

# *Introduction: Religion in the Margins*

“What do you do?” Many people have terrific responses to this question. A pediatrician. A prosecutor. A painter. I don’t. For me, it is a difficult question because how do I explain that I am a professor who studies religion, but that I am not a minister, or even a religious insider as naturally assumed? How do I make clear that I study religion, but not religion as it is usually recognized?

We generally associate religion with world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. These are ancestral religions that have been passed on from one generation to the next for centuries. They feel old and established. Because of their ancestry and longevity, they feel right to us in ways we might characterize as natural and normal.

Because they have survived for centuries, world religions are conservative, functioning to maintain the way things are, rather than challenging the status quo. They preserve and maintain what is important to traditional societies and cultures, justifying everything from a society’s customary political systems to its economies and financial structures, from its gender dynamics and race relationships to its understanding of civil law and justice. The world religions aren’t just religions for us, they are *religion*. In other words, religion is defined by them.

Thus my dilemma when asked, “What do you do?” Although I am a professor of religion, my area of specialty falls outside the world religions. I study all the materials that the first Christians wrote but that never made it into the Bible. The lost gospels. The apocryphal acts. The secret books. I study the groups that produced them, the ideas they promoted, and the rituals they performed. I study the stuff that either has fallen through the cracks or has been rejected by the majority religion. I study the people who *lost*.

## IMAGINING THE MARGINS

What do we do with this stuff, with texts that are not authoritative scriptures such as the Bible or Qur’an? How do we think about their respective movements, which mostly emerge within the margins of conventional religion? They might come from the direct religious experiences of a mystic or charismatic who swears that a personally experienced revelation is true religion. Or we might be dealing with a group that markets itself as an esoteric movement, which will reveal to its members divine secrets unsung by the conventional religions. How do we handle the people who view conventional religions as fraudulent, believing that they have direct gnosis, or knowledge of God that reformats traditional thought and worship? What do we do with religious expressions that go against the grain or do not fit into normative or standard worldviews?

**Pejorative Labels.** In Chapter 10, Wouter Hanegraaff explains that we have different ways to talk about these types of religious movements. We generally employ pejorative constructs such as sect or cult. By sect, we usually mean a religious movement that has broken away from a conventional religion because the members have become disillusioned with the mother religion, or as Ernest Troeltsch writes in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1931), are dissenters. The sect is regarded as deviant by the establishment because its ideas or practices stray from the mother religion, which is considered the orthodox, or right, way.

*Cult* is employed to suggest a religious group that is even more deviant than a sect, deriving its genesis from a culture outside the orthodoxy of conventional religions. Originally, the term was coined by sociologists to handle all the idiosyncratic mystical experiences that didn't fit our understanding of conventional religion because they were highly personal, and as James Richardson explains in "Definitions of Cult" (1993), often critiqued institutional religion. These terms, even in scholarship, have been associated with everything from fear and violence to manipulation and totalitarianism.

When writing histories of religion, these labels are highly problematic because they continue to reinscribe the value judgment of differences that a religion's power brokers use to define the orthodox or right way of their religion, over and against the heretical or wrong way of religious movements they consider to be marginal or on the fringe. These marginal movements are characterized by the stuff of heresy, charlatans, mental illness, and ignorance even by serious scholars. Yet these value judgments clearly reflect religious apologetics. As such, they skew the way we see the history of different religions and their value. They privilege the opinions of traditional religious authorities and the canonized scriptural texts, so that the truth of orthodox faith traditions goes unchallenged and convention is maintained. They end up disregarding religious voices that are vibrant historical witnesses to the shaping of religious landscapes, especially voices that challenge the status quo.

**Judging Religious Differences.** What do we do then with religious deviance, with religious people operating in the margins of traditional religion, people who clearly are criticizing orthodoxy and transgressing convention? How do we understand them? How do we talk about them? Sociologists have long recognized that deviance is about people breaching norms, violating what is acceptable to the dominant social group. The breach elicits disapproval, and if considered especially threatening to the fabric of social order, negative sanctions, including pejorative labeling and sometimes actual physical punishments, even death.

The hallmarks of deviance are dual then. According to Marshall Clinard and Robert Meier in *Sociology of Deviant Behavior* (2008), they involve difference and they involve judging those differences, placing more value on some differences at the expense of the value of other differences. When this is done, moral qualities, good or bad, are attached to opinions and behaviors that ought to be done or avoided. This is how judgments about better or worse begin to influence the definition of transgression in societies and the negative classifications that make up the structure of deviance. This is how differences become deviance.

**Marginal Religion?** When we hold off judging religious differences, what we have left is this definition of religion: a community of people who together express their perceptions of *ultimate reality* and commemorate this relationship through symbol, language, and behavior. These religious communities may be one of the standard world religions, or they may not.

Although the power brokers of conventional religions portray these movements as marginal religion, it is more accurate to view them as religion in the margins, because they often form at the edges of conventional religion as counterpoints or as critiques. *Marginal religion* suggests that they are not worth our while to study, whereas *religion in the margins* says otherwise. When we study religion in the margins, we study difference—what it is, how it is, and why it is. When we study religion in the margins, we begin to understand what different people value about religion. Whereas marginal religion makes no difference, religion in the margins makes a big difference.

Consider the problem of Christianity, which began in the margins of Judaism, with Jesus an apocalyptic Jewish preacher and Paul the Pharisee who had a mystical vision of Jesus as God's glorious form or manifestation. How did religion in the margins of Judaism end up two centuries later poised to become a world religion at the center? Or consider the first Christians who observed all the Jewish laws from circumcision to kosher dining to Sabbath. Less than a century later, Christians who maintained these laws found themselves on the outskirts of Christianity. What was at the center had moved to the fringe within two generations. What was valued had changed.

Clearly, without the margins, there is no center to understand or evaluate, because, without the margins, there is no emergence of the center, no negotiation of its boundaries, no maintenance of its borders, no shift in values. Without the margins, there is no critique of the center, no way to challenge, innovate, or revolutionize conventions. Which may be why religion in the margins has been viewed by the center as demonic, beastly, and blasphemous. It also may be one of the reasons why religion in the margins is shrouded in secrecy.

## CLASSIFIED KNOWLEDGE

Generally, religion in the margins has been coded by scholars in terms of three classifications: gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism. Each of these classifications are built around the claim made by gnostics, esotericists, and mystics that they possess divine secrets that traditional religions do not have and that they intend to reveal these divine secrets to people who join up. Because gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism all deal in the exchange and transmission of classified knowledge, it has been suggested on more than one occasion that distinctions among these three categories are not sufficient to maintain them as separate categories.

But is this an accurate perception? This handbook is divided into three parts, setting side by side for comparative purposes the three categories: gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism. Each part is structured with a similar set of chapters written by different scholars who are preeminent in their fields. This structure is strategic in that it allows for comparison across the classifications, to make transparent both similarities and differences. Each part consists of eight chapters: (1) how the classification emerged within the academy; (2) how the classification is theorized and approached by scholars; (3) what major debates surround the classification; (4) what historical figures and movements are identified with the category; (5) what types of social groups and communities are associated with the classification; (6) what texts, scriptures, or parascriptures are classified within the category; (7) what major ideas and perspectives make up the outlook of the classification; and (8) what rituals are linked to the classification.

What we discover when looking across these chapters is that each of these classifications has distinct histories and parameters. All of the chapters deal in classified knowledge or divine secrets, but they define this knowledge and its acquisition in unique ways.

**What Gnostics Know.** The ancient gnostics, whatever stripe, asserted that they had access to a God who transcends the gods of all religions, including the biblical creator God whose name is YHWH. For a price, they were willing to initiate people into their mysteries, which were shamanic-like journeys through hell and heaven to meet the supreme God who was hidden just outside our universe.

This meeting imparted *gnosis*, or knowledge of God. Gnosis is not discursive or rational knowledge. It is not information that can be gathered from books or discussions or by thinking it through. It is knowing, as in becoming personally acquainted or even *becoming* what one knows. For the gnostics, the divine secret they tendered is personal acquaintance with the supreme God of transcendence. The gnostic revelation culminated in the transformation of the human self into a full-fledged divinity as it returned to its transcendent source.

Gnosticism is an innovative and transgressive form of spirituality that emerged in the early first century CE. It challenged the old gods as fakes and their religions as frauds. Gnosticism, as a spirituality, was a new way of being religious that challenged conventional religions. It reengineered traditional religions or rejected them for new revelation, so that the needs of the human being took precedence over the needs of the gods in gnostic movements. As I explain in *The Gnostic New Age* (2016), religious practices for the gnostics became about the care of the soul rather than charming, pleasing, or satisfying the gods.

**What Esotericists Know.** Esotericists maintain that they alone are privy to divine secrets, which they feel chosen to reveal. In the ancient world, esotericism indicated higher order teaching that was delivered in private to advanced pupils in a particular discipline or religious movement. This was viewed in contrast with the public teaching of conventional catechisms delivered to newcomers and people who were considering joining the movement.

In the twenty-first century, scholars use the label *esotericism* to indicate religious currents in Western thought that are countercultural and occult oriented, reflecting everything from astrology, Christian kabbalah, neo-Pythagoreanism, and alchemy, to Hermeticism, spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, and the paranormal. The term is used as a container for a number of interrelated religious movements that emerged as occult philosophy in the European Renaissance of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries and continued into the modern period.

According to Erin Prophet in Chapter 15, this rather arbitrary grouping garners some coherence from a cluster of shared ideological perspectives. Esoteric currents emphasize a correspondence between all levels of reality in the universe, so that the microcosmos (little universe) or the human body is a mirror of the macrocosmos (big universe) or the universe and God. A famous esoteric teaching to this effect states, “As above, so below.”

This idea is found in combination with the belief that the universe is *living nature*—a living organism permeated by a soul that is suffering exile from its divine source. This is likened to pantheism and cosmotheism, beliefs that identify the universe with God so that the divine world permeates the material world, including human beings. In this way, all of nature is interrelated in essence, like a great chain of being linked to God.

Because of these links, the thoughts and actions of human beings can effect and influence the invisible levels of reality and interact with intermediary beings such as spirits and angels. As Antoine Faivre writes in *Western Esotericism* (2010), all of these items—correspondence, divine

permeation, and magical action—result in the divinization or transmutation of the human self into its divine counterpart.

**What Mystics Know.** Mysticism is about an immediate encounter with a sacred reality that is hidden from mundane view. In more precise terms, it is the solicitation and participation in a direct immediate experience of ultimate reality. This, I explain in “Jesus Revealed” (2011), is to be distinguished from the mystical experience itself, which is the direct immediate experience of *ultimate reality*, solicited or not.

Kelley Coblenz Bautch explains in Chapter 23 that there are two main perceptions of this reality. Kataphatic perceptions describe God in affirmative terms (i.e., God is love), as revealed in nature, as approachable, and as known through his reflection in the natural world. Apophatic perceptions describe God in negative terms (i.e., God is not hate), how God is hidden by the nature of his transcendence, how he is indefinable, ineffable, and mysterious. These perceptions are not necessarily oppositional, because most mystics describe their experiences of the divine as experiences of the Good, the beautiful, life, light, being that is beyond all words, all comprehension, and all expressions.

In the ancient world, such an experience is called an *apocalypse*, a word that means in Greek an uncovering or revelation. Often, such experiences are recorded as events of rapture, unbidden and spontaneous. Since William James (1842–1910) published his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, such unprompted individualistic experiences of unity with the divine have been celebrated in the modern world by some as true religion, whereas organized institutional religions have been viewed by these same individuals as secondary constructions. Consequently, mystical experiences have been perceived as a kind of religious therapy for the damaged human self, when according to James, through the direct experience of God, the self rejoins its source. James’s understanding of mysticism as a spirituality separate from religion is one of the main inspirations for the demographic “spiritual but not religious” that has arisen in contemporary culture.

## EMERGING FIELDS

For most of history, given the dominance and longevity of religious orthodoxies and their normative narratives, the study of religion in the margins has been neglected, relegated to the trash bin, or framed in damaging ways. The classifications gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism all emerged within this climate of scrutiny and judgment, whether religion in the margins is good or demonic, valuable or worthless, beneficial or harmful. It is only in the past century or so that these classifications have begun to be reassessed as meaningful to the study of religion. The question of how we go about integrating this meaning into the classic narratives about religion is yet before us.

**Framing the Gnostic.** In Chapter 1, Michael Williams writes that gnosticism as an *-ism* denoting Christian heresy was in use by 1664 as attested by the works of Henry More (1614–1687) and William Sancroft (1617–1693), but the parameters of the gnostic as Christian heretic were already established by early Catholic church leaders such as Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (130–202 CE) in the second century, and carried on through the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, and modernity. In Chapter 6, Bas van Os tells us that its association with ancient texts such as the Apocryphon of John and the Gospel of Judas limited its scope to a specific range of Christian or quasi-Christian texts that were labeled by second-century Catholic leaders as falsified and heretical. In Chapter 7, John Turner and Kevin Corrigan explain that these same Catholic leaders

identified as deviant the gnostic pursuit of the transcendent God as the God of worship, rather than lesser deities such as the biblical God  $\text{YHWH}$  (who were really demons in disguise).

Because the gnostic classification is tied with the negative rhetoric of the first Catholics wishing to oust groups of Christians with whom they did not see eye to eye, one of the major debates among scholars is whether to retain or discard the gnostic as an academic category. As we read in Chapter 1 by Williams, Chapter 2 by Matthew Dillon, and Chapter 3 by Grant Adamson, for those who wish to keep the category, there are several ways in which it is theorized and debated. Many who wish to keep the category do so by limiting the category to a group of ancient people we call Sethians, because the Sethians appear to have been the first people designated as *gnostikoi* (gnostics) and their mythology seems primary.

Others who see utility in the category apply it more broadly to designate a typology or descriptive umbrella for certain religious movements in antiquity. Hans Jonas (1903–1953) is famous for casting it as an existential phenomenon that pervaded the religious worldview of late antiquity. Still others consider the gnostic classification as a useful taxonomy for framing a type of countercultural spirituality oriented toward a transcendent God beyond all gods (including the biblical God). As a countercultural spirituality, it interfaces with conventional religions (whether ancient, premodern, or modern) in a way that critiques and reformats them, or as I write in *The Gnostic New Age* (2016), births new religious movements entirely.

Historically, gnosticism has been used to identify a wide range of movements, mainly Christian, that were popular in the second century. Although there are many ways to limit this range, in Chapter 4, Tuomas Rasimus identifies three main groupings that can be derived from Irenaeus's catalog of heresies when compared with the Nag Hammadi literature: the Sethian group, the Simonian group, and the Valentinian group. That said, it still remains a question how accurately these groupings reflect grassroots gnostic movements in antiquity. Generally, suggests Adamson in Chapter 3, scholars question how reliable these reports about gnostics are when they were written by Catholic leaders to shame, humiliate, and destroy gnostic movements and their leaders.

In Chapter 2 by Dillon and Chapter 3 by Adamson, we learn that scholars have been preoccupied with questions of the origins of gnosticism, making arguments for early Persian influence, Jewish roots, Platonic ancestry, and a Christian pedigree. The Egyptian religious buffer in which Greek pilgrims sought initiation from Egyptian priests also has been suggested by my own research (2016). Related is the uncertainty over who copied and owned the books we traditionally have associated with gnostics, such as the thirteen books from the Nag Hammadi collection. In Chapter 3, Adamson asks, were they preserved and owned by the local monastery, or were they grave goods with which someone had been buried? Given the presence of a skeleton buried next to the jar of texts, he favors the latter option. If this is so, the Nag Hammadi gnostic texts are not a collection from the local monastic library, but Egyptian books of the dead.

In Chapter 2, Dillon notes that studies of gnosticism have been affecting the study of religion in modernity. Scholars are beginning to question the effect that found gnostic literature, such as the Nag Hammadi collection, has on contemporary forms of religion and spirituality. In Chapter 3, Adamson raises ethical questions about what we should do when the next ancient manuscript turns up on the black market.

**Framing the Esoteric.** Esotericism as a field of study has a quite different history. It has been used in two main ways. First, it designates classified knowledge that is not supposed to be accessible to everyone, but rather is reserved for an elite few when they are initiated into a particular religion. In this case, the phenomenon can be applied transhistorically and cross-culturally. Second, as Marco Pasi notes in Chapter 9, its usage is limited to a historical phenomenon that is based on certain currents and texts in the Western world that are considered interrelated through either influence or transmission.

So although the word *esoteric* has been in use since antiquity to refer to secret in-group knowledge, esotericism as a field of study is relatively recent. The classification has been commandeered in academia to frame the exchange of secret knowledge, especially since the Renaissance when the lost Hermetic literature and works of the school of Plato (427–347 BCE) were rediscovered and translated from their original Greek. This historical framing, says Claire Fanger in Chapter 12, has led scholars to identify esotericism’s referential corpus: core authors and texts that are examined for key ideas and their entanglement in Western history. In Chapter 11, Kocku von Stuckrad notes that this scholastic framing has meant that esotericism usually refers to secret knowledge as it was and is exchanged in the Western European context.

Others, explains Hanegraaff in Chapter 10, have suggested that esotericism is a category for knowledge that has been rejected by normative venues, from the Renaissance to the new age. Although Hanegraaff’s characterizations of esoteric knowledge as “rejected knowledge” and the “wastebasket of Western history” reflect the often-deviant identities of esoteric practitioners, they also reinforce the same value biases that we are trying to avoid as scholars. This narrative of persecution and rejection can make it difficult for us to see the enormous impact that esotericism has had on mainstream culture over the centuries, explains von Stuckrad in Chapter 11. Additionally, words such as *marginal* and *alternative knowledge* are too limiting. As Fanger explains in Chapter 12, they do not begin to acknowledge the diversity and richness of the esoteric category.

This emphasis on Renaissance beginnings, however, does not mean that the ancient and medieval worlds have nothing to do with esotericism as they are crucial for our understanding of the academic frame. First, ancient cultures were the seedbeds for the philosophical and religious debates that we have come to view as essential to esotericism. Second, ancient and medieval peoples captured certain standards of truth, and these were drafted into the service of rejecting or authorizing later religious ideas. In Chapter 11 by von Stuckrad and Chapter 14 by Dylan Burns, we learn this is particularly the case with earlier Christian claims to knowledge, as well as with Greek and Roman claims to an Oriental past in which Egyptian priests knew all the important secrets and in which the Greek god Hermes was considered the same as the Persian sage Zoroaster (c. 630–550 BCE) and the biblical hero Moses.

**Framing the Mystic.** The history of mysticism is complicated by the fact that people in the ancient world did not use the word *mysticism* to describe their direct experiences of the divine, as the word has been popularized since William James, says Chad Pevateaux in Chapter 17, and since Evelyn Underhill, explains Jeffrey Kripal in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (2001). Rather, they called these direct experiences of God apocalypses or revelations. They also spoke about the revelation of mysteries, which usually referred to hidden sacred things that were revealed in visions or auditions, as I explain in “Jesus Revealed” (2011). Since James, mysticism as the direct experience of God has come to

define a primary spirituality when the holy is met personally, apart from the secondary trappings of the conventional religions.

That said, mysticism is also a classification that is used by historians of religion to discuss direct experiences of God. These experiences, writes Brian Ogren in Chapter 20, usually are solicited through some kind of religious ritual or performance that is linked closely to conventional religions. These mystical religious traditions include ancient Jewish *merkavah* mysticism, which features “descending” onto the *merkavah* or chariot of God, and later Jewish kabbalah, which showcases esoteric traditions about the formation of the mortal world from an infinite being. Also included in the classification of western historical mysticism are Islamic sufism, Christian medieval mysticism, and popular twenty-first-century expressions, such as Madonna’s popularization of kabbalah.

In addition to historical applications, there is an upswing in studying mysticism through neuroscientific, sociological, and anthropological lenses. These newer approaches give serious attention to the connection between mysticism and historical religious traditions and other immediate environments of the individual, rather than studying mysticism as the detached experience of an individual. In Chapter 18, Jared Calaway discusses the cultural contexts, ritual practices, brain involvement, and social communities that have become a large part of the conversation about mysticism, providing a necessary corrective to James’s influential psychological model.

According to Coblenz Bautch in Chapter 23, because mysticism deals in an experience of the transcendent during one’s lifetime, it is studied cross-culturally as well as within particular religious contexts. Although each religion may name the transcendent differently or achieve transcendence differently, Coblenz Bautch notes that the essential comparative question when it comes to mysticism is how people contemplate, use, and connect with the transcendent.

## UNCONVENTIONAL REALITIES

Gnostics, esotericists, and mystics all promise the revelation of divine secrets unknown to conventional religions. Whether it is the therapeutic gnostic experience of the God who transcends all gods, the advanced esoteric teaching of the interrelatedness of all levels of reality, or the mystic path to invade the *wholly other*, we are dealing with religious currents that challenge reality as we know it.

This type of interrogation of reality is captured beautifully in Peter Weir’s 1998 film, *The Truman Show*. The hero of the film, Truman Burbank, lives in a fake world of reality television, produced by the arrogant television mogul, Christof. Only Truman doesn’t know it. Adopted by Christof as a young child, Truman has grown up on the television set and believes that the domed world of Seahaven is the real world, and the television stars are his family and friends.

Truman lives in ignorance and bliss until the cracks start showing up, the little things that Truman notices, things that disrupt his image of what is real. A lantern labeled with the name of the star cluster, Sirius Canis Major, falls from the sky and crashes in the street in front of Truman. He picks it up, curious. A rainstorm drenches him, but nothing else around him, as if it were a lone showerhead mounted in the sky. The same bikers ride past his driveway every day at the same time as if they are being regulated by a timer. Every time one of these odd incidents calls into question Truman’s reality, he is distracted with sex by his television wife Merylor and with booze by his television friend Marlon.





*Movie still from The Truman Show, directed by Peter Weir, 1998. How was it possible for the hero of this film to live for thirty years in a fake world of a reality television show, without realizing it? Simply because, as the producer of the show explains, "We accept the reality of the world we are presented." Gnostics, esotericists, and mystics hold this same conviction, contending that people have been duped into believing the reality that the conventional religions have presented to them. © MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.*

One day, a woman named Sylvia infiltrates the show, wanting to reveal to Truman the reality of his pitiful situation. She whispers to him when they are alone in the library that she is not supposed to be there. He has to listen to her. They have so little time. Everybody knows everything he does. "They are pretending. Do you understand? Everything I am telling you is the truth. Everything's a fake. Get out of here."

Sylvia's whisper awakens Truman to the truth, that his world is fake, that someone is controlling him, and that he needs to find a way out. Christof watches Truman from his lunar control room. Why has it taken Truman thirty years to realize that his world is not right? "We accept the reality of the world we are presented. It's as simple as that," Christof explains. Gnostics, esotericists, and mystics hold this same conviction. We have been duped to believe the reality that the conventional religions have presented us.

**A Transgressive Reality.** According to gnostics, who have the most transgressive view of reality, at the heart of the deception is the belief that we are mere mortals who are born to die. We believe this because we have been fooled to think that we were created by a god like the biblical Lord  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ , or Yahweh. We believe that we are his creatures. Buying into this deception, we have become obliged to this God and his rules. We have become his servants and slaves. We allow ourselves to be governed by the fear that our disobedience results in our justified suffering and ultimately our destruction. We have been tricked into believing that there is nothing beyond our universe and this God, that our insubordination is the cause of our suffering and death. Submission to this God and his human representatives is the necessary response to thwart eternal damnation.

We live in this perspective as if it were *it*, when, in fact, according to gnostics, it is not. Instead, gnostics offer another reality. We suffer because we have been fractured from a transcendent God who is the ultimate source of reality. Because our spirits or essential selves are fractured pieces of God, even while living in this world, we are connected to the supreme God who transcends the world. We are powerful and graceful mortal gods who control our own fates as masters of our destinies. We are not obliged to submit to authorities, religious or otherwise, who speak against our conscience.

This orientation toward the transcendent spirit and God is reflected in gnostic mythology in terms that are not cosmic friendly. Gnostics of all types were uneasy about the natural world, convinced that it reflects the whims of an erroneous (sometimes demonic) creator god and his rogue militia who are embattled against the transcendent God to lock down the human spirit and keep it in their realm. This results in an ongoing antagonism of the human against the world and the powers that created it, say Turner and Corrigan in Chapter 7, and an opposition between the powers that govern the world and the supreme transcendent God.

The gnostic reality is the most transgressive of the three strands of secret religion because of its transtheistic perspective, in which the ultimate reality transcends our universe yet is the source of all life. This leaves the traditional gods and religions in a precarious position, as frauds and fakes. The traditional gods from Marduk and El to Zeus and  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$  demand worship to appease their anger and empower their rule. Liberation comes by overthrowing traditional religion and its gods, and engaging the supreme God through gnostic revelation.

**A Perennial Reality.** Even though esotericists deal in the countercultural, too, they are less transgressive when it comes to traditional religions than gnostics, because they seek the reality behind conventional truth. They believe that all religions are reservoirs of hidden knowledge, which needs to be distilled from them. Although conventional institutions have erred in formulating exclusive religious dogmas, underneath these dogmas exists a perennial or eternal philosophy that is the lifeblood of all religions, says Pasi in Chapter 9. Many esotericists believe that this eternal philosophy is a *philosophia perennis* or perennial philosophy, a single revelation of truth that threads through all religions from ancient to modern times and is always available. This claim, according to Prophet in Chapter 15, is problematic given that esoteric ideas have changed over time and in different locales.

Related to this claim is another idea popular among esotericists: that the secret wisdom they know is a *prisca theologia* or ancient theology. This is the notion that religious and philosophical wisdom has a long history of being handed down in antiquity by sages such as Zoroaster, Moses, and Hermes Trimegistus. This transmission fell on hard times, says Pasi in Chapter 9, but it was rediscovered in the Renaissance when ancient Greek texts were translated for the first time in centuries. This notion differs from perennial philosophy, which grants that eternal truth is always available. Ancient theology can be lost, but it is recoverable.

Although the distillation of this truth varies according to different esotericists and movements, generally it reflects a belief in a higher reality that exists above our concrete world of nature. Yet this higher reality permeates all of nature. All of nature has a soul linked to this higher reality in a great chain of being. Intermediary entities live in a mesocosm, or middle world, straddling the higher reality and our world. In *The Western Esoteric Traditions* (2008), Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explains that humans who are initiates of this secret

knowledge experience divine transmutation. What holds this all together, says Pasi in Chapter 9, is the confidence that these occult teachings are consistent throughout the centuries, predating Christianity, and that their ultimate source is God himself.

**A Rapturous Reality.** Mystics are the least transgressive of the three strands of secret religion because mystics work within traditional religions as well as without. In fact, they often identify the god of their visions with the God of their religion or the God behind all religions. Although mystics can be found operating outside the tradition, viewed as antinomian by religious authorities, more often, notes Coblenz Bautch in Chapter 23, they are found operating within the boundaries of a given religion, in which they represent the ideal of the communities, the perfected devotee.

Mystics generally believe in a dual reality, the physical world that we inhabit and a divine world where God and other spiritual entities live. From the mystic vantage point, these two worlds are separate, and the divine must either in-break via rapture, or the human must cross over via invasion. Rapture is unbidden and uncontrolled revelation, but mysticism is meant to elicit and control revelation, to alter the human body, to move it safely across the chasm into the *otherworld* where contact with God or ultimate reality can be made.

Religious movements often emerge from rapture, when someone claims a sudden revelation of the true God or the true religion. We might reconsider Jesus's identity and intentions in light of this. Was he a Jewish mystic at the same time he was a Jewish rabbi and radical social prophet? Viewed as such, it can be argued that he experienced himself united to God in some radical way. Because of this divine integration, he reached out to heal the sick and assist the poor, the suffering, and the socially marginalized. His acts against the establishment set him in conflict with the reigning political and religious authorities and ultimately led to his crucifixion. In Chapter 19 by Kripal, we learn that because Jesus's deification as a mystic implies that any human can achieve the same end, the wider Christian church worked to resolve this problem at Nicaea and Chalcedon by restricting the full and natural experience of human divinity to Jesus, a single historical person.

The ritual path of invasion and divine transformation that we call mysticism is meant to reproduce the rapturous experience. A case in point is early Christianity, which emerged in the manner it did because Paul, the apostle and missionary to the Mediterranean churches, had a revelation of Jesus, a sudden moment of rapture on the road to Damascus when he recognized Jesus as God's glory. As he traveled around Asia and Greece with this message, he fashioned baptism and the Eucharist, or communion services, as mystical moments that collapsed the human and divine realms. They were engineered as moments when the human soul united with the descendent Spirit of Christ. This joining of the human and divine, this crossing of worlds, worked like powerful medicine that transformed the convert into the image of God. As I note in "Jesus Revealed" (2011) and Kripal and Ogren write in Chapters 19 and 20, respectively, Paul's rapture had been democratized in Christian ritual.

The rapturous reality that mystics claim they know is a personal revelation that ultimately does not depend on any external authorities—religious, political, or even scriptural. Given that the buck stops with the mystics themselves, not the conventional leaders of churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, it should not be a surprise that communities that form around the seer are associated with secrecy. In Chapter 19, Kripal says that secrecy hides and protects them from the scrutiny of powerful conventional authorities that otherwise would disapprove and censor them.

This is especially important when we acknowledge that the experiences of mystics are nothing less than extraordinary and supernatural, described as ineffable or beyond words. This observation has resulted in several academic debates about mystics and mysticism. First, scholars conjecture whether something psychopathological is going on. Are mystics schizophrenics? Second, given the highly erotic content of so many mystical accounts, scholars want to understand the relationship between the gendered and sexual body and the mystical experience. Third, can mystical experience exist outside cultural contexts? Or, to put it another way, is there a common core to mystical experiences? Finally, how does the brain relate to the experience? Kripal asks in Chapter 19, does it cause it, filter it, or something else?

### COMMUNITIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Certainly, gnostics, esotericists, and mystics have experiences that stay private or that may never catch on with other people; it also is true that communities form around the keeping and the revelation of divine secrets. According to Hugh Urban in Chapter 13, these complex communities develop around the elite who are in the know and are part of the group. The idea that there are deep mysteries of the universe waiting to be discovered, as explored in Hanegraaff's Chapter 10 and Henrik Bogdan's Chapter 16, is enormously attractive and may speak to the longevity of esoteric currents and the popularity of secret societies and related conspiracy theories, especially within countercultural movements.

**The Sociology of Secrecy.** Occult communities become harbors for the secrets, keeping them safe for future generations. They also become harbingers of the secrets, distributing them to their members and beyond their borders to potential converts. Quite often, these types of communities face tension over what information ought to be withheld from the public and taught or practiced privately, and what ought to be shared publicly to grow the movement or sell a book.

This tension over what information to reserve and what to share has social ramifications. The dynamics of secrecy for these communities is essential to their social regulation and to the transmission and manipulation of knowledge. Scholars call this phenomenon *the sociology of secrecy*. In these groups, says Hanegraaff in Chapter 10, secrecy can function as social capital, lending power to those people who are able to control its revelation. Secrecy functions as a way to legitimize and authorize. This authority can be wielded to support or to challenge the norms and values of the larger society, explains Bogdan in Chapter 16.

So, says von Stuckrad in Chapter 11, secrecy and claims to perfect knowledge can be viewed as a powerful social discourse in which the concealment and revelation of knowledge produces religious communities through exclusion and marginalization, even criminalization. This discourse of secrecy can have significant political consequences and complications, as we read in Urban's Chapter 13 and Bogdan's Chapter 16.

No single type of community emerges to safeguard and distribute divine secrets. And no single type of interaction exists between these movements and conventional religions. To consider these movements small and idiosyncratic with loose organizational structures is to misconceive their social geography. In fact, there are as many avenues to classified knowledge as there are groups of gnostics, esotericists, and mystics. Nonetheless, in terms of their relationship with traditional religion, these groups fall into three main types: nonexclusive groups, countermovements, and new religions.

*Nonexclusive Groups.* It may be surprising to learn that most gnostic, esoteric, and mystic groups that have arisen to safeguard secret knowledge have done so as nonexclusive communities. Far from being exclusive venues, most have allowed their members to hold multiple religious affiliations in addition to their own. They perceive themselves to be pedagogical units, providing instruction to their members about divine secrets with which traditional religions don't bother. If the unit is closely affiliated with a single traditional religion, it might be marketed as a place for advanced learning about the religion's secrets and members may hold dual citizenship, affiliating with both the traditional religion and the private school.

This is how gnostics, such as the famous second-century teacher Valentinus (c. 90–165 CE), operated, at least in the beginning years of Valentinus's movement. Valentinus was considered to be a prominent Christian teacher, the almost pope, who took on disciples to instruct them about the deeper secrets of God. He conducted his private school in much the same way as Greek philosophers did, explains Ismo Dunderberg in *Beyond Gnosticism* (2008), providing instruction and a way of life for his disciples to follow. He and his disciples considered themselves Christians, and they likely attended Christian worship services as well as their special school catechism.

Jewish mystics who teach kabbalah, such as the Rabbi Issac Luria (1534–1572 CE), maintained similar pedagogical movements, with religious masters guiding their disciples into the secrets of the *sephiroth* (the manifestation of God's being) and the divine *merkavah* (cf. Ezek 1:15–26). The model is one of special instruction that augments more traditional practices to impart God's deeper secrets to qualified students who affiliated mostly with conventional Judaism.

Schools that are not affiliated with a traditional religion might construct lodges or assemble covens where members are initiated and meet regularly to discuss and practice their occult program. Usually, members are allowed to hold multiple religious affiliations outside the lodge or society. The Sethian gnostics provide a good example from antiquity. In addition to their own religious services, they were known to attend together classes of the great philosopher Plotinus (204–270 CE). The delivery of knowledge in their own settings is characterized in their literature as pedagogical and initiatory, as the transmission of teachings from parent to child, master to disciple, or mystagogue to initiate. In Chapter 5 by Madeleine Scopello, we learn that Sethian gnostics were ascetics who trained the people within their communities to undertake collective mystical journeys, which culminate in ecstasy and experiences of self-transformation.

We might also think of the Rosicrucians. The Rosicrucians were a popular secret society of debatable origin, teaching ancient esoteric truths to their lodge members, including the famous philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Freemasonry operated similarly. As we read in Chapter 12 by Fanger and Chapter 13 by Urban, the Theosophical Society, founded in the mid-1870s, is a comparable kind of hybrid study and initiatory community. Wiccan covens fall into this loose category as well.

Since antiquity, most of these pedagogical groups that tend to allow their members to hold multiple religious affiliations function as private initiatory schools. With the advent of the modern media and globalization, public pedagogical venues have arisen, such as occult training at retreat centers, special symposia, and even dedicated festivals. This model, says Fanger in Chapter 12, has been particularly successful for new age and esoteric movements, which resist institutionalization, whose teachers have no intention of starting a religion or becoming a religious leader.

One of the best known is the human potential movement's retreat center, Esalen, in Big Sur, according to Kripal in his book *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007). People of different religious affiliations or *none* attend seminars on the grounds of Esalen to learn more about the spiritual secrets of the universe and practices designed to *actualize* these in the human body and person. They also soak naked in the hot tubs perched on the ocean cliff, an activity that is as much about social bonding as meditation. A similar public venue is the neopagan festival at which people gather to eat, dance, and drum around bonfires, play music, and buy occult merchandise, including instructional books and videos. With the dawn of the digital age, writes Urban in Chapter 13, the occult has gone viral, generating new forms of online groups, chat rooms, and web-based emporiums. These types of public movements suggest a strong tendency among twenty-first-century occult seekers to consider spiritual truth a lifestyle to be studied and lived, perhaps in addition to an affiliation with a traditional religion. Perhaps not. The *none* or *spiritual but not religious* affiliation has become quite popular in modern occulture.

*Countermovements.* There are risks to multiple affiliations. In the case of the Valentinians, their dual affiliation with their school and the Catholic church ended up generating a great deal of tension among the Catholics, who disapproved of Valentinian teachings and practices. When this tension became too much for the communities to tolerate, the Valentinians reformatted themselves into a Christian reform movement with their own exclusive spiritual churches. Operating as a countermovement allowed the Valentinians to recruit new members from the Catholic communities. According to Scopello in Chapter 5, the Valentinian gnostics offered instruction and initiatory rites as part of a five-year or even lifelong commitment to the group.

The Valentinian story is a prime example of the emergence of an occult countermovement that works to reform a conventional religion. In these types of movements, the gnostic, esotericist, or mystic arises as a leader within a traditional religious setting and tries to reform that religion based on the revelation of secret knowledge that was received. The conventional religion is viewed as corrupt or contaminated, needing to be returned to its pristine state. The pristine condition of the religion is knowledge that has been divinely revealed to the gnostic, esotericist, or mystic. These reformers work to bring the conventional religion in line with their heavenly visions of what the religion ought to look like and how it ought to operate.

In the second century, a triumvirate of mystics who channeled the Holy Spirit organized a Christian reform movement meant to bring back the prophetic and moral character of pristine Christianity. To make concrete their visions of an egalitarian and future-oriented Christianity, the three leaders (a man named Montanus, and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla) established during the late second century a successful movement that they called the Church of New Prophecy in what is now Turkey. Together, they chastised Christians for their laxity and laziness and warned them of impending judgment, which they predicted was right around the corner in the year 172 CE. On the basis of their famed visions, they were able to convince Christians that New Jerusalem would soon descend on a mountain in Phrygia, a province of Asia Minor. Families from across the Mediterranean pilgrimaged to this mountain where Noah's ark was believed to have come to rest. They set up camp as they waited faithfully for the final day when New Jerusalem descended from the skies. When the day did not come, they admitted they were wrong and intensified their efforts. They reorganized into a church with itinerant preachers much like Jehovah's Witnesses who write the *Watchtower* magazine and distribute it door to door. They were the Watchtower preachers of antiquity.

Closely related to the reform movement is the separatist movement. The revelation of divine secrets may lead the gnostic, esotericist, or mystic to believe that the conventional religion has become so corrupt that it cannot be salvaged. These leaders are operating at the very margins of the conventional religion. Under their leadership, countercommunities may form as the true expression of the traditional religion. The leaders of these movements tend to separate themselves from the conventional religion, while maintaining that they are its only true adherents. Again, their conceptualization of what the religion ought to look like and how it ought to be practiced is knowledge that the gnostic, esotericist, or mystic claims are revelatory and thoroughly authoritative.

A prime example of a separatist movement comes from a newly discovered (2006) gnostic gospel called the Gospel of Judas. The author of this second-century text identifies all Christians besides his own as fake Christians. Because this author is a Christian gnostic, he believes that the God of worship is a God who transcends the universe. This is the unknown Father God that Jesus preached. This Father God is not the Old Testament creator God YHWH. The Old Testament God is a lesser god worshipped by the Jews. From this perspective, the author criticizes other Christians for worshipping YHWH, for being closet Jews. He warns that the Eucharist, when Jesus's body and blood is offered as a sacrifice to YHWH, is a wicked ritual that only empowers demons. In *The Thirteenth Apostle*, I consider how the author of the Gospel of Judas considers his own gnostic community to be the only community fostering true Christianity (2009).

*New Religions.* Some movements also form completely in the margins of the conventional religions as new religious movements. In such instances, the gnostic, esotericist, or mystic understands the revelation of divine secrets to lead to a new religion altogether. The old religions may be culled for marketable ideas and practices, or links may be established with them to help legitimate the new religion, yet the religion that emerges is its own thing. It is a religion that may have Christian or Buddhist aspects, for instance, but is not Christianity or Buddhism. It is understood by its members and marketed by its leader as real religion or true religion, in contrast with anything else that exists.

My favorite example of this type of religious community in antiquity comes from the Euphrates River valley in what is now Iran in the third century CE. Mani (216–276 CE), a young poet and artist who lived there, began to have visions of his angelic twin. Mani records in his diaries that this divine messenger revealed to him true religion and the falsity of all religions. This revelation of secrets not only included a fantastic account of a divine transcendent world of light, but also a regiment of bodily control to redeem the light that had dispersed in our world and bodies in primordial times. I explain in *The Gnostic New Age* (2016), how out of his visions and revelations, Mani built a gnostic religion, Manichaeism, complete with its own scriptures and rituals. It was so successful that it became the first world religion.

New religions with occult tendencies can emerge with surprising structures that blend ancient classified knowledge with modern science, technology, pop culture, and capitalism. Such is the case with the Church of Scientology whose founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), combined Hermetic knowledge drawn from the Golden Dawn and the Ordo Templi Orientis, with psychoanalysis, elements of Asian religions, and his own science fiction and fantasy writings. He composed and published a text called *Dianetics*, which became the impetus for a new religious movement. Its truth consisted of a therapy called *auditing*, which is claimed to clear the believers of negative memories so that their true identities as a *thetan* or ancient spiritual being could be recovered. The Church of

Scientology has come under scrutiny for certain practices, raising the question about the connection between esoteric movements and deviance, even criminology. As Urban asks in Chapter 13, where is the line drawn between esoteric practices that are secret because they are a matter of classified knowledge and those that are secret because they are a matter of immoral and illegal activities?

### THE DIMENSIONS OF REVELATION

Here is the secret about secret religion. The secrets aren't kept secret. Secret religions are about revelation, receiving revelation and circulating revelation. This double meaning is captured in a saying attributed to Jesus in the gospels, "Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, nor is anything secret that will not be known" (Matt 10:26; Luke 8:17, 12:2; Mark 4:22; Thom 5, 6). Secret religions are about the claim to possess divine secrets unknown to conventional religions, *and* the willingness to distribute or circulate them to other parties. It is the combination of these two dimensions of revelation that leads to the formation of religious movements in the margins.

**Agents of Truth.** The primary revelation of the secrets takes many forms across the various movements, although, says Burns in Chapter 14, they involve either a direct message delivered through a human medium like a prophet or a channeler, or an indirect message that is discovered through divinatory methods that include observations of the natural world and skies, or dream interpretation. These people—whether prophet, priest, sage, shaman, or new age leader—are considered by their followers to be agents of truth because they are perceived to be in contact with the divine world or the real realm of reality.

For instance, prophets often are considered inspired by a divine being or spirit to advocate a message from God. In some occasions, prophets are visited by angels and receive special teaching from them. We might consider the early Christian mystic, Hermas (early second century CE), who was visited by several angels including an old lady who Hermas believed embodied the church. These angels communicated clearly how Hermas should clean up the Roman church and install a stricter moral code of conduct. Valentinus was visited by Jesus in the form of a small child, who revealed to him the cosmic secrets and how Christianity should be reformatted to reflect salvation by grace, not works. Valentinus's vision of a God of grace preempts by thirteen centuries the message of the Protestant reformers.

Prophets also might receive their message in dreams or waking visions, such as was the case with the biblical Ezekiel who was taken up to God's heavenly chariot and shown God's form or manifestation as evidence of God's providence. In Chapter 23, Coblenz Baultch tells us that dreams and dream interpretation are found in religious traditions spanning ancient Israel to the Native American Lakota Sioux nation. Dreams are considered divine messages that need to be decoded by a specialist who is seen as an agent of truth.

Channeling is a similar mode of revelation, but it involves a spiritual entity using a human being as a mouthpiece for the special message. According to Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1998), channeling is a particularly popular mode of communication used by new age leaders. The famous *A Course in Miracles*, for instance, is claimed to be the direct teaching of Jesus channeled through Helen Schucman (1909–1981) from 1965 to 1972. Other notable new age ascended masters and divine entities include Ramtha, Bashar, Kryon, and Adamus. These otherworldly beings were channeled by



J. Z. Knight (1946–), Darryl Anka (1951–), Lee Carroll (1948–), and Geoffrey Hoppe (1955–), respectively.

**Verbal Media.** The circulation of the divine secrets occurs along two main media routes: word of mouth and the written word. Some groups consider the hottest secrets to be spoken secrets, reserving them as verbal utterances known only within the group. These secrets are never written down but rather are passed on during catechismal training and ritual performances. One of the most stunning examples of this is the redemption ritual performed by Marcus (late second century CE), the famous gnostic from the Valentinian tradition. The redemption ritual was central to the gnostic church he founded in the Rhone Valley. It was a graduated ceremony that took place over years, as the soul was taught to ascend through the heavenly realms on its way home to the transcendent world. The final stage in the ritual was reserved for the deathbed when the last words of power were whispered into the ear of the dying gnostic. These words remain unknown to everyone except the priests and the deceased. This type of gradual revelation of secrets and their verbal disclosure at eschatological moments like death are successful strategies that keep members committed to the group.

We might also consider as verbal media the revelations of Edward Kelley (1555–c. 1589), which John Dee (1527–c. 1608) wrote down and interpreted. Dee wanted to learn the classified knowledge about the nature of the universe that had been lost after Adam's fall. So he employed scryers such as Kelley. Scryers were practitioners who claimed that they could receive visions from angels by gazing into a crystal or special mirror. Dee was fascinated to converse with angels in a secret language Kelley used, a language that they called Enochic. Dee believed it was the language that Adam had known, write Burns in Chapter 14 and James Davila in Chapter 24. In this case, the verbal language itself was esoteric, not just the message it divulged.

**Written Media.** In terms of the written media, gnostics, esotericists, and mystics are prolific. At least in the ancient and premodern eras, says Fanger in Chapter 12, they are mainly elites and intellectuals. They are famous for adapting and revising conventional scriptures, composing their own new scriptures, writing down their visions and channeled materials, and creating church handbooks and manuals for spiritual living. Occult literature is sometimes pseudepigraphical, written in the name of an ancient biblical hero to supplement personal stories with revelations and other knowledge that the author considered classified. Although many occult writings are anonymous, an equal number are attributed to famous gnostics, esotericists, and mystics as well as to ascended new age masters. According to Burns in Chapter 14, much of their literature might be best characterized as parascripture, writings that are written to supplement, revise, or supplant what is considered to be conventional scripture or general religious knowledge.

What we know about gnostic literature has benefited greatly from accidents of history when books from tombs—traditional grave goods in Egypt—have been recovered. The largest cache is known as the Nag Hammadi collection, discovered in 1945, although earlier books, such as the Askew, Bruce, and Berlin Codices, had resurfaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the writings in these collections represent the opinions of a variety of gnostic groups, all of the books deal in a subversive type of knowing that denounces ordinary reality as fake and encourages the discovery of the divine reality through direct experience rather than empirical experience. In Chapter 6, Os notes that evidence from these gnostic texts suggests that their readers felt that they were religiously authoritative, even scriptural.

Rather than composing works that deal heavily in discursive knowledge, gnostics instead compose works that reflect the resources and ways of the religious imagination. Not only do their writings relate a bricolage of images of real worlds beyond the physical cosmos, they also tell the deep secret of how to discover the true human self and journey along a safe path through the transcendent worlds above. So, according to Turner and Corrigan in Chapter 7 and Turner again in Chapter 8, everywhere we turn in gnostic writings, we are faced with descriptions of praxis, the contemplative activities the gnostic must undertake to journey the path back to the true God.

Literature that deals in mystical currents is identified in scholarly research, explains Ogren in Chapter 20, with everything from narratives in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to Qumran texts, from Jewish *Hekhalot* literature to the kabbalah, from the Neoplatonic corpus to Pseudo-Dionysus, from Bonaventure and Theresa of Avila to Abraham Abulafia and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. This material is highly visionary in orientation, often providing details about the complex architecture of the heavenly world, the location of the heavenly host and God, depictions of celestial worship, and descriptions of God's countenance. Entangled in these details are accounts of rituals used for ascent and other more practical activities of magic.

The esoteric corpus is broader than those of the gnostic and the mystic. When scholars refer to esoteric literature, they have in mind a diverse referential corpus that includes ancient writings, such as Neoplatonic literature from famous philosophers such as Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus; Chaldean Oracles; ancient Hermetic literature, alchemical texts, and gnostic texts; kabbalah, and the Picatrix. Additionally, they include writings composed by occult leaders and teachers themselves. These are too numerous to list in this context, but as noted by Fanger in Chapter 12 and Burns in Chapter 14, they include works such as Helena Petronvna Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and the compositions of Aleister Crowley. The content of this literature is so broad that little can be said in terms of commonalities beyond perhaps what we noted to be the four characteristics of esoteric thought: correspondence, divine permeation, magical action, and transmutation or divinization (Faivre 2010, 12).

**Distribution of Media.** In some cases, these materials are written for members of the group and are not widely distributed beyond their walls. This seems to have been especially the case in antiquity, during which scriptures, homilies, and manuals were not circulated publicly. That said, it should be acknowledged that access to their writings was not necessarily guarded. People outside their groups found access to their writings when they went looking. So, for instance, Origen (182–254 CE), the third-century leader of the Christian seminary in Alexandria, was able to lay his hands on a secret map of the soul journey that had been drawn up by a group of Christian gnostics he called Ophians. In “The Road for the Souls Is through the Planets” (2013), I explain that according to Origen, some fifty years earlier, the Ophians had shown a similar map to the Roman philosopher Celsus (middle of second century CE). When we consider how much Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons knew about gnostic teachings as he wrote his famous treatise *Against Heresies* in the middle of the second century CE, it is clear that he had direct access to gnostic writings, even though they did not enjoy circulation in the public sphere.

In the modern world, the distribution of the written secrets has become big business with special esoteric bookstores cropping up around the globe and retreat centers offering technical instruction and spiritual manuals for sale. This wider public dissemination of

occult wisdom actually began with the large-scale use of the printing press, when Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875) and the Order of the Golden Dawn produced a massive number of publications on occultism and esoteric thought in the nineteenth century. The translation of ancient gnostic and hermetic texts into common languages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and their publication and distribution at affordable costs, also played into this popularizing of the occult, explains Burns in Chapter 14. All that was needed to go global were bands such as The Beatles, authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), films such as *The Matrix* (1999), and the World Wide Web.

**Community Control.** Texts are central to religion in the margins in two ways. First, occult teachers and leaders generate new texts. But equally important is the group's cultivation of how a scripture or parascripture ought to be read and understood correctly. In this way, the occult community not only controls the new knowledge generated by their teachers and leaders, but also the *real* meaning of the old scriptures. So, the power of the community is its ability to control through its hermeneutical strategies the secrets of the texts it uses.

For instance, in the Jewish and Christian mystical literature, meditation on the prophet Ezekiel's visions of God's manifested glory seated on his *merkavah* chariot or throne is quite prominent. In fact, writes Christopher Rowland in Chapter 22, meditative engagement with the Bible often is the starting point for Jewish and Christian mystics seeking their own journeys into heaven to grasp God's secrets. In this way, the mystic orientation toward scripture tends to be the least transgressive, although still innovative. Mystics are more interested in using the visions of scriptural heroes as prompts for their own mystical experiences and acquisition of classified knowledge than in subverting the scriptures. Often, they will use a scriptural vision as the basis for the composition of their own parascripture, which reveals the secrets that they believe figures such as Elijah, Abraham, or Moses experienced during their heroic raptures. As we have seen, occultists too have tended to mine ancient scriptures, although for their perennial truths rather than paradigmatic visions.

The gnostic reader of conventional scripture is not so generous. This hermeneutic usually upsets and topples the traditional scriptural understanding as, for instance, is the case with the Genesis story. Gnostic hermeneutics develop the ambiguities of the scripture so that the creator God is no longer the good God of worship, but the bad God who tricks and enslaves Adam and Eve, denying them immortality and the knowledge of good and evil. The same can be said for their understanding of texts such as the Gospel of John or the letters of Paul. Gnostic hermeneutics works to unleash ambiguities, reverse readings, and countercultural perspectives.

**The Revelatory Milieu.** Every single occult movement is unique and requires a thick description of how it formed in the margins. That said, how do we go about explaining some of the commonalities they share, especially the countercultural and transgressive edge of secret knowledge movements? This question has proven difficult to negotiate because of variance in local environments. Is there a common factor that would allow for their countercultural orientation, a factor that transcends local contexts?

To help explain this, many scholars have found informative the concept of the *cultic milieu* put forward by the sociologist Colin Campbell in his classic article, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization" (1972). He argues that while specific cults may come and go, there is a cultic milieu in which they exist and from which they are spawned. This is a constant feature in society and can be defined by its deviancy in relation to established

cultural orthodoxies. This concept, says Hanegraaff in Chapter 10, allows the study of occult movements to be seen as highly significant to a society in which diffuse countercultural networks emerge that are grounded in a consistent rejection of conventional religious and scientific knowledge.

Yet the concept of the cultic milieu does not stand without critique. Scholars now recognize that what in previous centuries was considered to be esoteric, hidden, and deviant knowledge—part of the cultic milieu—has become in the modern world increasingly ordinary, everyday, and mundane. The emergence of this new pop subculture of the occult has been named *occulture* by religious scholar Christopher Partridge in his two-volume work, *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004–2005). The occult and its secrets has become part of the mainstream, distributed widely in film, fiction, and the arts. The esoteric may have been deviant once, but it is acceptable now.

That said, esoteric knowledge still is connected to religion in the margins and still fosters critique of traditional religion. Although the hidden has been revealed through mass media, it still can have a cutting edge that reformats or turns upside-down traditional religion. When we think about it, religion in the margins generally develops because religious seekers claim multiple religious affiliations while *also* questing for something beyond them, usually the God beyond conventional gods of the traditional religions. In their quests for the truth behind it all, they consciously draw on everything from standard sacred literature, philosophy, astrology, science, and pop culture. These seekers claim to have direct access to newly revealed knowledge unexpressed by conventional religions, while also being inspired by them. So the subculture or milieu of the occult movement need not be deviant or cultic.

If the subculture or the milieu is not deviant, then what is? Here we enter into territory that is most uncomfortable for the academic community to discuss because it is the territory of what traditionally has been defined as the *irrational*. The seekers don't claim simply to be redesigning spirituality as an eclectic intellectual exercise inspired by the world's sacred scriptures. They claim to have new knowledge, which changes everything for them. This revelation of classified knowledge often is declared to be the result of rapture or some other kind of religious experience, an experience that in the twenty-first century we might argue involves an altered state of consciousness. This altercation can have enormous impact on individuals, moving them to see religious truth quite differently from their former positions. They often believe that their discovery of the hidden truth of the old sacred scriptures or their authorship of new scriptures channels the true message of God or *true* religion that previously had been unknown or messed up. Once this happens, they find themselves on the margins, at odds with conventional religion.

For these reasons, it may be better to describe the petri dish for occult movements as a *revelatory milieu*, in which the claim to revealed knowledge puts standard religious practices and readings of conventional scriptures into reverse or inverse, or produces new practices and scriptures altogether. Because their claim to revealed knowledge puts to the test the conventional religions, I explain in *The Gnostic New Age* (2016) that these seekers are defined by traditional authorities as deviant and cultic. Out of this exchange, countercultural networks that critique religion form within society and become entangled in it.

## MAGIC AND MIRACLE

The ritual activities of gnostics, esotericists, and mystics usually are characterized as magic or sorcery, whereas the ritual activities of conventional religions are called sacraments or sacred

rites. In some ways, we are dealing with the paradox that one person's magic is another person's miracle, although neither of these terms has an easy place in a world in which we too often make absolute distinctions between the natural and supernatural. In fact, explains Kripal in Chapter 19, new categories such as the *paranormal* collapse these earlier distinctions and attempt to move beyond them. The perception that we are dealing with magic rather than sacrament is not benign or innocuous. It reflects the strategy of conventional religions to label the activities of religions in the margins in derogatory and defamatory ways.

**Consorting with Demons.** The *magos* (or magician) and the *goes* (or sorcerer) have been associated with secret religion since the first usages of the words in Greek literature, says Fritz Graf in "Excluding the Charming" (1995). They were considered ritual specialists, especially employed to hold private therapeutic rites, ceremonies to harm their client's enemies, and initiations into the otherworld. They were religious specialists who had taken over the role of the shaman, once people had migrated from tribal to farm and urban living.

They were not necessarily connected to the conventional temples or priesthoods. Many were freelance religious itinerants, offering their services for sale. The services they offered, from healing to ceremonies of private ecstasy, were services that generally fell outside civic Greek religion. In part, magicians were considered to be dangerous because they operated outside the traditional religion of the Greek *polis* or city, in the margins of respectable religion. Because they were considered powerful people at the edges of civic religion, they were portrayed with suspicion as outsiders and foreigners. They were approached with caution. As Graf explains (1995), it commonly was believed that these magic specialists did not deal in *eusebeia* (or true religion), but rather were a religious *asebeia* (or aberration).

This pejorative advertisement of magicians working harmfully in the margins of true religion, even against true religion, has been deployed successfully throughout Western history to demonize religious workers who deal in secret religion. Augustine (354–430 CE), bishop of Hippo, consolidated this view when he identified magic, including the Neoplatonic theurgic rituals, as illicit communication with demons, nothing more than necromancy. This has meant that the prayers of those who deal in religion in the margins are *spells*, their liturgies are *incantations*, their sacraments are *superstition*, and their healings are *witchcraft*. And in the mix is usually the charge of indecent exposure and illicit sexual acts, although occult practitioners who mix sex and magic claim that the sexual act is sacred and a powerful aid in the practice of magic because it charges the practitioner with ecstatic feeling and energy or provides the practitioner creative potency, says Bogdan in Chapter 16.

**Rituals of Power.** How do we weigh this? The bottom line is that the religious workers who operate in the margins of religion do so by developing and employing rituals of power that outsiders see as demonic magic. Most often, these powerful rituals offer people things that cannot be had in traditional religion, such as soul trips to the otherworld or insurance that a person's opponent gets what is coming. They might offer a *séance* to contact the dead or a charm to ensure that a lover stays true. That said, it is also equally true that their rituals might mimic conventional religion but with a twist. They might offer, for instance, a second baptism that does not just purify the soul but divinizes it. In such instances, the religious specialists see their rituals as improvements on the conventional ones or as authentic versions of traditional rituals gone corrupt.

In the case of gnostics, to overcome social alienation and isolation, they performed a range of initiatory rituals that allowed them to subdue the powers who rule the world and

become integrated with the God of transcendence. For some gnostics, such as the Valentinians, their rituals were quite similar to those of the wider Catholic church, although the Valentinians innovated baptism by adding a second baptism for redemption. The Sethians also used baptism, but not as a single initiatory rite as the emerging Catholics did. In their case, it was performed repeatedly at different cosmic and transcendent levels, returning the human spirit to its original condition. In Chapter 8, Turner discusses the descriptions in gnostic literature of investitures of robes, acts of enthronement, coronation, meals, and sacred marriage.

Mystical experiences are chronicled as invasions of another reality, in which human beings prepare for the experience and participate in activities that serve as prompts for the experience. Mysticism is a praxis, or practice, of invasion, a set of activities that people in a religious community engage to bring about an immediate encounter with what they consider to be ultimate reality. The secret that mystics safeguard and share with their trainees is the precise and dangerous path to this ultimate reality, a supreme God or sacred source hidden from our mundane senses and intellect.

Preparation for this dangerous journey focuses on purification activities such as fasting and vegetarianism, sexual asceticism, and water rituals. These exercises in purgation are meant to remake the normal human body into an extraordinary human body that can survive in terrifying realms populated by spiritual entities. The result of the invasion is transformative, so that the person experiences apotheosis or deification by joining an angelic retinue or uniting with the divine source of all.

Given this extreme praxis, Kevin Sullivan notes in Chapter 21 that it should not be surprising that historically Jewish and Christian groups that entertain mystical goals often organized themselves into ascetic or monastic communities. The creation of these intentional communities shaped local environments in which individuals, by performing specific practices, felt that they could prepare and transform their human bodies into angelic bodies to invade the heavens.

It has not gone unnoticed that the rituals used by mystics have significant overlap with anthropological reports of shamanic rituals and ceremonial practices. According to Coblenz Bautch in Chapter 23 and Davila in Chapter 24, these rituals include widespread patterns of experiences associated with these rites. In fact, the shamanic complex might be the best interpretative frame to use to understand what the early Jewish mystics were doing when they tried to ascend into the rooms of the heavenly temple to acquire the power of the angels to heal and to harm, a process Jewish mystics thought of as *descending* to the *merkavah* or chariot of God. This connection between ceremonial magic and therapeutic power continues to be seen with the angelic séances of Dee and Kelley in the Renaissance, writes Davila in Chapter 24.

Ceremonial magic and alchemy, complete with secret codes and cryptograms, usually are highlighted in academic discussions of esotericism, notes Burns in Chapter 14. Theoretically, ceremonial magic relied on the concept of universal correspondences that occult practitioners believe exist between the microcosmos, or the human body, and the macrocosmos, or the universe and God. In this system, each of the planets is related to specific body parts and to particular metals. So, says Prophet in Chapter 15, if the metal that is associated with a particular planet is manipulated, then the associated body part could be affected and healed. Magical ritual is highly significant to many forms of esotericism, including contemporary occult movements, such as Wicca.

But equally important for esoteric movements are rituals of initiation. These are commonly understood to be rites of passage that a candidate has to go through to become a member of the secret society or to be admitted to higher levels or degrees within the community. These rituals usually are unknown to the candidate in advance. They are theatrical with ordeals that the candidate has to face, endure, and overcome. They always are described as transformative. The required oaths of secrecy are more than a game. Breaking silence to reveal the rites, says Bogdan in Chapter 16, often results in violent penalties.

## SUMMARY

Although gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism have emerged as specific fields of study with unique historical, textual, imaginary, social, and ritual dynamics, they have as common ground the claim to the revelation of “what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” (1 Cor 2:9). In all cases, this revelation involves a reality that transcends the known parameters of our universe. This ultimate reality is portrayed as a source of life that is responsible for the generation of our world. Or as a divinity that permeates human beings as the true self. Or as a hidden God who hopes to become known and welcome us back from exile.

The people who make this claim to the revelation of divine secrets are seekers after truth. These are people, according to Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), who tend to be unsatisfied with traditional religious answers and conventional religious affiliations. They tend to be open to multiple faiths and philosophies, science and the paranormal, quantum mechanics and astrology, sweat lodges, and yoga. They see themselves on a journey to uncover reality as it really is, wherever that quest may take them.

Their revelation is understood to precede and supersede what conventional religions have to offer. Their revelation views conventional religions as inept, incapable, inadequate, or ineffectual in their attempts to capture the ultimate reality known to the gnostics, esotericists, and mystics. At best, conventional religions have tried to capture this vision, but failed, leaving us with secondary symbols and subsidiary rituals that do more to cover over the truth than expose it. At worst, conventional religions are fakes and their gods frauds meant to deceive us into thinking that this is all there is.

Secret religion is about uncovering the truth about us and our existence. It is a challenge from the margins of religion to expose an ultimate reality that is beyond human comprehension and communication, an ultimate reality that is known intuitively and experienced innately as the ground of our being.

**April D. DeConick**

*Chair, and Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, Department of Religion  
Rice University, Houston, TX*

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