CHAPTER FOUR

HANS JONAS AND RESEARCH ON GNOSTICISM FROM A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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The work of the so-called humanities, cultural studies, or social sciences is, as we know, determined by different research strategies. Apart from the work areas as such—in other words, the objects on which the researcher’s attention is focused—it is above all the methodological approaches and the situation concerning sources, in other words the various types of evidence, that strongly influence the progress of research. The concept of the paradigm shift, introduced by Thomas S. Kuhn, can be readily extrapolated to cultural sciences, as often occurs, since there too, the process of advancing appropriation of past and present occurrences depends on certain conscious or mostly unconscious “preconceptions.” The present day in particular shows, often in a fairly dramatic way, how the increasing chronological and spatial expansion of the scientific view is accompanied by increasing reflection on the researcher’s acts of “commission and omission.” One need only recall the question of “ethnocentricities” in these areas.

Historical research in particular, in our case the history of religion, has had to undergo paradigm shifts time and again, often quite late compared with neighboring disciplines. This can readily be demonstrated in the area dealing with ancient gnostics, or Gnosticism (as it is frequently termed in English and French). One challenge is the change in the way questions are formulated in relation to this subject matter.

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in general, while another challenge is posed by the material gained through new discoveries. The material of religious history cannot be controlled or predicted. New discoveries are often the trigger not only for a widening and deepening of the research area, but also for a change in perspective, and even the method in general. This becomes apparent in the example of research on Gnosticism, which became so dominant for Hans Jonas in his early academic endeavors. Aside from the heresiological apologetics of older Christian literature, which has preserved for us some pieces of evidence of the ancient Gnostics but which had a prejudiced attitude toward them, it is the work of the more modern church historiography since the end of the eighteenth and then the nineteenth centuries which initiated not only a pioneering critique of the traditional sources but also showed itself to be more open to the theological concerns of Gnosticism. Representative names include Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, Ferdinand Christian Baur, Richard Adalbert Lipsius, Adolf Hilgenfeld, and Adolf von Harnack. The strangeness of some Gnostic ideas, which can be explained by neither Christian nor Greek traditions, was often attributed to oriental, even Asiatic (e.g., Buddhist) origins, or else people resorted to explanations founded on the old fertile ground of magic. The viewpoint taken was, however, primarily one from the stance of ecclesiastical history or history of dogma. In other words, Gnosticism was a topic of the early history of Christianity; for Harnack, it was the example of an “acute secularization of Christianity.” A change began only around the turn of the century with the emergence of the Göttingen-based “History of Religions School” (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule) which introduced, as above all Wilhelm Bousset did, a religious-historical view of Gnosticism and thus asserted a new “paradigm” of research, which strictly speaking still holds sway to a great extent to this day. The core elements of this view were the following theses:

1. Gnosticism is a topic not only of the so-called early church history, but also of New Testament exegesis.
2. The now expanded bodies of evidence (sources) show an autonomous world which arose before, or at least independently of, Christianity.

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