

University of Groningen

About the concept of "Gnosticism" in fiction studies

Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk

Published in:
CLCWeb - Comparative Literature and Culture

DOI:
[10.7771/1481-4374.2997](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2997)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Kwiatkowski, F. (2016). About the concept of "Gnosticism" in fiction studies. *CLCWeb - Comparative Literature and Culture*, 18(3), [2]. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2997>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

About the Concept of "Gnosticism" in Fiction Studies

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski
Jagiellonian University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk. "About the Concept of "Gnosticism" in Fiction Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.3 (2016): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2997>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2997)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as „comparative cultural studies.“ In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 18 Issue 3 (September 2016) Article 2
Fryderyk Kwiatkowski,
"About the Concept of 'Gnosticism' in Fiction Studies"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss3/2>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.3 (2016)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss3/>>

Abstract: In his article "About the Concept of 'Gnosticism' in Fiction Studies" Fryderyk Kwiatkowski notices that in the twentieth-century humanities the concept of Gnosticism has become a popular term for labelling tendencies in modernity and postmodernity. Kwiatkowski argues that the majority of scholars in fiction studies base their research on outdated methodologies. In consequence, Kwiatkowski presents an overview of contemporary approaches in Gnostic studies and discusses how they can be adapted in studies of literature, film, video games, comic books, etc. By outlining advantages and disadvantages of methodological approaches, Kwiatkowski posits that in studies of fiction with Gnostic components it is advantageous to adhere to precise methods, terminology, and explanation including their limitations and the purposes of application.

Fryderyk KWIATKOWSKI

About the Concept of "Gnosticism" in Fiction Studies

In the twentieth century the religious phenomenon known as Gnosticism has gained much interest (see, e.g., Brakke; King; Williams). Gnosticism as a category has been used not only by scholars in religious studies, but also by researchers from other fields including cultural studies, political philosophy, literary studies, etc. The problematic nature of the subject affected the research of scholars who have tried to propose several theories of modernity based on the idea of Gnosticism (see, e.g., Blumenberg; Jonas; Voegelin) or to broaden our understanding of various phenomena in Western culture (see, e.g., Bloom; Filoramo; Hanegraaff). Unfortunately, in many cases their research lead to ineffectual outcomes. Ioan P. Culianu summarized these efforts by writing that "Once I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity ... I was to learn soon, however, that I was a naif indeed. Not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the catholic authors were gnostic, the neoplatonic too. Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism, existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka, Rilke, Proust, Joyce, Musil, Hesse and Thomas Mann were gnostic. From very authoritative interpreters of Gnosis, I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic; power, counter-power and lack of power are gnostic; left is gnostic and right is gnostic; Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; Freud is gnostic and Jung is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic" (290-91). In my view, Culianu exhibits oversimplifications and pitfalls made by scholars who used terms Gnostic and Gnosticism too loosely and not much has changed since he wrote his words. The way I see it, most scholars who are not in the field of Gnostic studies still reproduce many stereotypes on Gnosticism. This problem, however, stems mainly from the fact that scholars in Gnostic studies themselves have not come to the consensus whether the concept of Gnosticism should be abandoned, narrowed only to one group of early Christians, or reformulated. The objective of my study is to discuss contemporary methodological approaches in Gnostic studies which can be applied in fiction studies (especially literary studies, film studies, and video game studies). By outlining the advantages and disadvantages of each method I show their possible use for scholars in fiction studies. This, I hope, should make their prospective examinations of fictional narratives more precise and up-to-date with new trends in Gnostic studies.

Before proceeding to examine whether some ideas expressed in a fictional text can be read as Gnostic, a scholar should clearly expose the methodological perspective from which she/he is willing to provide an interpretation. In contemporary scholarship we can outline at least three possible approaches towards Gnosticism. I do not hold that this list should be seen as perfectly reflecting all the methods available in the contemporary scholarship on Gnosticism, but for the purposes of this article I find it the simplest and most informative: 1) Typological: a) Gnosticism as single religion b) Gnosticism as interpretive or heuristic category 2) Self-designation 3) Identity formation. The typological model a) assumes that Gnosticism was a distinct religion, independent from Christianity which manifested itself in various currents and schools, for example in Sethianism or Valentinianism, but nonetheless it comprised a homogenous movement describable by a set of common features. This approach became influential and popular in defining Gnosticism also outside scholarship. It is understandable owing to the clarity of the results that this method yields. Many scholars followed Hans Jonas's work and developed a typological approach he proposed (see, e.g., Pearson; Rudolph). However, after the Nag Hammadi Library had been found scholars have begun to realize that the very concept of Gnosticism should be either abandoned or completely reformulated. Many scholars pointed out that typological approach is ineffective, gives oversimplifying view on the phenomenon and does not capture the diversity of positions among the so-called Gnostics. Karen L. King in her *What Is Gnosticism?* exposed that twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism stems from the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. The term and concept of Gnosticism "was substituted for heresy as the object of the discourse. The functions of this object were transformed, at times working ... Yet the function of this discourse has remained unchanged: to represent the other" (*What Is Gnosticism?* 219). King argues that by positing a single religion behind the category of Gnosticism modern scholars have reproduced the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy which was not established in the second and third century. Jonas "contributed to the reification of Gnosticism as an independent religion and a singular monolithic phenomenon" (see King, *What Is Gnosticism?* 135). King's critique of typological approach that presupposes Gnosticism as the monolithic movement is hard to ignore. Drawing conclusions from such a method might easily lead to distortion of the meaning of examined material and contribute to developing stereotypes. Thus, we might ask how it can be fruitful for a scholar in fiction studies to employ this approach and to argue that several motifs presented in a fictional work refer or resemble certain ideas manifested in Gnosticism. Firstly, by applying this approach a scholar makes it more suitable for a reader, who is unfamiliar with ancient Gnostic thought, to learn some basic knowledge on manifold religious currents which flourished especially in the Middle East in the second and third centuries. Typological approach towards Gnosticism, understood as a single religion, gives a clear understanding of this movement and Jonas's work still comprises "the classic starting point for exploring this topic" (King, *What Is Gnosticism?* 135). However, a scholar who provides an interpretation of a selected fictional work should clearly depict the limitations of this method and highlight the introductory character of the analysis. Unfortunately, the majority of scholars both in the fields of literary studies and film studies have unwittingly based their Gnostic examination of fictional works on typological approach in its a) version (see e.g. Landess; Mawby; Mackey). In most cases, they indiscriminately referred to works of Hans Jonas (*The Gnostic Religion*) and Kurt Rudolph (*Gnosis*) to depict what Gnosticism "is" without discussing problems of the use of this method, persuasively highlighted by King and other scholars. Having said that, it could be interesting if a scholar used this approach to depict

some fictional work as displaying Gnostic motifs in the way that it reproduces the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. For instance, in one of his interviews Czesław Miłosz said that his interests in Gnosticism and Manichaeism had begun with studying the textbook on the history of the Church, Roman Archutowski's *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego w zarysie* ("An Overview of the History of The Catholic Church"). Archutowski described beliefs of Gnostics and Manichaeists from a theological point of view which inspired Miłosz to express his personal experience of dualistic attitude towards the world (Miłosz qtd. in Kaźmierczyk, *Dzieło demiurga* 8-9, 15-16). Moreover, Miłosz revealed in his interview that he was later inspired by Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion*: "Frankly, when I was giving lectures at the university about Manichaeism, then as a course book I gave to students the book of Hans Jonas, a German professor, on Gnosticism. He cites in there some texts, for instance, the classic of Gnostic literature, that is ... *Hymn of the Pearl*" (Miłosz qtd. in Gorczyńska, *Podróżny Świata* 55; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Therefore, it is no surprise that typological approach, represented by Hans Jonas or Gilles Quispel, was shared by Miłosz (Kaźmierczyk 43-47). Not only can we find Gnostic motifs in the literary works of Miłosz but, according to Zbigniew Kaźmierczyk, he also used them to interpret and express his own personal experience (19). For this reason, it is tempting to assume that since Miłosz's knowledge on Gnosticism was built on books whose authors reproduced the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy he also could do the same in his literary works. I will not try to examine this issue further. My aim is only to show that there might be few possible ways of adapting typological approach to fiction studies which assume Gnosticism as a religion. However, it is of crucial importance that a scholar depicts this method as one of several possible options and for what reasons she/he uses it.

The propositions of the second group in Gnostic studies are also embedded in the typological approach. However, their adherents do not claim that Gnosticism was a single religion. They use the category of Gnosticism rather as an interpretive and heuristic concept that can be useful in comparing a group of texts and thinkers who expressed similar ideas, not to define a religious phenomenon understood as monolithic entity (see, e.g., Marjanen; Marksches; van den Broek). Their propositions are purely academic constructs which aim is to delineate some characteristic features of Nag Hammadi scriptures, but at the same time not to conceive them as determinants for the whole Gnostic movement. However, this approach also has its limitations and problems because any typological method artificially extracts certain features and presents them as definitional elements of a phenomenon while disregarding other traits, which are seen as less relevant. Typological approaches can easily essentialize by disregarding the fact that it develops in time. Advocates of typological approaches which see Gnosticism as heuristic concept used for comparison try to evade King's objection. They are aware of the immense diversity of ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi literature which are hard to put into one single category. Thus, scholars build typological definitions to find certain similarities between chosen texts and explain them without positing that they represent a single phenomenon. This method might not be entirely satisfactory for scholars in Gnostic studies because it only contributes partially to understand the broad range of religious movements and currents of late antiquity. However, its application to fiction studies can bring results. A scholar might note that she/he is not aiming to give a proper definition of the terms "Gnostic" or "Gnosticism" and simply leaves this issue to historians of religion. She/he can use the concept of Gnosticism as an interpretive category to argue that some work, for example a novel or a film, manifests certain ideas that can be linked with those formulated in Nag Hammadi texts. By doing it, scholar puts greater emphasis on the connections between motifs and ideas instead of definitional problems with Gnosticism. For example, Marcin Czerwiński proposes the category of "crambs of gnosis" which means certain "unspecified gnostic tendencies which appear in all kinds of heterogenic, distinctive even, philosophical positions. It should be elaborated that 1) these elements of gnosis can work in complete detachment from their religious, sacral roots 2) sometimes they are implemented in a context which is ideologically alien for them 3) they can occur individually without any connection to other features of ideological complex of gnosis. We use terms "gnostic" or "gnosis" ... or "gnosticism" ... only because it facilitates the classification of themes and motifs which -- as it appears "live" totally independent from historical and cultural basis of gnosis/gnosticism" (*Smutek labiryntu* 50). Czerwiński sees the crams of gnosis as specific patterns, a set of recurring motifs in different times and historical contexts in Western culture. Although he does not place his methodology within the typological approach towards Gnosticism, understood as interpretive category, nevertheless he certainly moves into that direction. However, I cannot agree with the third assumption he makes, namely that we can name some motifs Gnostic without referring them to the mythological expressions of gnosis of late antiquity. If we isolate only one or two ideas from the original scripture and claim it still has a Gnostic meaning then we would make a false statement.

The reason of my disagreement for this is that many ideas formulated in Nag Hammadi scriptures can be also found in other religious and nonreligious narrative texts. Artur Jocz, in his study on Jerzy Przybyszewski's *Androgyne*, states that the author "metaphorically presented flesh as a hypersensitive mean which is absolutely vulnerable to every kinds of experience. One could venture a statement about excessive, totally unjustified vulnerability to physical suffering or bliss. In that way flesh becomes a prison in which human being is subjected to enslavement as a result of his own sensual attentiveness" (106). Jocz links the motif of body as prison with the negative assessment of flesh which can be found in Gnosticism. However, he does not place this motif within the broader network of ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi scriptures. That makes his interpretation unconvincing since the concept of body as tomb or prison for the soul was also present in Orphism or Platonism. Jocz adds that the negative evaluation of flesh was also expressed in Platonism or Neo-Platonism but he does not outline what are the reasons for such a view in both cases. Robert Galbreath discussed already in 1981 a similar problem which he called after David H. Fischer the "fallacy of the perfect analogy" (247). The latter explains that this problem takes place when one makes wrong inference from "a partial resemblance between two entities ... to the false conclusion that they are the same in all respects" (247). Galbreath argued that "the

statement ... that Gnosticism surfaces today in 'such a classics of existentialist despair as Camus's *The Stranger* rests on the unproven assumptions that existentialism and Gnosticism are sufficiently defined by despair, that the despair is identical in both, and, for that matter, that *The Stranger* is in fact a novel of existentialist despair. A similar example is the familiar practice of describing the modern literature of alienation as ipso facto gnostic, as though 'alienation' possess an invariant meaning, regardless of cultural context" (23).

Jacek Kwosek, about Stanisław Lem's work, provides more examples which support my view that we cannot name some motif Gnostic without referring it to other ideas displayed in Gnosticism: "the approach towards the world as tainted by evil; the idea of imprisonment in the world; the idea of 'imperfect God' ... ironic or negative attitude to human body; finally anthropological pessimism ... It is worth highlighting that some of these themes individually are not Gnostic. We can find anthropological pessimism in St. Augustine's thought, with negative attitude to flesh we are also facing in some Christian ascetic texts and Neo-Platonic philosophy. However, the combination of these themes from Lem's works is characteristic of Gnosticism" (213). On the example of the study of Jocz and by referring to Kwosek I attempt to show that themes and motifs which are present in Nag Hammadi scriptures if taken in isolation, might be also traced in other religious and intellectual currents. Therefore, Czerwiński is wrong when he assumes that Gnostic ideas can reappear individually in different times and they can be analyzed without relating them to their primordial religious context. In my view, what makes them Gnostic is the context of other ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi texts with which they remain in a relationship. The idea of body as prison in Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism stems from different metaphysical assumptions. Therefore, Gnostic ideas in fictional works should be studied only by placing them within the broader context of Gnostic thought if, of course, we want to stick with terms Gnostic and Gnosticism.

Robert Galbreath, about Gnosticism in philosophy, depicted how can we meaningfully speak about Gnostic themes in different historical contexts: "The senses in which it is either useful or accurate to speak of the gnostic nature of, or gnostic tendencies in, existentialism, Nazism, cosmology, postmodernism, occultism, or literary theory need to be specified. The specificity must refer to features which are contextually significant and which continuously inform the text, movement, or phenomenon in question. Such features naturally must parallel or be derived from the major structures (usually binary) of traditional Gnostic thought: the radical dualism of matter and spirit, light and darkness, good and evil; the opposition between this-worldly imprisonment and otherworldly salvation; the linking of psychology, ontology, and soteriology in the paired categories of sleep/awakening, forgetting/remembering, ignorance/knowledge (gnosis)" (22). When Galbreath wrote these words, the typological approach to Gnosticism represented by Jonas or Rudolph still awaited revision. Hence in contemporary typological approaches in which Gnosticism is understood as interpretive or heuristic category, can put the accent on different features of Nag Hammadi scriptures. Regardless of the presented characteristics of Gnosticism the fundamental interpretive mechanism should remain the same: despite which typology scholar adapts she/he should try to find all the equivalents of Gnostic features he described in the examined fictional work. However, the meaning of some idea expressed in a fictional work do not necessarily has to display exactly the same meaning and function of its Gnostic prototype. Let me refer to Galbreath again who in his critical analysis on the use of the term "modern Gnosticism" explains that this idea "cannot be defined usefully without specifying the components which constitute its modernity and its Gnosticism. I argued previously that the gnostic quality must encompass, parallel, or derive from the major structures of early Gnostic thought. It cannot isolate a single feature from the larger Gnostic context that includes its binary. Alienation without enlightenment, for example, is not gnostic, ancient or modern. This criterion alone invalidates or limits much that is written about modern Gnosticism. But this is not to say that the alienation and the enlightenment of modern Gnosticism must be identical with their prototypes of the second and third centuries. Modern Gnosticism is not ancient Gnosticism in the twentieth century. The modernity of modern Gnosticism is not a chronological property, but a function of the displacement of recognizably Gnostic structures from an ontology of metaphysical transcendence to a psychology of immanence, relativity, and imputed rather than inherent meaning. The distinctive feature [of modern Gnosticism] is instead the effect of the displacement upon the traditional Gnostic message" (34). As I highlighted earlier, although Galbreath's account is rooted in typological understanding of "Gnosticism as religion," the main line of his argument can be extended to other approaches towards Gnosticism and applied to Fiction Studies. By examining Gnostic motifs in fictional works, we should not only demonstrate the similarities between certain ideas in fiction and Gnosticism, but also explain the differences between them.

Following Antti Marjanen, I call the third stance towards Gnosticism "self-designation" (207). Advocates of this method argue that in the second and third century there was a group whose representatives could be distinguished on two premises: first, they used a specific language to self-differentiate themselves from other early Christian groups and second, their opponents also used a specific vocabulary to designate them. By and large, in scholarship this group has been called Gnostics or Sethians owing to the relevance of the Seth figure who was perceived as the ancient forebear of the saved human beings. On that basis scholars have tried to reconstruct all the information that could well define this religious community: both the texts they produced, including the myth they shared, and social practices, such as baptismal ritual (see, eg., Brakke; Layton). Therefore, adherents of this approach instead of using umbrella term Gnosticism prefer to speak about one distinctive group -- that is, Gnostics or Sethians -- within wider religious network of that time. This method avoids the allegations of selectivity with which the typological and interpretive approaches have to struggle. It puts the accent on the community that "truly existed" through the study of the myth they shared and practices that shaped their identity. The most recent proposition within this paradigm came from David Brakke who in the light of *Gospel of Judas* (Codex Tchacos) strengthened the argument that we might speak about the existence of a group named "the Gnostics." He admits that the corpus of texts which in his view were written by the Gnostics

coincides with what scholars consider as Sethian literature. Nonetheless, he prefers to speak about "the Gnostic school of thought." Brakke bases his account on Irenaeus's testimony and argues that scholars could abandon qualifier "Sethian" since it suggests the possibility of other forms of Gnosticism (31-41). King, however, questions that the group described by Brakke should be named Gnostics instead of Sethians (Rev. of *The Gnostics* 299).

Applying the self-designation approach comprises a middle way in the reception of Gnostic ideas in fiction studies. On the one hand, the problematic concept of Gnosticism is thrown away and instead we are given a much more clear understanding of the term Gnostic based on numerous ancient testimonies. On the other, the explanatory power of such method is greatly reduced only to one mythical narrative. Thus, if a scholar does not have a compelling evidence that a fictional work could be based on Sethian-Gnostic mythology, disregarding other schools of Gnosticism, or it clearly resembles ideas expressed in Sethian literature then in my opinion further restrictions should be made. For the long time in the history of Western culture a broad range of ideas which have been commonly concerned as Gnostic (in a broad sense) were transmitted through the works of Church Fathers. It is reasonable to assume that one of the results of the prevalent discourse of orthodoxy and heresy was that certain ideas amid early Christian groups, which were later labelled as Gnostic, could influence many scholars, science-fiction authors or filmmakers under the very notion of Gnosticism: Carl G. Jung, Philip K. Dick, or the Wachowskis to name a few. I am referring, in particular, to many clichés of Gnosticism, such as antic cosmological dualism, the opposition between evil Demiurge and transcendent God, the Gnostic redeemer myth and so on. Hence it would be very difficult to argue that in some fictional work only Sethian ideas can be found. Rather, in great number of narrative works the ideas associated with Gnosticism have been depicted in less specified form, especially in Hollywood films (see, e.g., Kwiatkowski; Verarde; Wagner and Flannery-Daily; Wilson). However, a scholar who adapts self-designation approach to his study can argue that, although in the analyzed work one might find many other ideas of late antiquity, she/he is in pursuit of giving the interpretation only in the light of Sethian texts. Therefore, the aim would be to expose only Sethian reading of examined work although it should not be perceived as determining other possible meanings of the work.

The last approaches I discuss and that can be useful to apply to fiction studies are the most radical and methodologically accurate in the field of Gnostic studies. These theories are lumped together under the umbrella of theories of "identity formation." Their adherents share views partly with scholars of the self-designation method to the extent that they stress the importance of how early Christians distinguished themselves from each other and through what rhetoric and social practices they shaped their identities. King outlines that these approaches aim "to understand the discursive strategies and processes by which early Christians developed notions of themselves as distinct from others within the Mediterranean world (and were recognized as such by others), including the multiple ways in which Christians produced various constructions of what it means to be Christian. Methodologically, it is oriented toward the critical analysis of practices, such as producing texts; constructing shared history through memory, selective appropriation, negotiation, and invention of tradition; developing ritual performances such as baptism and meals; writing and selectively privileging certain theological forms (e.g., creeds) and canons; forming bodies and gender; making place and marking time; assigning nomenclature and establishing categories; defining 'others' and so on" (King, "Which Early Christianity?" 73).

To put it briefly, these varieties of methods highlight the hybrid identity of early Christians and the rhetorical strategies of self-identification including the language of ethnicity and citizenship. In contrast to the self-designation method, the method of identity formation approach does not presuppose clear bounds between early Christians. Rather, they blur the distinctions amid them and stress the diversity of sources. Moreover, they argue that the categories modern scholars have applied to group early Christians together, for example under the notion of Gnosticism or "proto-orthodoxy," do not fairly reflect the fluidity of their identities. Scholars suggest these constructs partly stem from the rhetoric used by early Christians to give the impression that they differed from each other more than they really did. Thus, it is inappropriate to speak about clearly defined communities of Christians, for instance "the Gnostics," even if we consider their constant self-development within polemical discourse. The usage of such wide but rigid social categories would lead us, they argue, to reification. It would confine our understanding of the religious phenomenon of late antiquity to an unduly narrow view which cannot encompass the dynamics and pluriformity of an ongoing process of shaping the limits of authority and boundaries of acceptable difference in early Christianity (King, Rev. of *The Gnostics* 298). Therefore, scholars who advocate identity formation approaches tend to focus on individual authors and texts as the smallest possible entities for analysis and to place them within the cultural *milieu* of late antiquity. Their goal is to expose the variety of resources which served as means for creating multiple forms of Christianity that mutually influenced one another and contributed to what we now understand as "the Church."

Hence it is no surprise when King does not share Brakke's view that the term Gnostic can be rehabilitated by reducing its meaning to one group because "talking about a distinctive group of 'the Gnostics' or Sethians could further promote imagining some sort of unified or overly well-differentiated social group too early, too widespread, and too persistent" (Rev. of *The Gnostics* 300). Brakke, however, points out that methods which concentrate on the rhetoric omit the importance of social practices: "Heresy was indeed an invention, but not one created through rhetoric alone. Rather, it was created also through practices such as excommunication, ritualized condemnation, and silencing of texts. Cohesion of religious groups was not just a function of shared ideas; it was also the effect of such practices as repeated rituals, exchange of letters and gifts, and patronage ... Such practices had real social effects. Boundaries among early Christian groups may have been porous and in constant need of reassertion, but sometimes they did exist. Our goal should be to see neither how a single Christianity expressed itself in diverse ways, nor how one group of Christians emerged as the winner in a struggle, but how

multiple Christian identities and communities were continually created and transformed" (15). Brakke highlights that transmission of ideas does not take place in "social vacuum." Since early Christians performed the practices Brakke enumerates, including people who produced the so-called Sethian texts, then can we count these practices as the criterion for a distinctive, fully-fledged communities whose representatives had a clear sense of self-identity? Both Brakke and King seem right in a way depending on the methodology they presuppose. Although it would be convenient if a more subtle approaches would arise that could bring together the diversity amid early Christians, including the variety of cultural sources and methods of self-differentiation on the one hand, and the importance of social practices through which they continually re-invented their hybrid identities on the other. Nonetheless, how can we use the identity formation approaches to examine fictional works in the light of Nag Hammadi texts? The advantage of such an approach is that a scholar does not have to deal with such problematic terms as Gnostic or Gnosticism whatsoever. The Nag Hammadi scriptures would not be read through artificially created concepts which modern scholars tried to impose onto them. Instead, these texts are perceived individually but not in isolation from the context of late antiquity. King explicitly expresses her stance by saying that "we need to refer to individual texts. That is, rather than generalize about what Gnostics believe or what Sethians believe -- especially as opposed to what Christians believe -- I think it best to talk about particular texts. The goal is not to create the perfect category (an impossibility in any case), but to make these texts available for critical and constructive work, whether in historical reconstruction or theology (King, *The Secret Revelation* ix). In *The Secret Revelation of John* King presents an extensive study of one of the most important Nag Hammadi texts. What is worth noting is that she does not embed her methodology in typological language, provides multiple interpretations, and pays special attention to the complex intertextual references which makes her reading thorough and placed outside of the paradigm of Gnosticism. Scholars in fiction studies can do a similar move that King does. They could provide a comparative analysis between one or a few selected texts of Nag Hammadi and the chosen work of fiction without referring to the concept of Gnosticism in modern scholarship. This type of study might lead to a fruitful outcome especially in terms of textual analysis. Scholar could seek for possible affinities between certain ideas, motifs, text structures or narrative patterns expressed in selected scripture(s) and the scrutinized fictional work. The greatest advantages of applying formation identity approaches to fiction studies are at least twofold. First, this kind of research would avoid many definitional problems that stem from the modern scholarship on Gnosticism. Secondly, it can definitely provide the high level of precision in determining the similarities between ancient texts and fictional works with the special emphasis on their intertextual character. However, this method lacks the possibility of depicting that certain fictional works could be based on the so-called Gnostic myth -- the artificial product of modern scholarship and Church Fathers. Let me illustrate my argument with an example. For instance, many motifs and ideas in films such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), or *The Matrix* (1999) fit into the description of Gnosticism provided by Jonas. One can argue that they display the most stereotypic features of Gnosticism: antic cosmological dualism, the figures of Savior, evil Demiurge and archons, dream motif or the idea of liberating gnosis. For this reason the application of identity formation approaches into fiction studies would not explain the possibility that the typological understanding of Gnosticism could have had the greatest influence on the popular discourse on Gnosticism. I certainly do not claim this is the main reason or the only explanation why certain works can be viewed through typological approach towards Gnosticism. My point here is that the identity formation approaches in fiction studies also has its limits. Since its use would be primarily focused on certain texts and motifs it could not elucidate to what extent typological approach to Gnosticism have influenced the understanding of this religious phenomenon in Western culture. This issue lies beyond the scope of questions to which identity formation approaches could provide an answer because advocates of this methods simply reject the category of Gnosticism. I hasten to add that I am not discussing the issue of how ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi texts have circulated over the ages and through which -- direct or indirect cultural streams -- could have influenced authors of narrative fiction works. This problem is especially puzzling for film scholars since most of Hollywood directors and screenwriters of 1990s and 2000s in whose works one can find Gnostic motifs were most likely not aware of Gnosticism understood as interpretive context. Hence it is hard to provide a clear line of succession concerning how Gnostic ideas were transmitted into US-American popular culture and have become attractive for Hollywood filmmakers.

Typological approach to Gnosticism, understood as a single religion, have long been indiscriminately used by scholars who proposed interpretations of fictional works in the light of Gnostic thought. The problem with their examinations is not that certain ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi scriptures, for example evil or malicious Demiurge, the idea of imprisonment within false reality or the motif of ascension through heavenly spheres, cannot be seen in fictional works of modernity or postmodernity. Rather, since they most frequently do not discuss their methodology or refer to the contemporary scholarship in Gnostic Studies they tend to find the concept of Gnosticism unproblematic. Thus the interpretations they give should not be viewed as exhaustive but only preliminary. Moreover, scholars in fiction studies who uncritically based their scrutiny on works of Hans Jonas, Kurt Rudolph or, more generally, typological understanding of Gnosticism unknowingly placed their view within serious political and ethical discussion. For King when "modern historians adopt the same strategies as well as the content of the polemicists' construction of heresy to define Gnosticism, they are not just reproducing the heresy of the polemicists; they are themselves propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy. We should not therefore be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians using the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity—whether in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, intra-Protestant debate, or the colonial politics of Orientalism ... The language, themes, and strategies of orthodoxy and heresy proved to be a powerful discourse, persisting in various forms up to our own day" (*What Is Gnosticism?* 54).

In conclusion, after groundbreaking scholarship by scholars such as Brakke, King, van den Broek, and Williams, advocates of typological understanding of Gnosticism perceived as a single religion have been losing ground and they have taken a defensive position. However, the typological approach to this ancient movement is not completely invalid. Scholars try to limit the meaning of terms Gnostic or Gnosticism or they create subcategories such as "biblical demiurgical myth" (Williams 235) or "radical form of gnosis" (van den Broek 10) which are designed to elucidate a narrower scope of data. What is of crucial importance, is that they should clearly state the purposes for adapting such a view and highlight its preliminary character. As I argue, the terms and concepts of Gnosticism or Gnostic have been used too loosely, especially within cultural studies and fiction studies. The issues I discuss in this article do not exhaust the topic and the theoretical remarks for the studies in the reception of Gnosticism I attempt to elaborate demand further research. Nevertheless, I hope this topic would receive more attention from scholars who are eager to seek for Gnostic roots of cultural phenomena in a much more precise fashion, based on the contemporary results in Gnostic studies.

Note: Research for "About the Concept of 'Gnosticism' in Fiction Studies" was funded by the Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University under the program "DSC" for doctoral candidates.

Works Cited

- Archutowski, Roman. *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego w zarysie*. Warszawa: Książnica-Atlas, 1928.
- Bloom, Harold. *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.
- Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1983.
- Brakke, David. *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010.
- Culianu, Joan P. "The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature." *Gnosis und Politik. Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*. Ed. Jacob Taubes. München: Fink, 1984. 290-306.
- Czerwiński, Marcin. *Smutek Labiryntu. Gnoza i literatura. Motywy, wątki, interpretacje*. Kraków: Universitas, 2013.
- Dark City*. Dir. Alex Proyas. New York: New Line Cinema, 1998.
- Filoramo, Giovanni. *A History of Gnosticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Galbreath, Robert. "Problematic Gnosis: Hesse, Singer, Lessing, and the Limitations of Modern Gnosticism." *The Journal of Religion* 61.1 (1981): 20-36.
- Gorczyńska, Renata. *Podróżny Świata. Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem: komentarze*. New York: Bicenennial, 1983.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter. "A Dynamic Typological Approach to the Problem of 'Post-Gnostic' Gnosticism." *Aries* 16 (1992): 5-44.
- Jocz, Artur. "O potrzebie gnozy, czyli jak literacko wyrazić naturę zła -- cierpienia." *Gnoza, gnostycyzm, literatura*. Ed. Barbara Sienkiewicz, Mariusz Dobkowski, and Artur Jocz. Kraków: Nomos, 2012. 97-111.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.
- Każmierczyk, Zbigniew. *Dzieło demiurga. Zapis gnostyckiego doświadczenia egzystencji we wczesnej poezji Czesława Miłosza*. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011.
- King, Karen L. *The Secret Revelation of John*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008.
- King, Karen L. Rev. of *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. By David Brakke. *History of Religions* 52.3 (2013): 294-301.
- King, Karen L. *What Is Gnosticism?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- King, Karen L. "Which Early Christianity?" *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. Ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. 66-84.
- Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk. "Climbing a Ladder to Heaven: Gnostic Vision of the World in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)." *Journal of Religion and Film* 19.2 (2015): 1-32.
- Kwosek, Jacek. "Wątki gnostyckie w twórczości Stanisława Lema." *Literatura Popularna. Fantastyczne kreacje światów*. Ed. Ewa Bartos, Dominik Chwolik, Paweł Majerski, and Katarzyna Niesporek. Katowice: U Śląski, 2014. 2, 211-31.
- Landess, Thomas H. "James Joyce and Aesthetic Gnosticism." *Modern Age* 23.2 (1979): 145-153.
- Layton, Bentley. "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism." *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays*. Ed. Wayne A. Meeks, L. Michael White, and O. Larry Yarbrough. Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1995. 334-50.
- Mackey, Douglas A. "Science Fiction and Gnosticism." *The Missouri Review* 7.2 (1984): 112-20.
- Marjanen, Antti. "Gnosticism." *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. Ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. 203-20.
- Markschies, Christoph. *Gnosis: An Introduction*. London: T & T Clark, 2003.
- Mawby, Paris. "The Kingdom Is Within: Religious Themes and Postmodernity in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*." *The End of Religions?: Religion in an Age of Globalisation*. Ed. Peter Oldmeadow, Carole M. Cusack. Sydney: Dept. of Studies in Religion, 2001. 139-54.
- Pearson, Birger A. *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2007.
- Pearson, Birger A. "Gnosticism as a Religion." *Was There a Gnostic Religion?* Ed. Antti Marjanen. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005. 81-101.
- Rudolph, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Trans. P.W. Coxon and K.H. Kuhn. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.
- van den Broek, Roelof. *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Verarde, Randall. "Suspicion, the Seed of Awakening: *The Truman Show* as Gnostic Fairy Tale." *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 19.1 (2000): 37-49.
- Voegelin, Eric. *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1952.
- Wagner, Rachel, and Frances Flannery-Dailey. "Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism and *The Matrix* Project." *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*. Ed. Christopher Grau. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 258-89.
- Williams, Michael Allen. *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Wilson, Eric G. "Gnostic Paranoia in Proyas's *Dark City*." *Literature-Film Quarterly* 34.3 (2006): 232-39.
- Wilson, Eric G. *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- The Matrix*. Dir. The Wachowski Brothers. Hollywood: Warner Bros., 1999.
- The Truman Show*. Dir. Peter Weir. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1998.

Author's profile: Fryderyk Kwiatkowski is working towards his doctorate at Jagiellonian University. His interests in research include the reception of esoteric ideas in contemporary Western culture with particular focus on Gnosticism in philosophy, literature, and popular culture. Kwiatkowski's recent publications include "How to Attain Liberation from a False Word?: The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in *Dark City*," *Journal of Religion and Film* (2017) and "'Let Us Make ROBOT in Our Image, According to Our Likeness': The Examination of Robots in Several Science-Fiction Films through the Christian Concept of the 'Image of God'," *Studia Religiologica* (2016).
E-mail: <fryderyk.kwiatkowski@doctoral.uj.edu.pl>