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Preface

This volume contains contributions to a seminar on ‘The Rise of the Christian Intellectual,’ and perhaps I was not only asked by the editors to write a preface because I took part in the meeting in 2016, but also because I wrote some years ago an article about ‘Intellectuals and Church Fathers.’ At that time I admittedly did not discuss groups of people *in Rome* during the early imperial period, but rather in the *Holy Land* during the third and fourth centuries.¹ Nevertheless, a simple repetition of my comments from that time would be unwarranted, not only for the reason that their focus was on late antiquity and the East of the Roman Empire. Moreover, it seems to me now, when I reread my remarks from that time, which were only belatedly published, that I had only just begun to identify the problem of the use of the term ‘intellectual’ in a history of ancient Christianity. I must therefore return to my comments at that time and develop them in more detail.

At that time I said that the concept of Christianity as a religion characterised by ‘intellectuals’ can be traced back in the German case—as Hans Georg Kippenberg has shown²—ultimately to Max Weber, who, in around 1909, was probably the first scholar to attribute a certain role to the social class of intellectuals in the formation of the “new religion.” In defining this role and this social class, Weber used the term “intellectual,” which at the time was quite new. The term “intellectual” itself appears to have originated in France (to be precise, during the time of the Dreyfus affair) and was used for some time merely in a pejorative—or, at the

1 C. Markschies, “Intellectuals and Church Fathers in the Third and Fourth Centuries,” in *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, ed. O. Limor and G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 239–56. I’ve finished the manuscript at the end of the year 1999.

2 H.G. Kippenberg, “Intellektuellen-Religion,” in *Die Religion von Oberschichten: Religion—Profession—Intellektualismus*, ed. P. Antes and D. Pahnke (Marburg: Diagonal, 1989), 181–202. Contrary to the German case “Intellectual” in its original French conception is a deeply political concept (cf. P. Ory and J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les intellectuels en France de l’affaire Dreyfus nos jours* (Paris: Colin, 1986): “it designates the well-educated author and thinker who is outside the government and of threatened delegitimation. Weber ‘germanised’ the concept by neutering its political content. Instead, he ‘hegelianizes’ it: the intellectuals form part of the world historical process by which, independently of their own personal intentions, the gradual rationalization of the world spirit is pushed onwards” (Glen W. Most, in a letter, 10.9.2016).

very best, ambivalent—sense.³ In contrast, Weber’s definition has recognizably positive connotations and is limited to the description of function: the “intellectual” is, according to Weber, responsible for the rationalization and systematization of the theory and practice of life conduct.⁴ The intellectual, according to Weber, sees the world as a meaningful cosmos and fashions his own account of that cosmos.⁵ With his ideas, the intellectual develops new views of the world, which Weber apostrophizes as “*Weichensteller*”—that is, “points men” on a railway line.⁶ So far, so good. This concept of “intellectual”, which is functional and concentrated on “rationalization,” is entirely suitable for examining particular traits of ancient Christian thought on the topic of religion in the imperial period, as well as for describing more precisely groups of early imperial philosophers.

Yet the use of the term “intellectual” as developed by Weber is by no means unproblematic, at least for the purposes of analyzing early Christianity—and this problem was unfortunately only partially clear to me around twenty years ago. What are the potential problems here? *First*, it seems to me that Weber himself would not have apostrophized many of the people whom will be mentioned in this volume as “intellectuals” in the strict sense of the word. For Weber, ancient Christianity was essentially anti-intellectual and petty bourgeois,⁷ and we will shortly see why. Accordingly he speaks (for example, in the case of Paul) of “petty-bourgeois intellectualism” and claims that Paul’s works represent “logical fantasy” (instead of logically correct reasoning).⁸ According to Weber, this form

3 D. Bering, *Die Intellektuellen: Geschichte eines Schimpfwortes* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1982), 32–67.

4 R.M. Lepsius, “Über die Institutionalisierung von Kriterien der Rationalität und die Rolle der Intellektuellen,” in *ibid.*, *Interessen, Ideen und Institutionen*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009), 44–52.

5 M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlaß*, Teilbd. 2: *Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, ed. H.G. Kippenberg, Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe I/22–2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 266–290, esp. G. Hübinger, “Intellektuelle, Intellektualismus,” in *Max Webers ‚Religionssystematik‘*, ed. H.G. Kippenberg and M. Riesebrodt (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 297–314 and Peter Ghosh: *Max Weber in Context: Essays in the History of German Ideas c. 1870–1930* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 197–249 (Chapter 5: “Max Weber and the literati”).

6 M. Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften und Reden 1915–1920*, ed. H. Schmidt-Glintzer, Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe I/19 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 101.

7 M. Weber, Letter to Elisabeth Knauck-Kühne, 15.07.1909, in *ibid.*, *Briefe 1909–1910*, ed. M.R. Lepsius and W.J. Mommsen, Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe II/6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 176–8.

8 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 280.

of “petty-bourgeois intellectualism” continued “in the charismatic teachers (διδάσκαλοι).”⁹ Admittedly, at this point Weber only mentions the Epistle to the Hebrews and refers (without footnotes and in a summary fashion) to Harnack’s interpretation of this now-canonical epistle. But his definition of course also is also relevant to particular kinds of Christian teachers in the second century. Nevertheless, Weber also seems to assume some development of less restricted forms of “intellectualism” in this century when he speaks of “the intellectualism of the apologists.” That “intellectualism of the apologists” is somehow greater than and different from the “petty-bourgeois intellectualism” of Paul. Weber does not, however, precisely describe this step from one degree of intellectualism to the other. In any case, however, Weber argues that the apologists were not “intellectuals” in the full sense of the word. He thought of ancient Christianity as a “religion of redemption”¹⁰ and as such, it is and will remain for him in its core anti-intellectual, especially as represented by the apologists, because here “the way to salvation does not [lead] via trained knowledge.”¹¹ Weber’s reasoning produces the converse argument: unlike the apologists, ancient Gnostics were “intellectuals” to a much greater extent and in a much more comprehensive fashion. Weber first speaks of “intellectuals” in the full sense of the word, necessarily distanced from the church and from Christianity, only when he turns to the European middle ages—and then of course in view of the modern transformation of Christianity and finally, in particular, in view of his own era.¹² He would presumably have considered the topic of this volume, Christian theologians of the imperial period, an “intellectual collapse” into inherently anti-intellectual Christianity.¹³

A *second* problem with following Max Weber in using the term “intellectuals” is that he adopted a view of imperial Christian theology of the second century that primarily originated from the German religious-historical school and that few people hold today. This is entirely evident when you look at his view of so-called Gnosticism. Weber refers to the Gnostics, as we have seen, very much as “intellectuals” of the second century but he does not especially consider them a characteristic group within ancient Christianity. In this sense, his view fundamentally differs from Harnack, who famously understood the “Gnostics” as

9 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 281.

10 E. Hanke, “Erlösungsreligionen,” in *Max Webers ‚Religionssystematik‘*, 209–26.

11 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 282.

12 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 283–6.

13 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 283.

the first *Christian* theologians.¹⁴ In contrast, “Gnosticism” for Weber constituted in its core (as it does in the definition of Messina 1966¹⁵) a form of religion and a way of thinking about religion that are strictly divorced from Christianity.¹⁶ Thus we consider our second problem now somewhat more precisely: Weber’s understanding of ancient Gnosticism has very little to do with the understanding of the phenomenon that has been established in recent years, not only by David Brakke, Karen King or Michael Allen Williams.¹⁷ By this I mean not only Weber’s firm support of an understanding of Gnosticism as being conceived in its origins as non-Christian (and therefore also not Jewish), which stands in contrast to today’s common re-contextualisation of the relevant actors in a history of ancient Judaism and Christianity. These days we perceive as problematic Weber’s view that there exists in Gnosticism a strong separation between a magical religion on the one hand and the intellectual search for meaning on the other.¹⁸ In view of Weber’s conceptual framework one can, for example, only concur with Irenaeus and consider, for example, the Valentinian Gnostic Marcus Magus to be a particularly anti-intellectual charlatan, but given his framework one cannot describe him as genuinely engaging in “intellectual” consideration of religion and ancient rationalization *sui generis*.¹⁹ Ultimately today we cannot assert the

14 C. Markschie, *Christian Theology and its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology*, transl. by W. Coppins (Waco, TX: Baylor / Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 5–20.

15 “Final Document,” in *The Origins of Gnosticism / Le origini dello gnosticismo: Colloquium of Messina, 13–18 April 1966. Texts and Discussions*, ed. H. Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1970), XXVI–XXIX.

16 H.G. Kippenberg, “Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus,” in *Numen* 17 (1970): 211–31; *ibid.*, “Intellektualismus und antike Gnosis,” in *Max Webers Studie über das antike Judentum. Interpretation und Kritik*, ed. W. Schluchter (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 201–18.—I will deal with those matters in greater length in a larger book on Gnosticism, which will appear in German language with Beck, Munich 2020, in English translation later. The presuppositions of Weber’s image (Bousset, Reitzenstein and Troeltsch) are highlighted in Kippenberg, “Intellektuellen-Religion,” 205.

17 D. Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press, 2010); K.L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press, 2003); C. Markschie, *Gnosis. An Introduction*, transl. by J. Bowden (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2003); M.A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

18 C. Markschie, Heilige Texte als magische Texte, in *Heilige Texte: Religion und Rationalität*, ed. A. Kablitz and C. Markschie (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2013), 105–20.

19 N. Förster, *Marcus Magus: Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergruppe. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); concerning so called “Valentinian Gnosticism” cf. now Valentinianism: New Studies, ed. C. Markschie and E. Thomassen (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

existence of the strong cleft that Weber described between Gnostic formation of systems on the one hand and the church's formation of teaching practices on the other: "dogma formation", which, for him, "portrays self-assertion against intellectualism in all its forms, is characteristic of Christianity itself."²⁰

In view of these clear differences between the religious-historical understanding of ancient Christianity and ancient Gnosticism (I assume here that one may speak of such a phenomenon *faute de mieux*), that Weber assumed and the understanding subscribed to today, what remains from the concept of "intellectual" as Weber defined it? Should one ever use this concept and/or term in the context of ancient Christianity? I believe that one may refer to "intellectuals" as a category, even if one uses the term in a somewhat different fashion than Max Weber.²¹ On the one hand, it seems to me in any case, what remains from Weber until today's attempts to redefine the concept and/or term is the functional definition of the activities of intellectuals as being the systematization and rationalization of knowledge.²² On the other hand, however, the provocative question remains from Weber not only for the usage of the term in German contexts as to whether those whom we call Christian intellectuals in the second century are not perhaps—especially by ancient standards—better characterised as "petty-bourgeois," even if the lamentably flat sociological categorisation of early imperial Christianity as "petty-bourgeois" only captures the reality of the new religion in a limited fashion. And perhaps one could also discuss again critically Weber's until now not mentioned idea of the de-politicised and thus apolitical intellectual.²³ Hans Georg Kippenberg contrasted the Epicureans and the Gnostics in an essay that explicitly invoked Weber: both are characterised by a distance from the political that is absent in the rest of ancient classical philoso-

20 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 282.

21 C. Charle, s.v. "Intellectuals, History of the Concept," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* Vol. 11 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 7627–31 = Vol. 12, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 273–6; R.J. Brown, s.v. "Intellectuals, Sociology of," in *ibid.*, 277–82.—Probably a non-native German never ever would deal the history of the term with such a strong focus to Weber. But all approaches to Antiquity are always dominated by one's one intellectual biography.

22 Concerning those terms "systematisation" and "rationalisation" cf. C. Marksches, "Introduction", in: *Rationalization in Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Y. Friedmann and C. Marksches on behalf of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 1–4 and *ibid.*, "Origen of Alexandria: The Bible and Philosophical Rationality, or: Problems of Traditional Dualisms," in *Rationalization in Religions*, 63–73.

23 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 269–74.

phy.²⁴ Hubert Cancik posed some time ago the simple question of whether this description of Epicurean and Gnostic intellectuals—which we find for example in Hans Jonas, Kurt Rudolph and others—is really true.²⁵ This could be a reason enough to examine once again these classic theses concerning groups of imperial intellectuals.

In my initial remarks I pointed to the problems that arise when we try to apply the concept of the “intellectual” to ancient Christian theologians during the early Roman Empire. To summarize here: we take up a whole slew of assumptions that are connected to the functionalist concept of the intellectual in Weber. Of course, one can use this functionalist concept to describe Christian theology in the second century, provided one is prepared to accept the reductionism of this approach as regards to content. Ekkehard Mühlberg, some time ago, drew our attention to the costs of such an ontological reductionism, which has in fact since been thoroughly philosophically accepted.²⁶ The concept of the “intellectual” is like all concepts that do not originate in our sources, but are formed much later: we cannot get away from them, we see many things more clearly in their light, but we must not underestimate their problems and should in no case overestimate their power. This volume, *The Rise of the Christian Intellectual*, offers many excellent examples showing the power of this terminology!

24 Kippenberg, “Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus,” 215, concerning Weber *ibid.* 223.

25 H. Cancik, “Gnostiker in Rom. Zur Religionsgeschichte der Stadt Rom im 2. Jahrhundert nach Christus,” in *Gnosis und Politik. Religionstheorie und politische Theologie* Vol. 2, ed. J. Taubes (München et al.: Wilhelm Fink, 1984), 163–84, esp. 183. For the political dimension cf. above fn. 2.

26 In a review of the German version of C. Marksches, *Christian Theology and its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire*, in *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* 262 (2010): 230–47; some remarks *ibid.*, XIII-V (Introduction to the English Edition).