

The Countercultural Gnostic: Turning the World Upside Down and Inside Out

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Abstract

Because the gnostic heresy is a social construction imposed by the early Catholics on religious people they identified as transgressors of Christianity, scholars are entertaining the idea that ancient gnostics were actually alternative Christians. While gnostics may have been made into heretics by the early Catholics, this does not erase the fact that gnostics were operating in the margins of the conventional religions with a countercultural perspective that upset and overturned everything from traditional theology, cosmogony, cosmology, anthropology, hermeneutics, scripture, religious practices, and lifestyle choices. Making the gnostic into a Christian only imposes another grand narrative on the early Christians, one which domesticates gnostic movements. Granted, the textual evidence for the interface of the gnostic and the Christian is present, but so is the interface of the gnostic and the Greek, the gnostic and the Jew, the gnostic and the Persian, and the gnostic and the Egyptian. And the interface looks to have all the signs of transgression, not conformity. Understanding the gnostic as a spiritual orientation toward a transcendent God beyond the biblical God helps us handle this kind of diversity and transgression. As such, it survives in the artifacts that gnostics and their opponents have left behind, artifacts that help orient religious seekers to make sense of their own moments of ecstasy and revelation.

Keywords

Heresy – Counterculture – Revelatory Milieu – Emergent Structure – Deviance – New Age – Transtheism

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Making the Heretic

For two thousand years, the gnostic has been defined as the heretic, as the impious sinner, as the dangerous transgressor. This construction of the gnostic as heretic has developed in relationship to emergent Catholic Christianity, indicating those people who belong to a *hairesis* or *scholê* that deviates from nascent Catholicism, the heir to the teaching of the twelve apostles.¹ This pejorative keying of *gnostikoi* with *hairesis* in a deviant sense is a strategic way that heresiologists marked the gnostics negatively as outsiders and transgressors of Apostolic Catholic Christianity as they understood it.²

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (ca. early second century–202 CE), is certain that the knowledge the gnostic possesses is knowledge from the devil, making gnostics apostates and blasphemers against the biblical God. This is the god who is called in the Bible $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$.³ In his five-volume work *On the Refutation and Reversal of Falsely Called "Gnosis"* ("Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνῶσεως"), he says that they are possessed by the devil and agents of Satan because, like Satan, they refuse to submit to the biblical God, who created the heavens and the earth according to scripture. Like Satan and his horde of rebellious angels, the gnostics will be confined to the fires of everlasting punishment.⁴ He thinks that they use the name *Christian* in order to try to conceal their impiety.⁵ They are wolves in sheep's clothing, drawing the unsuspecting Christian into their perverted fantasies.⁶ Like hyenas, they must be hunted and slain.⁷ Given their absurd insolence and arrogance, Irenaeus thinks the gnostics are insane.⁸

1 Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.1; 1.29.1; 1.30.15; cf. Tertullian, *Val.* 11.2.

2 There are emerging many superb studies on the meaning of *hairesis* and its pejorative use in the battle for Christian identity. Cf. Boulluec 1985, 2000; Pietersen 1997; Henderson 1998; King 2003, 20–54; Cameron 2005; the collection of papers in Iricinschi and Zellentin 2008; Royalty 2012; DeConick 2013b; Lehtipuu 2014; G. Smith 2015. The classic piece on the subject is Wisse 1971.

3 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.pref.4 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 386–390).

4 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.1; 1.13.1, 3; 1.15.6; 1.16.3; 1.25.3 (Rousseau and-Doutreleau 1979, 154–159, 188–197, 250–253, 260–265, 284–289; 2.28.7 (Rousseau and -Doutreleau 1982, 336–339); 5.26.2 (Rousseau et al. 1969, 330–338).

5 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 336–339).

6 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 20–25); 3.16.8 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1974, 318–320).

7 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.31.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 388–391).

8 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 338–341).

Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–235 CE) in his anthology of heretical writings, *Refutation of All Heresies* (Κατὰ πασῶν αἱρέσεων ἔλεγχος), considers them sexual offenders, certain that their nocturnal rites include orgies.⁹ This accusation is an old one, already present in the writing of Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE).¹⁰ They keep their teachings and practices secret, Hippolytus thinks, because who among them would want to admit publicly that they participated in such shameful deeds.¹¹ Like Hydra, they are monsters that must be exterminated.¹²

Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160–220 CE) considers them threatening outsiders who lie when they call themselves Christians.¹³ Really their teachings are poisonous. They produce a dangerous fever that weakens the body and makes it susceptible to sickness.¹⁴

Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 320–403 CE) writes an entire treatise, *Medicine Chest* (Πανάριον), which he considers the medicinal antidote to the deadly poison of bites of heretics.¹⁵ He characterizes the gnostics as biting insects and scorpions that live in manure and swarm around the unsuspecting in order to infect them with their rubbish, perversities, and obscenities.¹⁶

This portrayal of the gnostic as deviant heretic has also formed the basis of modern studies of gnosticism.¹⁷ In fact, one of the earliest uses of the word *gnosticism* was by Henry More (1614–1687), a famous Cambridge Platonist.¹⁸ He used it to designate the range of views the heresiologists wrote about. For him gnosticism was “the primal Christian heresy.”

More was himself influenced by Henry Hammond (1605–1660) whose work on the New Testament showed some knowledge of the heresiological literature.¹⁹ He took the view that the *gnosticks* was a common name for “all the Heresies then abroad” among the Christians. According to Hammond, the *gnosticke-heresie* was morally depraved and corrupt. This is how the modern word *gnosticism* came to designate the reinscription of the position of the heresiologists, who demonized the gnostics.

9 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 1.pre f.5 (Marcovich 1986, 55). Cf. Roig Lanzillotta 2007.

10 Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology* 1.26.7.

11 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 1.pref.3–4 (Marcovich 1986, 54).

12 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.11.1 (Marcovich 1986, 173); cf. Roig Lanzillotta 2007.

13 Tertullian, *Presc.* 30.1–2. For a more lengthy discussion of Tertullian's strategies, see Lehtipuu 2014.

14 Tertullian, *Presc.* 2.1–3.

15 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 4.pref.2.3.

16 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 2.26.1.1–3, 2.26.3.5.

17 Cf. King 2003.

18 Cf. Marksches 2003, 14.

19 Layton, 1995.

From this perspective, gnosticism is viewed as a religious movement that is an ancillary development to real Christianity. Many scholars who perceive gnosticism in this way have argued strongly that gnosticism represents “the acute secularization and Hellenization of Christianity” or “Platonism run wild,” and that this is an adverse or corrupting force that degraded original Christianity.²⁰ Over the last century, it was standard for gnostic writings to be characterized by scholars as “the underworld of Platonism” or as witnesses to the early perversion of Christianity.²¹ Robert Grant and David Noel Freedman wrote in 1960 that gnostic literature stands, “like Lot’s wife, as a new but permanently valuable witness to men’s desire to make God’s revelation serve them. Ultimately, it testifies not to what Jesus said but to what men wished he had said.”²² It was generally assumed that the gnostics who referred to Christian scripture did so by falsifying it and interpreting it violently in order to force fictitious meaning on it, creating “heretical theology” in the process.²³

Gnosticism then has been characterized by scholars as a perversion of pristine Christianity (which is identified with emergent Catholicism or *normative* Christianity) and a dangerous heresy to boot. This understanding of gnosticism is still popular today because it reinforces the triumphant story of conventional Christianity that many Christians prefer. For instance, Darrell Bock, writing in 2006, argues that the diversity of gnosticism proves its “parasitic” quality.²⁴ It is not a “legitimate” development of the Christian faith.²⁵ According to Philip Jenkins in his 2001 publication, gnostic texts are “heretical texts” with “an odd slant” unconcerned with “historical realities.” Because of this aberrant perspective, “they arouse widespread excitement among feminists and esoteric believers, and aspiring radical reformers of Christianity.”²⁶ They represent “a vital weapon in the liberal arsenal.”²⁷

However, another perspective has been argued forcibly by Elaine Pagels. Her reflection on the Nag Hammadi literature in her 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels* was the first to seriously consider whether it is a misnomer to see the gnostic as a heretic. She follows the lead of Walter Bauer who suggested that, from the

20 Harnack 1885 (1961, 227); Nock 1964, 256.

21 Dillon 1977, 384–396.

22 See Grant and Freedman 1960, 20.

23 For instance, see Gärtner 1961, 11–12, 78–80, who aligns his own academic interpretation with Irenaeus’ rhetoric of falsification and violence.

24 Bock 2006, 24.

25 Bock 2006, 212, quoting and agreeing with Witherington 2004, 114–115.

26 Jenkins 2001, 37.

27 Jenkins 2001, 39.

start, Christianity was made up of a diverse number of different groups, many of them not Catholic.²⁸ Pagels goes on to demonstrate from inside the gnostic literature that the gnostics were not really heretics, but religious competitors who challenged the Catholics. She notes that “ideas which bear implications contrary to that development come to be labeled as ‘heresy’; ideas which implicitly support it become ‘orthodox.’”²⁹ While there was nothing theologically amiss with the ideas and practices of the gnostics, they lost the battle of faith because of extenuating social and political circumstances.³⁰ In the process of losing the battle, they were made into heretics by their Catholic opponents.

This position has been further substantiated primarily with the work of Karen King. She has argued that the characterization of the gnostic as a heretic is a fabrication of powerful Catholic leaders who constructed the gnostic heresy largely to suppress alternative forms of Christianity in the second century.³¹ Influenced by New Historicism and literary and post-modern critics like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, King’s work deconstructs the gnostic and gnosticism.³² Her main argument is that the rhetorical term gnosticism has been confused with an historical entity. Or to put it another way, because the words *gnostic* and *gnosticism* reflect the polemics and grand narrative of triumphant Christianity, we should not continue to reify them as historical facts. The gnostics were Christians, so we should discuss them under the Christian rubric, not the gnostic one.³³

Identity Work

While this deconstruction of the gnostic and gnosticism has been popular among many scholars, it has left me uneasy. Although it is true that the heresiologists framed the gnostic as the demonic and created a grand narrative that connected a variety of unrelated groups to the arch-heretic Simon Magus, this does not mean that gnostics did not exist historically, nor that gnostics were innocuous *alternative* Christians. Or to put it another way, while gnostics may

28 Bauer 1934.

29 Pagels 1979, xxxvi.

30 Pagels 1979, xxxv.

31 King 2008. Her essay fits nicely in this edited volume, where many of the papers also push away from the “objectification” of heresy.

32 King 2008.

33 King 2003.

have been made into heretics by the early Catholics, this does not erase the fact that gnostics were operating in the margins of the conventional religions with a countercultural perspective that upset and overturned everything from traditional theology, cosmogony, cosmology, anthropology, hermeneutics, scripture, religious practices, and lifestyle choices.³⁴ When we insist on gnostics as *alternative* Christians, we run the risk of taming the shrew. The word *alternative* points to equivalent acceptable routes to the same destination. The gnostic road, however, is countercultural, concerned with journeying on a road to a different destination, perhaps even along a road in the opposite direction.³⁵

Making the gnostic into a Christian does not resolve the problem either. Rather it imposes another grand narrative on the early Christians, one which domesticates gnostic movements and presents them as no-nonsense alternative forms of Christianity. Granted, the textual evidence for the interface of the gnostic and the Christian is present, but so is the interface of the gnostic and the Greek, the gnostic and the Jew, the gnostic and the Persian, and the gnostic and the Egyptian. And the interface looks to have all the signs of transgression, not conformity.

It is not debatable that the *gnostic* was an identity that was known in antiquity. Bentley Layton has laid this out quite eloquently, demonstrating that the word identified a type of religious believer more than a specific group.³⁶ I too have reviewed the primary evidence, noting that the ancients' concept of the word *gnostic* associated it with religious people who claimed to know (gnosis) through direct experience the God who transcends the gods of all the religions, and to be substantially connected to him. Furthermore, they employed rituals to reunite themselves with this true transcendent God.³⁷ Ancient writers applied the word broadly to individuals including Basilides, Valentinus, Saturnilus, Colorbasus, Justin, Ptolemy, Secundus, and Carpocrates, and also groups including Sethians, Ophians, Barbeloites, Carpocratians, Prodicians, Justinians, Naassenes, Nicolaitans, and Valentinians.³⁸

As different people and groups claimed to possess knowledge of this supreme God and linked themselves to him, competition in the religious marketplace intensified. In some camps represented by heresiologists like Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, and Hippolytus of Rome, this led to the demonizing of the gnostic as a way to delegitimize competitors' claims

34 For more on this, see DeConick 2016b; also Kaler 2009.

35 For this wonderful image, see Yinger 1982, 42.

36 Layton 1995. See also M. Smith 1981.

37 DeConick 2013a. See also DeConick 2016.

38 For primary references, see DeConick 2013a.

to superior knowledge and contact with a supreme God beyond the biblical God YHWH. The heresiologists consider the knowledge that gnostics claim to possess to be false knowledge. For others, like Clement of Alexandria, it meant refashioning the gnostic to refer to the perfected Christian who followed the biblical God's law, rallied around the creator God, and engaged in self-restraint and the contemplative life.³⁹ According to Clement, the gnostic lifestyle was an extreme one, where Christians trained daily as contemplatives and mystics, to draw the biblical God toward themselves and to bring themselves toward him.⁴⁰

Although Michael Williams has demonstrated for us that the diversity among the gnostics calls into question the ways in which scholars have used gnosticism as an overarching category, this does not mean that "biblical demiurgy" is the answer.⁴¹ Such circumscription does not resolve the problem of the diversity of gnostic identity. In fact gnostic identity is complicated because it is an identity that crosses traditional group boundaries and creates new ones that often critique the old. It is an identity that is not so much a group designation as it is a religious orientation towards a transcendent God beyond the conventional God(s).

As such, it is an orientation that is affiliated with multiple groups, which often have other names for themselves. For instance, the Sethians, who call themselves the *Seed of Seth* and the *Standing Ones*, may be some of the earliest people designated as gnostics.⁴² We have the Valentinians, who claim to possess knowledge about God that others do not have. Yet they claim to be *Christians*, while they call the Apostolic Catholic Christians *Hebrews* because they still (mistakenly) worship YHWH.⁴³ We have Basilides, who also teaches about a God who transcends YHWH, saying that the people in his group are "not quite Jews and not as yet Christians (*et Iudaeos quidem iam non esse dicunt, christianos autem nondum*)".⁴⁴ We have Justin telling everyone that his initiates are *gnostics* because they have seen the true God, the Good, and he definitely is not the God traditionally worshiped by Jews and Christians.⁴⁵ We have Mani creating "true religion" out of his revelations of the true God, a transcendent Father

39 Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.21–23 (Stählin 1960, 304–316).

40 Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.14, 19 (Stählin 1960, 37–41, 58–62); 2.15 (Stählin 1960, 146–151); 5.4 (Stählin 1960, 338–342).

41 Williams 1996, 265–66.

42 Williams 1985.

43 Cf. Gos.Phil. NHC II,3 52.21–25.

44 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.6 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1979, 330).

45 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.23.3–24.1.

of Light, while viewing all other religions, including Christianity, as “false.”⁴⁶ The Mandaeans, whose name comes from *manda* or *knowledge*, despise Jesus, considering him a lapsed Mandaean and false prophet.⁴⁷ We have the Hermetics with no Jesus at all and a world not quite as dark and maddening as portrayed by other gnostics. In my opinion, we need a construction of the gnostic that can handle this kind of religious diversity and transgression, an identity that can face the countercultural.

The Invasion of the Centaurs

To be clear, the *counter culture* is a term coined by the American historian Theodore Roszak in his famous 1968 book, *The Making of a Counter Culture*. He did so to try to explain the uprising of the youth, mainly in America and Britain that he observed in the 1960s. He notably defines the counter culture as “a culture so radically disaffected from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric invasion.”⁴⁸ It is like the invasion of the centaurs that Apollo must drive back (although sometimes Apollo does not win).

Roszak does not displace the importance of local society and culture in the youth rebellion against what he identifies as the main culprits: technocracy and the domination of science. Yet he defines the essence of the counterculture in psychological terms as an assault on the reality of the ego as our true identity. The counterculture instead “transcends the consciousness of the dominant culture and runs the risk of appearing to be a brazen exercise in perverse nonsense.”⁴⁹ It gains its vision and power from that moral and imaginative level of human personality that lies deeper than our ego or intellectual consciousness. Although Roszak resists naming it anything but “non-intellectual consciousness,” he thinks this deep aspect of human personality provides our guiding vision and ultimately determines for us what we regard as sanity.

The counterculture emerged, according to Roszak, when people could no longer align this deep aspect, including their moral compass and ideal visions, with the direction of the society. He broadened his definition by declaring that a counterculture emerges when people become alienated from society’s institutional structures.⁵⁰ The counterculture is reflected in any figure or

46 Cf. BeDuhn 2015.

47 Cf. Lupieri 2002, 240–253.

48 Roszak 1968, 42.

49 Roszak 1968, 55.

50 Roszak 1968, 95–96.

movement, Roszak argues, that privileges non-intellective knowledge and personal visions of truth over cultural constructions of knowledge. In this way, Roszak was able to take the question of counterculture relative to the hippie generation and suspend it phenomenologically to embrace what, for him, is at stake: the spirit of humanity which underlies social systems and ideologies, and which must serve as the ultimate point of moral reference.⁵¹ Basilides, Valentinus, and their gnostic friends would have exclaimed, "Amen!"

Since Roszak, social scientists speak of the countercultural in terms of a set of norms and values shared by a group that are in sharp contradiction to the dominant norms and values of the larger group or society.⁵² Sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists today recognize the fermentation of countercultures in economic disparity and feelings of relative deprivation, the demographic rise of youth, social isolation, and personalities that are impulsive, alienated, narcissistic and antinomian.⁵³ They have identified a wide variety of types of countercultural groups that emerge, everything from activist institutions to hippie communes (one size does not fit all).⁵⁴

That said, they also critique Roszak's insistence that the counterculture emerges out of the non-intellective consciousness of the human self. Instead, they believe that what is at stake are *socially constructed* worldviews of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Countercultures emerge, they argue, when these cultural worldviews no longer function to help people organize their experiences and deal with crises and ambiguities. When such a rupture happens, people may choose to adopt a drastically different worldview, one that they might believe has been revealed to them experientially.⁵⁵ So in the end, their conclusion, like Roszak's, suggests that the counterculture is about the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian ways of knowing.⁵⁶

Framing the Category *Gnostic* as a Spirituality

In order to explain gnostic diversity, it is necessary to move beyond our previous visions of gnosticism as a heresy, religion, philosophy, (originating) group,

51 Roszak 1968, 62.

52 Westhues, 1972, 9–10; Musgrove, 1974, 9; Yinger 1982, 3.

53 Keniston 1960, 56; 1968, 259, 340; Yinger 1982, 51–79.

54 Yinger 1982, 89–95.

55 Yinger 1982, esp. 95–97; cf. Douglas 1973, 81.

56 Musgrove 1974, 40–64.

typology, or rhetorical fabrication.⁵⁷ We need to frame the gnostic in such a way that it can account for multiple origins, affiliations, and identities, some of them not historically linked. Any such conceptualization must begin with how the ancient people first framed the concept for themselves. I have written extensively on how the ancients understood the gnostic to be a person who claimed to have direct knowledge of the transcendent God beyond the conventional God(s), and to be substantially linked to that God.⁵⁸ This is a distinctive metaphysical or spiritual orientation. As such, it is not defined by one religion or confined to one religion.

It might be helpful to think of the gnostic and gnosticism as concepts like the fundamentalist and fundamentalism, which identify a very particular orientation toward God and the world. In the case of fundamentalism, it is a perspective that conceives God as an authoritarian patriarch and scripture as a sacred infallible document that is literally true. The human being must conform to God's will as it is revealed literally in the scripture. This leads to an exclusive outlook, where certain people in the group are saved according to their obedience to the scriptures and everyone else outside the group is damned. We have in our world today Christian fundamentalists as well as Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim. They may not call themselves fundamentalist at all, but Southern Baptist, Catholic, Adventist, Theravada Buddhist, or some similar designation.

Put simply, I think it is valuable to view the gnostic and our modern descriptor gnosticism as identifying its own unique form of spirituality, one that emerged when some ancient religious seekers attempted to make meaning of their experiences of the world in a radically pluralistic environment much like ours today. When I try to imagine what this looked like on the ground, I consider modern New Agers as a parallel. These are religious seekers who, like the ancient gnostics, claim multiple religious affiliations while questing for the God beyond convention. In their quests for the truth behind it all, they consciously draw upon everything from philosophy to astrology, sacred literature, new revelation, and science. They claim to have direct access to knowledge unexpressed by conventional religions, while also being inspired by them.

Out of this milieu, these religious seekers produce new scripture, which they believe channels the true message of God. The religious groups that emerge from the modern New Age do so as their own religious movements, although figures like Jesus and scriptures like the Upanishads are not wholly forsaken.⁵⁹

57 For an overview and bibliography of these depictions of the gnostic, see Denzey Lewis 2013.

58 For fuller discussion, see DeConick 2013a; 2013b.

59 For details about New Age movements, see especially Hanegraaff 1997.

Because the sources of inspiration for religious seekers old and new are not necessarily countercultural in and of themselves, I prefer to discuss them in terms of a *revelatory milieu*, instead of the *cultic milieu* postulated by Colin Campbell in 1972.⁶⁰ *Revelatory* signals that it was their use and interpretation that was countercultural, putting standard readings of conventional scriptures into reverse or inverse.

Gnostic spirituality emerged as a religious identity in the first century CE when a number of religious people began to claim that they possessed a new kind of spiritual knowledge.⁶¹ *Gnostic* expressed for them, not a new religion, but a new type of spirituality, a new way for them to live in their world as religious people, whatever their current religious affiliations—Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, or Christian. As gnostic spirituality emerged within these different personal contexts, these religious people began to call into question the truth of their regional and ancestral religions, and spun that truth in new and unusual directions.

This means that the real issue for me does not lie in the long-standing debate whether or not gnostic spirituality originated from Judaism or Christianity.⁶² The real issue for me is to try to understand what kinds of religious movements develop when gnostic spirituality with its transgressive orientation engages conventional scriptures, ideologies, and practices of Jews and Christians (and others like Buddhists and the followers of Zoroaster).

The Gnostic as an Emergent Structure

What did this new spirituality look like in the ancient world? Here I rely on the understanding of *emergent structures* theorized by cognitive linguists like Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier.⁶³ What is an emergent structure? It is the creation of a new mental concept, an idea that never existed before. New concepts come out of a mental process called *blending*, when we recruit from long-term memory what we already know about a concept and merge it with our experience of something new. What we already know about a concept is called

60 Campbell 1972; on the term *religious buffer*, see DeConick 2016a.

61 For this argument, see DeConick 2013a; 2013b; 2016a.

62 The relationship between gnosticism and Judaism is highly contested; much of the discussion focused on dependence issues, on whether or not gnosticism originated from within Judaism or not, on whether or not references to Jewish scriptures are indicative of Jewish origins. For a recent summary of this discussion, see C. Smith 2004 and Lahe 2012.

63 See especially Fauconnier and Turner 2002.

by cognitive linguists a *mental frame* or *schema*.⁶⁴ This is knowledge that we have organized into useful categories around ideal attributes.

I like to use the *book* as an example of a frame. What makes a book a book to us, and not something else? We mentally frame the book with ideal characteristics, like a folio of paper bound between two covers. Does a book have to have covers, or can it be a simple folio of paper bound with a string? Usually there is writing inside that we read, but not always. There are blank books to be journaled, as well as unwritten books in our imaginations, or in outline form. There are published and unpublished books, handwritten, typeset, and picture books.

So there is considerable flexibility in the frames we recruit when we think about our world. We recognize that all books are not the same. They do not all have exactly the same properties as the ideal frame. Yet we still recognize them as books. Even more important, the elements that define the book can shift to accommodate new experiences of book-like objects. These new experiences either expand the frame, shift it, or break it open and blend it into something new.

Take the *e-book*, for example. It has no pages, no cover, and virtual words that disappear when the device is turned off. Yet we have come to recognize it as a book because it is an electronic version of a real book. This is an innovation in the concept of the book, what linguists call an *emergent structure*. If this emergent idea stabilizes, as it did with the e-book, it reorganizes the categories we use to think. The e-book allows us to think in new directions about everything from reading to publishing to libraries to other forms of media like magazines and newspapers.

Like the e-book, the *gnostic* is an emergent structure, an innovative concept that some ancient people began to use to describe a new way to be religious. If we look at the gnostic as an emergent structure, what are its characteristics, what are the elements of its frame? I argue that in the ancient memory it is associated with five ideal characteristics.⁶⁵

The first characteristic is framed around direct experiential knowledge of a transcendent God beyond the gods of all the religions (including YHWH), what the gnostics called *gnosis*. In ecstatic moments, the gnostics felt immersed in the overwhelming presence of transcendence, believing that they had been reunited with the Very-Ground-of-Being.

Second, these people were convinced that humans have an innate spiritual nature, a spark of God that is an extension of this transcendence. Most often

64 Coulson 2001. They are called *idealized cognitive models* by Lakoff 1987.

65 For more details, see DeConick 2013a.

they called this spark the *pneuma*, or spirit, also the *nous*, or mind. The spirit would survive into eternity, but only if it could be awakened and reconnected with the transcendent God.⁶⁶

Third, these ecstatic states were carefully choreographed in terms of ritual. Gnostic spirituality is oriented toward very particular religious practices that were used to prompt the ecstatic states and unitive experiences of transcendence that gnostics pursued.

Fourth, this was transgressive talk that set gnostics at odds with the conventional religions of their time, which worshiped local deities associated with the earth and the celestial spheres, not the transcendent realms. While some of the Greek philosophers in the first centuries CE also were talking about a transcendent deity beyond Mind and Being (ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ οὐσίας), they did not worship this God as the gnostics were doing.⁶⁷ In the second century, several philosophically minded Christians began thinking about a transcendent God too. To resolve the transtheistic problem that the gnostic vision raised—that the true God of worship is the supreme God who lives beyond the cosmos and is not the biblical God—these Christians weld the concept of a transcendent deity with the biblical God.⁶⁸ When gnostics engaged conventional theology and traditional religion and its scriptures, they did so by upending normative understandings of the gods and normative readings of texts. They developed a countercultural hermeneutic that turned conventional worship and scriptures on their edge.

Fifth, to achieve this inversion, they incorporated into their religious discussions everything but the kitchen sink. To reorient religion as *true religion*, they relied on everything from Homer and Plato, to magic and astrology, to ancient brain science and fantastic cosmological speculations about multi-worlds. They were embedded within the countercultural even as they sought to reinvent conventional religion to reflect their vision of true religion. Their intellectual engagement was open-ended, their mentality that of seekers.⁶⁹ Although we might be tempted to dismiss this kind of eclecticism as a “cafeteria-style” spirituality that is totally a function of the religious marketplace, to do so would diminish the fact that gnostics locate spiritual authority in the individual’s soul or spirit. So what the individual already knows and comes to

66 Cf. Roig Lanzillota 2013.

67 For a history of this deity “beyond Mind and Being,” see Whittaker 1969, who popularized this phrase.

68 Cf. Whittaker 1969, 104.

69 On the seeker mentality, see Roof 1993, 79–83.

know through ecstasy and revelation is what comes into play in their plans to remake religion as true religion.

Turning the World Upside Down and Inside Out

The current trend in scholarship to deconstruct the gnostic and gnosticism results in a most unfortunate consequence, unintended or not. If we domesticate the gnostic into the Christian, we end up erasing transgressive religious identities from history when, instead, we should be fully exploring their meaning.⁷⁰ We end up divorcing from the historical record countercultural identities that have so much to tell us about religion and its power to innovate, stir up, change, and even revolutionize the way we are in our world.

It is something of a paradox that scholars of early Christianity have either declared the gnostics heretics and thus not worthy of study, or have deconstructed them so that the gnostics have been tamed into Christians, with the same result. The gnostic is marginalized or rejected, either as a heretic or as a heretical fabrication, having no worthwhile contribution to make to Western thought and culture. In this discourse, the gnostic has become irrelevant.

Yet sociologists who study deviance have shown that transgression is marked by one group, usually the dominant group, when another group has overstepped a boundary that may not have been evident up until that moment.⁷¹ If the boundary is considered by the dominant group to be significant enough, the dominant group works to naturalize its own position and construe the counterpoint as deviant, wayward and heretical, even to the point of establishing sanctions for future offenses.⁷² This is when things get serious, when value judgments about right and wrong get attached to certain positions and reinforced as the natural order of things. This is when the transgressor becomes the heretic.

So for me the really interesting questions hinge on this sociological insight. What is it that gnostics were saying and doing that so riled up the emergent

70 For a discussion of gnostic transgression, see DeConick 2013b.

71 For complete literature review, see DeConick 2013b.

72 For an overview of this sociological perspective, see Becker 1963; Schur 1971, 1980; Curra 2000, Clinard and Meier 2008, 11–12, 76–83; Clarke 2008; Franzese 2009 88–101. For sociological studies of deviance and religious groups, see Erikson 1966; Davies 1982, 1032–63; Greenberg 1988; McWilliams 1993. Studies in early Christianity have successfully applied deviance theory to early Christian literature: cf. Malina and Neyrey 1991; Barclay 1995; Still 1999; Pietersen 1997, 2004.

Catholics to the point that they began naturalizing their positions? What buttons did gnostics push that lit up the limits and became decisive rallying points for bishops like Irenaeus? What mattered enough to the Apostolic Catholics that they were determined to make gnostics into monsters?

These are particularly important questions given that Jesus and the very first Christians like Paul had their own countercultural programs. It is not insignificant that the author of Acts records that many people in Thessalonica became violent because Paul's preaching about Jesus "has turned the world upside down." Paul's message, they felt, had led to the abuse of Roman laws, replacing Caesar with Jesus as the real king.⁷³

While this is not the place to analyze in detail the first Christians as countercultural champions, it is significant that by the second century this countercultural program was beginning to be tamed by many of the Apostolic Catholic Christians who wrote treatises to assure the Roman rulers that they were good citizens. Even though the Apostolic Catholics rejected aspects of Roman society as decadent and heathen (including their gods), they begin to settle in and accommodate their new religion to Rome, especially in terms of advocating for a public form of Christianity that claimed old ancestral customs. For the most part, this domestication did not happen among the gnostic groups who were at odds with both the values of the Romans and the emerging Catholic Christians.

While the Apostolic Catholic Christians began to develop their religion out of a network that interfaced with the traditional values of Rome promoting their religion as "old" and public with customary rites and hierarchies, gnostics prized the new, the revelatory, the unmediated experiences of the God beyond the God of the biblical covenant, beyond the gods of civic duty and the patron-client relationship. Gnostic Christians made little claim to an ancestral past or the God of traditional scriptures, preferring to sever the tie with Judaism and marketing their communities by promoting a new previously unknown deity who wanted nothing whatsoever to do with covenants, traditional sacrifices and other public ceremonies. For them, the practice of religion was not about civic duty and moral obligation, but personal therapy and empowerment. The human being and its needs surpassed the biblical God and the old Greco-Roman and Egyptian gods, and indeed, overturned them and their earthly representatives. This transtheistic perspective cut across not only Judaism and Christianity, but also laid the Roman cult to waste. Gnostic spirituality turned the world upside down—and inside out!

73 Acts 17:6.

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that the evidence reveals that the major transgression that mobilized the emergent Catholics against gnostic groups was the gnostic insistence that the Supreme God of worship is not the biblical LORD called in the scripture by the name YHWH. This allowed gnostics to regard the biblical LORD as a lesser god, a trickster, and demon, on the same level with the Greco-Roman, Syrian and Egyptian gods. He also was an apostate, a rebellious warrior like Satan or the Titans. As such, he controlled this world and the process of birth and death.⁷⁴

This theological crime was connected to another in the writings of the Apostolic Catholics. This is the gnostics' claim to have direct knowledge (gnosis) of the Supreme God who transcends the gods of all the religions of the world, including YHWH. This God does not live in the world, but beyond it, in a special realm of his own.⁷⁵ The Catholic concern expressed over these theological crimes suggests that the first Apostolic Catholics had taken for granted that the biblical YHWH is the supreme God of worship. And this was something they were invested in enough that they were willing to fight for it.⁷⁶

Another major transgression identified by the early Catholics, and also by Plotinus, is the gnostic claim to be substantially God, to be mortal gods because a particle of the Supreme God—a seed or a spirit—had been deposited in their souls.⁷⁷ This was considered transgressive because it allowed gnostics to claim that they were superior beings to YHWH and all the other gods worshiped conventionally across the Mediterranean.⁷⁸ The fallout from this perspective is immense. Because gnostics have nothing to fear from YHWH or the other gods, they were free to live above the laws and were not bound to the duties of civic

74 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1, 1.16.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 18–21, 260–265); *Haer.* 2.9.2, 2.13.3, 2.26.1, 2.28.7 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 84–87, 114–117, 256–259, 284–289); 4 pref.3–4 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 384–390); Tertullian, *Val.* 3.1–2 (Kroymann 1954, 754–755).

75 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1, 1.4.3, 1.16.3, 1.21.3–4 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1979, 18–21, 68–69, 260–265, 298–305); Tertullian, *Val.* 1.1–4 (Kroymann 1954, 753–754); Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.1.4, 5.23.2–3 (Marcovich 1986, 141, 198–199).

76 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pref.1, 1.10.3 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1979, 18–21, 160–167); 2.28.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 270–273); Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich 1986, 258–259).

77 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.19.2–4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 186–191); 4.19.1 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 614–616); 5.19.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau-Mercier 1969, 250–252); Tertullian, *Val.* 4.4 (Kroymann 1954, 756–757).

78 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.26.3, 2.30.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 260–263, 302–305); Hippolytus, *Haer.* 1.pref.2–3 (Marcovich 1986, 54).

religion.⁷⁹ Given this, it is not surprising how often were expressed charges of gnostic hubris and concerns that such attitudes would result in nemesis.⁸⁰ This suggests that the Apostolic Catholics had been assuming that the subordinate nature of the human to the gods is natural. They recognized that they were YHWH's servants. They were subject to his rule and his law. Their salvation depended on this.⁸¹

Yet another transgression identified by the emergent Catholics is the gnostics' contrary reading of scriptures and other texts like Homer—against their conventional hermeneutic.⁸² The Apostolic Catholics had been under the impression that their own way to read the scripture was standard because they focused on the natural flow of the narratives and the connections they saw between Jewish prophecy and Christian writings. They dismissed the gnostic preference for focusing on the disjunctures and ambiguities in the scriptures and reading allegorically rather than literally.⁸³ Ongoing revelation, which the gnostic claimed, was nonsense to the emergent Catholics, who were sure this represented forgery.⁸⁴

The Apostolic Catholics were not happy about gnostic practices either because they perceived them to be secretive, exclusive, and expensive.⁸⁵ Clearly the Catholics took for granted that religious practices should be publicly available, rather than performed for a small select group at a cost to the initiate. They also were concerned that some gnostic ceremonies were intentionally made to be similar to their own, or even the same.⁸⁶ The transgression

79 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3, 1.28.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 94–97, 356–357); 2.14.5 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 136–139); Tertullian, *Presc.* 41.1, 43.3.

80 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.30.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1982, 300–303).

81 Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.38.4 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 956–960).

82 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.3.6, 1.9.4, 1.19.1–2, 1.20.2 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1979, 60–63, 146–151, 284–289, 290–293); 3.6.5; 3.7.1–2. On gnostic use of John, see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.1 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1974, 138–142); 4.41.1–3 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 982–992). On the use and interpretation of John 8:44 in gnostic literature, see DeConick 2013c; 2013d. On gnosticism and John more generally see, Pagels 1973; Hill 2004, 172–293; Turner 2005; Rasimus 2010. On gnostic use of Paul, see Pagels 1975.

83 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 32–35).

84 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.20.1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 288–289); 3.11.9 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1974, 170–176).

85 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.4.3, 1.21.3–4 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 68–69, 298–303); 3.15.2 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1974, 278–282); Hippolytus, *Haer.* 1.pref.2–5 (Marcovich 1986, 54–55).

86 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.3 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 808–10). Cf. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 1.26.7; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.1–3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 294–303); Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich 1986, 258–259).

of the ritual, however, did not reside in their imitative quality. Rather it resided in the fact that the liturgies and ceremonies were cued into a different hermeneutic. So Valentinians might confess the same creed as a Catholic, "There is one God the Father and everything comes from him, the Lord Jesus Christ." But the meaning they took from it was different. They were not confessing the Father God to be ΥΗΩΗ. Rather they were confessing the Father God to be the transcendent God.⁸⁷

Prior to its emergence, there was nothing like the extreme gnostic orientation that empowered the individual and subverted religion's traditional purpose to serve the gods. Before gnostic spirituality surfaced, the religions in the Mediterranean basin conceived the human being and God to be vastly different, both in terms of substance and power. These traditional religions understood the human being as a mortal creature made by a powerful god for the sole purpose of obediently serving the god and his appointed king as slaves and vassals. This submissive orientation, what I call *servant spirituality*, clearly is foundational to the assumptions fostered by the Apostolic Catholics about the God ΥΗΩΗ, the scripture, worship, and the nature of the human being.⁸⁸

To the contrary, gnostic spirituality spotlighted the perspective that human beings are more than mortal creatures fashioned by a god to do his bidding. The human being is perceived to be bigger and more powerful than the conventional gods, substantially connected to a divine source that transcends creation.

Gnostic movements and religions that were forged out of this new metaphysical orientation focused on the revival of the divinity that lives at the center of the human being. They conceived this revival as a therapeutic ritual journey of integration, a transpersonal journey to spiritual wholeness. They reoriented the focus of religion from the welfare of the gods to the health and well-being of humans who were not to submit to the gods of this world, but vanquish them.

Gnostic spirituality was not innocuous. Its countercultural program reformatted conventional religions in ways that many traditionalists felt would lead to civil disorder, unrest, and damnation. Yet its call for the liberation of humanity from the tyranny of the gods and their kings did not result in military coups and bloodshed. Gnosticism did not emerge out of political revolt nor did it encourage it.⁸⁹

87 Ireneaus, *Haer.* 4.33.3 (Rousseau et al. 1965, 808–810).

88 For a thorough discussion of *servant spirituality*, see DeConick 2016a.

89 Several possibilities for the political origins of gnosticism have been published: unrest in first-century Palestine and Syria (Rudolph 1987, 282–292); Jewish revolt 66–74 CE

Rather gnosticism emerges from the life experiences of people who were oppressed but who had no hope for political advantage. Roman colonialism and imperialism had left them despondent and demoralized. Facing brutal oppression on a daily basis, they began to question the value of their religious upbringing, which taught them to submit to the will of the king as the representative of the gods, to suffer divine retribution for their sins, and to endure the fate the gods had cast for them. For some people this was not good enough. These are the people who began searching for truth outside the normal channels. These are the people who were the first gnostics.

This countercultural spirituality was attractive to many ancient people who had never heard anything like it before. It was not long before gnostic spirituality went viral, engaging the conventional religions in ways that turned them inside out. This new spirituality migrated into Greco-Egyptian circles of the Hermetics and the Jewish circles of the Sethians. It moved through Palestine, Samaria, and Asia Minor where it interfaced with emergent Christianity in the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John. By the second century, a variety of gnostic thinkers had interacted with Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy, ancient medical knowledge, as well as the craft of ancient astrology and magic. The result of this religious interchange is the emergence of a large number of unique gnostic grassroots religious movements with wildly networked mythologies, doctrinal systems, and ceremonies.

The relationship between gnostics and conventional religions was tenuous at best. Because of this, gnostics ended up developing reform and separatist movements at the margins of the conventional religions, where they critiqued conventional thought and worship. More often than not, gnostics found themselves beyond the borders of their ancestral religions. Because of this, many gnostic leaders choose to start their own religions altogether, rather than try to reform an existing tradition. One size did not fit all.

Gnostics heavily critiqued claims to authority that traced religious legitimacy to the traditional gods or their human representatives or their scriptures. For the gnostic, authority lay within the heart of each person, and revelation was its succor. This fostered hostile relationships with those people who honored traditional wisdom. The Apostolic Catholic reactions to gnostic spirituality and the movements and religions it generated were disparaging and dangerous. Gnostic transgression galvanized people of the traditional faiths,

(Grant 1966, 33–37, 118); unrest from 70–135 CE (Dahl 1980–1981 689–712); Roman suppression of Jews in Egypt 115–117 CE (C. Smith 2004); Bar Kokhba Revolt (Yamauchi 1978, 169–174; Wilson 1995, 206; Segal 1977, 262–265); disaffected Jewish intellectuals (Pearson 1997, 120); alienated Egyptian Jews in first century CE (Green 1985).

who sought to control the fall out by sanctioning the gnostics with humiliation, shame, violence, intolerance and accusations of heresy.

New Age Gnostics

For years, I have been aware of an uncanny similarity between the gnostic movements in antiquity and esoteric movements in our own time, often superficially categorized as the New Age.⁹⁰ Both cultivate a form of spirituality that is aggressively countercultural and highly critical of conventionally organized religions. They revel in exposing the errors of conventional religions, religions which they believe to be ineffective. At the center of their transgression is their disapproval of talk-religion, religion that tries to codify God or intellectualize spirituality. For ancient gnostics and modern New Agers, the heart of religion is the subjective experience of the individual meeting a transcendent or transpersonal Reality who is the Source of all existence. Religion is about the God-experience, not God-talk. And so the contemporary spiritual leader Eckhart Tolle says when explaining what God really is, "It's not what you think it is! You can't think about presence, and the mind can't understand it. Understanding presence is *being* present."⁹¹

Both past and present movements have at their center a transcendent or transpersonal Reality believed to be the Source of our existence. All reality derives from this Source, including us. So this divinity is present within the human being and is recognized as the person's true self. Religion is marketed as a quest for wholeness or, in New Age terms, holism. The way to achieve this transpersonal spiritual integration is envisioned as some kind of sacred psychological therapy, with high-octane contemplation and ritual magic in the mix.

The religions that emerge out of this type of spiritual orientation are vibrantly pluralistic, engaging a wide swath of religious currents, alternative science, magical thinking, and stargazing. Revelation and prophecy are central, providing leaders with authority and legitimacy, and new knowledge to package and market.

Historians are reluctant to make anything out of these types of coincidences because of the long span of time between past and present and the clear lack of historical cause and effect. Without a gnostic church surviving from the ancient times into modern America, the linear track of historical development

90 For overviews of the New Age and its characteristics, see Hanegraaff 1998; Roof 1999; Versluis 2014. Cf. Campbell 1972; Bloom 1996.

91 Tolle 1999, 93.

between the old gnostics and the modern New Agers is reduced to nonsense. And yet the similarities are too close to leave to coincidence.⁹² Something is going on here, and it begs explanation.

Certainly there are a number of factors at work, including sociological comparatives. Both gnostic and New Age movements arose during historical periods when there was a rapid breakdown of traditional institutions and structures. In antiquity, we had the brutal imperialism of Rome, which advanced the collapse of native cultures and aroused enmity toward the dominant political regime. Likewise, in the 1960s the American romance with traditional politics and cultural structures disintegrated and left a vacuum where countercultural movements could make headway.

It is equally true that in both past and present, there was increased interaction between native and non-native cultures. This expansion in cultural knowledge created a pluralistic environment where eclecticism and inclusiveness allowed for innovation in the realms of spirituality and religion. The ancient Mediterranean world at this time was undergoing internationalization previously unknown due to the increased traffic of merchants, tourists and new residents on Roman built roads, along the Silk Highway, and over the seas. The 1970s witnessed something similar, when there was an explosion of the Asian into America, as well as an explosion into outer space. With our race to the moon, the options for truth expanded to the point that they became alien.

So both eras, the first century CE and the twentieth century CE were the right moments for countercultural religious movements to emerge and take hold. Yet we cannot reduce the similarities to the fact that the countercultural milieu or conditions were spot-on.⁹³ While the conditions were right, we have to turn elsewhere to explain the meeting of the minds.

Gnostic Artifacts Left Behind

The solution lies in understanding gnosticism as an emergent religious orientation, an innovative form of spirituality, a new way of being religious that persisted outside conventional religious structures while engaging them in disruptive ways. So where does gnostic spirituality survive physically, if not within its own institutions? Quite simply, it is embedded in the literature our ancestors wrote and the cultural artifacts that they created both as expressions of

92 Similarities between gnostic thought and modern American religion have been noted by others. See Bloom 1992, 1996; Smoley 2006; Burfeind 2014.

93 Cf. Kaler 2009.

gnostic spirituality and as attacks to suppress it. Artifacts like literature do not require a church to pass on a tradition from one generation to the next in an historical chain of transmission. All they require is people at any given time in any given location to pick up the book and read it for themselves. The connection to gnostic spirituality is directly made from text to readers. Time and location are irrelevant. The ancient text speaks directly to its readers, whenever and wherever they are.

In terms of literature that has been accessible to the western world since antiquity, we should mention the great gnostic opponents like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Augustine. Their writings have been “good reads” for Christians over the centuries. While believing that they were soldiering against the spread of gnosticism, these authors probably never realized that their attacks only preserved gnosticism and redistributed gnostic spirituality into the religious buffer and our communal consciousness every time their condemnations were picked up and reread.

The other texts to mention are the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. To suppress their gnostic sensibilities and domesticate the texts, the leaders of the Catholic Church imposed strict orthodox interpretations on them. These interpretations were marketed successfully as the *natural* way to read John and Paul. This successful reinterpretation of the texts allowed the leaders of the Catholic Church to canonize the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul within the New Testament. Yet, because the interpretation is the only thing controlling the gnostic spirituality embedded with these texts, the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul are Trojan horses. They await readers who either do not know or do not care about the orthodox interpretation. When these readers engage John or Paul, the door in the Trojan horse opens up and they are confronted with gnostic spirituality head on.

While this brief essay is not the place to map the complex movement of gnostic spirituality from antiquity to the present, explicit gnostic awakenings have taken place, at points when actual literature written by gnostics has resurfaced. These accidents of history have reengaged gnosticism in very public and profound ways. These awakenings have been instrumental in the survival of gnostic spirituality and its ever-widening distribution, as it has been reframed over and over again to meet the needs and interests of new generations of religious people.

There are four major gnostic awakenings that we can mention. The first gnostic awakening probably took place in the medieval period, evident with the emergence of the groups we know of as the Paulicians, Bogomils and Cathars. Although very little, if any, of their literature has survived to impact future generations, legends about them certainly have played heavily into the

modern gnostic consciousness. The second gnostic awakening took place in the late fifteenth century when the *Corpus Hermeticum* was translated and became a reservoir for new generations of people to reengage gnosticism in its most cosmic-friendly guise. The third gnostic awakening occurred in the nineteenth century as the result of the recovery of two old gnostic books known as the Bruce and Askew codices, inspiring figures like Helena P. Blavatsky and Carl Jung. The fourth gnostic awakening began in the mid-twentieth century. It was the result of the remarkable accidental finds of several hoards of gnostic texts, including the Nag Hammadi collection, the Berlin and Tchacos codices, and the ongoing flood of Manichaean materials. This renaissance helped build up New Age movements on the old gnostic frame, which has been bent or broken open to accommodate modern sensibilities like Darwinism, environmentalism, and our race into space.

The Revelatory Milieu

When it comes to the survival of gnostic spirituality, past, present and future, another factor is in constant play. It is a factor that most modern people, scholars included, are uncomfortable discussing because it is irrational. Yet it has happened and still happens and will happen over and over again. It is rapture. The spontaneous religious experience. The sudden overwhelming revelation. The ecstatic encounter with transcendence, with Ultimate Reality, with what the gnostic understands to be the God beyond all gods. Such rapture can be routinized through particular religious rituals and practices, as gnostics did, so that the ecstatic experience of the God beyond all gods is the living source of the gnostic current. Whether we can or ever will be able to explain it, experiences of ecstasy and the transcendence of the self is what continually births gnostic spirituality.

The ecstatic experience of an all-encompassing transcendent Reality prompted many ancient gnostics to seek religious truth beyond their ancestral and regional religions. Because their profound religious experiences did not align with the conventional religions of servitude to powerful capricious gods, they cast traditional religion aside. The gods and religions of the world, they came to believe, were false attempts to capture what cannot be captured, the Reality that is the Source of our being.

In today's global environment, this transtheistic perspective may provide a new solution to religious intolerance and exclusivism. Rather than indulging in the perennialist view that all religions are expressions of the same God, which leaves us with no ability to compare the truth claims of various religions,

the transtheistic perspective encourages critique of religions as human constructions. Perhaps Mani said it best when he called all religions false because their organizers were unable to truly capture the God who had been revealed to them through prophets like Moses, Zoroaster, and Jesus.

The survival of gnostic spirituality is linked to this revelatory milieu, when the visions of true religion generated from ecstasy and experiences of self-transcendence give birth to new scriptures as well as new hermeneutics for understanding the old scriptures. Gnostic spirituality survives then in the artifacts left behind. It lives in the gnostic writings themselves, buried in tombs and brought to light by accidents of history. It inhabits the Hermetic literature, exposed with each new renaissance. But it also lies beneath the vehement words of the writings of the Apostolic Catholic leaders, waiting to be resurrected every time they are read. It hides in the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John, which are Trojan horses. While these scriptures are part of the Christian canon, they are also easily drawn upon by people who do not take from them the same meaning as Catholic Christians. It is waiting to be rebuilt by new generations who read the same passages in Genesis and the New Testament gospels, and the same sentences in Plato, and, like the first gnostics, wonder how their own ecstatic and transcendent experiences of the self and God fit into it all. It is the reason that, since the first century, there have always been gnostics among us.

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