section, it shall be remarked that Gnosticism itself shall be treated here as an mnemohistorical term, too. Definitions thereof are numerous and encircled by scholarly controversy. The term derives from Greek γνῶσις, knowledge, whose meaning and connotation shifted throughout the course of Classical up to Late Antiquity. For example, γνῶσις was already a considerable part of the philosophy of Plato, who held the belief that a specific mode of knowledge means the regaining of a primordial but lost wisdom about the human essence. This specific perception would lead the seeker of γνῶσις towards an understanding of the world of ideas and thereby to an approximation with the divine.14 In the periods of Hellenism and Late Antiquity, the aspect of a divinely instituted or revealed knowledge gained prominence, which would constitute an important part of various philosophical movements like Middle and Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, or religious groups like Early Christianity, Hermeticism or parts of Judaism.15 This specific conceptualization of γνῶσις bore the connotation of elitism – a knowledge for initiates, not accessible to everyone.16 Gnosticism as a term, on the contrary, was shaped by Early Modern European scholars who aimed to categorize various late ancient Christian heterodox groups. To this end they drew on the polemical accounts of the Apostolic and Church Fathers and Neoplatonic philosophers who reported about Christian groups which were perceived as heretical by the first or erroneous by the second. While, for example, Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130 – c. 202) mentions in his *Refutation of All Heresies* (I:25,6) a specific group which designated its own members as ‘Gnostics’ the vast majority of so-called Gnostics have to be understood as externally described as such. This can be exemplified by a Gnostic Christian group mentioned by Justin Martyr (c. 100 – 165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 155 –160; chapter 35,6), which would call its members ‘Christians’ – not ‘Gnostics”.17 Naturally, this broad subsumption of various groups under the umbrella term ‘Gnosticism’ created confusion and required precise definitions.

16 Markschies, *Die Gnosis*, 12.
17 Markschies, *Die Gnosis*, 16–19.
One of the most famous attempts to create a definition was effected on the conference of Messina in 1966, which proposed a typological model in which Gnosticism was defined to be in possession of stereotypical characteristics such as salvation through γνῶσις and the latter’s revelation through a messiah; or dualism between a transcendent God and a lesser deity. In spite of the variety of definitions of γνῶσις which were circulating already in ancient times, Markschies argues that using a “typological construct” – as Williams referred to Gnosticism – derived thereof can still be of benefit in order to perceive phenomena stemming from related religious currents which share common characteristics. Thus, Markschies supports the preservation of the concept of Gnosticism, which was rejected before by Williams altogether in his provocative work Rethinking “Gnosticism”. An argument for dismantling a dubious category (1996) due to its constructed character. However, when dealing with mnemohistory as explained by Assmann above, we are not bound by the parameters of actual historicity when it comes to the discussion of Gnosis and Gnosticism: The question whether ‘Gnostics’ actually existed becomes irrelevant in the light of this current endeavor. The decisive aspect lies in the fact of the existence of the memory of Gnosticism produced by the heresiological discourse and modern scholarship: late ancient heterodox Christian groups and their writings were classified within the history of research as ‘Gnostic’ and are remembered and called thus by the protagonists of the Neo-Gnostic churches which will be investigated in this study. The advantages or disadvantages of the term ‘Gnosticism’ for the Early Christian studies shall not be discussed here, since the present aim is to investigate the particular mnemohistorical constructions of Neo-Gnostics and their genesis.

III. Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica

The roots of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (EGC) can be traced back to the first wave of Neo-Gnosticism in late 19th century France. Either in 1889 or 1890 Jules-Benoît Stanislas Doinel du Val-Michel (1842 – 1903) became the founder of the Église Gnostique. Its cultural atmosphere has to be sought in the aftermath of the French Revolution which gave rise to several heterodox Catholic groups which oftentimes blended elements of Catholicism with occultism, spiritualism and Freemasonry as Pearson points out. While some schismatic branches such as the Petite Église or the Gallican churches were especially concerned with political agendas, such as loyalty towards the Bourbons (the former) or the creation of a distinct national French form of Catholicism (the

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19 Markschies, Die Gnosis, 24.
20 Introvigne, Il ritorno dello gnostismo, 87.
latter), groups such as the Église Johannite des Chrétiens Primitifs formed by Dr. Benard-Raymond Palaprat (1777 – 1838) incorporated esoteric elements derived from Freemasonry and the latter’s enthusiasm for the Knights Templar.\(^{22}\) As Pearson indicates, many of these heterodox groups were concerned with the idea of the restoration of a “pure, primitive” form of Christianity and could be led by private revelations and visions which bestowed authoritative claims upon their leaders, such as the case of Pierre-Eugène-Michel Vintras (1807 – 1878) of the Oeuvre de la Miséricorde.\(^{23}\) Deriving from this milieu we can comprehend Doinel's impulse for the foundation of his church. Although claiming to have been already spiritually consecrated in a vision by the Aeon Jesus in 1867 as a Bishop of Montségur, it was after a séance that was held with the help of the medium Countess Maria de Mariategui aka Lady Caithness (1832 – 1895) in which the spirit of Cathar bishop de Castres was contacted, that Doinel was allegedly entrusted by the latter with the command to establish the Assembly of the Paraclete—the Gnostic Church.\(^{24}\) As Plummer highlights, he took the name Valentin II as the title of his office, thereby identifying himself with the ancient Theologian and heresiarch Valentinus.\(^{25}\) Additionally, this late ancient imagery was blended with a sacramental system inspired by the Cathars.\(^{26}\) Plummer points out that Doinel’s Gnostic Church soon attracted the attention of prominent esotericists and Freemasons such as Gérard Encausse (1865 – 1916) or René Guénon (1886 – 1951), who became members.\(^{27}\) Another important character was Jean Bricaud (1881 – 1934), who was not only consecrated as a bishop within the Église Gnostique in 1901, but later introduced a line of the Apostolic Succession into the Neo-Gnostic movement.\(^{28}\) As early as 1907 he became an apostate to the Doinel-group in favor of the foundation of a church which one year later would be known as the Église Gnostique Universelle.\(^{29}\) After having met the head of the fringe-masonic Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), Theodor Reuß, in 1908 on an international conference about Freemasonry and spiritualism in Paris, the latter founded his own German branch of the church as the Gnostisch-Katholische Kirche (GKK), apparently with the EGU’s consent.\(^{30}\) From now on

\(^{22}\) Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 43–44.
\(^{23}\) Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 44.
\(^{29}\) Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 46–47.
\(^{30}\) Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 47.
the GKK was integrated as an ecclesiastical arm into the organization of the OTO, which blended Western Esotericism and Christian mysticism with Indian yogic practices. However everything would change with the establishing of its British section in 1912. The infamous British magician Edward Alexander–better known as Aleister–Crowley (1875 – 1947) reformed the whole system, both of the OTO as well as of the Gnostic Church, to promote his own syncretic religion called Thelema.

One of its central and often misunderstood mottoes is “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law”, as written in his Liber Al vel Legis, or The Book of the Law – the fundamental work of Thelema, which allegedly was dictated to Crowley by his Holy Guardian Angel. He taught that the individual human will, or True Will, is identical with God’s will and is to be explored by the means of introspection, yogic practices and rituals–calling this whole set of practices Magick. It is important to distinguish this concept of True Will from randomly appearing affects; since the imperative to do one’s will should be understood as an auto-soteriological task, to align oneself with God. In 1913, during his stay in Russia, Crowley wrote the central ritual of the now so-called Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the Liber XV – Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae, or simply the Gnostic Mass. While it incorporates elements both from Catholicism and the Orthodoxy, its theology is distinctively Thelemic. Moreover, it makes frequent references to sexual magic and incorporates transgressive elements such as a priestess who would undress in the course of the ritual. But what specifically late ancient characteristics can we identify within this testimonial? Due to the limited format of this article it is only possible to highlight a selection of objects of reception, which nonetheless shall be considered as representative.

The first example is a Neo-Gnostic Trisagion which is uttered by the priest. The Trisagion is a prominent feature within the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, which

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was witnessed by Crowley. It is a hymn sung by the priest, whose traditional Greek wording is Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, Ἅγιος ἰσχυρός, Ἅγιος ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς, thereby referring to the angelic vision of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6:3. While Crowley does significantly deviate from the Orthodox Vorlage, thereby removing any Judeo-Christian notion in it, he incorporates at the same time typical features of ancient magical texts – the so-called voces magicae and nomina barbara. The latter are incantatory magical names or voices, as witnessed in typical texts like the Greek Magical Papyri. However, literary texts which were typologically classified as ‘Gnostic’ also incorporated these. The Greek passage from the Gnostic Mass reads as follows:

"Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, Ἅγιος ἰσχυρός, Ἅγιος ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.

In this passage, Crowley blends in late ancient syncretic style various epithets of the Jewish God and pagan deities. While Iao (ΙΑΩ) and Sabaoth (here rendered ΣΑΒΑΩ) are obviously popular Graecized epithets of God stemming from Hellenized Jewish literature, they are abundantly attestable for late ancient magical amulets and Greco-Egyptian magical papyri. Of course, they are additionally attestable for typologically Gnostic sources wherein also divinities like Abrasax (ἈΒΡΑΣΑΞ) may appear as benevolent celestial beings. Whereas pagan Gods such as Mithras (ΜΕΙΘΡΑΣ) or Pan (ΠΑΝ) are included into this section as well, it includes both the epithets Mighty One (ἸΣΧΥΡΟΝ) and Immortal One (ἌΘΑΝΑΤΟΝ) derived from the Orthodox Christian Trisagion-formula mentioned before, as well as the concluding Trisagion itself (ἌΓΙΟϹ, ἉΓΙΟϹ, ἉΓΙΟϹ ΙΑΩ).

Another example is the EGC’s canon of saints. The latter are invoked prior to the consecration of the Eucharist. This eclectic list is not only made up of mythical or historical personages like the Buddha, Dionysos, Friedrich

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37 Literally “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.”


41 E.g. he appears in NHC III, p. 52,26–53,1 as the “Great Abrasax” associated with the Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,2. The Gospel of the Egyptians (The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit) (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 104.
Nietzsche, William Blake and, of course, Crowley himself, but includes Simon Magus, Mani, Basilides, Valentinus, Bardesanes—and ironically Apostolic Father Hippolytus of Rome—who are revered as transmitters of the “Light of the Gnosis to us their successors and heirs.”

One more example for a reception of late ancient discourse lies in the particular consecration of the Eucharist of the EGC. While the gestures of this rite and the Greek wording are explicitly adapted from the Words of Institution as they are rendered within major Christian liturgical traditions, the significant shifts from the latter can be comprehended as explicit references to Gnosticism. As Kaczynski points out, the words recited by the priest to consecrate the elements of Communion are “τούτο εστι το σῶμα μου”, “this is my body” for the hosts as well as “τούτο εστι το ποτήριον του αίματος μου”, “this is the cup of my blood” for the wine. Shortly after the consecration the Catholic/Orthodox fractio panis rite is also adapted. The priest’s breaking of the bread is accompanied by his words “τούτο εστι το σπέρμα μου”, “this is my seed.” The last statement’s sexual allusion has to be understood in the context of the used hosts which are known as Cakes of Light. While they originally included bodily fluids such as semen and menstrual blood, a member of the EGC informs that these ingredients are not mandatory and should only be contained therein according to the explicit wish and will of the communicant. Nonetheless, the sexual symbolism therein persists in any case as can be evidenced by the text of the mass.

Now, how are these elements to be understood with respect to mnemohistory as well as archaeology?

The incorporation of late ancient elements here does not seem to possess a key relevance per se, but draws heavily on the late ancient discourse about ancient Gnosticism as a vehicle of Thelemic teaching. Gnosticism is alluded to by means of the adaption of the cited voces magicae, which are addressing several beings thereof. Also the alleged Gnostic libertinism is adapted within the practice and symbolism of the Eucharist, which as a topic is present both within the Patristic polemics as well as in Coptic primary sources. The closest match between the wording and imagery of Liber XV and an ancient source seems to be Epiphanius of Salamis’ account about the libertine ‘Gnostics’ or ‘Borborites’ which reads as follows:

But I shall get right down to the worst part of the deadly description of them (i.e., the Borborites) – for they vary in their wicked teaching of what they please – which is, first of all, that they hold their wives in common. And if a guest who is of their persuasion arrives, they have a sign that men give women and women give men, a

42 “Ecclesiæ Gnosticæ Catholicæ Canon Missæ.”
tickling of the palm as they clasp hands in supposed greeting, to show that the visitor is of their religion. And once they recognize each other from this they start feasting right away – and they set the table with lavish provisions for eating meat and drinking wine even if they are poor. But then, after a drinking bout and, let us say, stuffing their overstuffed veins, they get hot for each other next. And the husband will move away from his wife and tell her – speaking to his own wife! – “Get up, perform the Agape with the brother.” And when the wretched couple has made love – and I am truly ashamed to mention the vile things they do, for as the holy apostle says, “It is a shame even to speak” of what goes on among them. Still, I should not be ashamed to say what they are not ashamed to do, to arouse horror by every means in those who hear what obscenities they are prepared to perform. For after having made love with the passion of fornication in addition, to lift their blasphemy up to heaven, the woman and man receive the man’s emission on their own hands. And they stand with their eyes raised heavenward but the filth on their hands and pray (...) and offer that stuff on their hands to the true Father of all, and say, “We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ.” And then they eat it partaking of their own dirt, and say, “This is the body of Christ; and this is the Pascha, because of which our bodies suffer and are compelled to acknowledge the passion of Christ.” And so with the woman’s emission when she happens to be having her period – they likewise take the unclean menstrual blood they gather from her, and eat it in common. And “This,” they say, “is the blood of Christ.” (...)45

Another source which refers to this topos is the Pistis Sophia, one of the earliest Coptic Gnostic texts which were known to the modern scholarly public, contained within the Askew Codex. This Coptic translation of a lost Greek work of uncertain date renders a great quantity of theological dialogues between the resurrected Jesus and his disciples.46 In its fourth book it is the disciple Thomas who asks the Savior about the consumption of blood and semen as follows:

Thomas said; “We have heard that there are some upon the earth who take male sperm and female menstrual blood and make a dish of lentils and eat it, saying: ‘We believe in Esau and Jacob’. Is this then a seemly thing or not?”

Jesus however was angry with the world at that time. And he said to Thomas: “Truly I say that this sin surpasses every sin and every iniquity. (Men) of this kind will be taken immediately to the outer darkness, and will not be returned again into the sphere. But they will be consumed and perish in the outer darkness, the place in which there is no pity, nor is there light. But there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And every soul which is taken to the outer darkness is not returned again, but is destroyed and dissolves.”47

46 The dating of the Askew Codex, the container of the Pistis Sophia, is as distant as the 3rd up to the 10th century. This subject is covered in Walter Till, introduction to Koptisch-gnostische Schriften. Erster Band. Die Pistis Sophia. Die beiden Bücher des Jeû. Unbekanntes altgnostisches Werk, by Carl Schmidt (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962), XXVIII.
Moreover, the so-called *Books of Jeû*, which are contained within the Coptic *Codex Brucianus* and are closely related to *Pistis Sophia*, also refer to this topic. Therein Jesus emphasizes the importance to conceal his *mysteries* before the impious and unworthy as follows towards his disciples:

These mysteries which I shall give to you, guard them and do not given (sic) them to any man except he is worthy of them. Do not give them to father, or mother, or brother, or sister, or relative, or for food, or for drink, or for a woman, or for gold, or for silver, or for anything at all of this world. Guard them and do not give them to anyone at all for the sake of the goods of this whole world. Do not give them to any woman or to any man who is in any faith of these 72 archons, or who serves them. Neither give them to those who serve the eight powers of the great archon, who are those who eat the menstrual blood of their impurity and the semen of men, saying: ‘We have known the knowledge of truth, and we pray to the true God.’ However, their God is wicked.48

Contrary to the account of Epiphanius (c. 310–320 – 403), the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Books of Jeû* vehemently denounce the celebration of such a rite. Indeed, evidence of sexual libertinism within Gnostic primary sources is scarce and affirmation thereof even scarcer; even after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices, which were primarily read as ascetic texts and led to subsume the whole topic under the field of heresiological rumors and polemics.49 As Kaczynski points out, Crowley’s first reference to Gnosticism can already be pinpointed to 1904. It was in his early work *The Sword of Song* wherein he alluded to the Bruce Codex.50 He later came to know the *Pistis Sophia* as well, which was incorporated within the recommended readings for his students.51 Surely in both cases his mode of access were the translations of the scholar-theosophist George Robert Stowe Mead (1863 – 1933), whose publications ensured the availability of Gnostic texts to an interested lay-audience.52 While we can thereby confirm that Crowley acquired a direct familiarity with the late ancient testimonials which were available during his lifetime as a base of reception, it must be emphasized again that his modelling of the EGC, and therefore his method and interest of reception, was not motivated in a revival or reconstruction of ancient Gnosticism in the sense of actual historicity. As we can see from the mentioned excerpts of the Gnostic Mass, Gnosticism is something that is alluded to in the sense of style as well as *topos*, but not to reconstruct a particular theological system

51 Kaczynski, “Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation,” 144.
52 “In 1904, the only two translations of this codex [i.e., the Bruce Codex] were by Schmidt (in German) and Mead.” Ibid.
from ancient times. Indeed, this is confirmed by EGC-Bishop Tau Apiryon, who elaborates on the creed of the EGC as follows:

(…) We are Gnostic because we accept the emanationist cosmogony of the Gnostics (…) and their doctrine of individual redemption/illumination through Gnosis. We are Catholic because our system is non-elitist, open to all and “of universal interest”; but also because we, in common with the Catholic Church of Rome but in opposition to the Old Aeon Gnostics, affirm life and childbirth to be sacred, and marriage to be a holy sacrament.

We claim descent from the Gnostics of old, through the secret traditions of the Knights Templar, the grail legends of the troubadours and minnesingers, and the veiled teachings of the alchemists, hermeticists, qabalists, magicians, Rosicrucians, Masons and Sufis. However, we are not Gnostics in the sense of the word used by the modern-day Gnostic revivalists, who are attempting to breathe life into the dry skeletons of Basilides, Valentinus and Mani. Our Gnosis has been tempered in the furnace of 18 centuries of trial, experiment and dialogue, and has been ultimately transmuted by the Gnosis of a New Word: THELEMA.

Both in the sense of mnemohistory as well as method of reception, the decisive aspect of how the Gnostics are remembered consists of the anti-heretical polemics of the Church Fathers who portray various teachers and sects as transgressors of social norms, practitioners of magic, sexual libertines and adulterators of the Christ’s teaching. In fact, one probably would not miss the mark by calling this method an appropriation of Gnostic stereotypes. This approach towards a topic stemming from ancient times possesses a comparable access in Crowley’s reception of Ancient Egyptian imagery, which in turn is colored by a Western Esoteric lens, interfusing Hermetic ideas with the development of sexual magic which had its predecessor in Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825 – 1875). Nonetheless, Crowley traces a line of succession from the ancient teachers in his narrative by calling the members of his church “successors” and “heirs” of their “Light of the Gnosis”, which implicitly demonstrates the interest of reception. The image of genealogical relationship between ancient characters and the EGC created thereby certainly legitimizes

57 “Ecclesiae Gnosticæ Catholicae Canon Missæ.”
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the latter’s validity as an institution, even though its stances do significantly differ from the claimed ancestry.

IV. Ecclesia Gnostica

The Ecclesia Gnostica (EG) was founded as the “Pre-Nicene Gnostic Catholic Church” in England by the Wandering Bishop Richard Jean Chretien, Duc de Palatine, born Ronald Powell (1916 – 1977). After relocating to the United States of America in 1959, he consecrated the Hungarian-born Dr. Stephan A. Hoeller (born 1931) as a bishop in 1967, who took the name “Tau Stephanus” for his office. After separating from Duc de Palatine in 1970, Hoeller continued the church as the Ecclesia Gnostica. This Neo-Gnostic church has its parishes in Hollywood, Los Angeles, Portland, Salt Lake City and a one single European seat in Oslo. Contrary to the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the Ecclesia Gnostica emphasizes being a Christian Gnostic church. Its hierarchical structure, the vestments utilized by the clergy and its liturgy are styled after the Roman Catholic Church. The Tridentine Mass was utilized as a liturgical model, even though it was significantly modified.

A valuable testimony to trace the Ecclesia’s mnemohistorical image of Gnosticism consists of the Gnostic Catechism which was written by Hoeller, as it provides concise information about his particular conceptualization of it. In it, he renders Gnostic core-beliefs as a Dualism between a transcendental God and a Demiurge; an anthropology which regards humanity as a creation of the Archons, which is nonetheless endowed with a divine spark pertaining to the pleromatic realm. Moreover, he promotes a docetic Christology: Hoeller explains Christ as a celestial Aeon who manifested itself in the worldly person Jesus. Collective salvation through the crucifixion is vehemently rejected, as “His physical death was merely a tragic incident in the sublime drama of His life.” The catechism is interlarded with references to ancient primary sources like Pistis Sophia or the Gospel of Philip. A vast corpus of English translations of ancient sources is included in the church’s website, which does not only include typologically Gnostic texts, but also Hermetica, Mandean writings and other

60 See Lesson VIII. Of the Church and the Communion of Saints in “Catechism,” accessed August 2, 2018, http://gnosis.org/eclesia/catechism.htm#LESSON%20VIII.
Christian apocrypha. These texts are set in relation to metadata provided by academically renowned names like Marvin Meyer of Elaine Pagels.63

The high degree of reflection of Roman Catholic practice within the Ecclesia Gnostica is not only manifest in the liturgy, but also within the calendar of the church as well as in the adaption of the lectionary wherein the original structure is kept. Indeed, while the EG also makes use of the canonical scriptures, the collects, lessons and gospels can be drawn from the Nag Hammadi Codices and other heterodox material.64 While a substratum of critical editions or translations derived from various academic fields such as Coptic or Classical studies thus provides the main formation of theological education for the Ecclesia Gnostica, a lateral body of esoteric and psychological thought is received therein as well. Dillon points out that besides the primary sources mentioned above, the so-called Panosophy or western mysteries are integrated within the Ecclesia’s teaching, which refers to Hoeller’s idea that historical movements and personalities such as “Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, and alchemy, through the Hermetic Renaissance magi, on to Romantic poets, Nietzsche, Hermann Hesse, the ceremonial magic of the Golden Dawn, Carl Jung, and many others” may be seen as “expressive of gnosis.”65 Dillon goes on to state that this bricolage of movements “serves hermeneutic, discursive, and synchronous identity purposes” and explains that “by identifying chronologically later individuals ex post facto as part of the Gnostic tradition, Hoeller validates using their writings as hermeneutic lenses for understanding the ancient Gnostic texts,” since “he utilizes Jungian and Theosophical concepts to understand the NHC and the ancient Gnostics who authored them.”66 However, the ancient testimonials also are contextualized within the nomenclature of Gnostic tradition in Hoeller’s reception of Gnosticism, which is presented as a linear succession within “western Christianity from Simon Magus to the Christian Gnostics (…) forward through the Bogomils and Cathars, the Knights Templar, and into the present through Jacob Boehme, the Rosicrucians, Blake, L’Eglise Gnostique, G.R.S. Mead and, ultimately, Hoeller’s own Ecclesia Gnostica.”67 In accordance with Dillon’s elaborations, it has to be emphasized that Hoeller promotes Gnostics as of soteriological importance for the whole of Christendom, as the latter explains within the catechism:

Ever since the leaders of the exoteric (or mainstream) church cast out the Gnostics from their midst, they progressively excluded the guidance of the Holy Spirit from their assemblies. The need for a Gnostic Church thus became ever greater.68

66 Ibid.
67 Dillon, “The Heretical Revival,” 64.
68 See Lesson VIII. Of the Church and the Communion of Saints in “Catechism,” accessed August
The postulated continuation of a Gnostic Church is thus portrayed as a necessity for the oikouménē, whereby the modern expression in its core is not distinguished from historical movements, but expressed as a rephrased version of the claimed ancestry. The mnemohistorical image of ‘the Gnostics’ is thereby constituted by a synthesized understanding of the ancient sources: Even though academic positions concerning Gnosticism are integrated within the church, it still follows a model that has been present within the EGC before—one based on the concept of a historically unverifiable succession from ancient times. Even though explanations of Gnostic theology within the Ecclesia Gnostica resemble academic typologies, they are but one constituent of the mnemohistorical image. In terms of practice, a palimpsest approach is followed with respect to Catholicism: While the basic outline of the Roman Catholic Church is continued, its contents, liturgies, texts and prayers are overwritten by Gnostic terminology.

V. Conclusion

Several decades separate the foundations of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica and the Ecclesia Gnostica. This results in natural differences within their processes of reception. While the reception base within the EGC is primarily constituted by the discourse of the Heresiologists and the early Coptic Gnostic scholarship, as demonstrated in chapter III, the EG benefits from the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices and their respectively recent scholarship which provided a vast corpus of primary sources. Resulting from these distinct points of departure, the objects of reception do vary: The EGC operates primarily with the reception of aesthetics like in the case of the voces magicae, as well as literary topoi and allusions both present within Heresiological and Gnostic sources, while the main contents belong to modern esotericism. On the other hand, the EG directly draws on late ancient theologumena, nomenclature and textual excerpts within its religious practice with interpretative aid by modern scholarship. Yet again, this results in different methods of reception: While the EGC focuses on a mythopoetical reimagination of the Gnostics as shown in chapter III, the EG operates with a palimpsest approach in which Catholic or Orthodox terminology is simply overwritten as demonstrated in the last chapter. Nonetheless it is remarkable that the element of pansophy is received therein as well, as Dillon pointed out, as an auxiliary approach. In the end, both churches appear to have relatively similar interests of reception. Even though the EGC tries to shape a new form of Gnosticism, while the EG attempts a synthetic reconstruction of ancient Gnosticism, the investigated testimonials of both parties point toward ‘the Gnostics’ as crucial providers of legitimacy:

2, 2018, http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/catechism.htm#LESSON%20VIII.
the mnemohistorical image of a renegade tradition that would turn out as an esoteric (EGC) or salvific (EG) and authoritative foundation for a modern religious organization.

**Bibliography**


La Rosa di Paracelso


