

CRAFTING GNOSIS:  
GNOSTIC SPIRITUALITY IN THE ANCIENT NEW AGE

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What is it to craft something? To make. To fashion. To forge. With skill. By hand. To practice a trade. To practice an art. Crafting involves specialized knowledge, learned from a master, limited only by the imagination and cunning of the crafter who, when crafting, creates something new from the old.

My title, "Crafting Gnosis: Gnostic Spirituality in the Ancient New Age" is a double entendre. First, I am crafting a contemporary understanding of Gnostics in antiquity by studying how ancient religious people crafted identities as seekers or possessors of Gnosis. The ancients were knowledge-makers, crafters, as much as I am. My academic goal is to craft a contemporary understanding of the ancient Gnostics that corresponds tightly to the religious identity these ancient people had crafted for themselves.

Second, I am crafting a hermeneutical link between the past and the present by deploying the tag "New Age" with reference to the ancient world. I am doing so, not to suggest that there is a historical connection between the religious world of the ancient Gnostics and the religious world of the modern New Agers, although it is true that some New Agers have been exposed to ancient Gnostic sources and have incorporated this exposure into the New Age repertoire.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I mean to suggest a one-on-one correspondence between the motifs of the ancient Gnostics and those of the modern New Age, although there are similarities in some motifs that might be valuable to examine.<sup>2</sup> Rather, by invoking the New Age, I do so to craft a semantic link of analogy between the present and the past.

The New Age as a concept conjures for us a contemporary religious movement whose boundaries are difficult to delineate and whose relations among individuals and groups are less than clear.<sup>3</sup> Since it is not a single organization, it has no unambiguous leaders beyond those who are

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Burns 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. O'Regan 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Hanegraaff 1998, 1, 7–8.

self-proclaimed at the grassroots level, and no official documents or standard religious practices beyond those idiosyncratic items associated with those grassroots movements. The New Age is understood to emerge from the cultic milieu, the deviant belief systems and practices of society, as an alternative to the dominant cultural trends as they relate to spirituality and metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> The thing that unifies this diversity is a common spirituality of seekership and a quest orientation.<sup>5</sup> This quest orientation takes the shape of a personal spiritual journey focused on the inward search for meaning, self-transformation, and personal integration.<sup>6</sup>

I am not a specialist on the New Age or contemporary therapeutic movements. Rather, I study the ancient world. But what has struck me for some time now are my observations that these similarities between the New Age movements and those of the old Gnostics from the first four centuries of the common era are too strong to ignore.<sup>7</sup> The fact that we are dealing with very different historical moments and very different societies means that the sameness is either coincidental or dependent on something else. Today, I am going to explore the latter option, and suggest that the “something else” may have to do with the way humans think.

By combining insights from cognitive linguistics with historical-literary analysis of ancient texts, I suggest that a new type of religiosity, “Gnostic spirituality,” formed in the first century of the common era, when the adjective *gnōstikos* came to describe a particular kind of religious person, one who possessed *gnōsis*. A constellation of attributes was associated with this emergent category, including mystical practices, a transgressive esotericism and hermeneutics, a belief in an innate spiritual nature, a quest orientation, and inclusive metaphysics. Together these characteristics defined a new religious identity: Gnostic spirituality.

This concept was a cognitive innovation, what cognitive linguists call *emergent structure*. This new conceptual category was distributed and entrenched in Western culture as a cognitive model or frame. It became part of the fabric of Western cultural memory, embedded and disseminated in literature, practices, and conversations. While various ancient Gnostic groups and systems emerged as expressions of this new type of religiosity but ultimately failed to perpetuate themselves, the cognitive frame remained avail-

<sup>4</sup> Campbell 1972, 122; Hanegraaff 1998, 1; Roof 1999, 203–212.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell 1972; Roof 1999, 46–76.

<sup>6</sup> Roof 1999, 46–76.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kaler 2009 who explores the idea that the Nag Hammadi codices were copied for seekers within a deviant religious environment or cultic milieu.

able to recruit by future generations. The *Gnostic* in this way triumphs, remaining a vital aspect of Western culture and critique of Christianity even today, where it is recruited and reshaped by contemporary New Age movements.

In this essay, I must limit myself to the basics. First, I want to explain how emergent structure forms and is perpetuated. Second, I want to work on recovering from our ancient sources the *Gnostic* as an emergent structure and entrenched cognitive frame. And third, I want to craft a useful understanding of Gnostic spirituality based on this exploration.

### 1. THE WAY HUMANS THINK

My understanding of knowledge—its creation and dissemination—has expanded to take into account that mental activity is dependent on the situation or context in which it occurs. This localization refers to the fact that cognition relies on both our brains and bodies, as well as our cultural and social environments into which the cognitive process extends.<sup>8</sup> Recent studies in cognition argue for a concept called “extended mind” which means that cognition extends beyond the boundaries of the individual person.<sup>9</sup> Cognitive systems reach beyond individuals into their physical and social environments. Not only do we regularly off-load cognitive processing onto the environment and upload from it, but we cannot think without doing so. As Wilson and Clark observe, “In the domain of cognition, no one is an island.”<sup>10</sup>

So cognition foremost is embodied. Knowledge is produced, stored, and distributed by brains dependent upon bodies. Without the involvement of the body in both sensing and acting, our thoughts would be empty.<sup>11</sup> This embodied knowledge represents individual cognition, which involves largely unconscious processes, personal memory, the senses, bodily activities, and personal experiences. Professor Coulson has observed that cognitive activity has a mediating role between an individual’s words and the world. Our words arise in the context of human activity and they are used to evoke mental representations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robbins and Aydede 2009, 3; Wilson and Clark 2009, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson and Foglia 2011, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson and Clark 2009, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson and Foglia 2011, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Coulson 2001, 17.

Second, knowledge is enculturated. By this I mean that it is constructed by culture, and it constructs culture simultaneously. Knowledge is dispersed and spreads contextually within a larger cultural web that involves conversation, cultural memory, and artifacts. Artifacts are produced to prompt specific constructions of meaning, and serve as reference points, external memory resources and material anchors. So cognition is not simply something that happens inside our heads. It extends beyond our skin and is deeply dependent on and integrated into our cultural environment.<sup>13</sup>

This extension of cognition includes our social environment too. So my third point about knowledge is that it is embedded in local social matrices. These social matrices serve as group environments for activity, production, conversations, and collective or communal memory. Particular domains of knowledge serve to structure the memories and activities of the group, and provide resources for the storage, interpretation, and transmission of shared knowledge.

Finally, knowledge is historically situated and historically developed, not in some linear process or ladder of progress, but in complicated networks of speciation and clades that have common ancestors and traits, as well as unique and new characteristics. These networks do not only involve current contacts and conversations. They are deeply linked to the past, in mappings that continually remodel the past to bear on the present.

## 2. THE CREATION OF EMERGENT STRUCTURE

The main feature of situated cognition that I want to focus on in order to address the question of how Gnostic communities emerged and self-identified as unique and distinctive is a concept from the field of cognitive linguistics called emergent structure. I rely heavily on the work of Professors Lakoff, Johnson, Fillmore, Fauconnier, Turner, and Coulson who have been instrumental in developing a theory of cognition—how we construct meaning—that explains the imaginative, the creative and the innovative. This perspective relies on empirical evidence that the locus of reason for humans is the same as the locus of perception and motor control.

Professors Lakoff and Johnson in their ground-breaking book *Metaphors We Live By* argue for a new understanding of metaphor as the basis for the way humans think.<sup>14</sup> Metaphor is not only a matter of expressed language

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<sup>13</sup> Hutchins 1987; Suchman 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Lakoff and Johnson 1980.

or linguistics. Rather, cognition itself is grounded in analogy. They make the case that human thought processes, including even our mundane conceptual systems, are metaphorical in nature. In other words, when we want to reason about ourselves or our world, we mentally map a set of knowledge (also called domains, schemas or frames) onto another set by using analogy. This means that important information and inferences from the originally separate sets of knowledge are integrated to construct meaning analogically.

While considering Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory foundational, Professors Fauconnier and Turner have gone on to develop mental space theory in order to explain how cognitive innovations—what they call emergent structures—come into being. In other words, our thinking processes are not just about reproducing the input domains or even their partial structures. Our thinking processes are creative and frequently result in new structure or logic that was not found in the initial domains. When emergent structure forms and stabilizes, according to Professor Fauconnier, "it reorganizes our categories and allows thought to move in new directions."<sup>15</sup> When cognitive work occurs within the new blend, using the emergent logic, this is called "running the blend."<sup>16</sup>

To explain how this process works, Fauconnier and Turner build a network model based on the concept of mental spaces, which in reality are sets of activated neuronal assemblies. Mental spaces are conceived by Fauconnier and Turner to be small conceptual packets that we construct while we think and talk. Mental spaces are models that help us understand the dynamic mappings that occur in thought and language.<sup>17</sup> Mental spaces are conceptual in nature, having no ontological status beyond the mind.<sup>18</sup> They are understood by Fauconnier to be domains of discourse that are built up as we think and talk, providing the substrate for our reasoning and for our interface with the world.<sup>19</sup> In this model, cognition depends upon the capacity of our minds to manipulate a web of links between these mental spaces.<sup>20</sup> Conceptualization is a complex mental operation that includes binding, linking, blending, and integration over multiple mental spaces. Professor

<sup>15</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 150–151.

<sup>17</sup> Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 40. See Lundhaug 2010, for an application of cognitive blending to the Gnostic texts the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Exegesis on the Soul*.

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff 1987, 282.

<sup>19</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 149.

Coulson notes that meaning is constructed when mental spaces are linked into a bigger network.<sup>21</sup>

What is this network? Local mental spaces are connected or linked to long-term schematic knowledge known as “frames” and to long-term knowledge specific to the individual. Professor Fillmore explains that a frame is a category or system of concepts that are related in a holistic sense.<sup>22</sup> Mental spaces within working memory recruit frame structure and other knowledge otherwise located in long-term memory in the conceptualization process.<sup>23</sup> Professor Coulson explains that cognition involves linguistic cues that prompt us to recruit a referential structure or frame in which we fit relevant information about each of the entities of discourse.<sup>24</sup>

How does this work in terms of emergent structure or new ideas? Analogy is what enables the mapping of partial frame structures from two or more domains in order to produce new meaning. These frame structures are mappable because of their similarity with each other. The frames can be envisioned as schema with specific slots. These slots are filled with elements particular to each domain. When one domain maps onto another, structure is projected from the domains, often partially. Innovations are created when the newly constructed or target domain is expanded by extending the input structures further, creating new structure in the target domain, or reinterpreting the old structure in the target domain. This ability to extend the structure is the most crucial component of innovative thinking.<sup>25</sup>

When emergent blends are successful, they become for us new ways to construe reality. Some blends are significant enough to represent revolutions in thought. Fauconnier remarks that the change brought about by the rise of an emergent blend is permanent because, once formed, the emergent blend remains available to run more expansively. While this type of change is most readily noticeable in major scientific shifts, it also applies to conceptual change more broadly: to the reconceptualization or formation of categories, cultural models, and language itself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Coulson 2001, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Fillmore 2006, 373.

<sup>23</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 22–23; Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Coulson 2001, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Fauconnier 1997, 103–104.

<sup>26</sup> Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 12, 22–24; Fauconnier 1997, 168.

## 3. RECOVERING THE GNOSTIC FRAME

Past scholarship has been focused on understanding the ways in which historical forces are at play in the emergence of Gnostic communities and identities, although it has cast a spell of pure origins of Christianity that has been difficult to break. This spell has bound the Gnostic to a later secondary era when the pure Christian religion was threatened with Gnostic erosion and degeneration, but was saved by the heroes of the Catholic Church.<sup>27</sup> The other story that has been told most recently has unintentionally resulted in the complete marginalization of the Gnostic, so that the Gnostic is no longer part of history, and only the Christian remains.<sup>28</sup>

My own construction of the Gnostic asks us to consider the role of cognition in the formation of new identities and their perpetuation. What I will suggest here is that Gnostic spirituality is a complex cognitive network, an emergent structure, that forms in the first century. It is a new religious frame that people begin to identify with, using it to think about and discuss metaphysics and engage perennial conversations, many of which have existential dimensions. Once this new conceptualization of spirituality is formed in the West, it becomes dispersed into the wider cultural web of knowledge, entrenched in long-term and collective memory and distributed within artifacts that were built to prompt these specific constructions of meaning. This framework continues to be operational today, as the scaffold for the spirituality of the New Age and therapeutic movements.

My thinking on this subject has been greatly helped by the work of Professor Lakoff, who wrote an outstanding book in the late 80s on how humans create and use categories. The book is called *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Professor Lakoff understands the cognitive frames we use to organize our knowledge to have a logical integrity and be relatively stable structures in long-term memory. Each frame represents a whole system or category that is idealized, what Lakoff refers to as an idealized cognitive model. This frame or model is a complex symbolic structure where all of the structural elements exist

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<sup>27</sup> For most recent variations of this narrative, see Jenkins 2001; Bock 2006; Evans 2006; Wright 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Williams 1996; King 2003. For responses calling to limit the use of the terms Gnostic and Gnosticism, see Marksches 2003; Logan 2006; Marjanen 2008; Brakke 2010. Pearson 2007 remains a strong advocate for the existence of Gnostic religion in antiquity and the use of words Gnostic and Gnosticism.

independently, but the meaning of the whole is a function of the meanings of its parts.<sup>29</sup> These frames or models represent background or prototypical knowledge necessary for us to understand a given word or concept. Their complexity is increased when more than one idealized cognitive model combines to form clusters.<sup>30</sup> One of the advantages of Lakoff's idealized cognitive model is its flexibility. His model emphasizes that our thoughts are always relative to frames that are idealized, frames that may or may not fit the world well, and may not be consistent with one another.<sup>31</sup>

Categories then are conceptual structures or frames, that we recruit to discriminate phenomena.<sup>32</sup> Professor Langacker has shown that categorization is a comparative construal operation that is a fundamental operation of human cognition.<sup>33</sup> This cognitive operation involves a comparison between the phenomenon at hand and the entrenched frame that is recruited based on analogous elements.<sup>34</sup> Categories are constructed through experience that includes discourse and they are recruited as we conceptualize our experience.<sup>35</sup> The creation of categories occurs through discourse and negotiation, so they are not only idealized but also ideological and strategic. When categories are constructed in reference to a group identity, they tend to profile particular features of identity. When this happens, they highlight differences between the in-group and the out-group.<sup>36</sup>

The cognitive frame or model that I will employ to understand the *Gnostic* is the taxonomy. This type of category is one of the most common that we use to make sense of our experiences. They are structured as bundles of features or properties.<sup>37</sup> While taxonomies distinguish things by kinds based on shared characteristics or properties, we can imagine that there may be multiple reasonable ways to sort any given thing to represent different aspects of reality. But there is a folk sense among humans that there is only one correct division of the kind. We need to resist this folk sense as we continue the project of crafting the Gnostic. Taxonomies are cognitive constructions, invented by human minds.<sup>38</sup> Taxonomies are *idealized* cognitive models that

<sup>29</sup> Lakoff 1987, 284.

<sup>30</sup> Lakoff 1987, 68–90.

<sup>31</sup> Lakoff 1987, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Hart 2011, 171–192.

<sup>33</sup> Langacker 1987, 103–105.

<sup>34</sup> Croft and Cruse 2004, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Hart 2011, 171–192.

<sup>36</sup> Hart 2011, 171–192.

<sup>37</sup> Lakoff 1987, 286–287.

<sup>38</sup> Lakoff 1987, 118–121.



we construct and employ as frames when we think. While frames provide structure to our thoughts, they are not inflexible, but can shift to accommodate new information.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes they reflect our world well. Other times they do not. They may be consistent with other cognitive structures we hold, or they may not. But they are not only useful for cognition; they are necessary. We cannot think without them.

My project strikes at several major problems that have yet to be resolved in the study of Gnosticism, including whether or not there ever was a real type of religion that we can call Gnosticism. For me, this is a non-starter. Yes, there was a real type of religion that we can call Gnosticism and it still exists today. By the early third century, both Manichaeism and Mandaism had formed as new religions quite independent of other contemporary religions in terms of self-identity, religious beliefs and practices. Both religions were Gnostic religions. Mandaism continues today, although now most of the practitioners live in the diaspora.

So the trouble is not whether or not Gnosticism as a type of religion existed in antiquity. The trouble is that we have not yet determined how this type of religion formed or what its relationship was to the other major religious traditions in the ancient world. At the crux of the problem is the fact that we have not been able to delineate how Gnostic identity was initially constructed and continually negotiated by the Gnostics. Instead, we have adopted the constructions of the Gnostics that were formed by the first Catholic Christians, or we have dropped them completely. The result has been the same. The Gnostic is rejected—either as a heretic or as a heretical construction—having no worthwhile contribution to make to Western thought and culture.

So what about the *Gnostic*? First it is important for us to remember that the word *gnostic* was invented by Plato as an adjective of the word *gnōsis* that could be substantivized and used as a noun.<sup>40</sup> In the ancient world, *gnōsis* was not so much propositional knowledge, as it was the direct apprehension of objects. It was knowledge that involved knowing someone or something (i.e., “I know God”) as distinct from knowing *about* someone or something (i.e., “I know about God”).<sup>41</sup> *Gnostic*, as it was used almost exclusively in the Platonic tradition, referred to cognitive activity or theoretical understanding (*gnōstikē epistēmē*) such as exemplified by mathematics, rather than

<sup>39</sup> Coulson 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Smith 1981, 799–801; Layton 1995; Marksches 2003, 7.

<sup>41</sup> LSJ 355a; Layton 1987, 9.

understanding practically applied (*praktikē epistēmē*) such as exemplified in the work of a carpenter or statesman.<sup>42</sup> It points to knowledge that depends on a person's innate cognitive abilities (the divine element of the soul) versus knowledge acquired and used on the job. It was the cognitive capacity to know someone or something.<sup>43</sup>

Its application to people or a social group is discovered in second-century materials when it is used to define people who called themselves *Gnostics* or were called *Gnostics* by outsiders.<sup>44</sup> For the first time, the substantivized *gnōstikoi* is employed with reference to people, as in *Gnostic people*. It is an application of a technical philosophical term of Platonic-Pythagorean origins—*Gnōstikos*—to persons.<sup>45</sup> As such, it is an emergent blend.

Heresiologists in general use *Gnōstikoi* to indicate those people who belong to a *hairesis* or *scholē* that deviates from their own Catholic form of Christianity.<sup>46</sup> This pejorative keying of *gnōstikoi* with *hairesis* in a deviant sense is a strategic way that heresiologists mark the Gnostics negatively as outsiders and transgressors of Catholic Christianity. The Gnostics were understood by the heresiologists to be so diverse, that Irenaeus compares the Gnostics to mushrooms that have sprung up among the Christians.<sup>47</sup>

In particular, Irenaeus applies the name to those who propagate Sethian mythology or something like it, such as the so-called Ophian mythology.<sup>48</sup> The second-century Roman philosopher Celsus knows of some Christians who call themselves *Gnostics*, although it is not clear if these are the Ophians whom he later describes as *Christians*, or another group.<sup>49</sup> Porphyry in the third century identifies the Gnostics as Christian *hairetikoi* who were present in Plotinus' seminar.<sup>50</sup> They were therapeutic magicians and exorcists, as well as philosophers.<sup>51</sup> They knew a mythology such as that found in *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, which probably were versions of the Nag Hammadi texts modern scholars identify with the Sethian tradition. Epiphanius recognizes as *Gnostic* a number of groups that have Sethian mythological

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Pol.* 258E. Cf. LSJ 355b.

<sup>43</sup> Smith 1981, 801.

<sup>44</sup> Brox 1966, 105–114; Pétremont 1984, 358.

<sup>45</sup> Smith 1981, 800–801.

<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.1; 1.29.1; 1.30.15; cf. Tertullian, *Val.* 11.2.

<sup>47</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29.1.

<sup>48</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29–30.

<sup>49</sup> Origen, *Cels.* 5.61.

<sup>50</sup> Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 16.

<sup>51</sup> On their contributions to philosophy, see Turner 2001; and Rasimus 2010.

associations, including the Borborians, Phibionites, and Archontics.<sup>52</sup> Based on this evidence several scholars have moved to delimit Gnostic identity to the Sethian school and its literature.<sup>53</sup>

But this is not the entire story. There are a number of other major groups whom the heresiologists say claimed the Gnostic identity for themselves: the Carpocratians, Prodicians, Justinians, Naassenes, and Valentinians. Irenaeus says that the Carpocratians under the leadership of Marcellina in Rome called themselves *Gnostics*.<sup>54</sup> Clement of Alexandria says that followers of Prodicus called themselves *Gnostics*.<sup>55</sup> Tertullian mentions Prodicus along with Valentinus and a shared teaching of multiple gods.<sup>56</sup> Clement also claims to have known a leader of a *hairesis* who called himself a Gnostic.<sup>57</sup> Hippolytus says that Justin (mystagogue and author of the *Book of Baruch*) and his followers called themselves *Gnostics*, claiming that they alone know the Perfect and Good God.<sup>58</sup> He knows too that the Naassenes called themselves *Gnostics*.<sup>59</sup> The Naassene teacher is said to have taught that the only ones who can become hearers of the mysteries are the perfected *Gnostics*.<sup>60</sup> In the fourth century, Epiphanius tells us that Valentinus called himself a Gnostic, as did his followers.<sup>61</sup> This seems to fit with Irenaeus' opinion that the Valentinians were Gnostic offspring because they reinvented the Sethian mythology by adapting the principles of the Gnostic *hairesis*.<sup>62</sup> He says that the Valentinians flattered themselves as having gnosis that was superior to the gnosis that any other group had.<sup>63</sup> He claims that some Valentinians say that they were aware of powers that precede Bythos and Sige. Because of this awareness, they considered themselves to be "more perfect than the perfected (*teleiōn teleiōteroi*) and more Gnostic than the Gnostics (*gnōstikōn gnōstikōteroi*)."<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus intimates that Marcus the Valentinian considered himself to be "perfect" because he was acquainted with the highest

<sup>52</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 25, 26, 39, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Layton 1987; 1995; Logan 2006; Brakke 2010; cf. Rasimus 2009, who includes Ophians.

<sup>54</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.6.

<sup>55</sup> Clement, *Strom.* 3.4.30.1.

<sup>56</sup> Tertullian, *Scorp.* 15; *Prax.* 3.

<sup>57</sup> Clement, *Strom.* 2.20.114.5; 3.4.30.2; 4.18.114.2; 4.18.116.1; 7.7.41.3; cf. *Paed.* 1.52.2.

<sup>58</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.23.3.

<sup>59</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.2; 5.6.4; 5.8.1; 5.11.1.

<sup>60</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.8.30.

<sup>61</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 31.1.1; 31.1.5.

<sup>62</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29.1; 1.11.1; cf. Brakke 2010, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.3; 1.31.3.

<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.5.

power from the transcendent realm. Thus he claimed to possess the greatest knowledge and perfection of anyone.<sup>65</sup> This construction of the Valentinians appears to be shared by Tertullian who sees their doctrines as plants growing in a Gnostic forest.<sup>66</sup>

The heresiologists identified a number of other leaders and groups as *Gnostic*. In Eusebius' *Chronicon* it is reported that, in the sixteenth year of Emperor Hadrian's reign (132 CE), Basilides lived in Alexandria and "from him derive the Gnostics."<sup>67</sup> Epiphanius also recognizes Basilides as a Gnostic, along with Saturnilus, Colorbasus, Ptolemy, Secundus, Carpocrates, and the Nicolaitans.<sup>68</sup>

Given this type of rich evidence, it is clear that the word *Gnostic* had a wider application than to one group. In other words, it was not circumscribed by the ancient people to Sethianism. The term *Gnostic* did not indicate for them a single cult that we today identify as "Classic Gnosticism." This academic demarcation is a particular construal of the evidence that ignores the way the term was actually being employed by the ancient writers. To handle the complexity of the situation, I suggest that we try to approach the problem from a different angle, by posing a cognitive question: What does *Gnostic* as a concept mean for these writers?

It is my position that the concept of the Gnostic is an idealized cognitive frame that the heresiologists recruit and shift in pejorative ways in order to accommodate their own experiences and create capital for themselves. They understand the word to represent a type of religious person who claims to possess and teach Gnosis that others do not have. The Catholics adjust this element of the frame by nuancing the meaning of *Gnosis*, creating a demarcation between true Gnosis and false Gnosis. The *Gnostics* possess the latter, while the Catholics the former. Thus Irenaeus speaks of those who possess and teach "*Gnosis falsely so-called*."<sup>69</sup> Likewise Clement of Alexandria refashions the Gnostic category by defining the true *Gnostic* as the Christian who is perfected through his acceptance and observation of the law of Moses, his love of God for no practical or redemptive purpose, his recognition that creation is good, and his engagement of self-restraint and the contemplative life.<sup>70</sup> This is the *Gnosis* that Clement claims

<sup>65</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.1.

<sup>66</sup> Tertullian, *Val.* 39; cf. *Scorp.* 1; *An.* 18.

<sup>67</sup> Helm 1956, 201.

<sup>68</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 25, 26, 39, 40.

<sup>69</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.1, etc.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Clement, *Strom.* 4.21.130–123.152.

has been transmitted by the few through oral instruction received directly from the apostles.<sup>71</sup>

While this perforation of the cognitive frame is a heresiological construct, it represents a shifting of the frame, not its invention. The heresiologists were recruiting and differentiating a complex frame that was already entrenched in the culture. The Gnostic was a category that had emerged previously among people who claimed to possess and teach Gnosis. It was a category that compressed within it a number of individual concepts into a novel blend. When taken together as a whole, the compression of concepts pointed to a new way of being religious—a new type of spirituality that they called Gnostic. The heresiologists responded to this emergent category by differentiating the frame so that it defined the differences between those who possessed false Gnosis and true.

#### 4. CRAFTING GNOSTIC SPIRITUALITY

So what more can we recover about the Gnostic frame that the heresiologists recruited and then shifted to their own advantage? My first observation is that the heresiologists are aware of the Gnostics' claim to esoteric knowledge, that is, their *Gnosis* is known only to an in-group. It is marketed by the Gnostics as secret knowledge accessible only to an initiated community. For example, Justin the Gnostic and his followers claimed to be Gnostics because they were the only ones to have had direct apprehension of the supreme God.<sup>72</sup> How secret their *Gnosis* actually was is another issue. But the claim to secret knowledge had currency for them nonetheless.

My second observation is that the heresiologists know that this esoteric knowledge has ritual and mystical dimensions. Not only was the apprehension of God understood by the Justinian Gnostics as secret knowledge, it was understood by them to be the ineffable mysteries preserved for the initiates.<sup>73</sup> The Naassenes who styled themselves Gnostics did so, according to Hippolytus, because they alone were acquainted with the depths of knowledge and mystic rites, which are compared to the Eleusinian initiation rites.<sup>74</sup> According to Irenaeus, the Carpocratians who called themselves Gnostics taught that Jesus privately told the mystery to his disciples, and told them

<sup>71</sup> Clement, *Strom.* 6.7.61.3.

<sup>72</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.23.3.

<sup>73</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.24.1–2.

<sup>74</sup> Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.2; 5.6.4.

to pass on this mystery to their followers.<sup>75</sup> The Ophians, whom Epiphanius considers Gnostic offspring, trace the origin of *Gnosis* to the snake in Eden and present this tale as one of their mysteries.<sup>76</sup> What were the Ophian mysteries? We know from Celsus and Origen that the Ophians had a complicated initiatory ritual of ascent through the Zodiacal spheres which Celsus believed had affinities with Mithraic initiation.<sup>77</sup>

My third observation is that the heresiologists acknowledge that the Gnostics' claim to possess Gnosis is rooted in their assertion to be spiritual people who possess a divine nature. They understand this innate spirituality in exclusive terms. The Gnostics contain seeds of spirit or, in some way, belong to a spiritual generation of people. According to Irenaeus, some Gnostics claimed that most of Jesus' disciples were confused, and transmitted erroneous teaching about Jesus and the meaning of resurrection. He was only able to instruct a few of his disciples who were able to understand and transmit the great mysteries, which included knowledge of their true natures and destiny.<sup>78</sup> These "other" Gnostics arguably have affinities with Sethian teachings.<sup>79</sup> The Valentinians, whom Irenaeus understood as Gnostic offspring, were known for similar claims. Irenaeus says that they understand redemption to be complete when spiritual persons have been initiated into the mysteries of Achamoth and attained *Gnosis*, which they define as the perfect knowledge of God. They identified themselves as these spiritual Gnostic persons, while other Christians merely as faithful members of the Church for whom salvation consists of good works instead.<sup>80</sup> Tertullian compares the Valentinian *hairesis* to the Eleusinian mysteries, saying that they guard access to full knowledge until the person has reached the final stage of initiation, when the divinity who is secreted away is revealed. Tertullian finds it personally frustrating that they will not openly share their knowledge with non-Valentinian Christians like himself.<sup>81</sup> He complains that they feel gifted with the bequest of spirituality, which they link to the fact that their persons contain spiritual seeds.<sup>82</sup>

My fourth observation is that the heresiologists make it clear that part of the knowledge the Gnostics purported to have was contingent upon

<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.5.

<sup>76</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 37.3.1.

<sup>77</sup> DeConick 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.14.

<sup>79</sup> Layton 1987, 170–181; Rasimus 2009, 9–61.

<sup>80</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.1.

<sup>81</sup> Tertullian, *Val.* 1.

<sup>82</sup> Tertullian, *Val.* 4.

transgressive hermeneutics. In other words, they approached scripture very differently from Catholic Christians like themselves. There is demonstration again and again in the heresiological literature that their knowledge is “proven” with reference to an interpretation of scripture that is anything but traditional. Epiphanius gives voice to this well when he criticizes the Gnostics for reading scripture radically, refashioning its meaning and then saying that this new meaning comes from the Spirit of Truth.<sup>83</sup> The heresiologists know that this type of transgressive interpretation of scripture has resulted in the development of Gnostic metaphysical systems that are radically different from their own. Because the Gnostic metaphysical systems in part emerge out of transgressive interpretation of scripture, the systems themselves are transgressive. The Gnostics conceive of the world, humans and God in non-standard, even subversive terms, challenging and critiquing traditional views. Thus, both the Catholic heresiologists and Plotinus can object.

The heresiologists also know, and this is my fifth observation, that these transgressive metaphysical systems are not merely biblically based, but open out into a network of common philosophical and religious traditions known internationally in late antiquity. In other words, the Gnostic was an inclusive religious seeker and thinker, whose quest for truth extended beyond the answers given by any one religion.

If we compare this network of five concepts with extant texts that reflect the type of metaphysical systems identified by the heresiologist as *Gnostic*, we find rich references to support each one of them. Indeed the Gnostic texts themselves make claim to esoteric knowledge with ritual and mystical dimensions. The authors identify themselves as spiritual people, whose true nature is divine. They create transgressive metaphysical systems based on transgressive hermeneutics as they wrestle with perennial existential questions. This transgression is fostered by an inclusiveness, where the quest for truth crosses philosophical and religious boundaries.

This structural integrity between the extant Gnostic texts and the heresiological testimonies suggests that the heresiologists are recruiting a conceptualization of the Gnostic that is already in play among the Gnostics themselves. The word *Gnostic* was not circumscribed by the Gnostics to a particular religious group, although each Gnostic group likely felt itself to be the ones who possessed authentic *Gnosis* or *Gnosis* superior to all other forms of it. While their literature shows us that each group called themselves

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<sup>83</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 26.6.1–2.

by different in-group names (i.e., The Elect, Children of the Bridal Chamber, Kingless and Perfect Generation, Children of Seth, Seed of Seth, etc.), each group also believed its members to possess *Gnosis* exclusively. In other words, *Gnostic* did not identify a specific group as much as it referred to a type of spirituality that certain people associated with.

Gnostic spirituality, as an emergent frame structure, then, is a compression of five complex concepts. While each of these is an individual concept, when the five are taken together they form a whole that scaffolds the meaning of the category *Gnostic*. *Gnostic* references a new form of spirituality that people engaged in the ancient world, allowing them to think and talk about metaphysics and to participate in affiliated religious praxes in ways that previously had not been conceived.

(1) *The Personal Possession of Gnosis*. The main frame associates the *Gnostic* with a particular type of person or persons, one who possess *Gnosis*.

(2) *Experiential knowledge of God through Mysticism*. Since *Gnosis* is knowledge of God by acquaintance, Gnostic identity is formed within the forge of ancient mysticism. Through initiatory rites or some form of practice, the Gnostic encounters God directly. This experiential knowledge is reserved for the Gnostic and is elicited through a practice or ritual system that (re)joins the essential human being to its divine (fore)ground. In this way, the person attains spiritual wholeness and returns to the primordial divine condition.

(3) *Innate Spiritualness*. The possession of Gnosis is further linked to the exclusive claim to an innate spiritualness. The Gnostic is a person whose essential nature is believed to be uncreated, deriving directly from the divine. This innate spiritualness is what permits the Gnostic to see the truth, where others are blind.

(4) *Transgressive Esotericism*. There is a transgressive esotericism fundamentally grounding Gnostic spirituality. This is the belief that spiritual truth is hidden from the many, but when it is uncovered by the Gnostic, it transgresses the standard opinion of the many. This manifests concretely in terms of the transgressive hermeneutics which the Gnostic adopts. Central is the belief that sacred writings conceal truth from the many, but when they are read properly, they reveal a secret message that transgresses standard understandings of that scripture. Because of these subversive exegetical tendencies, the Gnostic metaphysical systems that develop radically transgress the traditional systems of Judaism and Catholic Christianity. So when God



is known by the Gnostic, it turns out not to be God as God is standardly conceived in either Judaism or Catholic Christianity. In fact, the standard conception of God is perceived by the Gnostic as erroneous trickery or illusion that has duped the majority population.

(5) *Seekership Outlook and Quest Orientation.* Gnostic spirituality is characterized by a seekership outlook and quest orientation that is focused on serious metaphysical questions. The quest for answers to perennial existential dilemmas is inclusive, spanning vast philosophical and religious territories, and negotiating a new identity across them. The Gnostic is a person who entertains pluralism and delights in unbounded knowledge, finding identity in the negotiation of the metaphysical expanse.

When we reconceive the *Gnostic* as a complex conceptual frame or idealized cognitive model that refers to a type of spirituality rather than a peculiar doctrinal system, we are freed from the confinement of typological and systematic definitions that have not been able to account for either the sameness or the difference in historical Gnostic systems, without distorting, marginalizing or eliminating the Gnostics who have always been among us.

## 5. MUSHROOMS

While there are wild differences and disagreements among the various metaphysical systems that the Gnostics develop, there are doctrinal and mythological similarities across them too. The heresiologists recognized this, and so they reorganized the entrenched Gnostic frame by further schematizing the systems of a variety of unrelated Gnostic thinkers with reference to a loose genealogical organization that had very little, if anything, to do with historical reality. This conceptual taxonomy worked to link together otherwise unrelated Gnostic systems into a huge and very confusing network of Gnostic ancestors and offspring that began with Simon Magus.<sup>84</sup> This new taxonomy restructured the entrenched Gnostic frame so that the category shifted away from its focus on a particular type of spirituality to a focus on mythic, thematic, and systematic similarities in Gnostic metaphysical systems as defining features of the *Gnostic*.

Whether one Gnostic system is an actual ancestor to another is something that the historian must determine based on critical analysis and

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<sup>84</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.1.1, etc.

argument. Most, if not all of the Gnostic systems that did arise seem to me to be variations of either a transc cosmic system where the God of worship lives outside the universe while the subordinate creator within, or a panastral system where the God of worship lives in the highest heaven while the creator in the lowest. Certainly it is true that some of the mythological sameness is due to inherited features shared among groups that were in direct contact and dialogue. But it is also true, based on what we know about how humans conceptualize, that some of the sameness could have been the result of independent developments within human minds.<sup>85</sup> The human mind can only construct so many answers to any given question, and has access to only so many presuppositions in any given historical moment. This is especially the case in situations where we are dealing with people who employ the same scriptures, myths, and philosophies as important foregrounds to their metaphysical discussions. Within this conversation, there are a finite number of entrenched frames available for ancient people to organize their concepts and converse about them. If these people also have seeker mentalities and believe themselves to have an innate spiritualness that demands a transgressive interpretation of scripture and theology, there are only a limited number of metaphysical systems that are likely to emerge from their conversations.

Once Gnostic spirituality emerges and is distributed into the cultural web, it is engaged by a variety of people and groups. The result is a large number of Gnostic religious movements, which boast alternative mythologies and doctrinal systems. Boundaries around the groups are difficult to delineate. Relations between individuals and groups is less than clear. Some Gnostics form supplemental or lodge movements whose members remain affiliated with a traditional Catholic church. Others create reform movements and hope to convince the Catholic church to alter its ways. Other Gnostics form separatist movements, believing themselves to be the only true Christians. Some Gnostics do not affiliate with the Catholic church at all, but forge their own path as new religious movements. Within this complex web, leaders rise and fall, along with disciples. There is no over-arching organization of the movements nor are the ritual systems standardized. Rather, numerous grass-roots movements spring up with self-proclaimed leaders and idiosyncratic publications. Difference abounds. And yet they are all Gnostic. Perhaps Irenaeus' comparison to mushrooms growing out of the ground is an apt metaphor after all.\*

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<sup>85</sup> See Couliano 1992, 1–22, who also advocated a cognitive explanation for sameness within Gnostic systematics.

\* I dedicate this essay to my mentor and friend, John D. Turner, in celebration of his

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# Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World

Essays in Honour of John D. Turner

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