

**The Nag Hammadi Codices & Gnostic Awakening**

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### **Abstract**

In the 1940s the world was changed in ways that are still unfolding. Focusing on discoveries of that era, the Nag Hammadi Codices discovery in Egypt painted a different picture of early Christian believers and followers. This allowed for Gnostic thoughts and philosophies to be preserved for future generations to question “the concepts of master narrative and counternarrative,” which “must be examined with care, that we cannot portray orthodoxy” (Burke, 2020, p. 477). The Nag Hammadi Codices preserved “Gnostic documents” that “offer a perspective on divine providence distinctive not just to Christian but philosophical circles as well” (Burns, 2016, p. 79). From ancient preserved texts to contemporary cinematic narratives, countercultural narratives that question the status quo of institutions could only remain hidden for so long. As the influence of the Gnostic texts discovered continue to influence content creators today, the growing interest in Gnosticism is revitalized in today’s world, in a way resembling a revival of sorts. As academics, philosophers, and theologians continue to study and reveal the hidden secrets discovered by archaeological and anthropological discoveries, modern scholars and researchers have a wealth of scholastic and academic resources to draw upon. While the master narrative gatekeepers try to destroy and eliminate counternarratives that threaten the foundations of their beliefs, materials like the Nag Hammadi Codices survive the test of time and remerge in a world different in many ways yet similar in many others. The war of censorship is real today and days past, and the Gnostics of old knew to preserve their teachings for those generations yet to come. We are one of those generations, benefitting from the preservation of knowledge and wisdom of the ancient and rebellious Gnostics of Nag Hammadi.

### **The Nag Hammadi Codices & Gnostic Awakening**

Bissell, J. (2023). The nag hammadi codices as monastic books. edited by Hugolundhaug and Christian H.Bull. *studien und texte zu antike und Christentum*, 134. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. pp. XIII + 384. Sewn paper, €99.00. *Religious Studies Review*, 49(4), 658–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.16845>

This provides a short synopsis and review of a work titled *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* by Lundhaug and Jenott, studying the monastic history and contemporary usage of the Nag Hammadi Codices in the “Upper Egypt monastic culture” (Bissell, 2023, p. 658). While the article is quite short, it captures the essences of the importance of the Nag Hammadi Codices in monastic and religious context from the past to contemporary time. The author outlines how studies of the codices from other sources have provided revelations that the codices were likely monastically studied by early Egyptian Christian Churches. This is an excellent source of reference for researchers of the codices and “Egyptian monasticism and early Christianity” (Bissell, 2023, p. 659). The author of this article is a theological graduate and pastor in Maine, with focused studies on Egyptian Christianity. The early Christian Church had many monastic materials they studied, and the neglect of the early Gnostic church’s contributions remains contentious and undermined.

Burke, T. (2022). Telling the Christian Story Differently: Counter-Narratives from Nag Hammadi and Beyond. *Review of Biblical Literature*, 24, 474–477.

The author of this article is a Professor of Early Christianity at the York University in Toronto with several publications on biblical studies. This article provides a review and synopsis of an “essay collection” that stemmed from a 2018 conference that was held in Rome (Burke, 2022, p. 474). The Nag Hammadi Codices were “counter-narrative” to “Athanasius’s orthodoxy” but there was a lack of evidence for a “master narrative,” from the fringe or Orthodox side of the house (Burke, 2022, p.474). The Nag Hammadi Codices and apocryphal scriptures embody a “counternarrative to the orthodox master narrative” (Burke, 2022, p. 474), master narratives imagined or otherwise, against those “editorial fatigue and missing middles” of the “Synoptic Gospels” (Burke, 2022, p. 474). Counternarrative elements discussed are those like the Demiurge and the “curse on Jesus’s fleshly part and not his spiritual core,” referencing Paul’s letter to the Galatians in the New Testament (Galatians 3:13) and Jesus’s crucifixion (Burke, 2020, p. 475). While “heterodox” findings like the Nag Hammadi challenge the status quo on canonical religious scriptures, that canon is “only mainstream in retrospect” (Burke, 2020, p. 476). At times we should consider that “heresy preceded orthodoxy” and “one location’s master narrative can be another’s counternarrative” (Burke, 2020, p. 477).

May, R. L. (2023). Modern Gnosticism: F.W.J. Schelling’s Philosophy as an Expression of Valentinian Theology. *Heythrop Journal*, 64(3), 348–366. <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1111/heyj.14175>

This article covers “esoteric second century Christian heresy “ (May, 2023, p. 348), concepts such as nous, the Demiurge, and the resurrection (May, 2023). The author’s analysis of “structural theological and philosophical symmetry between Valentinian Gnosticism and the middle and late philosophy of F.W.J. Schelling” (May, 2023, p. 348) echo the countercultural religious fervor that concepts contained in the Nag Hammadi Codices have spawned since its inception and rediscovery. Collections like the Nag Hammadi Codices has “themes largely conceived to be ‘heterodox’” and “may be evident within modern theological output” (May, 2023, p. 361). Jacob Boehme’s theosophical influence on Schelling’s work “demonstrate the fecundity of this hermeneutical approach” in this “Gnostic system of thought” (May, 2023, p. 349), which demonstrate the reach and influence of heretical collections like the Nag Hammadi Codices have had. The evolution of critical analysis and questioning of institutional narratives are correlated and perhaps a causation of forcing any belief on masses, especially those that are the most sacred and revered. The academic curiosity and innate rebellious human nature we possess provide a framework for societal reconfiguration when presented with old and new concepts that could be reintegrated into our worldviews. Dr. Richard Lee May is a graduate of Canterbury Christ Church University and theologian.

Weidner, D. (2019). The History of Dogma and the Story of Modernity: The Modern Age as

“Second Overcoming of Gnosticism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 80(1), 75–90.

<https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1353/jhi.2019.0004>

Dr. Daniel Weidner, a professor at Martin Luther University in Germany, outlines how “the second part of Hans Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*” suggested the modern age “has to be understood on its own terms” (Weidner, 2019, p. 75) and how “Gnosticism is considered a rather problematic category today, covering very diverse movements that cannot be reduced to any single fundamental myth” (Weidner, 2019, p. 89). Dr. Weidner discusses how Blumenberg’s “philosophical and historical” positions “develops a critical argument about the concept of secularization, but it does so in a mostly historical way, by presenting a broad panorama of the past” (Weidner, 2019, p. 76). While “understanding Blumenberg’s own counter-narrative” (Weidner, 2019, p. 76) is inherently challenging, Dr. Weidner delves into the depths of how Blumenberg’s work articulates how “we are confronted with a complex triadic relation between paganism, Christianity, and Gnosticism” (Weidner, 2019, p. 84). The “self-affirmation” developed by Blumenberg’s works and detailed by Dr. Weidner are concepts that echo the distilled interpretations that academics continually develop as a result of the Nag Hammadi Codices and “not only how we should write the history of ideas, but which methods and concepts we should employ” (Weidner, 2019, p. 90).

Roig Lanzillotta, L. (2020). Albert Camus, Metaphysical Revolt, Gnosticism and Modern Cinema. *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 5(1), 45–70. <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1163/2451859X-12340076>

Dr. Roig Lanzillotta discusses “the roots of metaphysical rebellion in Western history” relating to “Gnostics incarnate the spirit of proud rebellion and protest against a God

deemed responsible for human suffering and death” (Roig Lanzillotta, 2020, p. 45). The professor covers how “in *The Rebel* (1951) Albert Camus assigns ancient Gnosticism an important place in the history of human revolt” (Roig Lanzillotta, 2020, p. 45). Dr. Roig Lanzillotta’s “claim that modern cinema shows the impact of Camus’s *The Rebel* in the way several recent films conceive of their rebellious protagonists” (Roig Lanzillotta, 2020, p. 47) outlines how Gnostic views are alive and well today and continue to influence the counternarrative movement Gnosticism inspired almost two millennia ago. The “metaphysics and Neoplatonism” and “the Gnostic solution to the problem of theodicy has had unexpected success in modern popular culture” (Roig Lanzillotta, 2020, p. 58) are employed in several films the author discusses, such as *Cube* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *The Matrix* (1999) (Roig Lanzillotta, 2020). Dr. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta is a religious professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

Burns, D. M. (2016). Providence, Creation, and Gnosticism According to the Gnostics. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 24(1), 55–79. <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1353/earl.2016.0005>

Dr. Dylan M. Burns is an Assistant Professor of History of Western Esotericism in Late Antiquity at the University of Amsterdam. In this article Dr. Burns discusses the “distinctively Gnostic view about divine providence” and “other aspects of their ancient social and intellectual environments” (Burns, 2016, pp.55-56). Covering main topics of the Demiurge, philosophical and religious influences and motivations, and all of the

distinctions in-between, Dr. Burns details the differences in Orthodox narratives and the Gnostic cosmological world view(s). From Valentinians to Sethians, and how variant their beliefs were compared to the present day accepted theological cannon, Dr. Burns explicitly covers what those beliefs were and how they are seen today by scholars. The article explains how Gnostics viewed “the dualism of God and creator, and the divine nature of humanity—are intertwined of necessity and chief of priority” (Burns, 2016, p. 78) and how “there was certainly was a distinctively Gnostic view about divine providence, inviting us to rehabilitate the term “Gnosticism” accordingly” (Burns, 2016, p. 55). Those same views are alive and well today and provide a gateway for academics and researchers to see collectively accepted beliefs with critical eyes.

Calian, F. G. (2024). Einar Thomassen, *The Coherence of “Gnosticism”*, Hans-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 18, Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021, XIV + 39 p., ISBN: 978-3-11-070571-3. *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, 16(1), 142–143. [https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.2478/ress-2024-0011](https://doi.org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.2478/ress-2024-0011)

The author of this piece is Florin George Calian, a Romanian historian and Managing Director at Dan Slusanschi School for Classical and Oriental Languages. In this article he discusses *The Coherence of “Gnosticism”* by Einar Thomassen, which is a published series of annual lectures from a 2018 presentation. Calian discusses how Thomassen’s work “endeavours to define the term *Gnosticism*, questioning its utility and whether it encapsulates a preNicene religious reality” (Calian, 2024, p. 142). Regarding the title of “Gnostic,” the history of this term “as the term has evolved from the legacy of

heresiologists and has often been used as a tool of exclusion” (Cailan, 2024, p. 142) remains contentious in today’s world. While “the term “Gnosticism” does indeed encapsulate a religious reality that predates its labelling by heresiologists,” it “can be used fruitfully for understanding early Christianity” (Cailan, 2024, p. 142). From an academic and researcher’s viewpoint, Cailan agrees with the categorization and title of “Gnosticism” to provide readers with a framework of the works they are evaluating.

Rivera, J., & Metress, C. (2021). Blumenberg’s Problematic Secularization Thesis: Augustine, Curiosity and the Emergence of Late Modernity. *Religions*, 12(5), 297. <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.3390/rel12050297>

Dr. Joseph Rivera, a lecturer at Dublin City University, outlines how “Christianity may never have overcome its early conflict with Gnosticism” (Weidner, 2019, p. 75) and how “Blumenberg’s constructive proposal, that Christianity and Gnosticism share a certain theology of the world” are “its legacy, as a dualist framework for reality, was preserved in Augustine’s critique of theoretical curiosity” (Rivera, 2021). Dr. Rivera states “Blumenberg associates Nietzschean “self-assertion” with modernity more than any other form of anthropology” (Rivera, 2021). The author of this article outlines how Blumenberg’s work has influenced the “modern epoch of self-assertion” and how Irenaeus, Augustine, and Tertullian differ from past and modern Gnostic teachings and understanding of the world and the Divine. The secular philosophies of these influences is discussed and how it is widely interpreted, accepted, and shared by scholars of all eras. Dr. Rivera’s analysis of Blumenberg’s interpretations of Orthodoxy and Gnostic

philosophies outlines Blumenberg's potential failures and why academics should continue to be inquisitive and critical of everything they research. The Nag Hammadi Codices have provided this opportunity for critical analysis, allowing contemporary scholars to boldly question that which so many have never questioned before, the alleged Word of God (The Holy Bible) and the narratives that church leaders have forced upon the world since the fourth century.