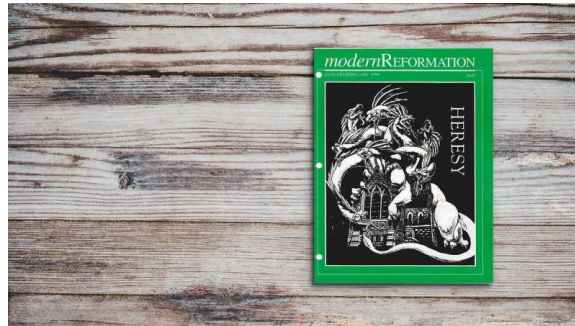


# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Gnosticism

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Like the ancient Gnostics faced by the early church, society today has adopted an escapist, anti-materialistic, anti-intellectual, anti-institutional, anti-sacramental spirituality. This is as true for non-Christians, with New York business executives attending New Age seminars taught by Stanford instructors. Both the past and the future are perceived as irrelevant intrusions into the present moment of what Schaeffer called “personal peace and affluence.” People want to escape reality and create their own.

This tendency has been evident both in the secular, Greek strain of Western history (Platonism, Neoplatonism, etc.) and in the religious adaptations of that strain (mysticism, much of monasticism, and the abundance of taboos designed to keep believers from the world). The early name for this mixture of Christianity and pagan, anti-material mysticism was “Gnosticism.” According to Marylin Ferguson, a New Age guru, Gnosticism is the fountain of contemporary mysticism.<sup>1</sup>

What on earth could Fundamentalism and the New Age movement have in common? There have been many New Age conspiracy theories floating about, trying to implicate nearly everyone. Isn't this stepping over the line of sanity just a bit? Not really. Let me explain.

An early pseudepigraphal writing (a document pretending to have been written by an apostle) states the recurring Gnostic disdain for the material world: “It is the spirit that raises the soul, but the body that kills it” (Apocryphon of James). One finds this same

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, Marylin (1987). *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. (New York: St. Martins Press).

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mysticism in current New Age thinking. It is also the sentiment revived by many forms of Pentecostalism, with comments such as, “Don’t focus on that body of yours. ...The problem is not your spirit; it’s your mind and body.”<sup>2</sup> A recently published non-Pentecostal, evangelical study guide reads, “Our problems arise from living as redeemed spirits in unredeemed bodies.”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Eric Voegelin, a political scientist at the University of Munich, regards our era as “the revival of Gnosticism,” although he has politics and science more in mind than religion. “The world is no longer the...Judeo-Christian world that God created and found good. Gnostic man no longer wishes to perceive in admiration the intrinsic order of the cosmos. For him the world has become a prison from which he wants to escape.”<sup>4</sup> This Gnostic revival draws many people into its wake—from the secularists who just want to make money to pay for things that will allow them to escape life’s realities, to the fundamentalists who exchange earthly responsibility for speculations on the end-times.

## What is Gnosticism, Anyway?

Gnosticism is not a tight, systematic body of beliefs, but an agglomeration of concepts easily integrated into other mutually exclusive belief systems. Common denominators usually include a dualism of spirit (good) vs. matter (evil), and a constantly developing access to direct, intuitive, divine knowledge that improves and liberates the spirit of the individual from its material and intellectual bonds. Another Gnostic writing, *The Gospel of Truth* states that “if one has knowledge, he receives what is his own, and draws it to himself.” The individual is nearly exclusively interested in him or her self, and it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish this spiritual self-realization from mere subjectivism.

F. F. Bruce, in *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, points out that Gnosticism can be ascetic, such as the type attacked in Paul’s letter to the Colossians; as well as antinomian, such as that opposed in the letter of Jude. Opposition to secret knowledge of God is apparent in other New Testament writings. Paul, for example, states in 1 Corinthians 15 that he passed on the saving knowledge he had received: objective historical events with theological meanings, not esoteric mysteries of the spirit-world known only to a spiritual elite.

In the American culture we are vulnerable to the loose interpretive framework of Gnostic subjectivism—with more than a dash of Yankee pragmatism thrown in. A belief is true for me if it satisfies a personal need for security. Hence, non-Christian influences, under the

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<sup>2</sup> Copeland, Kenneth. *Believers Voice of Victory* 1982, v2.

<sup>3</sup> Voegelin, Eric (1968). *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. (Chicago: Regnery Gateway), 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

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guise of spirituality, are welcomed uncritically into the Church. Again, it is a loose interpretive framework. Gnosticism is a collection of attitudes, beliefs, and criteria that mix easily with nearly any belief. Its colored glass is the window through which many unwary Christians view their Christianity and the world. In this model, what can't be seen through the glass is either highly suspect, or unquestionably evil.

Accepting this Gnostic subjectivism as a world-interpreting window means that we lose our awareness of God, his character, Word, and purposes, as existing independent of us. What's true of God and Scripture is what benefits me spiritually, or confirms what I already want to believe about him. Truth, doctrine, and theology become irrelevant. What matters is how I am progressing with my own personal, private, spiritual agenda. It's wonderful when God's interests and my own coincide—but if they collide, statements in Scripture can be dismissed as not being practical, or as being irrelevant to my daily walk.

Among the more Gnostic strains of Evangelical spirituality, God is considered distant from our world. He is reluctantly involved, and intrudes only to do something vaguely prophetic in the Middle East. End-times prophecy becomes important since the rapture is the means of getting out of this world. Since many have dumped the doctrines of Creation and Providence, this focus on prophecy is the only way to be sure that God is concerned about this present world—aside from the non-material transformation of the spirit of each Christian. Others ignore the realities of this world by becoming involved, once more like the ancient Gnostics, in cosmic spiritual battles with demons in “power encounters.” How easily we miss the point even of Paul's discussion of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, often the proof-text for such heavenly war-mongering. In that passage, Paul makes clear that the spiritual battle in heavenly places revolves around the truth of the gospel and its world-wide proclamation; it is not a blue-print for hand-to-hand combat with demons, but a metaphor for the urgency of gospel preaching.

According to the end-times obsession, Christ is significant because, for the most part, he is coming to get us out of here and destroy this material world. After all, isn't Satan the god of this world? Let it be understood that Satan is the god of this world only in the sense that all in creation who oppose God proclaim loyalty to Satan by default. God's creation—including people and their bodies—is very good: In Genesis 1:31 God said so. C.S. Lewis once quipped, “God likes matter. He invented it.” But like us, the material world is affected by the Fall in such a way that an odor of death lingers in it. The visible and invisible world is still God's world, and the devil is still under control. Paul writes, “The creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage to corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs at this time” (Rom 8:21, 22). Our bodies, along with the rest of creation, will be physically resurrected as the finishing touch of the New Creation.

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## How Does This Influence Us?

The Gnosticism we see attaching itself to Christianity throughout its history often comes from a misdirected desire to protect true spirituality from intellectualization. However, rather than loving the Lord God with all our mind, as Christ commands us (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30), we seem to deny the mind's very existence because of a desire for personal comfort. Perhaps we fear that our understanding of Christianity won't cut it intellectually, fearful that others, Christians or not, might see that we really are not sure what we're talking about. It's safer to stick to personal experiences, since we're often more certain of our own subjective experiences than we are of Scripture.

Refusal to view themselves and their culture through Scripture is given for unbelievers. Unfortunately, too many Christians are guilty of the same sin when they refuse to protect Christian truth from worldly influences. Instead, we're likely to absorb these influences uncritically, and even to defend them as Christian. Christian Gnosticism causes us to reject our responsibility as stewards of Creation, and keeps us from admitting that Christ is Lord over every part of his creation. If we do not admit him as Lord over all, how can we serve him? And where, if not in creation? Ironically, this Gnostic disregard for stewardship is being done in the name of obedience! If anything, this disobedient retreat from our God-given responsibilities means Christians are ensuring that Jesus is denied as Lord of creation.

It's obvious that this influence causes our stewardship over the ecological state of the environment to suffer. After all, the environment is material, and it is destined for extermination anyway. Stewardship in just government suffers as well, since no Christian should be involved in worldly pursuits. Talented artists are made to feel guilty if they give too much time to their "secular career"; honest workers and diligent homemakers feel as though they are not giving God their best if they don't have enough time in the week to give to a whole series of church meetings and activities. Secular work is divorced from spiritual service. Our calling in this world does not require spiritual justification to be honoring to God. The worldliness evident in anti-worldly Gnosticism is the net effect of attitudes and beliefs that see all matter in creation operating independently of God. Gnosticism disdains culture in general, including dancing, drinking, reading secular literature, or going to movies.

Ironically, such concern for sin does not take sin seriously at all! Rather, this thinking limits sin to things external. It ignores our guilt for inwardly giving in sinful desires. The Sermon on the Mount, and Mark 7:14, 23 clearly present Jesus' position on this confusion of sin with the external world. Against the revival of Gnostic mysticism in his own day Calvin wrote, "The depravity and malice both of man and of the devil, or the sins that

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arise therefrom, do not spring from nature, but rather from the corruption of nature.” Therefore, “Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater” (*Institutes* 1.14.20).

Nor are other Christian truths safe from this mess. The sacraments of Communion and baptism suffer because they become merely movements of matter in this Gnostic understanding of Christianity. After all, how can spirituality be involved with matter? Imagine what happens to the Incarnation according to this model! After all, if we insist, on the basis that they are material things, on the notion that the bread and wine in Communion are merely symbolic, how can we say that “the Word became flesh” nearly two thousand years ago? Yet many Christians believe this. Believers may have differing views of the sacraments and their efficacy, but there is no doubt that denial of God’s involvement with matter is heretical.

Gnostics new and old may caricature the orthodox as dead, bound to the letter rather than the Spirit, devoted to head knowledge in stead of heart knowledge, “more interested in what the Lord did yesterday than what he’s doing today,” and so on. In doing so they are denying the only objective communication they have from God.

Evangelism suffers as well. If we do not know the philosophies that shape our world-view, it is nearly impossible to communicate the gospel to other minds. Perhaps we don’t want to be seen in the company of worldly people anyway. Serious Christians might question our spirituality if we know too much about the world. Besides, it might ruin our witness.

How we understand ourselves is also affected. Televangelistic Gnostics set the human spirit over the rest of the person in an attempt to rend asunder what God has joined together. A cycle of despair results. Believers start with emotional, psychological, relational, or moral struggles and they are told that such afflictions are the old things that have passed away upon conversion: Now they are to totally surrender and submit those things to God. Believers are to deny the reality of sin’s dominion, which Paul teaches, and also to deny, with Paul, the reality of ongoing sinful affections and behavior. Christians are not, therefore, supposed to deal with these problems at all, for that would involve the flesh. They must simply let God fight those battles on their behalf. Immediately, they become aware of their inability to experience victory in these areas, and feel even more distant from God. At this point they either begin denying the reality of their fallenness, or they try harder not to try at all.

A religion that is really a collection of Gnostic experiences becomes a commodity to be advertised (disguised as evangelism), sold (disguised as acceptance, not necessarily conversion), compared (disguised as fellowship), and hoarded for one’s own

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development (disguised as a personal relationship). Francis Schaeffer warned us of this new super- spirituality, which stands opposed to creation. We have become interested in saving souls, not people. We deny the Lordship of Christ over the world when we refuse to be involved with his creation. That includes employment and culture. God's gifts to us in creation, including intellect, psychology, relationships, social institutions, and nature, too often are seen as evil by Christians. Isaiah's warning still calls us to repentance in our disdain for this world: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil."

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<https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/gnosticism>

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