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Book Review – October 2016

The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today

April D. DeConick (Columbia University Press, 2016)

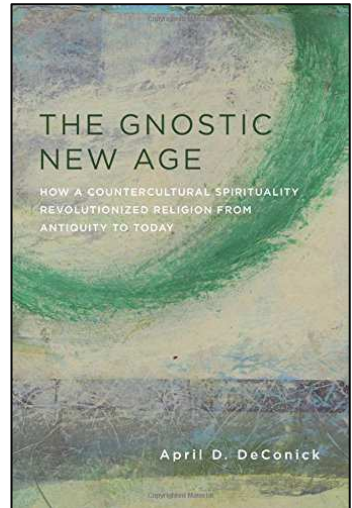
Reviewed by Lance S. Owens

At the beginning, let me give my bottom-line summary: April DeConick has written one of the most important and thought-provoking books on Gnosticism to be published in several years.

Gnosticism is a complex subject, and the understanding of Gnostic tradition has undergone radical shifts over the last century—changes powerfully impelled by the discovery in 1945 of an ancient library of Gnostic scriptures near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. After two decades of work on the translations, these manuscripts were published in 1977 as the *The Nag Hammadi Library*. The next year, in 1978, a young scholar named Elaine Pagels published a best-selling commentary on the texts, dubbing them *The Gnostic Gospels*. So began a new age in Gnostic studies.

Today, about forty years after those landmark publications, comprehension of the Gnostic gospels, and Gnostic tradition more generally, remains a work in progress. The first generations of scholars largely accomplished the primary task of translating the manuscripts from ancient Coptic and Greek. The principal challenge facing the current generation of students is unraveling the meaning, context, and modern relevance of Gnosticism. New generations of readers are bringing new visions to Gnostic studies; each is awakening perspectives uniquely significant to the present moment. The outmoded perception of Gnosis as a pernicious ancient heresy has been, thankfully, laid to final rest.

Agreement is emerging that Gnosticism should no longer be studied exclusively in the context of ancient Christian history or theology. Gnosis is a perennial tradition, and its rediscovery in this age presents a vibrant hermeneutic challenge to antique theologies. The Gnostic worldview resonates with modern consciousness and psychology; it unveils vital perspectives on human nature. Dr. April DeConick— Professor of Biblical Studies and chair of the Department



of Religion at Rice University—has been at the forefront of this resurgent appreciation and interpretation of Gnosticism.

Dr. DeConick has christened her new book with a challenging title: *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*. The clichéd phrase “New Age” is a “turn-off” for some people (including me), and its use in the title may turn away occasional book browsers. But don’t let it dissuade you. Just tune in. April DeConick has delivered a “must read” study for anyone interested in Gnosticism. Of course, the book has a few interpretive flaws; specialists in Gnostic studies will each find different points where they firmly disagree with DeConick, as do I. Ancient Gnosticism is a puzzle with many missing parts. The texts and facts can be – and have been – assembled in radically different ways. Here Dr. DeConick tells the story of Gnosticism her way, in a strong voice backed by years of academic study, and without bothering to repeatedly tip her hat to opposing views. This is not the first or only book to read on Gnosticism. It makes no attempt to summarize and balance divergent perspectives, or dissect ongoing interpretive controversies. Nonetheless, it joins my short list of essential introductory works on Gnostic tradition.

DeConick’s use of the term “new age” is nuanced by juxtaposing ancient and modern moments. Two thousand years ago, Gnosticism signaled a radical new age in religious thought and human self-understanding. However, in the last two decades some scholars argued that Gnosticism was really not an independent religion, but simply a type of early Christianity, one of many variants. DeConick forcefully rejects that assertion. Gnosticism was, in her interpretation, a tradition in its own right, based in a fundamental and transformative paradigm shift from preexisting Greek and Jewish religions. Gnosticism was a new religion at the dawn of a “new age.” To understand Gnosticism, DeConick explains that we must recognize it for what it really was:

...An emergent religious orientation, and innovative form of spirituality, a new way of being religious that persisted outside conventional religious structures while engaging them in disruptive ways. Gnosticism arose in the first century CE as an innovative spirituality of human empowerment and individualism, at a time when nothing like it existed. (p. 346)

The Gnostic New Age takes a deep dive into its subject but does it with an entertaining and creative flare. (And here the “old” new age, and the “new” new age do converge.) April DeConick begins each of her ten thematic chapters by revisiting the story line of a popular movie from the last twenty years. She kicks off the show with a dive into the *The Matrix*, inviting readers to take the Gnostic red pill. Thereafter, chapter-by-chapter, she pulls us into private screenings of

The Truman Show, *Avatar*, *Superman*, *Star Trek V*, *Dark City*, and other less-known films. Having set the stage in each chapter with storylines emerging from modern cinematic imagination, she then recounts in full scholarly detail the corresponding ancient Gnostic texts and tales, illustrating the parallel thematic intentions.

It is a fun approach, and it mostly works. Suddenly strange old Gnostic myths transform into images that are inventive, edgy, and very thought provoking—they are myths with potent meaning. DeConick makes no effort to “explain” the striking convergence of ancient Gnostic imagination and the cinematic visions of our newer age. That she leaves to your imagination. After reading the book, you may be tempted (as I now am) to spend several nights on Netflix, screening all of these films again. Could a few nights at the movies awaken insights into the revolutionary vision of Gnosticism? Drop down the rabbit hole, and find out.

April DeConick is pushing at the “edges” with this book; she is transposing Gnosticism from ancient to modern contexts—and on the journey, breaching some normative academic boundaries. The scholarship is sound, but the way in which she interprets the ancient textual evidence is sometimes idiosyncratic. If you do read the book (and not just this review), try first reading the initial chapter and then the brief concluding chapter, “Gnosticism Out on a Limb.” Together, these give a quick orientation to the path ahead, least you get lost early on. And if you are entirely new to Gnostic studies, it might be useful to read a few other things before diving in with DeConick. For a quick start, read Dr. Marvin Meyer’s wonderful (and short) introduction to *The Gnostic Bible* ([available in The Gnostic Society Library](#)). You might also take a another look at Elaine Pagels’ classic work, *The Gnostic Gospels*—this will give a sense of where the “new” new age in Gnostic studies began forty years ago. Then take a trip with Dr. April DeConick.

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