The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary “Gnosticism(s)”: A Case Study on the Apostolic Johannite Church and Jeremy Puma

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This article examines the impact of academic discourses on Neo-Gnosticism. The identities and ritual practices of Neo-Gnostics are constructed with reference to Gnostic Studies. Analysis of two case studies (the Apostolic Johannite Church and Jeremy Puma) shows how academic discourse legitimizes, challenges, or reforms Gnostic identity in the twenty-first century.

Transformations and inventions of ancient Gnostic religion in the twenty-first century take place in a crowded field of discourse.¹ There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of organized Gnostic churches in North America.² Prominent artists, writers, and intellectuals claim to be Gnostics and produce works that

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1. I use the term discourse in line with Jan Assmann to refer to “a concatenation of texts which are based on each other and treat or negotiate a common subject matter” (Assmann YEAR, 15–16). Lincoln (1989) exhibits how such discourses (in myth, ritual, and classification) on the past serve to negotiate religious identities. Post-structuralist approaches to discourse analysis, stressing the symbolic capital entrenched in particular discourses and the power dynamics inherent in the definition of terms, is a different project (Foucault 1972; Gee 1999); in action regarding the study of esotericism see for example, Robertson (2010); von Stuckrad (2010).
 2. The North American College of Gnostic Bishops (NACGP), an umbrella organization for Ecclesial Gnosticism, represents over three-dozen Gnostic churches. It is impossible to give a precise count of self-described Gnostic churches due to the short lifespans of most of them.
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represent their Gnostic worldviews.³ Scholars who translate and comment on ancient texts, such as the Nag Hammadi Codices (henceforth NHC), produce conflicting views of Gnostic religion. Each of these discourses influence the (re-)inventions of Gnostic religion as much as the reception of ancient texts themselves.⁴ The present contribution examines one discourse within this field: the impact of Gnostic Studies scholarship on how contemporary Gnostics define and practice their religious identity.⁵ An illuminating case study presents itself in the Apostolic Johannite Church (henceforth AJC) and two Gnostics who broke away from Gnostic churches, Jesse Folks and Jeremy Puma. Their schism provides a cogent example of how debates within academic Gnostic Studies over the identity of ancient “Gnostics” and the meaning of a modern category “Gnosticism” actively shape the ways in which individuals self-identify as Gnostic today. Three major strategies of neo-Gnostics relating to scholarship become apparent. Academic discourses are adopted to *legitimize* contemporary forms of belief and practice. Alternately, Gnostics *defend* their identity vis-à-vis scholarship. Third, Gnostics implicitly or explicitly *reform* their Gnostic identity and practice under the influence of scholarship.

The Apostolic Johannite Church: Gnostic Identity through Invented Tradition

In the year 2000, James Foster, then a member of the Temple of Set, founded the “Catholic Church of the Holy Grail.” The church was soon renamed the Apostolic Johannite Church. Today, the AJC claims to be the most active and wide-ranging Gnostic Church in North America (The Apostolic Johannite Church n.d.c.). An occult order called “The Friary,” devoted to magical practice “in the Western esoteric tradition,” is closely affiliated with the

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3. Influential self-described “Gnostics” and representative works by them include: Bloom 1982; Bloom 1979; Dick 2011; Dick 1991; Freke and Gandy 2001; Jung 1978; Jung 2009; Morrison 201, 253–288; Morrison *et al.* 2012.
 4. I would like to thank my anonymous peer reviewers for their insights, suggestions, and helpful references. More importantly, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dylan M. Burns. This article has benefitted tremendously from Dylan’s editorial work, recommendations, and criticism. Any remaining errors are my own.
 5. The concept of identity in this paper is a socio-psychological. To be a Gnostic for Stratford and Puma is to invoke a “we-identity” in the present (who are the Gnostics) and an “imagined community” from the past (who were the Gnostics). These imagined communities rely upon self-categorizations of what defines a “Gnostic,” such as a worldview, practice, belief-set, and epistemology. Such categorizations distinguish the in-group of “Gnostics” from the out-group, whether orthodox Christians or other self-described “Gnostics” (Popp-Baier 2016; Thoits and Virshup 1997).

church (The Apostolic Johannite Church n.d.a.). Their rituals and sacraments are drawn primarily from western esoteric sources such as Martinism, the Golden Dawn, French Masonry, and the French Gnostic Church (*L'Église Gnostique*).⁶

The AJC sees itself as part of a “secret” form of Christianity rooted in, but not entirely dependent upon, the religion of ancient Gnostics. Specifically, the AJC claims to operate within two lines of Apostolic succession that can be traced through the Roman Catholic Church back to John the Evangelist, not Peter the Apostle (Behun 2012a and 2012b). According to Shaun McCann, Patriarch and Primate of the AJC, the church of John the Evangelist developed into Christian Gnosticism. After Gnostics were forced underground, the church was sustained by groups such as the Cathars and Knight Templar before being revived by two modern figures: Bernard-Raymond Fabré Palaprat in his *Johannite Church* (f. ca. 1812); and Jules Doinel’s *L’Église Gnostique* (f. 1889).⁷ In academic terminology, the AJC’s claims are best understood as an assertion of legitimacy through an “invented tradition.”⁸ Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis suggest new religions invent a historical lineage or sacred past for several reasons: to invest authority in their claims; to legitimize their position vis-à-vis religious alternatives; to create a cohesive group identity and project this identification into the past; and to provide a plausibility structure for a group’s innovations (Lewis and Hammer 2011, 2–7).

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6. For influential approaches to the study and construction of “Western esotericism,” see especially: Bergunder 2014; Faivre 1994; Hanegraaff 1996; von Stuckrad 2005; von Stuckrad 2010; Versluis 2007. The AJC uses the term “Western esoteric” to refer to a Western tradition of “secret knowledge” that connotes a particular worldview. Their definition of the term, as well as the groups entailed by it, most closely resembles those of Faivre and Versluis. For an overview of how the AJC views “esoteric orders” (including the Friary, Martinism, Golden Dawn, and Masonry) see Silvia A., 2013, 196–211. For rituals that evidence the influence of these orders, see especially “The Text of the Service of the Logos for Lay Ministry” and “The Johannite Rosary” (Silvia A., 2013, 62–75 and 93–104, respectively).
 7. For a fuller account of the AJC’s sense of the Johannite tradition, see McCann 2012a–d and Churton 2015. My concern here is with the self-understanding of the AJC and not the thorny historical problems pertaining to the French Gnostic revival and its transmission to the United States. Those interested in these topics are encouraged to consult the following. On Fabré-Plaprat, see Fabre des Essarts (1905) and le Forestier (1987). On Doinel, see Kostka (1983) and le Forestier (1990). For more emic accounts of the transmission of French Gnostic churches into America, see Anson 1964; Keizer 2000; Plummer 2006.
 8. For a general overview of this problem of “invented tradition” in contemporary esotericism, see Lewis and Hammer 2011, esp. “Introduction.”

Claims to Apostolic succession serve these functions for Ecclesial Gnosticism, defined here as the subset of churches within the Independent Sacramental Movement that self-identify as “Gnostic.” The AJC claims it has the same Apostolic authority as the Catholic Church. The legitimacy of its Gnostic approach to Catholicism is, it says, found in early Christianity, with John the Evangelist, and is therefore neither an ancient heresy nor a recent innovation. Claims to a historical Johannite-Gnostic tradition authorizes the AJC to incorporate practices, rituals, and texts from antiquity to the present into their religion by *ex post facto* labeling them Johannite or Gnostic. In short, the “invented” tradition serves to legitimize the AJC as Catholic *and* Gnostic, invested with ancient apostolic authority but not constrained by the ritual or theological dogmata of the Roman Church.¹⁰ The AJC’s sense of its tradition impacts its reception of ancient Gnostic texts and the scholarship on them.

The Gnostic Worldview of the Apostolic Johannite Church

A lucid and engaging writer, Jordan Stratford has become the leading spokesman for the AJC.¹¹ He has been interviewed for Miguel Conner’s podcast on Gnosticism ancient and modern, *Aeon Byte*, three times.¹² He represented Ecclesial Gnosticism in an interview for a 2006 US News and World Report cover story on the revival of interest in ancient Gnostic texts (Tolson 2006, 70–79). In 2007, he published a slim introduction to modern Gnosticism entitled *Living Gnosticism: An Ancient Way of Knowing*. This book provides a useful overview of how the AJC defines Gnosticism, gnosis, and their Gnostic worldview. Stratford’s approach to scholarship in the book is ambivalent. He cites scholars who define gnosis psychologically or essentially to help legitimize the AJC’s worldview. In contrast, Stratford defends his essentialist view

9. The definition is my own, but the term is also employed in emic contexts with a similar meaning. See Silvia A., 2013, 216.

10. It must be said that it is dangerous to reify a binary distinction between invented and genuine (meaning historically recognizable) traditions. In Steven Engler’s words, “all tradition is genuine and all tradition is invented.” No tradition is passed down, verbatim, unchanged by cultural, social, hermeneutic, and institutional contexts. Nor do genuine traditions construct the past oblivious to the strategic aims we attribute to “invented” traditions. All traditions configure their presentations of the past to serve strategic aims, as well as to support diachronic and synchronic communities of identity. The AJC’s recent origin simply brings its strategic, invented features into the foreground. For nuanced approaches to invented vis-à-vis genuine traditions, see Engler 2005, 359–366.

11. Stratford is Archpriest and Apostolic Prefect within the AJC.

12. See episode 41, “Understanding Alchemy,” episode 196, “Sophia and the Demiurge,” and episode 76, “Living Gnosticism.”

of gnosis vis-a-vis scholars who define Gnosticism through common tropes in the ancient texts, such as the presence of a Demiurge (the “Craftsman” of Plato’s *Timaeus* reinterpreted as an evil or foolish lower Creator God in certain Gnostic texts), acosmism (the belief humans inhabit a world antagonistic to them), or anthropic dualism (the divine and the human body are interminably distinct).

For Stratford, “Gnosticism” is not something that died along with ancient groups in Late Antiquity. It is a subculture that survived within Western culture, erupting in heretical movements such as the Cathars, but also in Renaissance humanism and alchemy (Stratford 2007, 19–20). Such an argument largely reprises the theories of the Patrologist and scholar of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) Gilles Quispel (1916–2006), initially advanced in his book *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (“Gnosis as World-Religion”) and found later in many essays.¹³ Stratford’s “hidden” form of Christianity is understood more broadly than the more direct transmission of the Johannite Church.

Citing Quispel, Stratford defines “gnosis” as “knowledge of the heart” (Stratford 2007, 16).¹⁴ It correlates with terms such as “intuition” and “enlightenment” and produces “a deep understanding of the Divine and our relationship to it” (Stratford 2007, 16). Gnosis can also be understood as “inspiration” and commonly results in visionary myth-making (Stratford 2007, 17). Defined in this way, gnosis is not limited in expression to religious movements. Artists and writers can experience and transmit gnosis. As Stratford puts it: “dream and fairy tales, myth and metaphor, secret and cypher, symbol and poetry comprise the language with which the Gnostic interprets the constant signal from the inbreaking divine” (Stratford 2007, 37). Allen Ginsberg, John Lennon, and Henry Miller are therefore cited as representative “Gnostics” on par with Valentinus.¹⁵

13. See Quispel 1951; Quispel 2008c, 243–261; Quispel 2008b, 141–153; Quispel 1999, 10–25. The Nag Hammadi Codices are twelve books (and leaves of a thirteenth) discovered just outside of Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. The cartonnage of Codex VII has a *terminus ante quem* of the mid-fourth century CE, although some of the texts contained within the codices appear to be translations of works that may have been written anywhere from the second to the fourth centuries CE; see most recently Lundhaug and Jenott 2015.

14. Stratford does not provide a source for his citation, but it is possible that the quote derives from Tobias Churton’s 1987 television documentary *The Gnostics*, where Quispel defines Gnosis as “knowledge of the heart.” See “*The Gnostics*: Episode 1: Knowledge of the Heart.” To the best of my knowledge, this is the only time Quispel gave this definition of gnosis.

15. Stephan Hoeller (b. 1931) is the most influential Ecclesial Gnostic of the twentieth century. He is founder and head Bishop of the *Ecclesia Gnostica* in Los Angeles, CA, and

Stratford defines the Gnostic worldview as a set of four interrelated themes:

Who we really are is eternal and immortal.

The system is not the world.

Faith will not save us from the system.

Wisdom is in the world and wants to be known. (Stratford 2007, 36–37)

Stratford’s definition is as important for what is left out as what it includes. Many of the typological characteristics attributed to ancient Gnosticism are disregarded. He avers “worldly denial, radical dualism, and disregard for the Old Testament can be found in later movements, but not in Gnosticism *per se*” (Stratford 2007, 12). Stratford reinterprets antagonistic descriptions of the material cosmos in ancient Gnostic literature as referring to political and economic systems.¹⁶ The material world is an emanation of the divine (Stratford 2007, 40–41). It follows for Stratford that Gnostics do not hate embodiment, but celebrate it. He defends this assertion with reference to the Gnostic Eve. On his reading of an untitled work from Nag Hammadi commonly known as *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5), Eve is as “enlightened heroine [...] responsible, ultimately, for the material creation of all who come after her” as well as “an agent of liberation [...] an instructor” who brings Adam *gnosis* (Stratford 2007, 49–51). Nor does Stratford’s Gnostic worldview include the Demiurge, often taken as an essential feature in scholarly definitions of Gnosticism.¹⁷ There is no revealer, such as Christ, who brings gnosis. Instead, practices of “mysticism” catalyze religious experiences that open the individual to the “constant signal” from the “inbreaking Divine.” (Stratford 2007, 37)

Rethinking Gnosticism in Light of Gnostic Studies

In 2005, Jeremy Puma, then a member of the Seattle parish of the Ecclesia Gnostica, founded PalmTreeGarden.org, a discussion board for self-described Gnostics. Over time, this bulletin board came to include many members of the AJC, as well as new media figures such as Miguel Conner.¹⁸ Beginning

has written five books, numerous articles, and given a myriad of lectures on “Gnosticism” broadly construed. Hoeller makes a similar division between two traditions of gnosis—that of groups (Bogomils, Cathars, etc.) and independent thinkers reviving Gnostic mythical thought (Hoeller 2002, 2–3, 155–173, 192).

16. Similarly Hoeller 2002, 208.

17. For recent examples, see Pearson 2007, 12. Stratford argues specifically against M. A. Williams, whose deconstruction of Gnosticism and introduction of the category “Biblical Demiurgical Myth” will be discussed below.

18. My research here is based on posts and comments available from the now-disbanded PalmTreeGarden.org, via archive.org.

in 2006, the board hosted discussion groups on the work of John D. Turner, Michael Allen Williams, and other scholars. It is at this point that the AJC had to develop stronger strategies of self-legitimization through and vis-à-vis scholarship, and new forms of contemporary Gnostic practice and belief began to develop in the online community.

A case in point is a debate that took place primarily through posts by Stratford and Jesse Folks (bulletin board *nom de plume* “Bright Spark”), at the time a graduate student in Ancient Semitic Language and Literatures at the Catholic University of America and, at the time, member of the AJC. Folks and Puma had in fact been acknowledged specifically by Stratford for helping to produce the definition of Gnosticism in his book *Living Gnosticism*, as discussed in the previous section (Stratford 2007, 7). In his December 2010 post “The New Paradigm,” Folks notes that he started his graduate career hoping to understand his own Gnostic religious identity more deeply by learning the ancient sources firsthand. It seemed intuitively obvious to him that wherever “gnosis” as an individual experience of being one with God occurred, there was Gnosticism.¹⁹ When he began to read scholars such as Williams, Karen King, and Ismo Dunderberg, Folks began to see Gnosticism in a new light. He agreed that Gnosticism as a term did not reflect an ancient movement but was rather the product of intra-Christian polemics policing the boundaries of what became “orthodox” Christianity (Williams 1996; King 2003; Dunderberg 2008). “Gnostic” corpora like the Nag Hammadi texts were simply evidence of the diversity of early Christianity. Furthermore, he realized that Valentinians and the Sethians (a branch of ancient Gnostic literary tradition so-called because of its emphasis on the figure of Seth as savior and revealer) were “unquestionably dualists,” a position that challenged the panentheist theology of the AJC.²⁰

In this debate, Folks cites the arguments of two watershed books in the study of ancient Gnosticism. Williams’s *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1999) argued that the category “Gnosticism” has proven hard to define and agree upon because of the diverse data it attempts to encompass (Williams 1996, 49–51). Williams suggests that it would be better to begin afresh with categories that are purely scholarly constructs, designed for the sole purpose of describing the texts them-

19. This understanding is an echo of Stratford in his “Section I: Know Thyself” (2007, 15–19).

20. Unless otherwise indicated, in light of the views of my research subjects I adopt the typological model advocated by Hans-Martin Schenke. More finely tuned reconstructions of Sethianism (for example, Rasimus 2009) have yet to be incorporated into the work of contemporary gnostic thinkers.

selves (Williams 1996, 51–53). King’s *What Is Gnosticism?* (2003), meanwhile, argues that scholarship on Gnosticism has implicitly constructed the category in order to define and differentiate normative Christianity from what it is not. The term “Gnosticism,” therefore, is used to advance the ideological interests of normative Christianity, just as the term “heresy” was used by ancient heresiologists. Though King stops short of outright dismissal of the term Gnosticism, she urges scholars to recognize ancient texts as evidence for the enormous diversity of early Christian belief and practice (King 2003, 2–4, 7–9, 218–236).

Scholarly deconstruction of the modern category of Gnosticism was (and remains) intensely threatening to the identity of the AJC. As Stratford puts it, the claim of Folks comes from “a neo-heresological anti-Gnostic who wishes to erase our history in hopes of erasing our present” (Stratford 2010a). The word “heresy” is used deliberately: discussion on palmtreegarden.org concluded that the Nag Hammadi texts prove that “Gnostic dualism” is merely a polemical bogeyman invented by heresiologists such as the second-century Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons. Stratford intends to challenge scholars such as Williams, first by questioning their logic, and second, by invoking scholars who argue in favor of the existence of pre-Christian forms of Gnosticism (Stratford 2011a). *Pace* Williams, Stratford argues that it is logically absurd to abandon the term Gnosticism because it is either wrongly applied or did not exist in the early centuries of the current era: “[Williams] really does employ this reasoning to insist that there’s no such thing *as us*” (Stratford 2011a, emphasis mine). In other words: if scholarship deconstructs Gnosticism, it deconstructs the AJC, too. Stratford invokes Quispel to argue that the evil Gnostic demiurge—central even to the category Williams suggests we use to replace Gnosticism, “Biblical Demiurgical myth”—is inessential for defining Gnosticism. Rather, Gnosticism may be considered a religion postulated on the identity of the human and the divine, which manifests in various forms throughout Western history.²¹ Archons (malevolent rulers of the cosmos) and the Demiurge are not real beings, but mythological presentations of *psychological* realities. Neither are fundamental to Gnosticism insofar as the expression of gnosis will not necessarily concern them (Stratford 2007, 45–47). Secondly, Stratford notes that respectable scholarly advocates, such as Birger Pearson, hypothesize the existence of a Gnostic religion prior to Christianity.²² In the same year that this debate took place, the AJC would,

21. See Quispel 1999, 24; Quispel 2008b, 152–53; Quispel 2008a, 162. Significantly, a similar argument for gnosis as an underground stream in Western culture has recently been reprised in van den Broek 2013, 2–3.

22. For comments on Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism, see Stratford 2011b.

for the first time, invite a scholar to their annual conclave—and they invited none other than Pearson himself, with the express intention of discussing his hypothesis of a pre-Christian form of Gnosticism (Stratford 2007, 16; Stratford 2011b).²³

Debating Gnostic Worldviews: The Problem of Dualism

The debate then spilled over into the problem of dualism in classical Gnostic theology and cosmology (or, as it was referred to on the bulletin boards, “the great dualism debate”). This debate took place over interpretation of two ancient texts, *GosMary* and *Ap. John*, though in the interest of space I focus on the latter. At variance were Stratford and Folks’s interpretations of a section of the *Apocryphon of John* NHC II,1.2.33–3.3, which they quote from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*:³

He is the invisible Spirit, of whom it is not right to think of him as a god, or something similar. For he is more than a god, since there is nothing above him, for no one lords it over him. For he does not exist in something inferior to him, since everything exists in him. (Robinson 1988, 106)

With reference to the crucial final clause, Stratford cites *Gospel of Thomas* logion 77—“split a piece of wood, I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me”—in order to prove that “the divine is everywhere, in everything. And of course it *is everything*.”²⁴ However, he also attempts to justify his position with reference to ancient cosmogony as he conceives it. Stratford reads the quote from the *Ap. John* as an explanation of a three-stage cosmology that moves from monism to *qualified* dualism, followed by reunification into the Fullness: the reconciliation of opposites (Stratford 2010b). He emphasizes that the statement “everything exists in him” includes matter, that matter itself was inarguably emanated from the Invisible Spirit, and that it will return to Spirit in the reunification. Matter is distinct from and inferior to Spirit, but not antithetical to it.

Folks argues that Stratford has misread the proof-text:

The entire body of scholarship would disagree with Mr. Stratford. Either they’re all wrong, as a unit, and probably should resign from their jobs, or he is. *The Apocryphon of John* does not only espouse a different origin for matter than the Monad, but is an example of Sethianism, the most dualistic and matter-devaluing sect among those commonly called “gnostic.” (Folks 2011)

23. It should be noted Stratford goes much further than Pearson’s hypothesis of the Judaic origins of Gnosticism, insisting that Gnosticism can be traced back to Alexandria in the third century BCE.

24. *Gos. Thom.* NHC II,2.46, qtd. in Stratford 2010b, 26–28; see also Robinson 1988, 135.

Folks invokes scholars such as Zlatko Pleše to clarify the dualist position and to point out that Stratford’s views are more akin to those of the third-century Platonic philosopher Plotinus (who wrote a polemical treatise, which his student, Porphyry, entitled *Against the Gnostics*) (Plotinus 1966, 33). Specifically, Folks cites Pleše to show that, according to Plotinus, matter can never truly be cut off from the superior principles to which it owes its existence, and therefore, “matter will [forever] be illuminated.”²⁵ Conversely, matter and spirit are radically distinct in the Sethian Gnostic position, where the soul must decide between two mutually exclusive courses, “the spirit of life” and “the counterfeit spirit.”²⁶ For Folks, Stratford is therefore not a Gnostic. He is a Neoplatonist who makes the same arguments Plotinus made against Gnostics over 1,700 years earlier.

While Folks and Stratford do not offer new translations of the Nag Hammadi texts in their debate, they do argue the meaning of specific Coptic and Greek terms. For example, Folks takes umbrage with Stratford’s definition of “the all” (Coptic: ⲡⲧⲏⲣ̅ⲓ), arguing that in Middle Platonic thought, the term, much like the Greek verb *πληρώω* (“to fill up”), would have been used to encompass the set of archetypal Ideas, but not their copies in matter. He asserts this is why “the everything” of *Ap. John*—ⲡⲧⲏⲣ̅ⲓ—arises prior to the birth of Yaltabaoth and the creation of the material universe.

At odds in this “great dualism debate” were issues of Gnostic identity and authority. For Stratford and the AJC, the academic deconstruction of Gnosticism led to two related responses. On the one hand, they invoke the work of scholars who can seemingly legitimize their religious orientation. Given the absence of a tradition of interpretation such as one finds in Rabbinic Judaism—for the simple reason the Nag Hammadi Codices were buried for 1,500 years—interpretive authority over the texts has been tacitly granted to scholars.²⁷ As such, it is significant the AJC now invites scholars to their annual conclave (Pleše was their guest in 2014). It is also notable that panentheist readings are legitimized by scholarship produced during the first wave of

25. Pleše *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe* qtd. in Folks 2011.

26. As presented in *The Apocryphon of John*, the “counterfeit spirit” and “spirit of life” vie for the (souls) of human beings. The “spirit of life” descends from the Pleroma upon certain individuals, strengthening their spirits and thereby allowing them to overcome enslavement within materiality and evil (NHC II, 1.25.16–26.22 [Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 70]). By contrast, the “counterfeit spirit” is a creation of the chief archon Yaldabaoth, a degenerate copy of the “spirit of life” which leads souls into forgetfulness, lust for procreation, evil, and ultimately eternal punishment (26.32–28.32 [Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 71–76]).

27. Collections of the NHC and other Gnostic writings traditionally feature explanatory essays or commentary from scholars.

work on the Nag Hammadi Codices. Scholars such as Buddhologist Edward Conze, who suggested Gnosticism exhibits strong parallels to Asian religions, and the aforementioned Quispel, who envisioned Gnosticism as a distinct religious phenomenon traceable through Western history, help to legitimize the AJC's essentialist views.²⁸

On the other hand, the AJC defends its own hermeneutic authority vis-à-vis scholars. As Stratford claims, "we are the Gnostics now" (Stratford 2011c). For example, the AJC's Primate of North America, philosophy professor William Behun, offers a philosophical definition of Gnosticism to bridge the logical gulf between ancient and modern Gnostics (Behun 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Invoking Deleuze's notions of the ideal and the actual, which he illustrates as a "change in state, as from ice to water, and not something fundamentally different," Behun holds Gnosticism to be the *privileging* of the ideal over the actual, or spirit over matter. It need not be dualistic or acosmic. In this definition, Behun offers his own philosophical expertise to argue spirit and matter are reifications of ontologically unstable concepts. The AJC's own invented tradition might not survive philological scrutiny, but it is offered as a more sound philosophical position than strict dualism.

Contemporary Gnostic Worldview after Deconstruction: Jeremy Puma

"The great dualism debate" between Stratford and Folks would help catalyze Puma's break from the Ecclesia Gnostica and his creation of a form of Gnostic belief and practice modeled on the scriptures of the NHC, especially the Sethian texts. In this case, we see what anthropologist Bruno Latour identifies as the phenomenon wherein scholarly constructions become options that people can and do adopt for their religious orientation (Latour 2013). Puma has since become one of the most prolific authors among contemporary Gnostics. To date he has self-published seven books on contemporary Gnostic belief and practice.²⁹ He has appeared on Aeon Byte at least four times and contributes frequently to Andrew Philip Smith's journal *The Gnostic*.³⁰

In the book he wrote to break away from the Ecclesial Gnostics, *This Way:*

28. Of special interest are the essays by Conze (1999) and Quispel (1999) reprinted in Segal *et al* (1990), from which Stratford cites them.

29. Puma's writings prior to his break with Ecclesial Gnosticism include: *Running Towards the Bomb*, *The Pirate's Garden*, *Mysteries of the Gnostic Ascent*, and *The Face of the Sky and Earth*; Puma's writings after his break with Ecclesial Gnosticism include: *This Way: Gnosis without Gnosticism*, *A Gnostic Prayerbook*, and *How to Think Like a Gnostic*.

30. The Aeon Byte episode list is not publicly accessible. Puma appears on the following episodes: "Gnosis without Gnosticism," "How to Think like a Gnostic," "An Introduction to Philip K. Dick," and "The Gospel of Thomas."

Gnosis without Gnosticism, Puma points out contemporary academics such as Williams and Dunderberg had shown reifications of “ancient Gnosticism” to be unfounded (Puma 2011, 215–259). Puma then turned to Gnostic Studies scholarship to help redefine his relationship to the NHC and his identity as a Gnostic. He defines a Gnostic as “someone who pursues gnosis within the context of a particular set of myths, most of which are represented in a number of Christian non-Biblical texts referred to as Sethian” (Puma 2013, 101). Puma thus adopts the position of Bentley Layton that Irenaeus’s account of a myth assigned to certain “Gnostics” refers to a group of self-defined *gnōstikoi* in the ancient world, and that this myth represents their worldview (Puma 2013, 162–187, 2587; Irenaeus 1979, 358–385); Layton 1987, 5–22; Layton 1995, 334–350). Layton’s hypothesis informed the work of two later academics, Alastair Logan and David Brakke, each of whom attempted to reconstruct the ritual practice and worldview of these *gnōstikoi* (Logan 1996; Logan 1997; Brakke 2010, 74–76). Put simply, Puma’s response to the deconstruction of Gnosticism is to turn to a subset of academics that delimit the Gnostics *specifically* to a possible Sethian religious community.

In his next book, *How to Think like a Gnostic*, Puma articulates how to enter this Sethian myth as a worldview that accommodates genuine revelations, dualism, acosmism, real archons, and a Christocentric focus in the modern age, best illustrated in his formula of “Gnosis”:

Gnosis = Awakening (Word/Christ + Wisdom/Sophia)

(Puma 2013, 364)

“Awakening” refers to an individual experience through which one recognizes time, space, and materiality to be illusory instruments of control presided over by the archons, or what Puma calls the “World of Forms,” which mask the eternal reality of the Pleroma. The parenthetical statement is, in the first place, a direct interpretation of *Ap. John* NHC II,1.23.27–36, where Christ descends in the form of an eagle, and the character Epinoia (“afterthought,” “consciousness”) descends in the form of the Tree of Gnosis, or Light, in order to awaken Adam and Eve. In a second sense, they are interpreted practically: Word/Christ refers to the discursive forms of Gnostic knowledge: speech, myths, ritual, and rites (Puma 2013, 404). Sophia is conceived as the capacity to interpret the meaning of the revealed, discursive knowledge and also the need to enact those lessons through service and action (Puma 2013, 1211). Lastly, Sophia and Christ are not *merely* psychological phenomena for Puma: they are also ontologically unique, independent entities (Puma 2013, 1231).

Puma clarifies this seeming ambiguity between psychological, practical,

and hypostatic readings of *Ap. John* in his discussion of archons (Puma 2013, chs. 9–11). Archons manifest within the psyche as instincts, fears, and compulsions that keep us wedded to the World of Forms; within political and social systems that utilize fear as a controlling mechanism to prevent recognition of gnosis; and as hypostatic entities capable of paranormal manifestation. To explain this multivalence, Puma refers to a framework formulated by science-fiction author Philip K. Dick (1928–1982). Dick experienced a series of paranormal revelations in February and March of 1974 that he spent the rest of his life attempting to decode.³¹ Dick considered the possibility that the universe is a two-source hologram composed of information. The first source, Form I, is Dick's parallel to the Gnostic Pleroma. Form II, often called the Black Iron Prison, is responsible for madness, chaos, and perceived evil—Dick's parallel to the material world created by the Demiurge and guarded by archons (Dick 1991, 96–101). Humans are information-processing creatures who receive signals primarily from Form II. For Puma, in a holographic universe composed entirely of information, the archons are *processed* identically, whether *experienced* psychologically, politically, or paranormally. This epistemological position allows Christ and Sophia to be understood as ontologically independent—that is, “real”—revealers, not just psychological states or metaphors. Christ in Puma's system bonds (like the “plasmate” of Philip K. Dick) with an individual to awaken them to the living information beaming from Form I, the Pleroma. Utilizing Dick's conceptual framework, Puma has attempted not just to *interpret* the view of the Sethian texts, but to actually *adopt* it as a lived worldview that has room for psychological, political, and hypostatic entities. To awaken from Form II, though, requires rituals—in particular rituals adopted from classical Gnostic texts themselves.

Contemporary Gnostic Ritual after Deconstruction: The Five Seals

Puma differentiates himself from Ecclesial Gnostics by creating rituals based on texts from the Nag Hammadi Codices.³² In order to do so, he must lean considerably on the scholarship which has attempted to reconstruct Gnostic rituals from these inchoate, difficult ancient sources. Take Puma's ritual of the Five Seals. This ceremony is mentioned only in a few texts—the

31. For a firsthand account of these events, see Dick (1991 or 2011). The best biographical study of Dick remains Sutin (2005).

32. In their publicly available materials, the ritual and liturgical life of the AJC is strongly modeled on Western ceremonial magic (specifically the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the works of Alastair Crowley) and a modified version of the Roman Catholic sacramental calendar; see Silvia A., 2013, 121–64, 196–211; Stratford 2007, 55–96.

Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII*,1), *Egyptian Gospel* (NHC III,2; IV,2), and the long recension of *Ap. John* (Puma 2012, 1078–1278). References to the ceremony are sufficiently vague as to have led to diverse reconstructions from respected scholars. Most recent scholars have followed Turner’s lead and posited that the “five seals” referred to a visionary form of baptism (Turner 1994, 137–149).³³ Puma grounds his reconstruction in Turner’s hypothesis. He also turns to the writings of David Brakke and Alistair Logan to assert the Five Seals included chrismation of the senses that gave the ascending soul power over Ialdabaoth.³⁴ Bringing these hypotheses together, Puma creates his own “self-initiation into Sethian Gnostic mythology” (Puma 2013, 1078).

Beginning with an invocation of the Great Invisible Spirit and the upper aeons of the aeonic realm, the aspirant reads aloud the first *Stele of Seth* (the first part of the Platonizing Sethian tract, the *Three Steles of Seth* [NHC VII, 5]). Upon completion of the first *Stele*, the initiate disregards his earthly robes and puts on the Robe of Glory (or Robe of Light), symbolized by a clean white robe. This is a direct reference to another Sethian treatise, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (“First Thought in Three Forms”—NHC XIII,1), where the Gnostic is stripped of chaos (the corporeal and the psychic bodies) to be clothed in light (*Trim. Prot.* NHC XIII, 1.48.1–16). Then, the initiate (in Puma’s rite) anoints or “seals” each of their own five senses (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands) with myrrh and olive oil. Each seal is given in the name of the Christos, Sophia, Barbelo, Emmacha Seth, as well as each one of the angelic beings known as the Four Luminaries (Harmozel for eyes, Oroiael for ears, Dauethai for nose, Eleleth for mouth), before invoking the Luminaries as a group for the fifth seal (hands) (Puma 2012, 1140–1183).³⁵ The recipe of myrrh and olive oil for the ointment is not extant from classical Gnostic writings; rather, it is a hypothesis of Logan, who suggests such a recipe was used as early as the first century CE (Logan 1997, 193–197). Puma’s account of the anointment of the five senses is also unattested in the texts, following rather from a reconstruction conveyed in Brakke’s *The Gnostics* (Brakke 2010, 75–76). Afterwards the initiate lies in the form of the cross on the floor, closes one’s eyes and dispels each of the

33. For a contrasting view of Five Seals as water baptism, see Sevrin 1986, 37–38.

34. Logan 1997, 192–193, asserts the “faculties of the soul” (two eyes, two ears, and mouth) were anointed; Brakke 2010, 75–76, suggests both the faculties of the soul and the five senses (eyes, ears, hands, mouth, and nose). Neither *Trim. Prot.* nor *Holy Book* mentions myrrh and olive oil.

35. These Four Lights (or Luminaries) appear in the context of the “five seals” in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* NHC III, 2.65.13–22. On the Four Lights, see also *Trim. Prot.* NHC XIII, 1.38.35–39.5, and *Apoc. John* NHC II, 1.8.4–20 (and par.).

seven planetary archons from *Ap. John*, name by name, before reciting the second “Stele of Seth.” These two acts combined form the hypothesized visionary ascent after the reception of the sealing.

The culmination of the Five Seals is, for Puma, a visionary experience that incorporates one into “the community of knowers,” or fellow Gnostics. This inference is not obvious from the text of *Trim. Prot.*, but is an interpretation of the first person plural language in the text that Brakke takes to relate to an earlier section of the *Trim. Prot.* (NHC XIII,1.45.13–20). As Brakke reconstructs it,

As *First Thought in Three Forms* presents the ritual, it seems that the person is “washed in the wellspring of the water of life” after putting on the ritual robe. Both of these steps, stripping/clothing and washing, take place under direction of divine beings who are called “enrobers” and “Baptists,” respectively... The baptized person is given “a throne from the throne of glory” by “the enthroners,” and then “the glorifiers” glorify the candidate “with the glory of the kinship.” Finally, “those who catch up” take the person “into the luminous places of that person’s kinship”—a reference perhaps to some form of mystical ascent and contemplation. (Brakke 2010, 75)

Upon entering “into the luminous places of that person’s kinship,” the initiate in Puma’s rite is granted a new name, a reference to the anointing of the Son as Christ by the Father: “in this community of knowers, I shall be known as N. I now stand as a child of Seth and his immovable, immutable lineage” (Puma 2012, 1249). Like Christ himself (according to Puma), the initiate is born and named, inhabiting the living water in the image of the Father and then named by him. He or she has become one of the *gnōstikoi*, or “knowers,” temporarily free of the World of Forms, and a member of the lineage of Seth. Yet as can be seen, none of these interpretations necessarily follow from the ancient sources, nor is it immediately apparent that one must read *Ap. John*, *Trim. Prot.* and *Holy Book* as intertexts. Only thanks to scholars reconstructing the rituals of ancient Gnostics—specifically, from Sethian texts—was it possible for Puma create this rite.

Conclusions

It is clear that inventions of ancient Gnostic religion in the twenty-first century are profoundly influenced by work in Gnostic Studies. As has been demonstrated, the academic dispute over the definition (or lack thereof) of the category “Gnosticism” destabilized the identity of some contemporary Gnostics. Stratford and members of the AJC strove to defend their identity as members of an invented “gnostic tradition” by invoking the psychological-

essentialist model of Quispel. Puma, by contrast, assented to the deconstruction of Gnosticism and turned to Gnostic Studies scholarship to locate the historical *gnostikoi*, specifically the Sethians.

The influence of Gnostic Studies is further evident in the rituals practiced by the AJC and Puma. When *gnōsis* is regarded as “the wisdom of the heart,” a perennial experience of intuition that results in visionary myth-making, there is no need to practice ancient rituals *per se*. Any ritual that manifests the “wisdom of the heart” can be classified as Gnostic. In turn, most of the AJC’s ritual practices are drawn from French Masonry, Martinism, and the Golden Dawn—not ancient Gnostic sources (Silvia A., 2013). In contrast, Puma’s attempts to perform rituals as one of the *gnōstikoi* required close reading of the Nag Hammadi Codices. In order to reconstruct the ritual of the Five Seals from these difficult, inchoate sources, Puma turned to scholarship on them. Both the AJC and Puma see their rituals as legitimate forms of Gnostic practice. They simply define “Gnosticism” differently—and invoke different scholars to legitimize their doing so.

Psychological definitions of the “Gnostic” (such as Quispel’s) and historical-critical reconstructions based on close readings of primary texts (such as those of Layton, Logan, and Brakke) reconfigure contemporary Gnostic religion in distinctive ways. Psychological definitions are initially used by contemporary Gnostics to help to support the hypothesis of a secret or hidden tradition based on a perennial experience and sacralized model of the mind.³⁶ Yet these psychological definitions go on to impact how Gnostics understand *their own* experiences of *gnōsis*. Stratford’s definition of *gnōsis* as a form of intuition that manifests in visionary myth-making allows the AJC to expand its imagined community well beyond the confines of the Johannite tradition. Stratford embraced poetry, film, and novels as Gnostic scripture. Quispel is not the only prominent intellectual to argue for a psychological approach to *gnōsis*. Carl Jung himself practiced a psychodynamic approach to Gnostic texts—which surely influenced Quispel—and his hermeneutic has influenced many more contemporary Gnostics.³⁷ If this point holds, attempts in Gnostic Studies to redefine Gnostic epistemology with new psychological discourses, such as cognitive neuroscience, should have a similar impact on

36. On the sacralization of the psyche on contemporary esotericism, see: Hanegraaff 1996, 203–255; Kripal 2007, 112–180, 249–269, and 339–356; Luhrmann 1989, 224–229; Owen 2004, 148–185.

37. The influence of Jung’s psychological thought on contemporary Gnostics is enormous. See especially: Caruana 2009; Freke and Gandy 2001; Hoeller 1982; Hoeller 1989; Segal *et al.* 1995; Singer 1990.

religious neo-Gnosticism going forward.³⁸

In contrast, historical reconstructions of ancient Gnostics become paradigms for those who wish to identify as Gnostic in the present. Rituals reconstructed from the ancient world and published in monographs or journals become available for contemporary Gnostics to practice. Puma is not alone in his invention of Gnostic rituals through academic sources: visionary artist Laurence Caruana, comic book author Grant Morrison, and psychologist June Singer have all reimagined Gnostic rituals under the influence of academic authors.³⁹ Recent and future publications that reconstruct ancient rituals may well have a similar impact.⁴⁰ Gnostic Studies then does more than establish the historical past; its scholarship is appropriated to transform and invent religion in the present.

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38. For cognitive approaches to Gnostics and their texts, see especially: DeConick 2013; DeConick 2016; Lundhaug 2010. For cognitive approaches to religious experience more broadly construed, see Taves 2009; Taves and Asprem 2017.

39. Caruana's three depictions of the Bridal Chamber ritual in *The Hidden Passion* are based on hypotheses from academic literature. Mary Magdalene experiences first a sexual Bridal Chamber, followed by an ascetic ritual, and last a visionary union between herself and Jesus (Caruana 2007, 380–409). On these three approaches to the Bridal Chamber, see DeConick 2003, 307–10. For Morrison's use of Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, see Morrison *et al.* 2012, 615–619; Singer dedicated her *Gnostic Book of Hours* to Gilles Quispel.

40. I am thinking especially here of Choat and Gardner (2014).

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