

Conceptualizing Ancient and Contemporary Awakenings:  
*An Analysis of Themes of Social Structures and Individualism  
in Ancient Gnosis, the New Age, and the Modern Day*

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I analyze the claim that April DeConick makes in *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today* that the New Age was inspired by ancient Gnosis. DeConick disregards broader scholarly conversations in defining these two movements, which distorts the fact that she mischaracterizes ancient Gnosis as a fully individualistic faith. A comparison between a Valentinian Gnostic text, *The Gospel of Truth*, and a New Age text, Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, demonstrates the heavy emphasis that ancient Gnosis placed on the shared mythos and social structure, in contrast with New Age individualism. Furthermore, a discussion of what a Gnostic church may look like today, in comparison with the real-life Ecclesia Gnostica, exposes the tension between today's New Age-influenced religious landscape and the religious communities of ancient Gnosis. This work clarifies the unique distinguishing features of the two movements, as well as illustrating the danger of making broad comparisons between religious traditions in vastly different cultural situations and historical eras.

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## **Introduction**

Since the 1945 discovery of what came to be known as the Nag Hammadi Library, which consisted of Gnostic texts previously unseen by Western scholars, many critics have been captivated by discussing the relevance of this newly uncovered material to the contemporary world. Within spheres academic and public, religious and secular, commentators have asked how to characterize ancient Gnosticism, a widely-debated contemporary term describing movements based in early Christianity, Judaism, and Hellenism, among other influences, that valued Gnosis, or transcendent spiritual knowledge. These commentators have asked about the origins of the Gnostic mythos, about what Christianity today would be like if Gnosticism had survived, and about whether any contemporary religious groups are anything like the Gnostics. Amid a rapidly changing religious landscape in which individual spirituality has quickly gained unforeseen popularity over the course of the last several decades, it seems clear to some commentators that the most apt comparison for major trends in the present can be found in these Nag Hammadi texts. For these writers, a resurgence of ancient Gnosis can be found in the late twentieth century push towards contemporary or “New Age” spirituality, a movement distinguished by its syncretization of various esoteric traditions and its focus on the individual experience. In making this claim, these writers seek to draw simplifying connections between two vastly different religious movements.

In his 1996 book *Omens of Millennium*, literary critic Harold Bloom wrote that as the twenty-first century approached, the western world was developing a sudden fascination with themes found in ancient sources, including Kabbalah, Sufism, and what he refers to as “Christian

Gnosticism.”<sup>1</sup> He finds evidence for this claim in the modern interest in symbols including angels, dreams, and near-death experiences, eventually reaching a claim that modern American spirituality is quintessentially Gnostic. Claims similar to Bloom’s have come from radically different sources, including one written as a concerned report by a council commissioned by the Vatican’s Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue. In this report, titled “Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age,’” the authors write that “When one examines many New Age traditions, it soon becomes clear that there is, in fact, little in the New Age that is new.” They argue that what appears to be an appealing new movement in spirituality is instead simply just “a new way of practising gnosticism.”<sup>2</sup> For the Vatican writers, the need to explain the metaphysical spirituality of what they call the New Age comes from a place of fear that well-meaning Christians may be lured into what they see as false worship. Still, in sources as different as Bloom’s book and the Vatican’s report, authors make the claim that contemporary trends in religion and spirituality are reviving the ideas, practices, and spirituality of ancient Gnosis.

One example of this attitude that stands out as especially important is the argument of April DeConick, Chair of the Religion Department at Rice University, in her book *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today*.<sup>3</sup> DeConick argues that such a strong similarity exists between ancient Gnosis and the New Age that the latter can be viewed as a revival of the former. Several factors make DeConick’s hypothesis a particularly useful example to analyze. For one, she writes the book for a more

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Omens of millennium: The gnosis of angels, dreams, and resurrection*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue, *THE BEARER OF THE WATER OF LIFE: A Christian reflection on the “New Age,”* 2003, The Vatican.

<sup>3</sup> April D DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today*, (Columbia University Press, 2016).

general audience, avoiding overly scholarly discourse in a way that oversimplifies her argument to a striking degree. Additionally, one might expect that she, as a scholar of religion, would make a fairly well-reasoned argument. Finally, she argues that the two movements connect through a focus on individual spirituality that is actually far more central to the New Age than it is to ancient Gnosis, reflecting her contemporary perspective. In arguing this point, DeConick inadvertently highlights a major tension between ancient Gnosis and the modern day, and in attempting to erase this tension, DeConick risks flattening and distorting both movements into false parallels of each other.

A careful analysis clarifies the differences between conceptions of the individual and the community in *The Gospel of Truth*, a key Gnostic text discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library, and in Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, a classic book that both describes and promotes the New Age. This inquiry also engages with the way DeConick inadvertently obscures her point through her misuse of terminology and disinterest in responding to scholarly conversations. Furthermore, an examination of the Ecclesia Gnostica, a contemporary Gnostic community, demonstrates how truly out of place ancient Gnostic concepts of social structure would be in the present religious landscape. Through this work, one can observe that, despite the apparent similarities between the two movements, drawing too close of a comparison erases the unique aspects of each. Subjecting the two categories to a more rigorous analysis reveals just how distinct contemporary spirituality is from the movements of ancient Gnosis.

## **Part 1: How April DeConick Makes Her Claim**

In her book *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today*, April DeConick uses popular culture as a tool to demonstrate what she sees as the extant nature of Gnosticism in the modern world.<sup>4</sup> DeConick centers each chapter around a different science fiction or fantasy film, from *The Matrix* to *The Truman Show* to *Star Trek*, arguing that these films demonstrate “the survival of Gnosticism as a prized revolutionary spirituality in America today.”<sup>5</sup> Some of these examples (for instance, *The Matrix*) are more effective than others (for instance, *Man of Steel*) in depicting Gnostic ideas as prevalent in contemporary storytelling. However, few of them begin to do any of the work of proving that Gnostic ideas remain a part of American religion at large.<sup>6</sup> DeConick compares the characters from the films to figures and themes in ancient Gnostic texts, but she rarely examines the history of the connections between contemporary religion and ancient Gnosis.

Though her use of contemporary film does provide a tenuous connection between religion in antiquity and art in the modern day, DeConick only begins to fully attempt to connect the two through a causal relationship in her last chapter, *Gnosticism Out on a Limb*. Here DeConick identifies what she sees as the center of both movements, a shared emphasis on individual religious experience:

For years, I have been aware of an uncanny similarity between Gnostic movements in antiquity and New Age movements in our own time, and I have wondered what might this mean... For ancient Gnostics and modern New Agers, the heart of religion is the subjective individual experience of meeting a transcendent or transpersonal reality that is the source of all existence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> April D DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion From Antiquity to Today*, (Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> This isn't to say that popular culture can't demonstrate the prevalence of ideas in its society - popular culture is certainly a part of culture, but only one part.

<sup>7</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 343.



According to DeConick, ancient Gnosticism has found a resurgence in New Age spirituality, with strong parallels between the two ideologies, explained in part by the twentieth century discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts and in part because, according to DeConick, ancient Gnosticism, like the New Age, was a countercultural movement.

Though DeConick's claims regarding contemporary spirituality as a descendant of ancient Gnosis appear intriguing, they fall short of the burden of proof that such assertions would necessitate. In fact, DeConick fails to observe that, despite the secret knowledge that Gnosis entails, early Gnostic communities likely adhered to hierarchical community structures and shared belief systems much like other religious groups, whereas the New Age harshly criticizes such ideas and structures as "establishment." The individualism central to the New Age and to the contemporary spirituality movement that ensued is unparalleled in ancient Gnosis, and making such a comparison diminishes both the remarkable effects that the New Age has had on western religiosity and the distinctive features of ancient Gnosis, thus limiting the reader's understanding of both movements.

### **An Examination of DeConick's Claim**

This disparity in the centrality of individualism between the two movements is likely the largest problem with DeConick's claim, and it's useful to pay close attention to the way that she makes this claim. Most of DeConick's reasoning for the argument that the New Age is Gnostic is explained in the final chapter of the book, "Gnosticism Out on a Limb."<sup>8</sup> DeConick begins the chapter by focusing, as in other chapters, on an example from popular culture, this time the television miniseries *Out on a Limb*, which depicts an autobiographical account of actress Shirley MacLaine's quest for spiritual fulfillment. At the start of the series, MacLaine feels a

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<sup>8</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 341.

distinct lack of meaning in her life, which begins to change once she meets a New Age artist who helps her find books about metaphysics. In her quest for spiritual knowledge, DeConick describes MacLaine as linking “into a spiritual conversation that has survived since antiquity, that goes back to the Gnostic New Age.”<sup>9</sup> Her use of the term “Gnostic New Age” (here and in the book’s title) is somewhat confusing, because it refers to the Gnostic period that she claims is akin to the New Age, and not to the New Age which she claims is Gnostic. By using this ambiguous phrase, DeConick communicates the parallelism that she sees between the ancient and the modern, linking the two and minimizing their differences.

Her argument that this linking similarity exists unfolds in several ways. Chief among these reasons is the claim that both ancient Gnostic and New Age movements “cultivate a form of spirituality that is aggressively countercultural and highly critical of conventionally organized religion.”<sup>10</sup> For both groups in both eras, DeConick claims that this counterculturalism takes the form of disapproval of what she calls “‘talk religion’ - religion that tries to codify God or intellectualize spirituality.” DeConick’s argument, put simply, is that for both camps, neither the ideology or mythos that each puts forth nor their ethical and social structures are very important; instead, both movements are centered on the “subjective individual experience.”<sup>11</sup> These experiences, according to DeConick, access a divinity that is both the true self within each human being and “a transcendent or transpersonal reality that is the source of all existence,” for both ancient Gnosis and the New Age.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Her use of this term (here and in the title) is somewhat confusing, because it refers to the Gnostic period that she claims is akin to the New Age, and not to the New Age which she claims is Gnostic.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 343.

<sup>12</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 343.

When DeConick claims that the heart of both movements is individual experience, she ignores the many different facets of religion that distinguish these two movements from one another, creating an issue of defining terminology. Instead of a careful conception of Gnosis, the New Age, and religion in general, she condenses both ancient Gnosis and the New Age to the value that they place on individual experience. Though individual experience is important to many religious movements, there are many other elements as well, as the perennial attempts by scholars to create an adequate definition for “religion” can attest.<sup>13</sup> For my purposes in this essay, I will consider these two religious movements to be mostly three-pronged, made up of a shared mythos and a shared interpretation of this mythos, elements of individual experience, and a social and ethical structure to which its adherents belong. Though these three categories may not be completely applicable for all religious movements, they are quite pertinent for ancient Gnosis and the New Age, which value each of these categories to different degrees. DeConick misunderstands the degree to which both the shared ancient Gnostic mythos and the structured religious community mattered to its adherents. This creates a striking contrast with the New Age and contemporary spirituality, a movement with an often-noted emphasis on the role of the individual experience and a disinterest in social structure and in shared mythos.

DeConick also hypothesizes about how these two systems could have developed to be as similar as she believes they are. No ancient Gnostic church survived until the modern day, she notes, meaning that there can be no continuous linear connection.<sup>14</sup> Among the multiple hypotheses she deems possible, she writes that ancient Gnostic movements and the New Age may have come to prominence during similar cultural periods, in which people had less faith in

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Z Smith, "Religion, religions, religious," *Critical terms for religious studies* 1998 (1998): 269-284, provides an interesting look at the background of the formation of the category of “religion.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 344. In this statement, DeConick never mentions the communities that have sprung up during the last century that do consider themselves Gnostic, which I discuss during the third part of this thesis.

traditional institutions, allowing new cultural traditions and distinctly counter-cultural ideas to flourish. For the Gnostics, the Roman system of roads made possible the influx of cultural traditions from all over the Mediterranean and the East, while the imperial culture of ancient Rome continued to exercise power and orthodox varieties of Jewish and Christian faith emerged. For the New Agers, cultural traditions from Asian cultures were embraced through globalization together with the critique of Western political and social institutions. With such similar conditions, and “understanding Gnosticism as an emergent religious orientation, an innovative form of spirituality, a new way of being religious that persisted outside conventional religious structures,” DeConick proposes that the main reason that “Gnosticism” resurfaced to become reincarnated through the New Age is that readers have reconnected with its countercultural features through reading Gnostic texts.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library acts as the start of what DeConick believes is the newest of several “Gnostic awakenings.”<sup>16</sup>

DeConick makes assumptions about both ancient Gnostics and contemporary spirituality, including the claims that ancient Gnostic belief promoted “salvation [without] sacraments or rituals” with individual experience above all else at its center, disregarding the complexities of Gnostic traditions. Also important to pay attention to, however, are DeConick’s assumptions about the movements that she calls the New Age and ancient Gnosis.<sup>17</sup>

### **How DeConick Discusses Gnosis**

DeConick’s argument is further obscured by her disregard of scholarship on ancient Gnosis, especially in her use of the term “Gnosticism,” a term that has been heavily criticized

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 346. As I will later discuss, the claim that Gnostic religion should be understood as “a new way of being religious that persisted outside conventional religious structures” is tenuous at best, misunderstanding the structures that did govern certain Gnostic communities.

<sup>16</sup> This claim is one that is particularly difficult to believe, as it implies that readers of the Nag Hammadi texts directly shaped the ideology of the New Age movement, a hypothesis which DeConick makes no effort to prove other than pointing out what she sees as ideological similarities between the two.

<sup>17</sup> DeConick, 3 and 346.

over the last several decades. The terminology presents difficulty especially because of the turbulent process by which scholars have come to learn about ancient Gnosis, a world which has become more well-known outside the scholarly community only fairly recently. Before 1945, many of the texts available to provide description of ancient Gnosis were written by its critics, most notably Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, who wrote *Adversus Omnes Haereses* (or *Against Heresies*), in which he referred to “the Gnostic heresy.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Hippolytus of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen of Alexandria all wrote condemnations or criticisms of Gnosis, sources that scholars have viewed with skepticism but also found to be fairly accurate. However, the academic study of ancient Gnosis changed drastically in 1945 when a farmer named Muhammed al-Samman discovered a pottery jar underground near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt, finding about a dozen codices consisting of papyrus documents written in the ancient Egyptian language of Coptic.<sup>19</sup> Once translated from Coptic, including an English translation by a team led by James Robinson, the dozens of never-before-seen texts of the Nag Hammadi library was published in book form.<sup>20</sup> Over time, authors’ efforts to analyze these ancient texts captured the imaginations of both other scholars and, at times, the western public eye, especially through Elaine Pagels’ bestselling *The Gnostic Gospels*, originally published in 1979.<sup>21</sup>

As scholars have discovered more information about the groups that people have often called Gnostic, many in recent years have drawn attention to the origins of the terms “Gnosis” and “Gnostic” as both a positive self-designation and as a polemical term. In adapting the epithet

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<sup>18</sup> Nicola Denzey Lewis, "Introduction to “Gnosticism”: Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds," (2013), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, “Introduction to Gnosticism,” 1.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, James M, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, (Brill Archive, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> Pagels, Elaine H, *The gnostic gospels*, (Vintage, 1979). *The Gnostic Gospels* won the 1980 National Book Award for Religion/Inspiration and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism, in addition to critical acclaim.

“falsely so-called Gnosis,” “Gnostic heresy,” and the “Gnostics” in reference to his late second-century opponents, Irenaeus called attention to his opponents’ view of “Gnosis” as a type of knowledge that was often secret, redemptive, and transformative.<sup>22</sup> Though the concept of Gnosis and the name “Gnostics” (or, in Greek, *gnostikoi*) do therefore date back to antiquity, the term “Gnosticism” is more modern, coined by English theologian Henry More to describe a broader range of early Christian heretics.<sup>23</sup> For twentieth-century scholar Hans Jonas, the “Gnostic religion” was a philosophical movement that did not stem from Christianity but instead existed largely as its own tradition.<sup>24</sup> By the 1966 Gnosis Congress in Messina, scholars attempted to redefine “Gnosticism” to refer to “a particular group of systems of the second century after Christ” and define “Gnosis” as “knowledge of divine mysteries for an elite.”<sup>25</sup>

However, as Michael Williams pointed out in *Rethinking Gnosticism*, despite the fact that much of the Nag Hammadi Library was usually considered “Gnostic,” many of the individual texts failed to fit the features laid out by either Jonas’ definition or the definition created by the Messina Congress.<sup>26</sup> Williams attributed this difficulty in categorization to the modernity of the concept of Gnosticism. Another scholar, Karen King, wrote that Gnosticism was a category created in the modern day to describe views contrary to mainstream Christianity. This usage flattens a constantly changing ancient world, where in certain places and at certain times, the so-called Gnostic movements may have been dominant over the proto-orthodox strains that would eventually become the Christian mainstream.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Brakke, *The Gnostics*, (Harvard University Press, 2011), 1. Irenaeus of Lyons drew the phrase “falsely so-called Gnosis” - that is, fallacious claims to secret knowledge - from a warning against false teachers in the post-Pauline text of 1 Timothy 6:20.

<sup>23</sup> Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: an introduction*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 7-14.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, “Introduction to Gnosticism,” 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>26</sup> Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: an argument for dismantling a dubious category*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, “Introduction to Gnosticism,” 19.

A group of scholars whom Nicola Denzey Lewis terms the “Yale school” offer a counterpoint to these views, arguing for a more narrow meaning of the term “Gnostic.”<sup>28</sup> One of these scholars, Bentley Layton, writes of two meanings of the word: a broad meaning, which the modern use of “Gnosticism” implies, and a more narrow meaning, related to the self-designation of some sects of people who called themselves *gnostikoi* (that is, those possessing Gnosis, or secret knowledge of the divine).<sup>29</sup> Layton argues that this narrower designation, referred to by Irenaeus, applies to the most inarguably Gnostic of the texts, which he calls the classic Gnostic scripture and other authors refer to as the Sethian movement.<sup>30</sup> According to Irenaeus, these Sethians or *gnostikoi* inspired Valentinus, who adapted their beliefs into the texts of what became the Valentinian movement, the main variety of Christian Gnosis.<sup>31</sup> The Valentinian school, described in sources from within including *The Gospel of Truth* and sources written by outsiders including Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, flourished from the mid-second century to the fourth century CE.<sup>32</sup> These are the two main movements that comprise the broader meaning of Gnostic; that is, those who use the term Gnosticism, including April DeConick, typically do so referring to the Valentinians and the Sethians.

DeConick, for the most part, rejects criticisms of the term “Gnosticism” and the broader use of “Gnostic.” She views these critiques as an attempt by academia to erase the transgressiveness of Gnostic movements and to portray them as simply alternative Christians,

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<sup>28</sup> Lewis, “Introduction to Gnosticism,” 20.

<sup>29</sup> Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic scriptures: A new translation with annotations and introductions*, Anchor Bible, 1987, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, among others, champions this Sethian designation, in Hans-Martin Schenke, *Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften* (1974), trans. Anne McGuire, unpublished. The Sethians were distinctive in their less heavily Christian belief system and their belief in the cosmic importance of Seth, the son of Adam and Eve, and his lineage.

<sup>31</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.11, states that “Valentinus... adapted the principles of the heresy called ‘Gnostic’ to the peculiar character of his own school.”

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

writing that “we have either declared the Gnostics heretics and thus not worthy of study, or we have deconstructed them so that the Gnostics have been tamed into Christians.”<sup>33</sup> DeConick ties Gnosticism’s importance to its role as a unique religion separate from Christianity, which, in the case of the sects of Mandaeism and Manichaeism, evolved to be free of ties to other religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.<sup>34</sup> She considers the Gnostic “an emergent structure, an innovative concept that some ancient people began to use to describe a new way to be religious,” designating five characteristics of ancient Gnosticism: direct experience of a transcendent God, psychologically therapeutic ritual, a belief in the spark of God in everyone, a syncretistic mentality, and transgressive ideas, which DeConick sees as the most distinctive aspect.<sup>35</sup> In attempting to lay out a set of characteristics, DeConick attempts once more to define Gnosticism, falling into the morass that Williams warns about by setting forth categories that not every so-called Gnostic text or group can fulfill. With her argument for defining Gnosis as a unique religion, she allows herself to use the term “Gnosticism” without addressing its criticisms and joining the scholarly discussion about the terminology. In doing so, she demonstrates a disinterest in engaging with a larger conversation, rejecting a more careful consideration of this terminology in her analysis.

Though there was no single Gnosticism, DeConick thinks of “Gnostics” as a broad group that includes Sethians, Valentinians, and others, including Mandaeans and Manichaeans. When she writes about “Gnosticism,” she uses Layton’s broader definition of Gnostic. In my analysis of her claims, I utilize an example from this broader group of Gnostic traditions, referencing a Valentinian text as representative of what DeConick views as Gnostic. When discussing the

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<sup>33</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 11-12.



history of ancient Gnostic traditions, I focus mainly on this more specific tradition of the Valentinian school, many of the texts of which (*The Gospel of Philip*, some fragments of the writings of Valentinus, and *The Gospel of Truth*, for instance) are indeed quite connected to Christianity in their theology, despite the separation that DeConick claims. Some contemporary practitioners, as I later discuss, also describe themselves as Gnostic and believe their modern-day practices to be a new form of “Gnosticism.” At times the term “Gnosticism” can be helpful because of the amount of work that scholars have done under the presumption that it is a useful category, but in general, I avoid using the broad term of Gnosticism when constructing my own analysis, instead referring to more specific groups or to the less loaded term “ancient Gnosis,” which highlights the value that Valentinians and others placed on “Gnosis” itself.

### **How DeConick Discusses the New Age**

DeConick portrays her second focus, the New Age, as a syncretic, individualistic, and countercultural modern religious movement. Marked by the fact that it has never been governed by any organization or set of texts, the cultural movement called the “New Age” is one of the most intriguing and influential movements within the modern era, and it’s also one of the most elusive to define. While some New Age practitioners themselves, including Marilyn Ferguson in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, attempted to describe the movement as it progressed, many scholars in the last few decades have also been interested in how to characterize the New Age. Catherine Albanese has performed comprehensive research on the New Age by viewing it as a part of an American metaphysical historical tradition, a legacy that ranges from hermeticist colonists to post-Civil War theosophists to, eventually, New Agers and those who have succeeded them.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Catherine Albanese, *A republic of mind and spirit: A cultural history of American metaphysical religion*, (Yale University Press, 2007), 5 and 505. Albanese proposes three different types of religious activity in the history of the United States: Evangelical religion, which centers around strong emotional experiences; liturgical, which centers around communal rituals; and metaphysical, which centers around the experience of “mind.” I disagree with the

Albanese writes that “all the pieces of American metaphysical history came together in the New Age,” suggesting that practitioners freely combined practices, beliefs, and values from different traditions together, pulling from transcendentalism, Christian Science, and various Asian cultures, among others.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the specificity of the groups that had preceded it, the “New Age” essentially became a term to signify the alternative to the mainstream, whether that alternative was presented through medicine or philosophy or religion. Though Albanese describes the New Age in its earliest form as closely related to the channeling of other entities and the study of UFOs, these distinct markers of the movement fell away as it developed and grew.<sup>38</sup> By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, Albanese writes that the New Age label had become much less fashionable and much less common:

Just as Theosophy and New Thought, in the early twentieth century, had dissolved into more and more diffuse renderings, just as their spin-offs and ideational contents spread outside their cultural containers into America at large, the New Age began to do the same. Now it was “new spirituality” - a new spirituality that went its way innocuously and underlabeled.<sup>39</sup>

The clearly labeled New Age movement transformed and faded into something hidden in plain sight, and formerly-New Age concepts, including meditation, psychotherapy, and consumption of goods inspired by Eastern religions, became normal in the western world. Just as distinct belief systems had become more ill-defined as they began to form the New Age, the New Age

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simplicity of these definitions, which imagine that religious movements focus on either emotion, ritual, or mind, and never some more complicated formulation of these elements, but her further analysis of metaphysical religion as preoccupied with the powers of the mind, theories of correspondence between worlds, the use of terms of movement and energy, and salvation understood as healing, cements its use as a helpful category.

<sup>37</sup> Albanese 505.

<sup>38</sup> Albanese 501. Colin Campbell writes extensively about the phenomenon in which alternative and underground groups become syncretized in *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization*, 1972, in *The cultic milieu: Oppositional subcultures in an age of globalization*, ed. Jeffrey S. Kaplan and Heléne Lööw, (Rowman Altamira, 2002). In this collection, Kaplan and Lööw write that in the 1960s and ‘70s, this process began to escalate through globalization. For a different terminology related to these same events, see Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is ordinary," In *Contemporary Esotericism*, pp. 123-143, (Routledge: 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Albanese 513. I build on this concept of new spirituality, referring to it as contemporary spirituality, a descendant of the New Age.

eventually became more ill-defined as most of its undercurrents became exoteric instead of esoteric, becoming public cultural property.<sup>40</sup>

The New Age as a movement thus represents a cultural moment in which many historical strands of metaphysical religion began to unify. In this unification, these strands of separate traditions became much more present, visible, and accessible in the mainstream than they ever had been in the past. The New Age was diverse and metaphysical, and scholars define the movement through the changes that occurred in this diversity and metaphysicality. With this understanding of scholarship on the New Age, one can use this work to ask how accurate DeConick's characterization of the period was.

DeConick's writing on the topic, mostly contained within this final chapter of her book, shows conceptual familiarity with the New Age, if disinterest in the more recent scholarly work on the topic.<sup>41</sup> Significantly, DeConick writes about the New Age in the present tense, discussing "New Age movements in our own time," "modern New Age movements," and "modern New Agers."<sup>42</sup> This distinction, though innocuous, shows a disinterest in New Age scholarship, as to writers including Bender and Albanese, the New Age as such is in the past, and the modern day is already witnessing its effects. The New Age was a transitional period, altering the landscape of metaphysical and alternative religious groups in the United States and bringing these groups' ideas closer to the mainstream in making them more visible and accessible. Thus, referring to the transitional period of the New Age proper does mean something distinctively different than referring to the current post-New Age period does.

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<sup>40</sup> Albanese 511.

<sup>41</sup> In her final chapter, DeConick cites Colin Campbell and Harold Bloom, both of whom I reference here. Both are well-regarded, but neither author provides the most up-to-date or thorough research.

<sup>42</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 343.

DeConick's methodology in her book has been criticized by scholars, including Brian C. Wilson, who writes that "the thesis that the New Age is a form of ancient Gnosticism *redivivus* is implied throughout the book, primarily in the context of the pop culture introductions and conclusions of each chapter, but the thesis is only returned to explicitly in the concluding chapter 11 ('Gnosticism Out on a Limb,') the shortest in the book."<sup>43</sup> The bulk of the book does indeed consist of examples from contemporary film and media that were released any time from 1980, in the case of *Altered States*, to 2013, in the case of *Man of Steel*. DeConick suggests that these films are influenced by a New Age that echoes ancient Gnosis, implying that each film, released over more than a three decade gap, is a part of the New Age, a movement that by most accounts had ended long before the release of *Man of Steel*. Though media can be a useful tool for understanding cultural movements, DeConick makes quite a tenuous leap when formatting each chapter as a comparison between a contemporary film, like *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, and a Gnostic theme or figure, like the ascent of Zostrianos.<sup>44</sup> In using this format to represent her focus on both ancient Gnosis and the New Age, DeConick implies that these contemporary films in one era are akin to sacred texts in another. Though several of these films do express certain New Age ideals (for instance, *Out on a Limb*), others are neither a part of the New Age movement nor the chronological era during which it occurred.

In addition to her use of popular film and misrepresentation of the chronology of the New Age movement, DeConick also makes a very common assumption that the New Age is a fully individualistic movement. This point of view is quite prevalent, but this perspective, which heavily emphasizes the importance of individual experience in New Age and contemporary

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson, Brian C. (2017). *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, by April D. DeConick, Religion (48), 1-3.

<sup>44</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 225. Nothing about the *Star Trek* film implies any connection to ancient Gnosis specifically, as opposed to any other religious tradition that may have some aspect of a search for a god-like figure.

spiritual practice, ignores other crucial factors. Though the concept of the “New Age” is essentially in the past in terms of how practitioners describe themselves, its legacy lives on in the practices of the modern-day spiritual practitioners and mystics whom Courtney Bender terms the New Metaphysicals. Bender’s work questions the common assumption that the “New Age” (or, here, contemporary American spirituality) is a truly individualistic cultural movement, describing the way that, though practitioners may not have the same set of beliefs, many find companionship in one another based on the fact that they’re traveling similar paths.<sup>45</sup> One example of this is the Boston Whole Health Expo, a festival demonstrating a shared contemporary metaphysical culture, where a broad range of spiritual and holistic groups and artists come together.<sup>46</sup> For Bender, events such as this are important to the creation of a contemporary metaphysical community. Practitioners organize themselves into support structures, and though the self and individual experience are important, so are these loose community structures.<sup>47</sup> Bender’s work in describing the social networks that contemporary metaphysical practitioners form adds helpful nuance to DeConick’s assumption that spiritualists practice entirely alone, as does recognition of rituals such as yoga retreats in which one’s individual spiritual journey intersects with the journeys of others. This nuance is important to consider, although the New Age still centers individual experience much more than ancient Gnosis, which emphasizes a more structured community with more shared elements.

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<sup>45</sup> This loose sense of community is similar to what Marilyn Ferguson describes in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, a classic New Age text. This similarity over several decades demonstrates that even after the New Age, its influence remains. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, (London: Paladin, 1982),

<sup>46</sup> Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Reverend Jude Harmon offers another example to the nuanced picture of individualism in contemporary spirituality, discussing the shared rituals that many practitioners find important, such as yoga classes and retreats. Jude Harmon (Reverend at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco), interviewed by Ethan Emmert over the phone, 8 Feb, 2019.

Thus DeConick presents a fairly ordinary representation of the New Age, characterizing the era as longer and later than it was in actuality, but otherwise writing from a rather common point of view, which is important to understand before beginning to analyze DeConick's claims that the New Age movement parallels ancient Gnosis. In my comparison with Valentinian Gnosis, I utilize a formative text from the actual New Age movement, but due to her clear interest in the modern-day as well, I also later confront the effects that the New Age movement has had on the religious landscape. In this examination of the scholarly conversations around Gnosis and the New Age, one can see the careful distinctions that DeConick ignores in the claims that she makes, which complicates attempts to respond to her argument.

## Part 2: On Ancient Gnosis as Similar to the New Age

In her book, April DeConick contributes to a pattern of commentators attempting to interpret ancient Gnosis as a precursor to a religious tradition in the modern day. When DeConick refers to ancient Gnosis and to the New Age with a lack of specificity and caution, she makes it more difficult to analyze her claim that the New Age movement reflects and acts as a contemporary incarnation of the ideology of ancient Gnosis. However, a more careful analysis of a text from each movement reveals clear differences in how each treats the roles of the individual and the community. Comparisons between the two movements are not without merit - both encouraged immediate change in the world and displayed a strong focus on individual experience. However, where the New Age emphasized this experience almost exclusively, ancient Gnosis also valued community structures which utilized a shared interpretation of experiences through a Gnostic mythos.

This disparity becomes clear in an analysis of the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* in comparison to Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, two texts largely representative of their respective movements' views on this theme.<sup>48</sup> Neither ancient Gnosis nor the contemporary New Age has any single definitive text, but these two texts are useful in that each is both descriptive of and prescriptive for their movements. In the *Gospel of Truth*, a speaker often theorized to be Valentinus, writer and founder of the Valentinian tradition, addresses an audience of believers and specifically instructs them on how their church community should function, founding these instructions in a mythological premise.<sup>49</sup> In this sermon-like format, *The Gospel of Truth* describes the Valentinian Gnostic belief system as well as prescribing a way of action

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<sup>48</sup> An analysis of only two texts may appear to be an overly narrow focus, but it allows for more careful and in-depth analysis.

<sup>49</sup> Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A new translation with annotations and introductions*, (Anchor Bible, 1987), 250.

for the practice of Valentinians as a religious community. In a similar way, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* balances description of the then-emerging New Age with an optimistic encouragement for the reader to enter the movement.<sup>50</sup> The book had an impressive amount of influence on the new movement, being described as a bible of the New Age by the New York Times and being cited in many later works on the topic.<sup>51</sup> Both texts therefore offer overviews on the movements to which they belong, as well as instructing followers to enact beliefs in a certain way, and as both texts were very influential within their movements, they provide a useful basis for a comparative study.

### **Community in *The Gospel of Truth***

*The Gospel of Truth* seems to have had a vital role in the Valentinian tradition, according to Irenaeus of Lyons, who wrote of the Valentinian community reading a text of the same name.<sup>52</sup> The text focuses heavily on the nature of the Son (or Jesus), as well as the nature of Gnosis as something that can grant people a state of repose.<sup>53</sup> However, in the religious ideas that the text imparts, it also conceptualizes the nature of the human condition itself, imagining how this condition can be changed by a communal effort. Acting as an instructional guide based in myth for how the Valentinian religious community should function, *The Gospel of Truth* gives insight into the role of the community structure in addition to the individual experience in Valentinian Gnostic thought and practice.

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<sup>50</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, "The Aquarian conspiracy: personal and social transformation in our times," JP Tarcher, Los Angeles, CA (1980).

<sup>51</sup> William Grimes, "Marilyn Ferguson, Apostle of the New Age, Dies at 70," *New York Times*, November 4, 2008. For discussion of *The Aquarian Conspiracy* as a crucial text, see Catherine L. Albanese, *A republic of mind and spirit: A cultural history of American metaphysical religion*, Yale University Press, 2007, Jon P. Bloch, *New spirituality, self, and belonging: How new agers and neo-pagans talk about themselves*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998, and Colin Campbell, *Easternization of the West: a thematic account of cultural change in the modern era*, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, 3.11, <http://gnosis.org/library/advh3.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A new translation with annotations and introductions*, (Anchor Bible, 1987), 250.



*The Gospel of Truth* presents a mythic narrative rooted in a cosmic predicament dooming humans to an incomplete life unless they acquire Gnosis. A narrative section at the beginning of the text declares that Error personified, seeking knowledge about its origin but unable to gain knowledge about the Father, the source of the entirety, began to reside in humans.<sup>54</sup> Error substituted beauty for truth, trying and failing to make up for this lack of Gnosis. According to *The Gospel of Truth*, many negative aspects of human condition derive from this ignorance. For instance, forgetfulness arises out of not knowing the Father, but Gnosis of the Father can put an end to this forgetfulness.<sup>55</sup> *The Gospel of Truth* then elaborates on how one can gain this Gnosis on a metaphorical level. According to the text, the ways to gain this knowledge mostly stem from the Son, also conceptualized as the “Name” of the Father. In his crucifixion, the Son is portrayed as fruit that people can eat to gain Gnosis of the Father, finding him within themselves:

He was nailed to a tree and became fruit of the father’s acquaintance... To those who ate of it, it gave the possibility that whoever he discovered within himself might be joyful in the discovery of him. And as for him, they discovered him within them.<sup>56</sup>

Here, *The Gospel of Truth* references Christ’s crucifix as a tree with fruit that provides knowledge (or Gnosis), likely a reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the book of Genesis. Jesus, through his teachings, acts as a positive counterpart to the forbidden fruit, offering the transformative, restoring Gnosis of the Father. Another of *The Gospel of Truth*’s metaphors continues to elaborate on this theology, stating that “the living enrolled in the book of the living learn about themselves... returning to [the father].”<sup>57</sup> Here, Gnosis provides a

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<sup>54</sup> Gospel of Truth 17.17, trans. Layton. Though Layton’s translation of the text refers to Error as “error,” with a lowercase E, it also uses feminine pronouns to refer to her. As the word refers to a feminine personification of error, not the concept of error as we would use the word, I’ve capitalized it to make it clear that she is a character in this narrative, not merely a concept.

<sup>55</sup> Gospel of Truth 18.7.

<sup>56</sup> GTr 18.24-31. The comparison between the crucifix and a tree is not unprecedented, also seen in 1 Peter 2:24.

<sup>57</sup> GTr 21.1.

knowledge that not only leads one to the truth about the Father as the origin of the fullness but also leads one back to a state of unity with the Father.

Another exemplary passage that displays the *Gospel of Truth*'s depiction of the human existence without Gnosis is found in an account of ignorance, which is compared to having nightmares: "Thus they were unacquainted with the father... there was much futility at work among them on his account, and much empty ignorance- as when one falls sound asleep and finds oneself in the midst of nightmares."<sup>58</sup> Ignorance places the unacquainted in the metaphorical position of being asleep, and the futility in addition this ignorance is compared to the useless unpleasantness of nightmares. The text then lists many typical nightmare scenarios, eventually saying:

That is how each person acted while being without acquaintance: as though asleep. And the person who has acquaintance is like one who has awakened. And good for the person who returns and awakens! And blessed is the one who has opened the eyes of the blind!<sup>59</sup>

This passage demonstrates *The Gospel of Truth*'s view of Gnosis as something positive that humans urgently need to awaken themselves from their state of ignorance, error, and forgetfulness.

Considering the nightmarish description of existence that *The Gospel of Truth* describes and the value of Gnosis as the only means to combat this state, it's clear that Gnosis is drastically important on a level that would impact the way that people think about themselves and about others. *The Gospel of Truth* provides insight into the way that a Valentinian church may have functioned interpersonally, especially in one passage of exhortation that follows the aforementioned narrative:

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<sup>58</sup> GTr 28.32-29.11.

<sup>59</sup> GTr 30.6-14.

Make steady the feet of those who have stumbled, and stretch out your hands to those who are sick. Feed those who are hungry, and unto those who are weary give repose; and awaken those who wish to arise, and get up from your sleep. For it is you who are unsheathed intelligence.<sup>60</sup>

The message in each of these commands is clear: Those without Gnosis, even when they have difficulty along their paths, should be - and need to be - helped by those who do have Gnosis. Those faithful people within the Valentinian tradition should act as a force for good, working as “unsheathed intelligence” to spread truth and Gnosis.<sup>61</sup> According to this excerpt, the role of those who have been awakened is to awaken others to the Father.

This devotion to helping others in one’s community seems reasonable in light of the importance that Gnosis clearly holds, as established by the text’s theological views on the human condition. If, as *The Gospel of Truth* says, “whoever does not possess [Gnosis] is in need, and what that person needs is great, inasmuch as the thing that such a person needs is what would complete the person,” the situation of these people who are blind and without Gnosis is, in their perspective, very dire.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, providing assistance (through steadying their feet, helping the sick, feeding the hungry, and awakening the sleeping) absolutely seems rightful and just. It seems that those with Gnosis are even somewhat responsible for helping those without. One could easily imagine this responsibility for aiding those who have not yet awakened transforming into a full-fledged evangelism.<sup>63</sup>

These ethical exhortations to help others are especially important given that for the Valentinians who read the *The Gospel of Truth*, Gnosis was likely acquired only through social interactions. In the text, people seem unable to reach Gnosis of the Father all by themselves.

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<sup>60</sup> GTr 33.1-9.

<sup>61</sup> GTr 33.8-9.

<sup>62</sup> GTr 21.14.

<sup>63</sup> I acknowledge that using the word “evangelism” is somewhat anachronistic, but I don’t intend it with its contemporary protestant connotation, only its use in preaching one’s religious views to those outside of a tradition.

Based on the importance of the Father and Son to each person in *The Gospel of Truth*, one might imagine that there could be some way to search deep within oneself to find acquaintance with the Father, perhaps through prayer or a mystical experience. However, the text doesn't seem to support the idea that individuals could find their own individualistic truths within themselves without the aid of anyone else. People seemingly depended on the help of others who had already reached these gnostic epiphanies. This emphasis on social assistance is clear in other passages as well: the text commands the reader to "speak of the truth with those who seek it, and of acquaintance with those who have sinned in the midst of their error."<sup>64</sup> In other places, this obligation to speak about the truth becomes a compulsion to testify about one's own experience: "All, individually, will speak concerning the place from which they have emanated and the lot according to which they have received their establishment in the state of rest."<sup>65</sup> This passage implies that all who have Gnosis of the Father not only *should* but also *will* tell the ignorant. Therefore, *The Gospel of Truth* creates an imperative to assist others in the acquisition of Gnosis, as justified by a mythical predicament in which creation is ruled by Error and ignorance.

### **Individualism in *The Aquarian Conspiracy***

The New Age conception of the human condition differs from this foundation, basing its encouragement for an urgent transformation in a different sort of crisis. When Marilyn Ferguson wrote *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, she never mentioned "Gnosis" as such, nor did she refer to the Valentinian mythos of the Father, Error, and ignorance.<sup>66</sup> She intended to describe what she believed was a transformation of human consciousness and a remaking of society, which has

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<sup>64</sup> GTr 32.35.

<sup>65</sup> GTr 41.3-7.

<sup>66</sup> Following DeConick's theory of the Nag Hammadi texts causing the New Age as a new Gnostic awakening, one would certainly expect an influential New Age writer to reference Gnosis in some way. The fact that Ferguson does not do so acts as effective evidence against DeConick's claim of a causal relationship, even if it doesn't answer the question that I pursue of whether there is a resemblance.

come to be known as the New Age movement.<sup>67</sup> From her point of view, writing in the late 1970s, Ferguson describes a world in crisis. The troubles that surround the world for Ferguson are distinct from *The Gospel of Truth*'s theologically-based predicament, however, and instead one based on the behavior of human society. She writes:

Our crises show us the ways in which our institutions have betrayed nature. We have equated the good life with material consumption, we have dehumanized work and made it needlessly competitive, we are uneasy about our capacities for learning and teaching. Wildly expensive medical care has made little advance against chronic and catastrophic illness while becoming steadily more impersonal, more intrusive. Our government is complex and unresponsive, our social support system is breaking at every stress point.<sup>68</sup>

For Ferguson, the state of crisis is not predestined by the creation of humanity or caused by a mythological flaw, but instead caused by problems in the way that humans interact with one another and with the world. The crises are, as Ferguson writes, due to the way that human institutions mistreat nature. The burden of the world's crises falls not on creation or the cosmos but on the way that humans think and organize themselves.

Even if the causes differ, however, the two conceptions of the human situation share a similar urgency. From Ferguson's view, the time to strike is *now*. As the situation she describes is less inherent to the human condition and more caused by the constructed western culture, it's much more specific and much less enduring than the message conveyed to the Valentinians in *The Gospel of Truth*. The issues that Ferguson writes about are pressing in a completely different way: Instead of a call for all individual people to awaken themselves and each other from their nightmares, the much-needed awakening must take place on a global level. People need to act now, not because they need to salvage their lives from their ignorance, as *The Gospel of Truth* proclaims, but instead because they need to rebuild their cultural institutions, including hospitals,

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<sup>67</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, (London: Paladin, 1982), 17-21.

<sup>68</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 29

public schools, and governmental structures. “We are living in *the change of change*,” Ferguson writes, conveying that even the way that progress occurs is in flux, signalling the true novelty of the New Age, “the time in which we can intentionally align ourselves with nature for rapid remaking of ourselves and our collapsing institutions.”<sup>69</sup> Ferguson’s urgency is thus timely, not timeless, and it centers around fixing, not transcending, the world, but her message expresses an urgent need for awakening all the same.

Therefore, both texts describe that changes must occur to solve vast problems in the world. While *The Gospel of Truth* hints at a responsibility to help others to find this saving Gnosis, Marilyn Ferguson describes a distinctly different model of interpersonal relationships, favoring less structured networks in which people help each other in following what may be very contrasting paths. Ferguson stresses the shared aspect of the movement that she describes, which is demonstrated even in the book’s title, but the relationships she describes have a markedly less hierarchical form than those in *The Gospel of Truth*. By calling the movement the Aquarian Conspiracy, Ferguson highlights the interconnectedness that is key to the New Age as she envisions it:

I thought again about the particular form of this movement: its atypical leadership, the patient intensity of its adherents, their unlikely successes. It suddenly struck me that... they were not merely cooperating with one another. They were in collusion. “It” - this movement - was a conspiracy!<sup>70</sup>

Ferguson supports her use of the term “conspiracy,” which often has a negative connotation, by referencing its etymological meaning of “to breathe together,” representing what she calls “an intimate joining.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 29

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 19. Ferguson’s explanation for using this term is interesting and, to me, not very convincing.

The structure that this joining takes place within is not a religious community per se - Ferguson notes that structures of organized religion are too formal, authoritarian, and outdated for New Agers.<sup>72</sup> Instead, someone's awakening to their new perception of the world introduces them into what Ferguson calls a support network, as the conspiracy "offers moral support, feedback, an opportunity for mutual discovery and reinforcement, ease, intimacy, celebration, a chance to share experiences and pieces of the puzzle."<sup>73</sup> In these support networks, people who are undergoing spiritual transformations can find mutual support in small groups of people who are encountering similar changes. This conception of a support network differs from the Valentinian conception of the church community in a few ways, including the situations when each community becomes necessary. In *The Gospel of Truth*, the awakened Gnostics need to reach out to those who have not yet been awakened, but in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Ferguson does not imply that people need to spread the truth to those around them who have not begun their transformation, as any one truth may not apply to multiple people. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of a support network, people who are all in the midst of transformation, helping to guide one another through it. Those with sight aren't aiding the blind - instead, all co-conspirators are supporting one another as they begin to see more and more. In this way, all New Agers have some authority, a less harsh power gradient than in the Valentinian model.

Ferguson also discusses the role of more traditional teachers in New Age spirituality. In a brief passage within the chapter concerning the importance of direct personal spiritual experience, she describes the difference between the New Age model of teaching and the traditional western model: "In the West religious issues are customarily supposed to be resolved

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<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 368.

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 113. For more on the concept of support networks in the modern day see also Courtney Bender, *The new metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American religious imagination*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

by faith, but a teacher in the traditions of direct knowing encourages questions, even doubts.”<sup>74</sup> Though teachers exist within the New Age, it isn’t their job to answer questions for their students, but instead to help the students find their own way, finding answers that feel true to them. Ferguson demonstrates the purpose of the New Age spiritual teacher by referencing a metaphor from the Buddhist tradition: “[T]he teacher is compared to a finger pointing to the moon. Once you see the moon - once you understand the *process* - there is no point in looking at the finger.”<sup>75</sup> Teachers in the New Age serve to impart not knowledge or wisdom, but instead to impart technique; instead of liberating the students, the teachers show the students how to liberate themselves.<sup>76</sup>

The social aspects of the New Age movement that Ferguson describes therefore serve a different purpose from the social assistance described in *The Gospel of Truth*. Though New Agers may share ideas with one another, they also place much more emphasis on personal experiences. In the model set forth by *The Gospel of Truth*, those without knowledge must be awakened to the truth by someone who has that knowledge already. In the New Age model that Ferguson describes, however, being guided socially by others in a support network is just one way for people to further their transformations. Ferguson also describes many other ways to “expand one’s consciousness” through personal spiritual and mystical experience.<sup>77</sup> Ferguson quotes a Zen sage, who said that “One can only grasp it by experiencing, as one feels for oneself cold and hot by drinking water. It is to melt all space in a wink and to look through time, from

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<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 376. Ferguson’s use of the phrase “direct knowing” draws on the mystical and metaphysical origins of the New Age, as she references a quote by William James that “mystical states seem to those who experience them to be states of knowledge.” Therefore, Ferguson defines this movement once again around the vital importance of individual experience.

<sup>75</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 379.

<sup>76</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 379.

<sup>77</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 362.



past to future, in one thought.”<sup>78</sup> Here we see the importance of direct experience in the New Age spirituality, learning from personal experience instead of through listening to speech or reading written language. Direct experiences are inherently personal and not able to be generalized to an entire religious congregation. Ferguson uses statistics to illustrate the way that she sees people flocking to a new interest in direct experience, citing that 80% of respondents to a poll were strongly interested in “an inner search for meaning,” a search that would lead to knowledge “impossible to articulate.”<sup>79</sup> *The Gospel of Truth* does not describe this impossibility, instead directing readers to articulate their knowledge while testifying to others.

*The Gospel of Truth* presents a blueprint for evangelism in a Valentinian church, acknowledging that the predicament of human ignorance cannot be escaped without help and compelling those with Gnosis to assist those who are without. In laying out these commandments, the text designs a community-based set of guidelines for a Gnostic church, shaped by a Gnostic conception of the human condition. These guidelines value the preservation of the church community as a unit, in addition to valuing the process of teaching by the knowledgeable. In *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, however, there is no simple religious unit like the Valentinian church community providing outreach to evangelize those outside of the tradition. Support networks serve for New Agers to reinforce and encourage one another along their journeys, assisting one another as they interrogate their prior beliefs and conceptions about the world; teachers help those interested in expanding their consciousness to understand techniques that will help them along their personal spiritual journey; but *The Aquarian Conspiracy* makes

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<sup>78</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 362. This “sage” is unsourced in Ferguson’s text, and I personally believe this anecdote may have been apocryphal, but for more information on how New Agers use eastern spirituality, see Colin Campbell, *Easternization of the West: a thematic account of cultural change in the modern era*, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 364.

room for the individual in a way that *The Gospel of Truth* never does. By privileging personal and direct experience of the divine, New Age spirituality allows for individualist truths over a shared worldview. For this reason, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* could never construct a church community in the same way that *The Gospel of Truth* does. From the perspective expressed in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, despite all of the unorthodoxy in the mythos that the Gnostic text presents, a Valentinian community modeled after *The Gospel of Truth* would be a part of the religious orthodoxy that the New Age rejects.

### **Part 3: Gnosticism After the New Age**

In DeConick's hypothesis, the present descendant of ancient Gnosis is the New Age, but as my careful analysis demonstrates, this statement misunderstands and mischaracterizes both ancient Gnosis and the New Age. However, if the New Age is not, as DeConick claims, contemporary Gnosis, where can contemporary Gnosis be found? Does ancient Gnosis have any descendant that can thrive in the modern day? In fact, Gnosis has no heir in the contemporary western world that fully captures the spirit of its ancient incarnations. Furthermore, in comparing a hypothetical contemporary revival of ancient Gnosis to a religious community that has attempted to take up the Gnostic mantle, it becomes clear that in the contemporary post-New Age religious landscape, it's very unlikely for a religious community to both thrive and accurately emulate ancient Gnosis.

#### **What would a successful post-New Age Gnostic community look like?**

To understand the tension between Gnosis and the current Western religious landscape, it's helpful to imagine how a contemporary adaptation of an ancient Gnostic church or community would operate in the modern day, which can be done quite easily with the analysis of *The Gospel of Truth* that I have provided above. In structure, it would have a social community, with some sort of power hierarchy. Because of the vital importance of Gnosis, those who had already been awakened would likely be under some sort of imperative to guide others. Experience of Gnosis would also be an important component, and these experiences would likely be shared and interpreted through a common lens, based on the communal interpretation of sacred texts. In terms of mythos, it could be contrary to the beliefs of Christian orthodoxy and mainstream society in the way that ancient Gnosis countered proto-orthodoxy.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> When I use the phrase "Christian orthodoxy" here, I refer not to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but instead to dominant mainstream western Christian groups, especially the Catholic church.

Intriguingly, this vision of a contemporary Gnostic church does not differ greatly from an extant community which calls itself the Ecclesia Gnostica. To be fair, the theoretical church, despite its reliance on community and hierarchy, would likely depend less on a strict hierarchical structure than the Ecclesia Gnostica does. Still, despite this difference, contrasting the Ecclesia Gnostica with a community functioning on Valentinian principles reveals the tension inherent between ancient Gnosis and the post-New Age United States.

### **Introducing the Ecclesia Gnostica**

Los Angeles' Ecclesia Gnostica is one of the most well-known examples of a contemporary incarnation of Gnostic thought and practice, with Bishop Stephan Hoeller presenting his own brand of modern-day Gnosticism. If DeConick's theory of ancient Gnostic movements being echoed within the New Age movement or contemporary religious movements were correct, then the two categories would meet in the Ecclesia Gnostica, a community founded in the last few decades that claims to be the definitive twenty-first century descendant of ancient Gnostic movements. Through examining how the works of Hoeller, particularly his "Gnostic Catechism," deal with themes of the individual versus the established religious community, it becomes clear that the Ecclesia Gnostica's institutionalized, Catholic-esque approach to Gnosis is for the most part not at odds with ancient Gnostic traditions and that the community's structure fulfills the ideas of religious community described in the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*. In comparing the role of the individual versus the community in the acquisition of Gnosis in both traditions, it becomes evident that the Ecclesia Gnostica's power structure is more antithetical to New Age individualism than it is to ancient Gnostic tradition.

The question of how the Ecclesia Gnostica's institutional nature relates to Christian orthodoxy has arisen before. In 2003, an interviewer for Paranoia Magazine, a conspiracy

theorist publication for “readers with alternative views,” asked Hoeller, the head of the Ecclesia Gnostica, “How does a Gnostic Mass differ from a Catholic Mass?” Hoeller responded: “The forms are rather similar, although we use scriptures and readings and prayers from Gnostic sources. Here, in the Gnostic Mass, the intention is primarily to elevate and to transform the worshiper's consciousness so as to attain a liberating insight - Gnosis.”<sup>81</sup> It's true that the form of Hoeller's Gnostic Mass bears striking similarities in format to the Catholic Mass. Though the two differ in theology, the Ecclesia Gnostica does not seem to reinvent what a religious service or community can be. We can see this elsewhere in the Ecclesia Gnostica's liturgy - for instance, the Catholic Hail Mary is normally written as follows:

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.  
 Blessed art thou amongst women,  
 and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
 Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
 pray for us sinners,  
 now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

But in the Ecclesia Gnostica's revision, the role of Mary becomes that of Sophia, the divine personification of Wisdom:

Hail, Sophia, filled with light, the Christ is with Thee.  
 Blessed art Thou among the Aeons,  
 and blessed is the liberator of Thy light, Jesus.  
 Holy Sophia, Mother of all gods,  
 pray to the light for us, Thy children,  
 now and in the hour of our death. Amen.<sup>82</sup>

The similarities are unsurprising: Though Hoeller has had an interest in early Christian heresy since he was young, reading about figures including Valentinus and Simon Magus, he grew up in

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Guffey, “The Suppressed Teachings of Gnosticism,” *Paranoia Magazine*, 2003.

<sup>82</sup> A. W. Hill, "Exile in Godville," *L.A. Weekly*, April 05, 2016, <https://www.laweekly.com/news/exile-in-godville-2139968>.

the Catholic tradition and even studied for the priesthood. It wasn't until his adulthood that, taking refuge from Budapest in Belgium during World War II, Hoeller came across a French group of worshipers whom he called "live Gnostics." In 1958, having moved to California, Hoeller became a priest of the small American Catholic Church, then later became a bishop of the Pre-Nicene Gnostic Catholic Church. Both of these sects eventually became absorbed into the Ecclesia Gnostica, Hoeller's own parish.<sup>83</sup>

Therefore, through the traditions that helped to form the Ecclesia Gnostica and through Hoeller's own personal interest in the Catholic Church, Catholicism has had a central role in the creation of the Ecclesia Gnostica. Hoeller formed the Ecclesia Gnostica largely using the Catholic Church as an example, but with altered doctrine and liturgy. Operating within this format, the Ecclesia Gnostica has achieved fairly widespread recognition. The Los Angeles parish hosts a service of the eucharist every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, and additional churches in Portland, Seattle, and Austin each offer similar services weekly.<sup>84</sup> Four of Hoeller's own books are in Amazon's top 100 books related to gnosticism, a category that includes scholarly and historical works as well.<sup>85</sup> His views have been written about in the Huffington Post and LA Weekly.<sup>86</sup> The Ecclesia Gnostica is one of the highest profile communities that claims any sort of gnostic belief system.<sup>87</sup> As one of the premier contemporary representations of Ancient Gnostic traditions, the Ecclesia Gnostica therefore structurally resembles a traditional church community. Despite being one of the highest profile contemporary

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> "Schedule of Services at the Ecclesia Gnostica," Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, <http://gnosis.org/eghome.htm#ParishLA>

<sup>85</sup> "Best Sellers in Gnosticism," Amazon, <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Gnosticism/zgbs/books/172804>. Rankings are as of the end of 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Scott Smith, "The Case for Gnosticism, Part 5: Comparing Gnostic Christianity with the Traditional Version," Huffington Post, July 13, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/596791fee4b07b5e1d96edcb>.

<sup>87</sup> Ali Bhutto, "Behind Closed Doors," Newslines, May 2018. <https://newslinemagazine.com/magazine/behind-closed-doors/>.

Gnostic communities, the Ecclesia Gnostica does not match DeConick's description of Gnosis as centered around the subjective individual experience, but the power structures that Stephan Hoeller encourages in his church's "Gnostic Catechism" and other sources are actually not unprecedented in the history of Gnostic thought.

### **Individualism in the Ecclesia Gnostica**

*The Gospel of Truth*, as my earlier analysis demonstrates, describes the world as a nightmarish reality, incomplete and ruled by Error, with the only escape from this negativity being the acquisition of Gnosis. The mythos that Stephan Hoeller describes in the Ecclesia Gnostica's Gnostic Catechism finds a similar foundation in a tragic cosmic situation. Hoeller refers to the realm in which humans exist as a "material-psychic prison" for the spirit, ruled over by evil Archons.<sup>88</sup> This conception of earth as a prison is not referred to directly in *The Gospel of Truth*, but it resembles the attitude with which the speaker in *The Gospel of Truth* describes the general state in which humans live on earth. For Hoeller, the human condition is awful, and though he makes no mention of Error, he implies a similar state of life as incomplete, writing:

Being trapped in the body and deceived by the Archonic part of the soul, all humans suffer from a deficiency which they share with all of creation. This deficiency, however, is not the result of any particular sinful act on the part of human ancestors (Adam and Eve). Rather than being a sin (moral failing), it is an unfortunate existential condition.<sup>89</sup>

Much like the Valentinian construction of the human condition, Hoeller states that humans are incomplete not because of their sinful actions but because of a problematic origin of the observable universe. This origin differs somewhat in its details, instead taking inspiration from

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<sup>88</sup> Stephan Hoeller, "The Gnostic Catechism," Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, [gnosis.org/ecclesia/catechism.htm](http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/catechism.htm), 151. Archons aren't present in the Gospel of Truth, but they're commonly referred to in other Gnostic texts, especially those that are part of the Sethian tradition.

<sup>89</sup> Stephan Hoeller, "The Gnostic Catechism," 56

the “classic Gnostic” or Sethian texts that feature Sophia and Yaldabaoth. However, both *The Gospel of Truth* and Hoeller’s account of creation describe a deficient earthly reality.

Hoeller writes that the obstacle in absolving humanity of its flaws is ignorance, thus making the solution the attainment of Gnosis, similar to a model seen in ancient Gnostic texts including *The Gospel of Truth*.<sup>90</sup> Hoeller elaborates on his conception of Gnosis in a section labeled “Lesson IV: Of Gnosis And Salvation.” In the *Ecclesia Gnostica*, Gnosis is transformative, described as “revelatory and salvific knowledge of who we were, of what we have become, of where we were, of wherein we have been thrown, of whereto we are hastening, of what we are being freed, of what birth really is, and of what rebirth really is.”<sup>91</sup> This definition of Gnosis encompasses all knowledge of what it means to be human within the mythos that Hoeller describes. Though the specifics of this mythos do not fully align with those of *The Gospel of Truth*, the two systems do have similar emphases, both predicated mainly on two truths: First, that the world was created imperfectly, and second, that gnosis can save humans from this dark reality.<sup>92</sup>

Accepting both of these truths, even with the different mythologies that surround them, each text then describes the ways in which people should learn of these realities in their lives. *The Gospel of Truth* gives insight into the process of acquiring Gnosis interpersonally, a view of Gnosis that leaves little room for the “subjective individual experience” that April DeConick

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<sup>90</sup> GTr 28.32-29.11.

<sup>91</sup> Stephan Hoeller, “The Gnostic Catechism,” 151. This definition comes from the gnostic Excerpts of Theodotus, a series of sayings that Clement of Alexandria compiled originally written by Theodotus, a Valentinian Gnostic. The Excerpts of Theodotus can be read at the Gnostic Society Library on the website of, interestingly, the *Ecclesia Gnostica*. Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts of Theodotus*, trans. R. P. Casey, (Studies and Documents 1; London: Christophers, 1934), 40-91, online at Gnostic Society Library, <http://gnosis.org/library/excr.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, the New Age at large would break with the first point of these two. Though many New Agers, including Marilyn Ferguson, believed the world was currently in an era of many problems and bad circumstances, they often also believed that creation could be redeemed and that some divinity could be found within it. The position of the *Ecclesia Gnostica* and of most ancient Gnostics would say that the process of finding divinity is centered around moving away from the world to find divinity elsewhere, as opposed to the New Age seeking of divinity within the world.



proposes to be the heart of the ancient Gnostic religion.<sup>93</sup> For those adhering to *The Gospel of Truth*, Gnosis was not the product of prayer, meditation, or logic, but instead something that was taught by others. Instead of individualized, personal truths, *The Gospel of Truth* describes Gnosis of shared, if hidden, truths that do not vary from person to person. In the introduction to Hoeller's Gnostic Catechism, he makes a similar point, writing, "It is no doubt true that without Gnosis there is no Gnosticism, but it is also true that without the context of the Gnostic Mythos the Gnosis of the individual loses its salvific character."<sup>94</sup> Hoeller thus places importance on a personal experience of Gnosis, which he views as "the salvific and revelatory experience of transcendence," but he feels that the experience of this Gnosis is worthless without it taking place within the shared interpretation of a larger gnostic mythos. For Hoeller, the experience of Gnosis is personal, but the actual knowledge that is learned must be contextualized in a shared mythos. In *The Gospel of Truth*, these truths take the form of myths that require more interpretation, but both these myths and their interpretation are shared communally between teachers and followers.

Both *The Gospel of Truth* and Hoeller's *Ecclesia Gnostica* conceive of knowledge as shared community beliefs, not as individualized insight. Both texts also organize their instructions for their religious practice around this sharing of knowledge, revealing the institutionalized hierarchical nature of their communities. Much of *The Gospel of Truth* directs its readers to share knowledge with each other on an individual level, but it also suggests that there may have been a more strictly hierarchical power structure in place. One can observe this fact from the homily genre in which the text is written. Whoever originally wrote or delivered

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<sup>93</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 343.

<sup>94</sup> Hoeller, "The Gnostic Catechism," Introduction. Hoeller here uses the term "Gnosticism" to refer to the religious tradition, and "Gnosis" to refer only to the personal knowledge itself.

*The Gospel of Truth*, whether Valentinus or another Valentinian leader, had a role of power above the others, instructing them on the interpretation of a shared mythos and how to acquire Gnosis.<sup>95</sup> Leaders including Valentinus, Ptolemy, and the writer of *The Gospel of Truth* were tasked with helping Valentinian congregations in interpreting texts and understanding the world, revealing not a democratic but a hierarchically organized religious community.

Similarly, in his Catechism, Hoeller writes that Gnosis is acquired “primarily by way of the study and assimilation of the teachings of the Messengers of Light and of the seers and sages of the Gnostic tradition and by way of the amplification of these by individual insight.”<sup>96</sup> This statement builds on Hoeller’s concept of Gnosis as an experience and revelation which means nothing without understanding the gnostic mythos. Hoeller therefore creates a hierarchy similar to the Valentinian power structure, wherein ancient Gnostic texts (including *The Gospel of Truth*) have the highest authority, carrying the teachings of sages of the Gnostic tradition. Hoeller and the Ecclesia Gnostica clergy take the role that Valentinus, Ptolemy, and other community leaders took in the past, interpreting the texts and preaching about them to the masses.<sup>97</sup> Other duties that the clergy hold are also elaborated on in the Gnostic Catechism, where Hoeller writes about his responsibility as the church’s bishop to act as the successor to the apostles and administer sacraments. In addition to acting as an interpreter of scripture, this role

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<sup>95</sup> Ismo Dunderberg, “Myth and Lifestyle for Beginners,” in *Beyond gnosticism: myth, lifestyle, and society in the school of Valentinus*, Columbia University Press, 2008. Other sources verify this hierarchical power structure, which may have taken place in a more private context at times: for instance, in the *Epistle to Flora*, Ptolemy teaches a woman who seemingly knows little about Valentinianism his own view of the scriptures as a respected thinker in the community. He acts as a figure of authority here, introducing her to Valentinian interpretation of Old Testament texts.

<sup>96</sup> Stephan Hoeller, “The Gnostic Catechism,” 62. “Messengers of Light” is a term that Hoeller seems to have borrowed from the Mandaean tradition, using it to refer to beings, including Jesus Christ, sent from the Pleroma to bring humans to gnosis. Hoeller mentions this in “Introduction to the Ecclesia Gnostica,” Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, [gnosis.org/ecclesia/ecclesia.htm](http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/ecclesia.htm).

<sup>97</sup> In Hoeller’s case, these masses receiving his interpretation are more limited, consisting of only a few dozen people each week. However, through the internet, his views and interpretations of his Gnostic mythos are expressed on [gnosis.org](http://gnosis.org) to an unknown number of people.

as administrator of sacraments sets him apart from the congregation.<sup>98</sup> *The Gospel of Truth* does not go into any detail on the duties that people in positions of power may hold other than preaching to the congregation, but other Valentinian texts, including *The Gospel of Philip*, describe communal rituals that were likely performed by some sort of authority figure.<sup>99</sup> The reliance on communal ritual and power structures distinguish the Valentinian community - and the Ecclesia Gnostica - from contemporary spirituality.

Certain aspects of the Ecclesia Gnostica may strike modern critics as surprising, including the community's Gnostic Catechism and its strict power structure that calls to mind the offices of the Catholic Church. Yet these characteristics of the Ecclesia Gnostica do not differ strikingly from the characteristics of a community envisioned based on *The Gospel of Truth*. Both the Gnostic Catechism and *The Gospel of Truth* set out a worldview in which creation is incomplete and imperfect, yet redeemable by acquiring Gnosis; both characterize knowledge as acquired socially; and both enforce a power structure in which this knowledge is passed down hierarchically. This construction of knowledge as impersonal and shared, not personal and individualized, runs contrary to DeConick's claim that ancient Gnosis is centered around the "subjective individual experience."<sup>100</sup>

If subjective individual experience is not the center of the Valentinian community as described by *The Gospel of Truth*, it shouldn't be surprising that it's not the center of the Ecclesia Gnostica as described by the Gnostic Catechism. The Ecclesia Gnostica may even go further in allowing emphasis on the individual experience than did some Valentinian

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<sup>98</sup> Stephan Hoeller, "The Gnostic Catechism," XI. For some sacraments, such as Extreme Unction and Healing, only deacons, priests, and bishops can administer them to the congregation, and for others, including the sacrament of Holy Orders, Bishop Hoeller is their sole administrator

<sup>99</sup> Gospel of Philip Log. 60, trans. Layton. To be fair, the office of Bishop in the Ecclesia Gnostica is much closer to the offices of the Catholic church than the Valentinian construction of teachers and students is, but the point remains that both groups include power hierarchies that are a far cry from New Age individualism.

<sup>100</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 18.

communities: Hoeller writes that the mythos he writes about in the catechism is “of course not closed; rather it invites modifications and additions of an appropriate nature from other seers and travelers on the Aeonial paths of Gnosis.”<sup>101</sup> Here Hoeller allows for people to conceive of the gnostic mythos as not entirely solidified, but rather as a body of mythic teachings that modern-day experiences of Ecclesia Gnostica members can still add to. In making this allowance, Hoeller shows the way that the Ecclesia Gnostica, even in its rather hierarchical form, has been influenced by the democratic nature of New Age movement. The twentieth century saw an unprecedented amount of support for the concept that Americans could choose their own religious beliefs without any input from institutions of organized religions.<sup>102</sup> Viewed within the context of a groundswell of new religious movements with more vague doctrines that allow for congregants to have more choice in their beliefs, the Ecclesia Gnostica’s birth during the late twentieth century as a community that has a catechism and shared truths is surprising. The Ecclesia Gnostica’s catechism and hierarchical structure is rigid, but not as rigid in comparison to ancient Gnostic communities as it is in comparison to its fellow contemporary religious movements. It doesn’t rewrite the formula of what a church should be, but neither did ancient Valentinians, seemingly - their beliefs may have been counter-cultural, but their structure was not. Following April DeConick’s claims, one would be surprised by the strict structure of the Ecclesia Gnostica, expecting it to be a blend of ancient Gnostic movements and the New Age, both of which she interprets as intensely individualistic. However, much more than it subverts norms of organized religion, the Ecclesia Gnostica subverts the New Age, and its tendency towards shared truths doesn’t conflict with the ancient Valentinian Gnostic tradition.

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<sup>101</sup> Stephan Hoeller, “The Gnostic Catechism,” Preface.

<sup>102</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*, Princeton University Press, (2001), 145.

In its more traditional, ecclesiastical structure and its subversion of New Age norms, the Ecclesia Gnostica has chosen an interesting path for itself, and it's easy to wonder what effect these structural choices have had on the community's success. Hoeller has been persistent in offering services each Sunday and Wednesday, but despite claims often made about a Gnostic revival in the modern day, the decades over which these services have been running have accumulated few disciples. In 2005, services averaged about 40 worshipers, with other branches, including one in Seattle, reporting a maximum number of attendees at any given service around two dozen.<sup>103</sup> The Ecclesia Gnostica's in-person following, therefore, is modest: It certainly exists, but one would have a difficult time making the claim that a Gnostic revival is sweeping the nation.

The modest numbers of Ecclesia Gnostica members is due in part to the inaccessibility of its ecclesiastical structure. In contemporary spirituality, a movement marked by its individualism, people around the world can seek their own truths and find them with no need to attend a church service.<sup>104</sup> The New Age popularized the concept of truth as easily accessible, with no need to belong to a heavily structured religious organization. However, the website for the Ecclesia Gnostica writes that "regular attendance at [the Sunday morning Eucharist] service advances the personal spiritual transformation of those attending in marked measure."<sup>105</sup> Seekers hoping to have a "personal spiritual transformation," then, will have a difficult time doing so unless they live in Los Angeles and enjoy participating in a community structured after a traditional Christian church. These factors make the Ecclesia Gnostica, regardless of its degree of

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<sup>103</sup> A. W. Hill, "Exile in Godville," L.A. Weekly, April 05, 2016, <https://www.laweekly.com/news/exile-in-godville-2139968> and "Hagia Sofia Gnostic Church," Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, <http://gnosis.org/seattle/about.htm>.

<sup>104</sup> As I discuss otherwise, the importance of individualism to contemporary spirituality does not mean that it is entirely individualistic, as spiritual teachers and group rituals still have an important role for some, but these are less crucial than in a traditional church system.

<sup>105</sup> "Home," Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, <http://gnosis.org/eghome.htm>.

adherence to the ancient Gnostic tradition, rather inaccessible, as evidenced by its attendance numbers.

The Ecclesia Gnostica as a religious community is also adjoined to the Gnostic Society, a group founded in 1928 by James Morgan Pryse to study “Gnosticism and the Western Esoteric Tradition generally.”<sup>106</sup> Their website describes the Gnostic Society as the Ecclesia Gnostica’s “affiliated lay organization,” with their section of the website hosting longer lectures, a bookstore, and, most notably, the Gnosis Archive. This library claims to include over a thousand documents related to ancient Gnosis, including the Nag Hammadi library translated in its entirety, as well as many texts by and related to Valentinus.<sup>107</sup> This archive acts as a valuable resource both for those seekers interested in Gnostic texts and for those pursuing scholarly research on the topic. Interestingly, these documents are completely accessible for free, accessible to any users of the internet. Absent in the Gnosis Archive is the community, the shared interpretation that Hoeller gives in services, and the “personal spiritual transformation” that attending them can provide; present is an incredible collection of texts dating back to antiquity that readers anywhere can interpret in their own way.

Again, the Ecclesia Gnostica has a much more formal hierarchy of power than one would expect from an ideal modern-day Valentinian Gnostic church, but I would hypothesize that even this perfect theoretical church would still fail to find widespread popularity. Even with a looser structure than the Ecclesia Gnostica, it would still have an ecclesiastical form that would bear some similarity to the organized religion that the New Age rejected. The New Age as an era may not be occurring in the present day, but its effects on contemporary spirituality are still in progress, namely the popular spiritualist interest in individualism and disinterest in organized

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<sup>106</sup> “An Introduction to the Ecclesia Gnostica,” Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, <http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/ecclesia.htm>

<sup>107</sup> “Archive Index Search,” Ecclesia Gnostica, Gnosis.org, [www.gnosis.org/search\\_form.html](http://www.gnosis.org/search_form.html)

religious structure. Due to these effects that the New Age has had on the current landscape of western religion and spirituality, few spiritual practitioners would take interest in this theoretical Gnostic church, for the same reason that relatively few have taken interest in the Ecclesia Gnostica. In the twenty-first century, spiritual practitioners have little interest in a countercultural mythos unless it's accompanied by a countercultural structure that can make it individualized and accessible.

Therefore, in DeConick's claim that the New Age bears striking similarities to ancient Gnosis, she fails to understand that if Gnosis lives on in the modern day, it will be organized differently from the form in which it existed in the past. It will be a version that suits the post-New Age world, fundamentally altered so that people can read texts in places like the Gnosis Archive and draw their own conclusions about them, instead of belonging to an in-person Gnostic community.

## Conclusion

In DeConick's sensational claim, she compares an ancient movement with a contemporary one. In doing so, she falsely equates the individualism found in contemporary spirituality with the Gnostic church-based structure. More importantly, though, she reduces these movements to the way in which their adherents individually interact with divinity, ignoring the other facets of their religiosity. The reduction of these religious movements to one of their traits (and, in the case of ancient Gnosis, doing so inaccurately) puts the desire to make a striking claim ahead of careful scholarship.

Additionally, to make the claim that the New Age is stunningly similar to an ancient movement diminishes the importance and the uniqueness of both movements. The New Age played a crucial role in transforming religiosity in the United States and Western Europe, leading to strong support for an individualized contemporary spirituality. Though the New Age was based in the syncretic amalgamation of many other historical movements, it's unprecedented in the effect that it had on the western world. The New Age brought formerly alternative ideals of individualist and anti-establishment thought into the mainstream, and its successful championing of these ideals has no precedent in ancient Gnosis. The New Age is unique in both its representation of the alternative entering the mainstream and its focus on the individual. The growing spiritual-but-not-religious contingent in the US demonstrates a contemporary interest in individualist religion, an interest spread through the New Age. This interest is causing Americans to leave traditional religious groups in large numbers, and to consider it the same as Gnosis, which was at times a very ecclesiastical religious movement structured around community, diminishes the New Age's transformation of the religious landscape. Similarly, ancient Gnosis, especially in the Valentinian school, valued the community and their social structure in a way that DeConick's comparison diminishes.



To refer to ancient Gnostic movements as “the Gnostic New Age” muddles perception of Gnosis in an era when the public is still forming a conception of what the term means. Because of the sudden access to texts that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library granted to analysts, the late twenty-first century signified a scramble to make sense of new information about Gnostic movements. For DeConick, and other sources including Harold Bloom and the Catholic Church, the most salient way to interpret Gnosis was to compare it to the modern day. Still, no matter how dramatic and intriguing such a comparison may appear, its implications limit the accurate perception of both movements. On the other hand, a careful analysis of ancient Gnosis and the New Age, acknowledging the scholarly conversations surrounding each movement, both evidences the vital importance of careful use of terminology in scholarship and demonstrates the distinctions between the ancient Gnosis and the New Age.

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