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Continuity, and the Expansion of Gnostic  
Communities

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# Urbanization, Religious Pluralism, Cultural Continuity, and the Expansion of Gnostic Communities

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## Abstract

Gnosticism has been perceived as a Jewish heresy, a Hellenistic Christian heresy, an Oriental pre-Christian religious movement, an independent religious movement, and an existential response to experiences of alienation. More recently, King has argued that within a pluralistic cultural environment, Gnosticism was an integral part of early Christianity's identity-formation process. But how did this process operate? Expanding Stark's sociological analysis of the diffusion of Christianity, I argue that the diffusion of Gnosticism during the first two centuries of the common era is tied to the existence of population thresholds in larger urban centers, participation in a loosely regulated religious marketplace, and the maintaining of cultural continuity with existing religious movements. Data for twenty-two Greco-Roman cities are subjected to correlation and logistic regression analysis. Findings indicate that the so-called Gnostic communities were more likely to emerge earlier in urban locations where churches were present already and in larger urban centers.

Gnosticism is often portrayed as a second century C.E. heresy, the implication being that there was an existing orthodoxy (or proto-orthodoxy). The “Gnostic heresy” is then associated with such thinkers as Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus and religious groups and movements such as the Sethians, the Cainites, Mandaeism, and Manichaeism. Until the discovery of manuscripts at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and the more recent discovery and publication of the *Gospel of Judas* (Kasser et al. 2006), much of the information about so-called Gnostic groups was obtained from the polemical writings of the early Church Fathers. The writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian are representative. The Gnostic standard narrative includes varying combinations of such themes as secret knowledge (*gnosis*), cosmic dualism, the contrast between spirit and matter, the evil creator God, the redeemed redeemer, the divine spark that has been trapped in the material world, radical asceticism, and the libertine lifestyle.

King (2003) has provided a comprehensive overview of the academic study of Gnosticism by 19th and 20th century scholars. In *What Is Gnosticism?*, she discusses the problems associated with defining Gnosticism and critically evaluates the major classical and contemporary theories of Gnostic origins. Theories that she reviews include the perception of Gnosticism as a Jewish heresy (Friedlander, Pearson); a Hellenistic Christian heresy (Harnack); an Oriental, pre-Christian religious movement (Reitzenstein, Bultmann); an independent religious movement (Bousset); and an existential response to experiences of alienation (Jonas). King concludes that scholarly attempts to identify Gnostic origins and the major tenets of the Gnostic religion have been unsatisfactory.

Writing from an identity-formation perspective, King suggests that Gnosticism is primarily an academic construct and an outcome of early Christian polemics. While Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian were labeling the writings that were associated with Gnostic groups as heretical, Marcion, a so-called Gnostic heretic, established his own “canon.” Heracleon, another Gnostic writer, provided a commentary on both *The Gospel of John* and *The Secret Revelation of John*. Each writing has been attributed to John and was circulated widely among Gnostic groups (King 2003, 2006). At that time, it would have been appropriate to speak of many “Christianities,” as Bauer maintained. This being the case, the orthodoxy versus heresy polemics of the early Church Fathers represent an attempt to address the pluralistic nature of early Christianity by establishing and maintaining theological boundaries. In essence, this would bring order to a chaotic religious environment. King concludes by arguing that within a pluralistic cultural environment, early Christianity’s identity was constantly changing, and the movements labeled “Christian” and “Gnostic” could actually be examples of contemporary religious communities sharing a common worldview.

In trying to understand the dynamics of cultural change, cultural pluralism, and religious identity, King acknowledges that social groups struggle to establish

and maintain their identity. Consequently, the study of ancient cultural pluralism involves understanding the “discourses, processes, and practices by which people make sense of their lives . . . , the governing regimes and institutions that further constrain such practices, and the power relations that are at stake” (2003: 231). It appears that King is calling for a sociological analysis of religious movements within pluralistic environments. Given the paucity of sociological studies on Gnosticism (Layton 1995; Rudolph 1977), what processes would be addressed in a sociological study of the expansion of so-called Gnostic communities during the first two centuries C.E.? Rodney Stark has provided a provocative example.

### *THE DIFFUSION OF GNOSTICISM*

In *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), Stark provides a sociological explanation of the growth of early Christian communities. Writing from a rational-choice perspective and utilizing concepts derived from urban sociology, gender studies, and network analysis, Stark demonstrates how Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire along urban trade networks within a deregulated religious environment. In the chapter “Christianizing the Urban Empire: A Quantitative Approach,” he shows how the expansion of early Christianity might have been influenced by such factors as city size, proximity to Rome and Jerusalem, Roman influence, and cultural continuity with Judaism.

The analysis is based on a dataset that includes the twenty-two largest cities of the Roman Empire around 100 C.E. In addition to Rome, cities from North Africa, Palestine, Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Crete, Spain, Gaul, and Britain are included. A representative cross section of the empire’s cultural diversity during the first two centuries C.E. is thus provided. Correlation and regression analysis reveal that churches were established earlier in cities that were less influenced by Rome and had a synagogue. In other words, social networks and cultural continuity matter. But were similar factors at work in the growth of Gnostic communities?

The strongest statistically significant bivariate correlations are observed between the early presence of a Gnostic community and an early encounter with Christianity and between an early Gnostic presence and city size. Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations that supported a church and in cities that were larger. Additional statistically significant correlations are noted for the early presence of a Gnostic community and proximity to Jerusalem, weaker Roman influence, and early encounters with a synagogue. Again, social networks and cultural contact with other religious groups matter. Selecting Gnosticism, contact with Christianity, and contact with synagogues for regression analysis, Stark demonstrates that the early development of Gnostic communities and that of Christian communities are linked statistically. Consequently, Stark

suggests that these findings provide support for Harnack's claim that Gnosticism emerged as a Christian heresy.

These findings could also suggest that the two religious movements were contemporaneous, as King maintains. Because normative Christian boundaries were not more formally expressed until the latter part of the third century C.E. (cf. Eusebius), Stark's finding could indicate that a high degree of cultural continuity existed between emerging Gnostic and Christian communities. In fact, the early Gnostic communities could be an example of one of the many Christianities that were emerging throughout the empire. Rather than being a deviant form of early Christianity, perhaps the early Gnostic communities were an integral part of the Christian identity-formation process.

Before Stark's findings can be accepted as conclusive, however, several potential weaknesses in his analysis must be addressed. In a review of *The Rise of Christianity*, Bryant (1997) offered a critique of the methodology that Stark employed. Two of Bryant's methodological concerns can be extended to Stark's treatment of the rise of Gnostic communities.

First, Bryant is concerned that ordinal-level variables are treated like interval-level variables and subjected to linear, least squares regression analysis. Ordinarily, linear regression is utilized with interval-level variables (Blalock 1972). The three variables that are affected are Christianization, synagogues, and Gnostics. Each variable is coded by using an ordinal scale on which high values (2 or 1) mean that a church, synagogue, or Gnostic community was present in a particular urban location at an early date. A low value (0) indicates that the religious group was not present by the cutoff date. Because the exact dates when these religious communities emerged in the different cities included in the dataset are unknown, the distinction between early and late might be the most accurate measure available. This distinction allows Stark to specify differences in time, and the case may be made that these religious community variables function like interval-level variables. While researchers routinely utilize dummy variables in linear, least squares analysis, many of the methodological reservations can be resolved if logistic regression is employed (George and Mallery 2003). The primary restriction would be that the dependent variable would need to be dichotomous. Stark's Gnostics variable can easily be transformed from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional ordinal scale.

The second objection involves the city size variable. First century C.E. population estimates for the twenty-two cities included in the urban dataset range from 30,000 (Athens) to 650,000 (Rome). Yet Bryant argues that Stark fails to include midsize and smaller cities. Unfortunately, Bryant does not provide a standard for determining midsize and smaller cities. Closer examination reveals that Stark's dataset does include clusters of cities of small, medium, and large size. For instance, six cities have an estimated population in the 120,000–650,000

range, while eight cities are in the 75,000–100,000 range, and another eight are in the 30,000–45,000 range. Bryant's objections can be addressed by recoding city size as an ordinal-level variable (0 = 30,000–45,000, 1 = 75,000–100,000, and 2 = 120,000–650,000).

In an attempt to validate Stark's findings, I reanalyze the urban dataset on the basis of these modifications. Also, I add a variable on the establishing of an Isis temple to test the Reitzenstein-Bultmann Oriental contact hypothesis, and since King (2003) maintains that Christianity's identity-formation process took place within a culturally pluralistic environment, I create a religious pluralism measure. Thus, how might urbanization, religious pluralism, and cultural contact (continuity) with religious groups affect the diffusion of Gnosticism during the first two centuries C.E.?

#### *URBAN NETWORKS, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY*

In a classic sociological study on the nature of urban life, Wirth (1938) argued that size, density, and heterogeneity are three primary characteristics of urban environments. Larger cities tend to attract people from diverse cultural backgrounds and are able to provide more specialized services. Nolan and Lenski (2004) maintain that in advanced agrarian societies, cities were the center of political, commercial, religious, and cultural life. These urban centers included a diverse population composed of a governing class (landowners), merchants, religious leaders, artisans, and peasants. Urban growth and expansion were dominant characteristics of the Roman Empire during the first two centuries C.E. Transportation networks (roads and shipping routes) extended from Britain to India; and Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome (each included in the urban dataset) were major reshipment centers (Koester 1982). The Roman cities were centers of trade and industry, which attracted merchants and artisans. Given the availability of extensive trade routes and a high degree of mobility among artisans and merchants, numerous opportunities for cultural diffusion were created. These opportunities included contact with different religious groups (Meeks 1983).

Since urban markets are able to support more specialized social and cultural tastes and preferences, large urban centers would be able to provide the minimum number of customers (in terms of threshold and critical mass) needed to support specialized products such as new religious movements (Getis, Getis, and Fellmann 2004). Also, since city size and conventionality vary inversely (Fischer 1975), larger cities should be able to support a more diverse religious market. Furthermore, the growth of social (and religious) movements is tied to a group's ability to establish a network of cosmopolitan ties (Stark 2004). Given a highly mobile merchant class involved in long-distance trade relationships, information

about various new and different religious groups could be spread through an extensive cosmopolitan network of nonredundant ties. Since larger cities are able to provide the population thresholds needed to offer specialized products, to support higher degrees of cultural heterogeneity, and to provide opportunities for establishing cosmopolitan growth networks, the following hypothesis is generated:

*Hypothesis 1:* Gnostic communities emerged earlier in larger cities.

The impact of religious diversity on religious participation has been debated among sociologists of religion, and a paradigm shift is taking place (Warner 1993, 2002). According to the old paradigm, represented by Durkheim (1912 [1995]) and Roof (1978), religious homogeneity enhances social stability, while religious pluralism undermines it. Religious participation rates are higher in local settings where a common set of cultural traditions prevail. The new paradigm stresses the positive benefits of market competition. Disestablishment (deregulation) is associated with an open, free market. Religious pluralism stimulates market competition and religious participation (Stark and Finke 2000, 2002). Since the costs of and barriers to participation in these markets are low, religious markets become more culturally diverse and competitive (Warner 2002).

In developing a theoretical model of religious economies, Stark and Finke (2000, 2002) maintain that religious economies provide niches that satisfy consumer demand (preferences, tastes) for religious products. This demand is relatively stable, and to the extent to which the religious market is a deregulated, free market, religious suppliers compete to offer an array of services. A greater range of choices enhances market penetration, and new products (religious firms) will continue to emerge until the market reaches a saturation point (ceiling effect). Deregulation (disestablishment), pluralism, competition, and diversity are interrelated, and unless state support is provided, religious firms are unable to monopolize the market.

The Roman Empire was characterized by a high degree of religious pluralism and cultural hybridity (King 2003; Koester 1982). The Imperial Cult was tacitly supported,<sup>1</sup> and new religious groups could experience persecution, especially in Rome. However, different religious groups were generally tolerated throughout the empire. Judaism, Christianity, mystery religions, Mithraism, Pathagoreanism, Hermetic religion, astrology, magic, and Gnosticism coexisted (Koester 1982). In

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<sup>1</sup> Beard, North, and Price (1998) argue that the Imperial Cult never existed as an ideal type. The worship of the emperor appears to have been a common practice, but local and provincial-level variations in form and structure were substantial. While emperor worship was more mandatory in Rome and in the western parts of the empire, participation was more voluntary in the eastern regions.

38 C.E., Caligula recognized the Isis cult in Rome; and during the latter half of the first century C.E., Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian tolerated Isis worship (Takacs 1995). Support for the traditional Greek and Roman religions continued throughout the Roman Empire during the first two centuries C.E. Surviving Latin inscriptions indicate that Aesculapius, Liber, and Venus were venerated in North Africa, while support for Diana, Fortuna, and Hercules was evident in Rome and Italy. The worship of Apollo, Cybele, and Mercury was recognized in Gaul and Germany, and the veneration of Jupiter Dolichenus and Mithra-Sol was evident in the North-Central Provinces. The worship of Mars was more prominent in North Africa, Gaul, and Germany. Silvanus was recognized in Rome, Italy, and the North-Central Provinces (MacMullen 1981)

In many respects, the religious marketplace throughout the Roman provinces was loosely regulated. Religious groups were generally tolerated as long as Rome's authority was not threatened. Individuals could support the Imperial Cult and maintain their primary allegiance to other religious traditions (Koester 1982). Many religious groups were allowed to carve a niche as long as Rome's authority was not compromised, and these religious groups commanded a small market share. This pattern of religious control seemed to maintain social stability as Rome's emphasis shifted from conquering more territories to the integration of diverse populations throughout the empire (Beard, North, and Price 1998).

Stark (2001) maintains that religious pluralism persists within monopoly environments as long as competing religious groups are not perceived as threatening the monopoly's control of the marketplace. Because the Roman religious economy was loosely regulated during the first two centuries C.E., this environment favored Gnosticism's expansion during the second century C.E. However, the climate changed by the middle of the third century C.E. as the market share of certain religious groups, such as Christianity, grew. More formal attempts to regulate the Roman religious economy prevailed. By 249–250 C.E., Decius had ruled that sacrifice to the traditional gods would be mandatory, and by 303 C.E., Diocletian had declared Christian worship illegal (Beard, North, and Price 1998). It appears that by the beginning of the fourth century C.E., the conflict between polytheism and monotheism was coming to a head (Kirsch 2004). Stark (2001) argues that when exclusive religious groups (such as Christianity) begin to challenge nonexclusive religions (such as Greek and Roman traditional religion), exclusive groups prevail. Christianity eventually prevailed. During the third through fifth centuries C.E., the Roman religious economy became more and more regulated as Christianity gained strength and the Imperial Cult and the Greek and Roman traditional religions increasingly lost ground. However, it appears that during Gnosticism's formative period, the religious marketplace was loosely regulated. The Roman tolerance for different religious traditions suggests that the start-up costs for new religious movements were low



and that the religious market was not saturated. New religious products could be offered to meet unmet demand. Given this religious market environment, the following hypothesis is offered:

*Hypothesis 2:* Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations that were characterized by a higher degree of religious pluralism.

A religious pluralism index will be constructed to test this hypothesis (see Table 1 below). Cultural practices, knowledge, and technology tend to be shared among social groups. This process of borrowing and sharing is known as *cultural diffusion* (Haviland 2002). As groups borrow and share cultural phenomena, cultural continuity is established. Three primary patterns of cultural diffusion are relocation diffusion, hierarchical diffusion, and contagion diffusion (Getis, Getis, and Fellmann 2004). Relocation diffusion is linked to the migration process. As people move into and out of areas, they bring and share knowledge, technology, and cultural practices. With hierarchical diffusion, innovations may spread from larger population centers to smaller population centers, whereas geographic proximity is the key with contagion diffusion, as cultural practices spread to adjacent areas on the basis of contact. At any particular time, an area may be exposed to many different innovations through relocation, hierarchical, and contagion diffusion, and the borrowing and sharing of cultural practices will persist until a “limits to growth” point is reached (Getis, Getis, and Fellmann 2004). Drawing on Saussure’s work in linguistics (Fowler 1974), it appears that the diffusion process possesses synchronic and diachronic dimensions; in other words, the diffusion process is simultaneous and continuous. How might these insights be applied to the diffusion of Gnosticism during the first two centuries C.E.?

To the extent to which the Roman religious economy was loosely regulated and travel among merchants within a well-defined urban network was extensive, urban centers were exposed to a variety of religious practices at any given time (synchronic focus). Since the exposure to a plurality of religious ideas can be maintained until the marketplace for new religious expressions is saturated, multiple religious contacts and extensive networks of cultural continuity can be established and maintained over time (diachronic focus). Here, chronology is not used to identify a phenomenon’s beginning (origin) or ending point (mature state). Rather, chronology is an indicator of cultural continuity, the maintaining of cultural contact over time. Thus, in any given urban location at any one point in time, Gnostic communities could coexist and interact with other religious communities. Some of these communities could be closely related. This cultural contact (continuity) would persist as long as the Roman religious economy essentially functioned as a free market economy.

Familiarity and contact with other religious groups are key components of the cultural continuity argument. Stark (1996) argues that people are more likely to participate in a new religious movement if the movement maintains cultural continuity with known religious groups. This principle is modified in the following manner: *New religious movements are more likely to emerge earlier in areas where cultural contact with existing religious groups occurs.* Gnosticism's cultural continuity (contact) with Judaism, Christianity, and Oriental religion (the Isis cult) is tested through the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3:* Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations where a synagogue was already present.

*Hypothesis 4:* Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations where a church was already present.

*Hypothesis 5:* Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations where an Isis temple was already present.

The five hypotheses propose that Gnostic communities emerged earlier in larger urban locations that were characterized by a higher degree of religious pluralism and in urban locations where cultural continuity with existing religious traditions was established. To test these hypotheses, Stark's (1996) twenty-two-city urban dataset is modified, and several new variables are introduced.

#### *THE REVISED DATASET*

In the present analysis, city size, religious pluralism, and prior presence of a synagogue, church, or temple to Isis are treated as independent variables affecting the early emergence of Gnostic communities, the dependent variable. The study variables are operationalized (measured) in the following manner.

The city size variable is transformed from an interval-level variable to a three-dimensional ordinal-level variable to address Bryant's concerns about Stark's failure to distinguish between large, medium, and small cities. Large cities (120,000–650,000) are assigned the score of 3, midsize cities (75,000–100,000) are assigned the score of 2, and small cities (30,000–45,000) are scored 1. Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Apamea, and Pergamum make up the large city group; Sardis, Corinth, Gadir, Memphis, Carthage, Edessa, Syracuse, and Smyrna make up the midsize group. Smaller cities include Caesarea Maritima, Damascus, Cordova, Mediolanum, Augustodunum, London, Salamis, and Athens.

**Table 1: Construction of Religious Pluralism Index**

City	Religious Organization			Religious Pluralism Index Score
	Synagogue*	Church <sup>†</sup>	Temple <sup>‡</sup>	
Rome	+	+	+	3
Alexandria	+	+	+	3
Ephesus	+	+	+	3
Antioch	+	+	+	3
Apamea	–	+	–	1
Pergamum	–	+	+	2
Sardis	+	+	–	2
Corinth	+	+	+	3
Gadir	–	–	–	0
Memphis	–	+	+	2
Carthage	–	+	+	2
Edessa	–	+	–	1
Syracuse	–	+	+	2
Smyrna	–	+	+	2
Caesarea Maritima	+	+	+	3
Damascus	+	+	–	2
Cordova	–	+	–	1
Mediolanum	–	–	–	0
Augustodunum	–	–	–	0
London	–	–	+	1
Salamis	–	+	+	2
Athens	+	+	+	3

\*A “+” is assigned if a synagogue was present by 100 C.E.

<sup>†</sup>A “+” is assigned if a church was established by 200 C.E.

<sup>‡</sup>A “+” is assigned if an Isis temple existed by 200 C.E. Because reliable data were unavailable for Sardis, Cordova, and Augustodunum (Bricault 2001), it is assumed that no temple to Isis had been established in any of these locations by 200 C.E.

Source: Stark (1996).

Stark (1996) provides data on the presence of synagogues, churches, and temples to Isis, but he fails to develop a religious pluralism index. The construction of the pluralism index is portrayed in Table 1. An urban center is identified as supporting a Jewish community if a synagogue (+) was present by 100 C.E. Christianity is supported if a church (+) was established by 200 C.E., and support for the Isis cult (Bricault 2001) is recorded if a temple to Isis (+) was known to exist by 200 C.E. (Data for establishment of a synagogue by 200 C.E. were not available.) The index may be treated as either an interval-level or an ordinal-level variable and serves as a rough estimate of religious pluralism. Scores range from 0 to 3, with 0 signifying that none of the three religious groups was present in that particular urban location by the specified termination date. A 3 indicates that all of the religious groups were present.

While Stark provides data on the establishing of a synagogue, church, and temple to Isis, the church and Isis temple variables are slightly modified so that they may function as indicators of cultural continuity. Because 200 C.E. is used as the date for identifying the emergence of a Gnostic community, 100 C.E. is used as the cutoff date for establishing the presence of a synagogue, church, or Isis temple in a given urban location. The hundred-year lag period allows time for familiarity and contact with a known religious group to take place. Cities with a synagogue, church, or Isis temple by 100 C.E. were scored 1. Cities that lacked these religious organizations by this time were scored 0. Urban locations with a synagogue by 100 C.E. were Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Sardis, Corinth, Caesarea Maritima, Damascus, and Athens. Cities with a church by this time were Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Pergamum, Sardis, Corinth, Smyrna, Caesarea Maritima, Damascus, Salamis, and Athens. Temples to Isis were established in Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Pergamum, Corinth, Memphis, Syracuse, Smyrna, Caesarea Maritima, Salamis and Athens by 100 C.E.

The dependent variable is expansion of Gnostic communities. In constructing this variable, Stark (1996) relies on locations identified by Layton (1987). The variable was originally coded as a three-level ordinal variable. However, one of Bryant's (1997) objections to Stark's original analysis involves the use of an ordinal-level variable as the dependent variable in linear regression analysis. This objection is addressed by employing logistic regression. Ordinal variables may be utilized as the dependent variable in logistic regression analysis, but the dependent variable must be dichotomous (George and Mallery 2003). Distinguishing Gnostic communities that were established earlier from those that were established later or not at all creates a dichotomous ordinal-level variable. Urban locations in which a Gnostic community was present by 200 C.E. are included in the early category and given a score of 1. The remaining cities are included in the later category and given a score of 0. Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus,

Antioch, Pergamum, Sardis, Carthage, Smyrna, and Caesarea Maritima are included in the early category.

Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis and logistic regression are employed to evaluate the hypotheses generated and identify statistically significant patterns in the data. These analytical techniques are appropriate when ordinal-level and interval-level measures are being evaluated (Blalock 1972; George and Mallery 2003). With the switch to logistic regression analysis, the emphasis shifts to determining factors that increase the odds or probability that a Gnostic community was established earlier in a particular urban location. The relationship between Gnosticism and the study variables can be expressed as

$$\ln \frac{\text{prob. (early Gnostic)}}{\text{prob. (later Gnostic)}} = B_0 + B_1 (\text{Csize}) + B_2 (\text{RPI}) + B_3 (\text{Synag}) + B_4 (\text{Ch}) + B_5 (\text{Isis})$$

The log odds of a Gnostic community emerging by 200 C.E. in a particular urban location is a function of a constant ( $B_0$ ) plus the weighted average of city size, degree of religious pluralism, and earlier presence of a synagogue, church, or temple to Isis. The findings of the correlation and logistic regression analysis are presented below.

### *NEW FINDINGS*

The raw data for the variables included in the revised Greco-Roman urban dataset are displayed in Appendix A. Data for each of the twenty-two urban locations are included. Valid responses for Gnosticism and the five study variables are recorded for each case.

Bivariate rank-order correlations for Gnosticism and the study variables are presented in Table 2. Statistically significant bivariate associations exist between Gnosticism and each of the independent variables except earlier presence of an Isis temple. The strongest associations exist between Gnosticism and presence of a church ( $r = .574$ ;  $p = .01$ ), religious pluralism ( $r = .568$ ;  $p = .01$ ), and city size ( $r = .562$ ;  $p = .01$ ). A weaker association is observed for Gnosticism and presence of a synagogue ( $r = .436$ ;  $p = .05$ ). These findings suggest that Gnostic communities emerged earlier in larger urban locations that were characterized by a higher degree of religious pluralism and in urban locations where Gnostic groups were able to establish cultural continuity with Christian groups and, to a lesser extent, Jewish groups. The correlation analysis provides preliminary support for each of the hypotheses except the Isis hypothesis. The strong bivariate correlations between the religious pluralism index and synagogue, church, and Isis temple are expected, since each religious group is represented in the index.

These strong item-to-scale correlations imply that the religious pluralism index is characterized by a high degree of internal consistency (Green, Salkind, and Akey 2000).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2: Spearman's Rank-Order Correlations with Gnostic Expansion and Study Variables**

Variable	Gnostic Expansion	City Size	RPI	Synagogue	Church
City size	.562**				
RPI	.568**	.381			
Synagogue	.436*	.212	.751**		
Church	.574**	.241	.778**	.760**	
Isis temple	.388	.356	.778*	.388	.633**

\*  $p = .05$ ; \*\*  $p = .01$ .

Source: Stark (1996); new variables modified and created by author (see Appendix A).

While the correlation analysis does identify important, statistically significant associations with Gnosticism, neither the collective impact of the study variables on the early emergence of Gnosticism nor the net independent effect of each study variable on Gnosticism has been determined. In addressing these issues, the attention shifts to the findings of the logistic regression analysis, a multivariate statistical technique. The results of the logistic regression analysis are displayed in Table 3. A Wald forward entry procedure was employed to analyze these data. The criteria for variable entry was  $p = .05$ , and the criteria for exit was  $p = .10$ . The final logistic regression model identifies early church presence and city size as statistically significant correlates of Gnosticism. The variables that are included in the final model significantly affect ( $\chi^2$  [2 degrees of freedom] = 14.137;  $p = .0009$ ) the early emergence of "Gnostic" communities, and a  $-2$  log likelihood value (15.630) and a goodness-of-fit value (17.642) close to zero indicate that the model is stable. Early church presence and city size account for approximately 47% (Cox & Snell  $R^2 = .474$ ) to 64% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .639$ ) of the variation in Gnosticism. The final logistic regression model correctly places the predicted values for Gnosticism 86% of the time.

<sup>2</sup> A rough approximate of the religious pluralism index was tested also. The data for synagogue, church, and Isis temple were treated as three items composing a religious pluralism scale. The items were subjected to reliability analysis. This rough approximation of the religious pluralism index was characterized by a high degree of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Table 3: Logistic Regression of Study Variables on Gnostic Expansion**

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b>Wald</b>	<b>Significance</b>	<b><i>R</i></b>
Church	3.145	4.488	.034	.289
City size	1.921	4.194	.041	.272
Constant	-6.034	6.357	.012	

Cox and Snell  $R^2 = .474$ .

Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .639$ .

Source: Stark (1996); new variables modified and created by author (see Appendix A).

Furthermore, the logistic regression analysis suggests that Gnostic communities were more than three times ( $B = 3.145$ ) as likely to be established by 200 C.E. in urban locations where churches were present by 100 C.E. The Wald test indicates that the odds ratio ( $B$ ) for early church presence is statistically significant ( $p = .034$ ), and the impact of early church presence on the early emergence of Gnostic communities independent of city size and the constant factor is modest ( $R = .289$ ). Likewise, Gnostic communities were almost twice ( $B = 1.921$ ) as likely to be established earlier in larger urban locations. Again, the Wald test reveals that the odds ratio ( $B$ ) for city size is statistically significant ( $p = .041$ ). The impact of city size on early emergence of Gnostic communities independent of early church presence and the constant factor is also modest ( $R = .272$ ). These findings support the first and fourth hypotheses. Gnostic communities emerged earlier in urban locations where churches were already present and in larger urban centers. Cultural continuity and critical mass thresholds matter.

### *CONCLUSION*

It appears that the diffusion of Gnosticism and Christianity throughout the Roman Empire is intertwined and that Stark's earlier findings are supported. This finding does not mean that Gnosticism emerged as a Hellenistic Christian heresy, as Harnack thought. As was noted earlier, King (2003) maintains that previous researchers were sidetracked by focusing on religious origins, pure religious forms, and unified religious social structures. Focusing on the process of identity formation, King suggests that Christianity and the so-called Gnostic movement represent neighboring discourses that share a common worldview. In other words, the Gnostic movement may be best understood as an aspect of the Christian identity-formation process. King's point is well taken, given the fact that the Christian canon was not formalized until the late fourth to early fifth century C.E.

(Gonzalez 1970). She also suggests that cultural pluralism and cultural change affect the identity-formation process. Several insights may be gained from the present study.

First, cultural diffusion takes place simultaneously (synchronic dimension) and over time (diachronic dimension). In a loosely regulated religious environment, such as the Roman religious economy, extensive borrowing and sharing of religious ideas took place. Since trade and travel among the major Roman market centers were extensive, the opportunity for cultural contact (diffusion) was high. Given that people tend to affiliate with religious movements that maintain cultural continuity with religious groups that are already known (Stark 1996), it is not surprising that the Gnostic communities arose where Christian communities were also present. To the extent that the diffusion process underscores the cultural continuity between the two movements, the two groups may be participating in the same identity-formation process, since the religious identity of neither group was firmly established by 200 C.E.

Second, in many respects, the polemical writings of the period represent attempts to establish a sense of common identity, order, and control in a pluralistic religious environment. The terms *orthodox* and *heretical* become cultural identifiers and boundary maintenance mechanisms. In his classic study on the nature of prejudice, Allport (1958) suggests that prejudice becomes more pronounced when contact between unequal groups takes place in a competitive environment. Since it appears that Christian identity was not well formed by the end of the second century and Gnostic and Christian groups emerged in similar urban locations, cultural contact (cultural continuity) among these competing religious movements was high. Heresy charges within a social and cultural identity-formation process may therefore function as expressions of prejudice, discrimination, and boundary maintenance.

Third, the strong correlation between Christianity and Gnosticism suggests that the diffusion of these religious movements throughout the Roman Empire might be an example of parallel evolution. Parallel evolution involves similar adaptation to a similar environment by individuals or groups that have a similar cultural background (Haviland 2002). This development also reinforces Stark's cultural continuity argument and gives further credence to the perspective that Gnostic communities were an example of one of the many Christianities that were emerging at the time.

Finally, urban environments tend to be highly competitive, but why is this the case? Some estimates place the Roman Empire's urban population at 5 million people by 200 C.E. (Gottdiener and Hutchison 2000). As was noted earlier, the cities were centers of political and cultural activity, and the trade network spread from Rome to India. On the basis of the characteristics of the urban revolution outlined by Childe (1950), it appears that the Roman Empire had experienced an



urban revolution by 200 C.E. Several large, densely populated cities are included in the dataset, and a specialized labor force, a high degree of social stratification, complex cultural development, and extensive trade routes characterized these locations. Many of these cities were large enough to provide the population thresholds necessary to support a diverse local religious marketplace, and the long-distance trade networks that linked the major urban centers provided ample opportunity for the diffusion of different religious products.

Likewise, Wirth (1938) maintained that larger urban centers promote diversity (heterogeneity) and specialization and that increasing population density enhances competition. Under these conditions, it would be reasonable to assume that larger urban centers would be more tolerant of different religious traditions and would be able to maintain a competitive, free-market environment. The parallels to the major tenets of Stark and Finke's religious economy perspective are striking. The Roman religious economy was loosely regulated, and unmet religious demand was present, as many religious groups were able to flourish in the urban religious markets. Consequently, Gnostic communities were able to emerge earlier in the Roman Empire's larger, urban-based religious markets. Entry costs were low, and demand for religious products was high.

It appears that Gnosticism's growth during the first two centuries C.E. was linked to the movement's ability to maintain cultural continuity with familiar religious traditions and to the presence of receptive populations (thresholds) in the empire's larger cities. Furthermore, since the Christian canon was not established at this time and a consensus on Christian orthodoxy had not been reached, the findings of the present study suggest that within the identity-formation context, Christian and Gnostic communities might have been close cousins rather than distant strangers. Thus, the expansion of Gnosticism and Christianity during the first two centuries C.E. can best be considered an example of parallel evolution in the development of social movement ideologies.

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**Appendix A: Raw Data for Variables That Make Up the Revised Urban Center Dataset**

<b>City</b>	<b>Gnostic Expansion</b>	<b>City Size, 100 C.E.</b>	<b>Religious Pluralism Index</b>	<b>Synagogue</b>	<b>Church</b>	<b>Isis Temple</b>
Rome	1	3	3	1	1	1
Alexandria	1	3	3	1	1	1
Ephesus	1	3	3	1	1	1
Antioch	1	3	3	1	1	1
Apamea	0	3	1	0	0	0
Pergamum	1	3	2	0	1	1
Sardis	1	2	2	1	1	0
Corinth	0	2	3	1	1	1
Gadir	0	2	0	0	0	0
Memphis	0	2	2	0	0	1
Carthage	1	2	2	0	0	0
Edessa	0	2	1	0	0	0
Syracuse	0	2	2	0	0	1
Smyrna	1	2	2	0	1	1
Caesarea Maritima	1	1	3	1	1	1
Damascus	0	1	2	1	1	0
Cordova	0	1	1	0	0	0
Mediolanum	0	1	0	0	0	0
Augustodunum	0	1	0	0	0	0
London	0	1	1	0	0	0
Salamis	0	1	2	0	1	1
Athens	0	1	3	1	1	1

Source: Stark (1996); new variables modified and created by author.