

**Review of Jonathan Cahana-Blum, *Wrestling with Archons: Gnosticism as a Critical Theory of Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019**

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The late Jonathan Z. Smith, a renowned theorist of religion, would strongly approve of Jonathan Cahana-Blum's new book *Wrestling with Archons: Gnosticism as a Critical Theory of Culture*. Though Smith is curiously not cited, the study engages in precisely the sort of investigative comparative work that he argued should characterize the academic study of religion. The author, for his part, hopes to lay the groundwork for "a wholesale reconstruction of Gnosticism as a cultural phenomenon" (167).

The study opens with a discussion of the scholarly debate about the category "Gnosticism." Does it refer, scholars have debated in the last few decades, to a real, coherent group or movement in antiquity, or is it just a polemical term that proto-orthodox writers used to identify their opponents? Confusion over this term has led many scholars to argue that the category of Gnosticism invites more problems than it solves and it should be abandoned. Cahana-Blum is clear about his view: he wants to "salvage" (3) the category of Gnosticism, albeit in a fresh way. He regards Gnosticism "less as a philosophical and more as a cultural phenomenon, or, to be more precise, as an ancient form of critical theory of culture" (2). Like modern critical theory, it is a register of discourse that "deconstruct[s] mainstream discourses of domination" (2). In fact, it is in part because of our contemporary socio-cultural location, he argues, that we can fully appreciate what Gnosticism actually was: "Gnosticism, when read as a cultural and not only a religious phenomenon, presents us with an ancient form of cultural criticism which would be hard to parallel until the twentieth century [with the rise of critical theory]" (3). In addition to expressing cultural criticism at the level of discourse, we also find Cahana-Blum indicating that Gnosticism should be understood as a definitive *movement* in antiquity. For instance, early in the study, he suggests that Gnosticism has not been fully appreciated for the "subversive cultural movement" (34) that it was, and by the end, he comes full circle, stating that

we must consider Gnosticism “a well-demarcated cultural movement in late antiquity” (170).

The reasons for regarding Gnosticism as an ancient form of critical theory occupy the latter part of the book, but Chapter One is dedicated to outlining the textual evidence that will count as “Gnostic.” This chapter is critical to his study, because, as we will see, his approach is at odds with many other scholars who study Gnosticism. In demarcating the sources for studying Gnosticism, he excludes Valentinianism on the basis that it adapts Gnostic principles but does not necessarily represent the earliest expressions of Gnostic ideas. In perhaps his most controversial move, he also treats Nag Hammadi texts as “secondary” (33) to understanding ancient Gnosticism, because they might bear the marks of the fourth-century monastic environment that preserved them. The primary sources for Gnosticism, rather, are the quoted materials in the heresiological literature, which importantly, hang together with a certain ideological coherence. In particular, within these primary sources he is able to identify a “core” of Gnosticism: the tragic creation myth, often accompanied by sexually subversive rhetoric.

Cahana-Blum rounds off this chapter by discussing how modern critical theories of culture function. His thoughts on critical theories of culture are worth quoting at length: these theories are attempts to “see through” the “all-powerful system which constructs an illusory notion of reality and thus guarantees the subjects’ continued subjection.... critical theories overcom[e] [that] deception and counteract the very premises that appear to constitute the real” (51). The Frankfurt School, spear-headed by Adorno and Horkheimer, is the archetypical example of such critical discourse. For Cahana-Blum, Gnosticism, by questioning and deconstructing its own antique cultural system, engages in precisely the same *modus operandi*.

If one is looking for textual analysis of Gnostic sources, it is found in chapter two. Here, Cahana-Blum works through three examples (traditionalism, gender, and materiality) to show how Gnosticism operates as cultural critique, deconstructing what is assumed “given” or “natural.” Regarding traditionalism, he argues that Gnostic texts show a skeptical attitude toward the authoritative traditions associated with the apostles, a mentality he deems anti-traditionalist. Even when Gnostic texts appear to promote their own authoritative tradition (e.g., the *Apocryphon of John*), he argues that a close reading reveals instead that they undermine the currency of “tradition” altogether. For instance, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* unambiguously mocks and rejects all figures of authority from the time of Adam to the present (essentially “everything that has ever existed” [72]). In short, “the cultural premise of traditionalism was unequivocally rejected” (80) by Gnostics.

We find something similar in the second example (gender); the texts are not concerned with reversing a particular cultural valuation of gender, but rather, with dismantling the category entirely. The analysis looks closely at Gnostic creation stories, which center around the myth of the primordial androgyne that becomes gendered and sexed as part of an evil intervention. Just as Gnostic texts critiqued traditionalism in order to deconstruct the façade that conventional authority was built upon, so also, he suggests, is Gnostic play with androgyny and sexed beings in their myths functioning to “underline how constructed are the normative concepts of gender, and how indeed they can be constructed differently” (87). The reasons they might oppose traditional constructs of authority are self-evident, but why expend so much intellectual energy deconstructing gender? This stems from part of the “core” of Gnostic theology: “the original perfect human, to whose state the Gnostics strive, was neither gendered nor sexed, and gender is the creation of an evil, inferior, and overly masculine god whose purpose is to delude humankind lest they recognize their heavenly origin” (96). In other words, the cosmic stakes in letting gender exist unquestioned could not be higher.

The final example of deconstruction concerns the material world. Scholars have long gone back and forth about how the Gnostics felt about the material world; most have concluded that they regarded it as evil, or at the very least, a significant problem to be overcome. In Cahana-Blum’s interpretation, Gnostic discourse is not about accepting or rejecting the material world. Instead, they questioned the givenness of *any* constructs of reality, asking “who constructed them and for what purpose, and how they function” (105). In all three of these cases—in which Gnostics did not just take a position in a debate, but rather, tried to step outside of the field of the debate altogether—Cahana-Blum likens their approach to modern critical theory: “it is exactly the granted, the given, the natural that is put under review” (105).

Chapter three, an admittedly “experimental” (127) chapter, begins by suggesting that this cultural questioning in Gnostic texts is, in fact, another reason scholars should feel justified in treating Gnosticism as a unified and coherent tradition. Cahana-Blum then works through three case studies to show how elements of Gnosticism are analogous to modern cultural criticisms. He first compares the so-called “culture industry,” as described by Adorno and Horkheimer to the “conspiracy of the archons” (128) in Gnostic texts. In both cases, there is an illusory world in which subjects live; only certain inhabitants can recognize how this system oppresses them. By comparing these two similar cosmological constructs in vastly different settings, we can think more about how such constructs are created and sustained as real and unquestionable—in any cultural context. In the second instance, he compares the Gnostic treatment of nature to the way that modern critical theorists have taken issue

with “the natural.” As some radical feminists have argued, the hegemonic order regularly generates a notion of what is “natural,” which is, in turn, used to authorize certain technologies of the self and social relationships. Feminist scholarship often has its goal to deconstruct “the natural.” This is curiously similar to Gnostic texts, which also concern themselves with what is assumed to be natural. With their playful language of gender and their subversive myths of origins, Gnostics also call into question this given discourse. His final example in this chapter deals with the rhetoric of “the self-evident” and compares the Gnostic approach to this issue with the cultural critic Stuart Hall’s remarks on dismantling the hegemony. Both critical frameworks look to a class of intellectuals who have true knowledge of reality in order to dismantle its illusions.

Chapter four briefly explores two provocative suggestions: that Gnostic ideology lies at the origins of Christianity, and that proto-orthodoxy is an “adaptive reform of Gnosticism” (155). Admittedly a “thought experiment” (155) guided by queer theory, he poses the following question: “Is it possible...to read ancient Gnosticism as the ‘authentic’ and ‘mainstream’ Christianity, and the earliest proponent of orthodoxy as the deviant?” (158). Returning to the topics of gender and traditionalism for reference, he answers in the affirmative. Under this lens, for instance, one would place the Gnostics’ subversive ideas about gender quite early in early Christian discourse. We could understand later thinkers such as Tertullian as working intentionally against the uncomfortable consequences of this subversion. Consider the example of ascetic virginity; Gnostics appealed to virginity/celebrity to subvert their gender (and thus to resist the illusory world), but the proto-orthodox obsession with virginity was reworked so as to avoid the suggestion that gender differences were insignificant. In other words, it is possible to read proto-orthodoxy as a *response* to Gnosticism’s nascent ideas.

If proto-orthodoxy is seen as a corrective to the extreme views promoted in Gnostic texts, as his thought experiment explores, Cahana-Blum notes that there are important avenues of research to explore, namely, “to inquire into the ways it enabled nascent Christianity to simultaneously reduce its tensions with the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, yet also preserve enough of the gnostic subversive spirit; and to evaluate how the resulting amalgam could have allowed this religion to become both a viable as well as an attractive option in the largely disillusioned cultural climate of late antiquity” (163).

We end with a portrait of Gnosticism that, while sharing affinities with modern critical theory, actually looks relatively unique in its antique context. Gnostic texts, in the author’s words, are “distinctive” in antiquity “by their unrelenting endeavor to challenge Greco-Roman discourse through singling out and deconstructing its very *prediscursive* suppositions” (169). While I

generally avoid the claim that academic studies are unique, there are few other monographs to compare this to; in that sense, it is distinct. Its pivoting between the method of critique within ancient Gnostic texts and their ideological counterparts in some forms of contemporary critical theory is rare in scholarship, in part because it is difficult to convince publishers that audiences will want to read it. Indeed, one might initially struggle to identify the audience of such a study. It will resonate most with those trained in the academic study of religion, those who are interested in understanding the discursive mode of religious language and how it constructs, deconstructs, and critiques its own world. Those whose interests are limited to, say, Gnostic christology will likely find this study perplexing.

The greatest payoff for such a study is a “rethinking [of] Christian origins” (4). Indeed, Gnosticism becomes less about a strictly delineated set of theological ideas and more about a strategic manner of negotiating the world. In this sense, this study supports many who argue (correctly, in my view) that religion is not confined to a specifically religious sphere of life in antiquity. Yet, many of scholars of antique religion already agree that religion (if we can even use that term) is simultaneously culture and politics, *inter alia*, in its ancient setting; for this reason, perhaps Cahana-Blum does not need to argue so fervently that Gnosticism is a cultural movement. I suspect that many readers will have no problems treating it as such.

Furthermore, the presence of this salient cultural criticism across the corpus of Gnostic texts lends further support to the continued use of the category of Gnosticism. Cahana-Blum sees an even more far-reaching payoff, though. For him, many of the cultural criticisms that he identifies in ancient Gnosticism support a proposal that “original’ Christianity was Gnostic, while proto-orthodoxy was a result of continuous and gradual attempts to find the ‘middle-way’ between this new religion and surrounding Greco-Roman culture” (4). This will likely be contested by many readers, for the view that Gnosticism is a later ideological movement in antiquity is well entrenched in our field. Even those who rightly resist seeing Gnosticism as a distorted version of “mainstream” Christianity would still resist situating it too early in the landscape of early Christianities.

In addition, there is what we might call a dialectical payoff from this kind of comparative study. In several places, Cahana-Blum acknowledges that if we can use modern critical theory to help us think differently about Gnosticism, then we ought to be able to do the reverse. For instance, examining how metaphors in Gnostic literature serve to dismantle certain ideological constructs illuminates how critical theories of culture often operate with similar techniques. Indeed, we observe that both Gnosticism and critical theory question the premises that structure their respective realities. Gnosticism,

with its fantastic deities, vivid narrative conflicts, and sometimes violent drama, is obviously something *different* than modern cultural theory. It is “culture criticism transcribed mythologically” (144). Importantly, the analysis never tries to make the phenomena identical, only analogous.

There is a perennial question that lurks behind this treatment of Gnosticism (and one could raise the same question with respect to modern critical theory): can a cultural product ever disentangle itself from its own cultural context to achieve an unencumbered critical vantage point on it? Or, is it preferable to treat cultural critiques as *products* of their culture? Can they truly understand the mechanisms that are operating *within* the nexus of processes that we call culture, or is their always an obfuscation, an illusory veil? This raises a further question of where we draw the line among categories like culture, cultural criticism, and religion. It’s not about how reality is correctly delineated (for such correctness is impossible to know), but rather, *what is revealed* by drawing the lines in a certain way as opposed to other ways. For instance, Cahana-Blum treats Gnosticism as somehow apart from the culture that it critiques: “By locating the gnostic stance on these issues [traditionalism, gender, and materiality] over against the predominant Greco-Roman culture of the beginning of our era, I argue that in each case we can see the gnostic myth dismantling...those very cultural premises on which Greco-Roman discourse was based” (65). But why must the Gnostics’ stance be “over against” Greco-Roman culture and not simply a product of it? In other words, it is possible that cultures have a critique *of themselves* built *into themselves*. To what degree is the cultural critique that we identify actually part of the culture it is embedded in? I have a similar concern with the scholarly arguments about early Christian texts being “anti-imperial.” It strikes me that hegemonies and empires are sustained by allowing a certain amount of internal critique, if only to pacify the obfuscated/conquered subjects by giving them a benign outlet. In other words, the discourse that appears to be critical of culture (or anti-imperial) to modern scholars might actually be supporting the ideological infrastructure of the hegemony.

Very few scholars of early Christianity have waded into such complex theoretical issues. *Wrestling with Archons* not only delves into them, but it does so in a compelling manner, always with the comparative interest in view. We need more work like this in the study of ancient religion, lest we forget that ancient religious documents are ordinary ways of expressing human concerns. As Cahana-Blum shows, if we compare the right sort of discourse, we find counterparts to Gnosticism, hitherto thought to be marked by utter strangeness, in unexpected places.



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