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## *Book Reviews*



### **April D. DeConick**

*The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today.* New York: Columbia University Press. 2016. Pp. xii + 380.

ISBN 978-0-231-17076-5; EISBN 978-0-231-54204-3. \$35 (hb).

Doubtlessly, anyone interested in gnostic studies and early Christianity cannot remain indifferent to April D. DeConick's new book, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*. DeConick is a well-established scholar whose most renowned works are devoted to the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas. Her research interests, however, cover a broad range of issues with regard to the ancient Christian world: from New Testament literature, mysticism, and esotericism, through diverse expressions of pre-Nicene mysticism, therapeutic and shamanic practices in the Nag Hammadi texts, to gnostic movements.

In her recent book, she offers a new thought-provoking approach to “gnosticism” which, for many scholars, has been considered an obsolete category since the mid-1990s. DeConick's approach partly stems from her dissatisfaction with the current state of the field. She recapitulates that since the 1980s it has been widely assumed that “gnostics” were “Christians” (6). They have been described either as heretics who threatened the only true Catholic Church, or as “alternative Christians” that Orthodox leaders named “gnostics,” purposefully misinterpreting their beliefs. Consequently, one should not continue to reify the term but abandon it completely. She “finds this deconstructive project unsettling on many counts, including the consequence that we end up erasing transgressive identities from history when, instead, we should be fully exploring their meaning” (6). DeConick offers a counter-deconstructive enterprise and tries to revive the concept of gnosticism.

In chapter 1, DeConick outlines three types of religiosity in the ancient world before gnosticism flourished: “servant spirituality” in Egypt and Mesopotamia, “covenant spirituality” in Israel, and “ecstatic spirituality” in the Mediterranean

area. All of them share a similar view of the human being, who is viewed as “the lesser deity, bound to wishes and whims of entities far superior to him or her” (49). In DeConick’s account, these modes of being religious reflected societal relationships of servitude and authority used to sustain order and justice (49). She argues that the very first people who emerged onto the stage of history and undermined this status quo were the gnostics. According to DeConick, they were deeply dissatisfied with the way the world around them was organized, which they perceived as chaotic and unfair (53). The gnostics offered a new approach to the world and a form of spirituality that was distinctively transgressive. It challenged conventional norms and inverted cultural codes, and because of that they were marked as deviants and heretics (74).

By studying textual evidence, she reconstructs what the word *gnostic* meant for the ancient people who used that term. In order to do so, she refers to an idea of “mental frame” or “scheme,” borrowed from cognitive linguistics. These terms define a process by which people use the most common set of features to characterize a familiar concept. In other words, mental frames describe how human beings organize their knowledge into understandable categories. If a person encounters new information that can replace an established trait within his or her mind frame, or be easily connected to already existing ones, then such an encounter might expand the meaning of a known concept. DeConick shows how this works by giving an example of a term “e-book.” Although a regular e-book “has no pages, no cover, and virtual words that disappear when the device is turned off ... it is a book because it is an electronic version of a physical book” (10). The characteristics that define an e-book expand our understanding of the more general concept of a book. In cognitive linguistics this type of innovation is called an “emergent structure.” DeConick interprets the term *gnostic* exactly as the example of an emergent structure. In her account, ancient gnosticism was built upon the previous understandings of what it had meant to be religious. It resulted in creating a “countercultural spirituality” at the heart of which lies “transgression.”

She offers a semantic map that reflects the mental landscape of meanings and contexts in which the term *gnostic* was used most frequently in late antiquity. DeConick, by studying historical materials—both heresiologists’ reports and primary sources—gives a set of ideal characteristics of gnostic spirituality in antiquity: (a) Gnosis, a “direct experiential knowledge of a transcendent God” (11); (b) ritual, which was aimed at causing ecstatic states and “unitive experiences of transcendence” (11); (c) pneuma or spirit, God’s transcendence embodied in every human being; (d) countercultural approach to sacred texts that was based on the embracement of supreme God who is above conventional gods and remains outside of the material world; (e) spiritual

claims that relied on personal views and experiences which legitimized their derivation from any available materials: “from Homer and Plato to magic and astrology” (12).

At first glance, her ideal characteristics of gnostic spirituality may seem to be a regular typological definition. It should be recognized, however, as an innovative proposition. She starts with discursive research, by analyzing original sources and heresiologists’ testimonies, and on that basis she recreates the mental scheme of people who used the word *gnostic* in their texts. Behind this research stands an assumption that there is a tight connection between language and thought. Furthermore, DeConick perceives gnosticism as “a spiritual orientation that can be linked to other spiritual orientations that people of different religious affiliations embrace” (9). This move allows her to include a broad range of movements, historical figures, and texts, ranging from antiquity (e.g., Mandaeans, Valentinus, or Hermetic literature) to more contemporary cultural artifacts and phenomena (New Age movements or films). DeConick’s work, therefore, can be linked with the academic tradition in which gnosis or gnosticism has been perceived as a potentially transhistorical phenomenon.

Broadly speaking, in previous approaches that represent this strand of thought, there was always a difficulty in connecting a universal, abstract gnostic component with its particular articulation embedded in a very specific time, language, media, etc. In methodological terms, these theories could not take into account the differences between various cultural-historical expressions of “gnosticism.” Such was the case with Gilles Quispel’s model, for instance (see Quispel 1951, *Gnosis als Weltreligion*. Zurich: Origo, and Quispel 1992, *De Hermetische Gnosis in de Loop Der Eeuwen*. Baarn: Tirion). Quispel’s model could have served as one of the important sources of inspiration for DeConick. She was probably one of his last students and the influence of his scholarship has had a particular significance on her academic development. It can be seen especially in her transhistorical view of gnosticism and also in her use of psychological and cognitive language to describe it. DeConick aims to avoid the major problems of previous transhistorical approaches to gnosticism by proposing a methodological shift in understanding this category. The idea of mental frames, which she applies to her research, describes a dynamic between stability and flexibility that is involved in the process of how human beings effectively interpret new data. Firstly, this move allows her to trace how gnosticism, understood as a metaphysical orientation, could have reappeared in different socio-cultural environments. Secondly, by treating it as an emergent structure, she can argue that certain authors, texts, or other cultural phenomena can be named “gnostic” despite the fact that some of their characteristics might differ from the late antique model.

DeConick especially argues that New Age movements in America are gnostic, although transgression, one of the crucial features of ancient gnosticism, does not play such an important role in them anymore. From her methodological perspective, it can be said that in gnostic spirituality, transgression has been progressively losing its significance in Western history due to the vast cultural changes. One of the vital channels of transmission, through which gnosticism has been normalized in twentieth-century America, was certainly popular culture. DeConick introduces her case studies in each chapter with short analyses of films in which she finds gnostic themes. These include *Dark City* (1998), *The Truman Show* (1998), and *The Matrix* (1999), as well as less obvious examples such as *Pi* (1998) or *Dogma* (1999). By illustrating ancient gnosticism through motion pictures, she brings the gnostic metaphysical approach closer to the contemporary reader and shows that its basic features are not regarded as blasphemous or transgressive any more. Since the characteristics of a mental frame can be expanded or modified over time in different cultural circumstances, this framework allows her to speak about the shift of the role of transgression in contemporary expressions of gnostic spirituality and still recognize some of them as gnostic.

In the subsequent chapters, DeConick traces the origins of gnosticism in a chronological manner, describing its development and decline. She demonstrates where and when the key features of gnostic spirituality were formed and provides a detailed discussion of movements, groups, historical figures, and original texts. DeConick is very aware of the existing scholarly works on the issues that she discusses, supporting her bold interpretations with empirical evidence (see especially chapter 5, on “Gnostic footprints” in the Gospel of John, 141, 135–163).

Academics who represent a rather traditional and rigid approach to scholarship may be troubled, however, by the fact that she does not openly admit the limitations of her method. Sometimes she does not highlight problems with using certain concepts that are hotly debated in academic circles. For instance, she uses the notion of “New Age” as if it had a widely accepted meaning. She does not mention that many scholars, even if they have not discontinued to use it—because of its vagueness, little explanatory power, or negative connotations—at least have started to treat it as a provisional term, which should be repeatedly reinvented. Thus, what non-experts can roughly associate with certain new religious movements that have started to flourish since the late sixties, researchers will surely find highly problematic.

Some scholars might say that because she uses categories such as “Sethians” or “Valentinians,” she accepts certain testimonies of Church Fathers and, therefore, reproduces the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. It seems, however, that

in light of DeConick's approach this argument is misguided. In order to recreate the mental frame of people who used the word *gnostic* in antiquity, one needs to take into account all empirical data available. From this perspective the division between primary sources and heresiologists' testimonies becomes irrelevant.

The indisputable merit of DeConick's approach is that it allows us to grasp shifts that have been taking place in the articulations of gnosticism over long periods of time. It might be difficult, however, to determine how many traits of the gnostic spirituality can be replaced or supplemented by new ones, making it hard to say whether a cultural artifact in question, expressed in particular time and through specific language, is gnostic or not. What criteria should we use to investigate every case study thoroughly? This problem does not undermine the theoretical basis of DeConick's view and is certainly beyond the scope of her book. It would require further research on how to apply a broad range of methods from various disciplines in order to track when and why some of the features of the gnostic spirituality shifted, became replaced by different ones, or lost their significance. This issue should be further addressed and discussed in the prospective academic debate.

Finally, it can be added that DeConick's narrative is engaging and not overloaded with footnotes, which makes her work easy to digest for non-specialists. In that regard she might have even pursued Elaine Pagels, whose provocative *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979, New York: Random House) aroused wide interest on the American publishing market. DeConick's work should also provide food for thought for specialists in early Christian studies to step outside the historical-religious paradigm and look at gnosticism from a different methodological angle.

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