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.¹ 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.² 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.³ Since it is not a single organization, it has no unambiguous leaders beyond those who are

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³ 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. The thing that unifies this diversity is a common spirituality of seekership and a quest orientation. This quest orientation takes the shape of a personal spiritual journey focused on the inward search for meaning, self-transformation, and personal integration.

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 sometime 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. 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-

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4 Campbell 1972, 122; Hanegraaff 1998, 1; Roof 1999, 203–212.
5 Campbell 1972; Roof 1999, 46–76.
6 Roof 1999, 46–76.
7 Cf. Kaler 2009 who explores the idea that the Nag Hammadi codices were copied for seekers within a deviant religious environment or cultic milieu.