



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
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## **Gnosticism, Then & Now: Firsthand Spiritual Experience vs. Secondhand Theology**

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Over the past few years, I have preached three sermons inspired by the scholarship of [Jeffrey Kripal](#):

- **Mystical Humanism** - on the intersection of the scientific method with more-subjective firsthand spiritual experiences.
- **Eve Was Framed, the Serpent Was Right! Gnostic Reflections on Religion**
- **Reflexive Re-Readings of Religion** - connected to a class on “Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms.”

Kripal is a religion professor at Rice University in Houston, and one of my favorite contemporary religion scholars.

I am bringing up Kripal today because he shares some areas of research with his colleague [April DeConick](#), Chair of the Religion Department at Rice. And this morning’s sermon is inspired by DeConick’s new book on **The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today**. I would like to invite you to consider some of the important connections between ancient Gnosticism, our UU Transcendentalist ancestors, and Unitarian Universalism today.

To share some of DeConick’s story, in 1982 she entered college with plans to be a nurse. But that same year, her mother handed her a book she had just finished reading, saying, “I bet you will like this.” It was a new book that had just been published, titled *The Other Gospels*. It

was described as, “Gospels that never made it into the New Testament. Unknown saying of Jesus.” **Her mother was right: DeConick was intrigued** (1).

She was particularly struck by the third verse of The Gospel of Thomas, which she had never heard of previously, in which Jesus says:

The kingdom is *inside* of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to *know yourself*, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourself you dwell in poverty and it is *you* who are that poverty. (20, my emphasis)

**DeConick wanted to know about this perspective on religion and spirituality, which taught “Know yourself” and “Seek the divine within yourself—or risk living an impoverished life”** (1).

In her quest to learn more, she next found Elaine Pagels’s book The Gnostic Gospels, which had been published three years earlier in 1979. Pagels was one of the first scholars to write a book that was scholarly, accessible, and popular about the **Gnostic manuscripts, which had been discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt**. Soon afterward, DeConick found James Robinson’s 1977 book The Nag Hammadi Library in English, which was a primary source translation of the texts themselves (2).

For the almost two thousand years of Christian history, most Christians only had access to orthodox writings *against* Gnosticism. **Suddenly in 1945 we were able to read what the Gnostics had to say about themselves**. And scholars have increasingly come to see that there was not a simple, direct, unbroken line of succession from Jesus of Nazareth to Peter as the first pope straight through until Pope Francis today. According to that traditional view, any alternative perspective was a heretical deviation from the one, correct, orthodox way. The truth turns out to be much messier and more complex than that. The orthodox perspective was merely *one among many* groups competing against one another to be considered a legitimate extension of the Jesus movement (3). (I’m tempted to go into more detail here, but I have preached about this previously in a sermon that is available in our online sermon archive on **Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible**.)

For now, I will say just a little more to emphasize the huge shift that comes from reading what a group *says about itself* in comparison to what its opponents say about them. Consider, for example, if the only access you had to the outside world was Fox News. That's essentially the situation we were in prior to the 1945 discovery of Gnostic texts near Nag Hammadi: **we only had the Fox News version of Gnosticism.**

As a college freshman in 1982, when DeConick was first reading these newly-released, paradigm-shifting books about Gnosticism she began to realize that as valuable as these early interpretations of Gnosticism were, she was not convinced they were fully reading the Gnostics correctly. Some of the previous biases about Gnosticism seemed to be skewing the interpretations of these new texts. In particular, the Gnostics were consistently described as unorganized and anti-ritual, but **as she read the Gnostic texts closely for herself, the opposite seemed to be the case.** The Gnostic texts explicitly described rituals for cultivating “intense religious experiences of spiritual transformation.... And they were doing so in organized groups with guru-type leaders.” This realization was a turning point for DeConick that led her on a decades-long study of Gnosticism which included earning a Ph.D. in Near Eastern studies at the University of Michigan (3).

As it turns out, long before Marx was condemning religion as the “opiate of the masses,” the Gnostics were questioning the ways that much of conventional religion supported the *status quo*. In contrast, Gnostic approaches to spirituality were about *transcending* conventional conceptions through ritualized, firsthand spiritual *experiences* of union with the Sacred, the Holy, the numinous—*beyond* ideas about “God” (4). Consider the difference between writing about apples and actually taking your first bite of an apple—and thus coming to know an apple, not intellectually, but *existentially*.

Part of DeConick's contribution to contemporary scholarship to invite us to consider **Gnosticism as more than a one among many early Christian sects. Instead, it is more of a “countercultural orientation”**—an approach to spirituality that could potentially be present in almost any religious movement (4-5). Gnosticism (from the Greek “to know”) derives its name from the special “knowledge” about reality attained through firsthand religious experiences. Our silent “k” in knowledge is due to the silent “g” in gnostic.

**To cultivate a state of ecstasy, the rituals were often extensive and highly participatory.** To give you just one example, one Gnostic initiation ritual involved an individual going through a total of twenty-two baptisms (225). Compared to a single individual public Sunday morning baptism, consider the impact of an all-night private ritual of chanting, increased sleep deprivation, and immersion after immersion in water.

**Gnostics claimed to have discovered in their own firsthand experience a much more powerful, unifying spirituality beyond the “God” described in the Bible.** And many orthodox Christian leaders perceived these claims as a threat. They were terrified of people questioning religious hierarchy based on their own firsthand experience. And to give just one example of the anti-Gnostic polemics, in the late second century, an early orthodox Christian bishop named Irenaus wrote a five-volume series of books titled *Against the Heresies* (54).

To be clear, the Gnostics were literally heretics. **The word heretic comes from the Greek αἵρεσις, meaning “choice.”** Rather than unquestioningly accepting the secondhand teachings of tradition, they chose for themselves what to believe, based on their own firsthand experience. In that spirit, Unitarian Universalism is sometimes called a “chosen faith.”

In the ancient world, part of why the Gnostics were so threatening to orthodoxy is that they used the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to bolster their own claims. They pointed to passages such as Genesis 3 where God is described as “walking” through the Garden of Eden and “calling” for Adam and Eve, who are hiding. The Gnostic asked: what kind of God walks around like a human? And what kind of God are humans able to hide from? **For the Gnostics, these—and many other similar passages from the Bible—were evidence that the God of the Bible was, at most, a lesser god—distinct from the “Ground of All Being” they had experienced** (91). They pointed to all the times that the God of the Bible is capricious, petty, jealous, even genocidal at points—credited with killing large numbers of people for various different reasons (93).

Whereas the biblical God punished Adam and Eve for eating from the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” the Gnostics saw this transgressive act as the means of salvation. **They admired the *serpent*, who tells Eve in Genesis 3 that if she eats of the fruit, “You will not die.... Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God”** (55). Indeed, some of the

Gnostics are known as Sethians—because they identified with Adam and Eve’s third son Seth, after Cain and Abel. Seth “is the only early character in the Bible who never interacts with or worships YHWH” (97).

So, long before the hippies of the 1960s, the Gnostics were developing a counterculture, which one historian of the period has described as “**any figure or movement that privileges non-intellective knowledge and personal visions of truth over cultural constitutions of knowledge**” (283). But I don’t want to jump straight from the Gnostics to the hippies. DeConick has also traced four other major “Gnostic awakenings.”

During the **medieval period**, groups such as the Paulicians, Bogomils, and Cathars had a transgressive emphasis on trusting one’s personal spiritual experiences more than inherited orthodox teachings (347). Each flourished for a time, then faded in influence—although later Gnostic groups often drew inspiration from these earlier examples of Gnostic spirituality.

And just as a rediscovery of Greco-Roman philosophy and culture helped bring about the **Renaissance**, that same rediscovery of ancient text included some Gnostic texts, which led to a second Gnostic reawakening.

A third major Gnostic reawakening happened during the **nineteenth century** as figures like our own UU Transcendentalist ancestors—such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau —began reading widely in the world’s religious traditions as well as being attentive to their own firsthand experience. Consider this opening paragraph from Emerson’s breakout book, Nature:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. **Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?** Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? ... **Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?** The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are

new lands, new men, new thoughts. **Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.**

This third Gnostic awakening can be traced all the way through landmark modern figures such as Carl Jung, who wrote extensively about his firsthand spiritual experiences (348-349).

Finally, we can trace a fourth Gnostic awakening, starting with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in 1945 and continuing through today. **Polls continue to show the growing influence of the so-called “Spiritual But Not Religious,” who are seeking authentic spiritual experience, not merely secondhand theology.** And in this day and age, one of the exciting promises of movements like Unitarian Universalism is the opportunity to build a beloved community that is both spiritual and religious—a religious institution that is committed to honoring the value of each person’s firsthand experience. Indeed, in good Transcendentalist fashion, the first of our Six Sources is “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life”—which we balance with our Fifth Source, “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Before concluding, there is one other aspect of DeConick’s book that I particularly appreciate. She explores some of the ways that Gnostic themes are present in many popular films from *Star Trek: The Final Frontier* to *Avatar* to the more avant-garde cinema of Darren Aronofsky’s *Pi*. To briefly describe three examples in more detail, the 1999 film *The Matrix* has a classic Gnostic scene in which the protagonist Neo (an anagram for “One”) is offered a choice by a stranger named Morpheus:

You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth.

**The red pill is an allusion to the red apple that the serpent offered Eve.** And the “truth” to which Morpheus refers is a type of Gnostic knowledge. After swallowing the red pill, Neo wakes up

only to discover himself suffocating in a goo-lined pod. Like an infant struggling out of the womb, Neo pushes through the fluid and his cords are cut by Morpheus. He is the initiate faced with a new reality. The terms of this new birth are so immense that Neo immediately vomits. He is greeted by Morpheus and company, “Welcome to the real world.” (19-21, 50)

That scene is classic Gnosticism: **discovering a deeper reality beneath the surface—the simulacrum—of what you thought was reality.**

Another modern Gnostic parable is the Jim Carrey film *The Truman Show*. Just as the ancient Gnostics discovered “cracks” in the Bible that were clues about a larger reality behind “God” as described in the Bible, in the film Truman begins to notice clues that something is amiss about his life. Indeed, it turns out that he’s a reality tv star—and everyone is in on the deception except him. **Discovering the truth allows him to escape from the TV set that he thought was reality into the larger real world** (51-52, 67).

A final example is the film *Pleasantville*. This movie is particularly Gnostic because the mother in the show, Betty, begins to awaken from a “black & white” reality into the real world of full color when she suddenly becomes more conscious of her sexuality and realizes that she’s been following a lot of unnecessary rules. Likewise, “Mr. Johnson, the owner of the local soda shop [realizes that] what really brings him joy is painting. . . . He turns from black and white into color as he takes up some brushes and begins to paint oversized nudes of Betty in cubist style on his windows” (295-296).

Some of the Gnostic parallels here go back to Genesis 3, and the many layers of meaning around the word knowledge/*gnosis*/γνῶσις. You may have heard the phrase, “he knew her in the biblical sense,” meaning “carnal knowledge,” embodied knowledge. Note that immediately after Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden for eating from the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, we read in the very next verse that, “the man *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” The same Hebrew word for knowledge (*yada*/יָדָע) is used both for the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil as well as for Adam *knowing* his wife Eve in such a way that a baby was born nine months later. There are deep linguistic, archetypal, and existential connections between knowledge and sexuality.

The overall point is that Gnosticism—both ancient and modern—is an invitation to question secondhand religious traditions that have been handed down to you. It is a challenge to test religious claims in the crucible of your own firsthand experiences, critically examined. What do you know to be true because you have experienced it for yourself?