

Gnostic America

Gnostic America



A Reading of Contemporary American
Culture & Religion according to
Christianity's Oldest Heresy

Peter M. Burfeind



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✧ Introduction ✧

Surveying the Cultural Landscape

Tales from the Trenches of Our Times

Easter, 2012.¹ The audience gazed on in eager expectation, sitting in the stadium seating at the newest campus of the local mega-church. A giant screen towered over them. It revealed the countdown: *four minutes forty-three seconds til the service.*

People filed in. They moved hastily to their seats ushered by well-trained worship attendants. The feeling was electric.

One minute twenty-eight seconds.

Smoke began billowing out onto the stage. Introductory music, like something accompanying a champion wrestler, came from offstage.

Three . . . two . . . one.

The show began. The praise band stormed onto the stage and churned the audience into a clapping, swaying, hand-waving throng. Images of Christ's resurrection flashed on the screen. The editing was contemporary: quick cuts, odd camera angles, symbolic images, poetry evoking Christ's resurrection, but not too much – the rules of edginess dictate you can't reveal too much, at least not yet.

Many would say the event was saturated with the Holy Spirit. For the more cynical, the event was perfectly manufactured according to every known principle of mass manipulation.

The message was revivalistic, but clothed in electronic, hip garb.

The preacher took an almost apologetic tone toward anything traditional, like the altar call or the believer's prayer, or especially the offering. Still, the content was orthodox in the Fundamentalist sense.

Then came the climax of the service. At the point where Christians have reverently received the Eucharist for two millennia, a song by contemporary Christian artist Chris Tomlin filled the building: "This is the dream / My heart is free, no chains on me / Now is the time / Now is the time for freedom / Abandoned by cold religion / My heart on fire / The walls are coming down / The walls are coming down / The walls are coming down / The walls are coming down / Yeah, the walls are coming down / The walls are coming down / Like a rolling stone."²

As the singer, an attractive young female, segued into the final phrase of the song, she gave out a long impassioned moan typical of the pop-vibrato style: *ooooo abbbbbb oooo ooooo ooooo*. On cue the audience broke out into clapping and dance. The service ended.

Harold Bloom went so far as to call the scene Orphic,³ referring to the ancient mystery cult where flutists worked initiates into an emotional froth, and then priests leveraged the emotion toward the desired goal, the vision of the mystery.

Some identify erotic or romantic overtones: the *ooooo abbb* moaning, the impassioned surrendering, the emphasis on the heart's yearning. G. K. Chesterton is cited⁴ for saying, "A man knocking at the brothel door is looking for God." That is, faith is more a matter of internal passions reaching out for transcendent, unspeakable love than a matter of external doctrinal formulas. A lonely lecher's late-night escapades are really the tugs of God on his heart. "My heart is on fire," sang Tomlin. It's a love affair with God.

In the history of the Church, there is no precedent for this sort of emotion-laden, sacrament-less, erotically-charged religiosity. There is, however, a precedent outside the walls of the Church.

That tradition is the Gnostic one.

* * *

After the election of President Obama in 2008, cultural elites in entertainment and politics got mystical, believing the man was something otherworldly. Can we blame them? His advent was prophesied in sacred story, at least American sacred story, which is to say, Hollywood, which has been crafting his image in our minds for years through an archetype

Spike Lee calls the *Magical Negro*.⁵ The Magical Negro is the supporting black character who clarifies truth for the misdirected white hero, or the *deus ex machina*, some judge or authority figure who comes in just at the right time to be the voice of otherworldly wisdom and morality.

Through this archetype our pop culture prepared the way – like a composite John-the-Forerunner – for the sleek, cool black man with the silky baritone voice transcending our gridlocked politics: *isn't this how the movie ends?* When Obama finally came on the scene, it was as if, to paraphrase St. John, “The archetype became flesh and dwelt among us.” He was, in Mark Steyn’s words, “a younger Morgan Freeman, the cool, reserved, dignified black man who, when he’s not literally God walking among us (as in *Bruce Almighty*), is always the conscience of the movie.”⁶

Will Smith called Obama an “idea mark[ing] an evolutionary flash point in history.”⁷ An idea! Not an actual human being.

The Gospel according to Mark, Mark Morford that is, called Obama a “Lightworker” who can “actually help usher in a new way of being on the planet, of relating and connecting and engaging with this bizarre earthly experiment. These kinds of people actually help us evolve.” At least this is the opinion of “many spiritually advanced people” he knows.⁸

And then there’s the Gospel of Thomas, *Newsweek* editor Evan Thomas that is, who cut to the chase: “Obama is standing above the country, above the world. He’s sort of God.”⁹

The man fulfills a divine fantasy for them, the fantasy of a world where government ushers in an age in which the problems of poverty, war, and climate chaos are solved. Hollywood has been crafting this fantasy of the all-powerful government for years: what doesn’t exist in the real world, and never will, they passionately, desperately manufacture in their fantasy world. If ever that fantasy can leak off the screen into reality, *wow!*

True, Obama’s presidency simply fulfilled century-old progressive dreams. True, progressive ideology, like all others, is subject to debate. But to the believer, such bickering merely makes sublunary what should be transcendent: *Don’t argue about ideology when here is a man who will take us beyond politics.* Politics are the stale artifacts of another time¹⁰ otherwise known as *democratic*. *History*, after all, is fating the world toward a specific end. Evolution itself says so! So there can be no politics. There’s only where God, er, History intends to take us and His, er, Its detractors, or maybe if we’re “spiritually advanced” enough, *Her*

detractors. *Evolve or die!*

Meanwhile, back at earth, the cottage industry on the Right documenting the obvious religiosity of the modern progressive movement is a refreshing meme. But the meme hasn't been taken to its theological roots. Ending the discussion at the birth of the progressive movement isn't enough. The deification of government and the embodiment of that divine spirit in transformative, avatar figures has a history, a very surprising history.

It's a variant of a Gnostic movement whose proper beginnings go back to the twelfth century.

* * *

Around 2010, when *Catcher in the Rye* author J. D. Salinger died, blogger "Nick25" waxed philosophical:

"Everyone was phony and a hypocrite, according to Holden, in J.D.Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. The world is seen through the eyes of the judge, who is judging primarily himself. The world is a portrayal of the person who is seeing the world. As compared to phony, is there anyone or anything who is truly authentic, in the conscious level of thought? Everything real is beyond the conscious, just as everything is fake in the conscious (i.e., beyond the subconscious world of sleep and dreaming). The superconscious state is attained by meditation, and it is there where reality resides, not here where we are writing and reading in the conscious level of thought and analysis. The conscious level dies with the body; the superconscious level does not. This is why yogis who practice meditation are not afraid of death. They go there all the time."¹¹

Everyone is fake . . . the world is the product of the meaning I impose on it . . . sleep and dreaming is where the real stuff is at . . . death is release.

The blogger asks: *Is there anyone who is truly authentic?*

Authentic. The word is everywhere. It's the new *pious*, which traditionally was the proper state of mind one should have toward his deity. When God is distinct from me, my state of mind toward this other Being is that of *piety*. But what happens when my Self is God? Then the goal is *authenticity*. Being "true to my Self" replaces "deny yourself."

The word *authentic* derives from today's default pop philosophy: existentialism. In the truest sense of its own paradoxical terms, existentialism is the atheist's religion. *Authenticity*, or creating one's Self,

is its chief piety. *Choice* is its sacrament. It's how creation of Self happens.

In fact, there is a whole lexicon of words we use – *authenticity, choice, freedom, Self, culture, values* – whose meanings are shaped by this atheistic philosophy. But we have forgotten the philosophical contexts in which these terms arose, so we don't question their premises.

Why don't we question the premises? Because that's how faith works. It's premises just *are*.

Faith is far from on the decline in America. It's held more fervently than ever, and its premises are more blindly adhered to and more absolutely grounded on thin air than Christianity ever was.

An atheist faith? Absolutely. History has seen the movie before, in the Gnostic movement.

* * *

A seventeen-year-old “genderqueer” writes in Facebook: “I have a lot to worry about . . . But who thought I would have pressure from Facebook to decide whether I am male or female. Maybe this isn't an issue for everyone, but it is for me. I'm CJ, formerly known as Chana. I'm also ‘genderqueer,’ which, in my case, means that I feel part-female and part-male. I'm not sure yet whether I will transition or not. . . . People like me who don't feel comfortable in the bodies in which we were born aren't sure we want to be pegged as female or male. I am just trying to decide for myself, but Facebook forces me to follow the social norm of being a male or female. . . . Some doctors are beginning to understand, and I know that my doctor does. Even some official government forms now acknowledge that gender identity isn't black-and-white, so to speak.”¹²

Comfortable in the bodies we were born with.

Some, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would say the “we” and the “bodies” are one in the same: “Man does not have a body; he does not have a soul; rather, he is body and soul.”¹³ Others reject the notion, seeing flesh as distinct from our true Self, even an alien burden stifling who we really are, a prison cell to escape.

The former view represents orthodox Judeo-Christian presumptions, a presumption beginning with the creation of our flesh and the ultimate restoration and redemption of that same flesh: the resurrection of the flesh.

The latter view represents another tradition, the Gnostic one.

Gnosticism

A Neo-evangelical praise service, the anticipation of a progressive utopian age, the musings of an existentialist/New Age blogger, a young person's discomfort at his/her gender, these are spiritual artifacts of our times, detritus from the spiritual path our culture is carving out of our age. They don't stand out because no one notices the smell of the house they live in. They point to a dominant religious footprint so large no one notices it. The argument of this book is that the traits of ancient Gnosticism best explain this religious orientation.

What is Gnosticism? The Gnosticism 101 answer is, it was an ancient movement centered on esoteric knowledge. It held to a dualistic understanding of the cosmos, in which an evil, lesser god created all things material, and only those who had attained *gnosis* (knowledge) about their true Source (the higher deity) understood the bodiless Self-ness of their existence. Its salvation program was one of escape, escape of Self from materiality and this oppressive world order.

Gnosticism's major offense to traditional Christianity – to say nothing of its offense to traditional Judaism and the Western intellectual tradition in general – is its rejection of nature, nature's laws, and nature's God. The Gnostic is ever in rebellion against nature and, more to the philosophical point, natural *forms*. Such naturally-arising concepts as gender, national boundaries, the cold hard realities of economics, cultural institutions like family and church (especially its rituals), marriage, even language, are deceptive impositions, says the Gnostic, of a foreign God upon what should be the authentic Self liberated from all impositions of form, freed to transcend them altogether.

The Judeo-Christian orientation centers on created forms. God's first action was to separate the "formless and void" of creation and bring about the various species "each according to its kind."¹⁴ After separating the elements he named them, which is to say: *language arose out of the creation of forms*. Of course, language got the whole thing rolling in the first place, when the Lord said, "let there be." Hence the sacredness given the Hebrew language by the Jew, and the sublime implications of the foundational Christian tenet: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."¹⁵

Traditional Christianity grants that these forms have been corrupted by original sin, but the whole point of its doctrine of the incarnation is that God took on human form in order to redeem these corrupted forms. The end goal of the Christian faith is a "world to come,"

a world with redeemed forms, a world inaugurated by the resurrection.

Gnostics reject this entire premise. The God who established forms “each according to its kind” they consider an evil, usurping god, a false tyrant deceptively thought to be the one true God, the God of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. The true God, says the Gnostic, transcends all form, all that can be thought, all being, everything. Celebrating formless spirituality, Gnosticism rejects those formal things, peoples, and institutions marking traditional Christianity: the Church, its sacramental life, and its ministry. It despises the Jewish God and its regard for language and grammar, anything mooring spirituality to something so profane as a text.

Thus the Gnosticism 101 summary, but where things get interesting (and pernicious) is where the Gnostic movement works its program through culture, politics, and religion. Precisely because Gnosticism doesn’t have marked doctrines or creedal statements, being more a “spiritual orientation,” it can easily be coopted in non-religious arenas – in politics, marketing, and media – without fear of being accused of religious imposition, when in fact that is exactly what it is.

The best entrance point into this spiritual orientation is the phrase “spiritual, but not religious,” which is how more and more people are identifying themselves. In 2012, WIN-Gallup International reported that in the previous seven years, the number of people describing themselves as religious fell from 73% to 60%, while those believing in God or some universal spirit stayed at 91%.¹⁶ That’s an astounding number, demonstrating the dramatic 13% move of “religious” over to the “non-religious believers” camp in six years. The trend is accentuated vastly among the young, which suggests all the energy is on the “spiritual but not religious” side.

True, some of that 13% drop includes Neo-evangelicals who recoil at the term *religious*. They’ve taken to the “Christianity not Churchianity” distinction, seeing in the former more authenticity. “I have the greatest admiration for the Christianity of Christ. On the other hand, I have the greatest contempt for ‘Church’ Christianity, or ‘Churchianity’.”¹⁷ Are these Rick Warren’s words? No, they belong to Laurence Oliphant, the nineteenth century mystic and proto-New Ager, and good friend of the bizarre Madame Blavatsky. Neo-evangelical cooption of this posture forces us to investigate what it is in Neo-evangelicalism’s DNA leading it to become the Christian wing of the New Age movement.

On the other hand, how much of that 9% atheist crowd is truly atheist? The old meaning of *atheist* was anyone who wasn't a Christian or Jew, but who still held to some transcendent Truth. This definition dies hard, for how many atheists believe in some sort of transcendent morality, or a transcendent goal of human progress? How many of them *fanatically* embrace these goals and moralities? If one's God is that point at which doubt or skepticism ceases, one wonders if anyone is truly atheist, or if the human soul can even bear atheism.

The point is, a growing demographic of people, despite the labels, embrace a relatively unified *spiritual* posture. Alexis de Tocqueville predicted it two hundred years ago. He foresaw democracy breeding a people who believe in a divinity, but who don't put form to that divinity through doctrines, rituals, sacraments, or such.¹⁸ The democrat fears that aristocratic institutions like the Church or academia will put a straitjacket on God, binding him with their pedantry and scholasticism. God, rather, should transcend categorization, bursting the defining strictures of any Church or institution. God should connect with us psychologically, internally, in the mysterious nether regions of the Self, in a subconscious spiritual undercurrent shared by all people.

Such is the position, said Tocqueville, a democratic people will naturally take. Fine and good. Power to the people and all that. But as a self-governing people we're obligated to investigate whence this orientation¹⁹ arises and what it means if it truly is penetrating undetected our psychology, politics, politics, culture, and traditional religions. If it's ancient Gnosticism redux, the original "spiritual but not religious" orientation, we should at least know what we're getting into, to say nothing of applying First Amendment guidance, for a "spiritual state" is just as worrisome as a state religion.

The Waning Days of Irony and Nihilism

Gnosticism naturally rises out of nihilism, and ours is a nihilistic age. Nihilism is the view that nothing matters. Nihilism drives today's teen creed, "Whatever," whose burdensome three syllables have evolved into a languid "Whatev." Nihilism is the wrecking ball of society, an iconoclastic force tearing down traditional institutions, traditional moralities, traditional rituals, traditional habits, traditional customs, traditional grammar, traditional language, and traditional reasoning. Nihilism begins in despair and cynicism, despair because these traditions seemed to fail human aspiration, cynicism that they could have ever

satisfied it in the first place. To the nihilist, every institution is run by the “powers that be,” or the “rulers of the universe,” by people whose only concern is control: power for its own sake.

Nihilism often masquerades as a bitter sense of irony. Irony fits nihilism because it discharges any challenge to nihilism. Irony can cut anything good and beautiful down to size. It also raises the bad and ugly just enough to prove the high and great weren't that high or great in the first place. Irony levels everything so that nothing has meaning.

In Season Two of the 2001-2009 hit TV series *24* – a show about agent Jack Bauer's fight against terrorist plots in America – one of the main terrorist accomplices was a wealthy young blond woman.²⁰ In reality, for all practical purposes, this doesn't happen. But in the popular imagination, it *must* happen. It was the tribute the series had to pay to America's ironclad sense of irony.

What's the irony? It's that we all think a terrorist would be a young Arab male, but look, here's the very opposite, a typically all-American person – a wealthy, beautiful, blonde woman – who is really the terrorist. Irony puts the quote marks on phrases like *all-American*. It plants the thought in our brains: “See! You all have your ideas of what America is, but look, who *really* is the terrorist?”

But *24* was pure fantasy. Fantasy, by way of quick review, means it's not real. In reality, over and over again, terrorists are exactly what we expect them to be. That's reality. Yet, ironic Hollywood plants the question, *what is reality?* Hollywood's fantasy-fueled irony shields us from reality. It happens over and over again in the Hollywood-induced dream world so many of us live in.

Why is this sort of irony necessary? Because nihilism has taken root in the American mind. The moment any traditional institution or form or convention or custom – the nation, marriage, the Church, gender roles, freedom, the free market – is seen to have some worth or beauty or goodness (to say nothing of basic truth) attached to it, the demon of nihilism has a ready quip to deflate its pretenses. Hence the modern iconoclasm toward these institutions, their sentenced de-construction.

But the human soul cannot tolerate such emptiness, the vacuum created by nihilism. Something must fill the vacated domain. Something must be re-constructed. Hollywood understands this. At the same time they manufacture irony toward traditional notions, they craft new *fantastical* realities.

Reality, *real* reality, for example tells us that social pathologies

and crime devastate our inner cities. *No*, says Hollywood. The suburbs are where all the pathology, emptiness, and loneliness are. That's the irony. Meanwhile the poor, the straggled, the homeless, and the minorities have an other-worldly wisdom, displaying preternatural inner peace as they bestow guru-like knowledge to benighted "typical Americans." That's the re-constructed replacement myth.

Or again, reality shows women as generally vulnerable, appreciating a good man in their lives. Single women and single mothers bear crushing burdens and demands from all directions. *No*, says Hollywood. Women are independent warriors, the equal or betters of men in physical competition, who shine brightest when freed from male patronage. Traditional gender roles are nihilistically destroyed, but they are replaced by a newly crafted image.

That's because the human soul cannot tolerate nihilism. Irony though fun and funny is ultimately jejune and doesn't satisfy. Hollywood cannot end with irony; it must offer new, transcendent realities, transcendent in the sense suggested by those who proclaim with wide-eyed glee, *It was like in a movie!* as if they've tapped into something more real than life. The soul enters into the dark tunnel of nihilism, but finds a light at the end of the tunnel, on the flickering projection screens, but also in the fantastical images seeping in through television commercials, in the "trending" movements of the Internet, and in the other accepted conduits of reconstructed truth.

The path from nihilism to meaning has a parallel in the history of philosophy. The most virulent, anti-Christian, atheist philosophers almost always ended up with some sort of spirituality. They *must* have some appeal to the transcendent, else they'd have no reason to lay down their philosophies in the first place. What is the transcendent, after all, but whatever I believe is true for more than just myself? That transcendency, then, soon takes on the characteristics of spirituality.

Some simply end at the irony, like philosopher Richard Rorty. But even Nietzsche, as "he assails the reason he will be enlisting," at the same time "ironizes a discourse that at the same time struggles beyond irony."²¹ If modernity's most profound nihilist – who dedicated his life to assailing ironically the Logos-based foundations of Western civilization – "struggled" to find transcendence beyond irony, surely we cannot expect less from the culture he begot. The quest for truth cannot end at irony; there *must* be something beyond.

Heidegger displays the same tension between nihilism and

transcendence. He too, like Nietzsche, saw the West coming to a nihilistic end because *being*, as understood in the Western philosophical heritage, disintegrated when the Christian and classical traditions propelling that heritage ran out of steam. Heidegger also didn't leave it at that, at nihilism. In the words of political philosopher Michael Gillespie, "he believes he discerns in its depths the dawning light of a new revelation of Being." Nihilism, rather, is the "dawning recognition of Being."²² We must go through nihilism before getting to the new understanding of Being. At that same time, we face both "utter degradation and the possibility of salvation in a new revelation of Being."²³ In other words, it's as we've been contemplating: the point of nihilistic breakdown is also the point of new possibilities.

For him, this meant becoming a Nazi, which Heidegger hoped "could be directed toward a more fundamental experience of human existence that could serve as the basis for a more authentic ethics and politics."²⁴ As we will see, he followed Hitler's exact understanding of himself and his fascist movement. Needless to say, these phrases – "dawning light," "new revelation of Being," and "possibility of salvation" – clue us into the truly spiritual forces at work.

American society has also followed this philosophical path from nihilism to spiritualism. In the 1960s, society's vanguards led the way. *The New York Times Magazine* put Nietzsche's epithet to a query: *Is God dead?* In the 1970s and 80s, the iconoclastic wrecking ball came in devastating cultural institutions: marriage, family, gender norms, sex norms, cultural mores. Nihilism was in full force.

In the 1990s, society turned toward irony, palpably sensed in our comedy, mores, and social interactions. The Cold War ended and the economy was blossoming, leading to leisurely yet indulgent cravings for guilty, ironical pleasures like the black comedy *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or the sitcom *Seinfeld*. Bill Clinton feeling the pain of a populace at the apex of human history was irony on steroids. Urbane snark was in. Nothing was sacred.

Then 9/11 came, along with mounting economic problems. The quest for spirituality settled in. But people aren't going to church as understood for two millennia. They're going to places suiting their spiritual-but-not-religious orientation. That might be a church – one reinvented for the new paradigms of spirituality – or they seek some other personal spiritual program: Self-help, progressive politics, some Eastern religion, or some combination of the various Gnostic programs out there.

This explains the strange, paradoxical situation we find ourselves in today: the same person who looks cynically at any traditional institution will religiously, even fanatically, hold to some cause. There are psychological and cosmic structures underlying this fanaticism as well as a particular theology (or anti-theology) undergirding the structure. That is Gnosticism, a religion in its own right and one due the same critical analysis as any other, at least in a free-thinking Republic.

A Brief Outline of the Book

This book is divided into four parts.

The first part introduces the basics of Gnosticism, with a brief outline of its mythologies, teachings, and practices. These might be interesting on an academic level, to some, but far more interesting and important is how Gnosticism works through modern spirituality, how the Gnostic traits in its ancient version echo yet today. Considerable time, then, is devoted to the Gnostic traits. Finally, a history of Gnostic movements is given taking us from the ancient world to today.

This book is not an academic treatise. It's intent is not to get caught in the weeds of different Gnostic groups or teachings. For reasons this book will hopefully make clear, dealing with Gnosticism academically kind of misses the whole point of Gnosticism, which boasts a knowledge beyond book-learning. Thus it's far more productive to deal with Gnosticism in an archetypical or heuristic manner. This approach will make sense by the book's end.

The second part explores Gnosticism in culture. It begins with the existentialist understanding of the Self and goes on to the role media and music play in the development of Self. Important in this chapter is the "practical Gnostic" view of Renaissance Hermeticism, which is to say, how magic manipulates our fantasy lives in the creation of Self.

The third part tackles Gnostic politics, finding common themes in the totalitarian movements of the modern era. The central thesis driving this part is that a specific theological outlook of the Middle Ages – millenarian, Anabaptist, Pietist, and Puritan – has laid the foundation for modern progressive politics.

Finally, the fourth part deals with Gnosticism in religion, discussing how the Neo-evangelical movement has essentially become the New Age wing of the Christian Church, and indeed has always been so.

Part I

Gnosticism 101: Its Traits and History

✧ Chapter I ✧

Gnosticism: Antichrist Arising

Christianity's Archenemy

Long ago John the Evangelist wrote, “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.”¹

Little did St. John know what sort of hallmark character he was introducing into the imagination, art, and literature of the last two thousand years. Originally he was simply describing anyone who denied the two cornerstones of the Christian Creed, the Trinity and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.² This doctrinal understanding deflates some of the sensational mystique of the Antichrist, but in his mundaneness he becomes all the more insidious.

St. John was referring to Gnosticism, a teaching he wrote would shadow the Church throughout her days like a doppelgänger aping her across the annals of time. Addressing this trait of Gnosticism, Pope John Paul II wrote, “Gnosticism . . . has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian.”³

Gnosticism is offended by the central tenet of the Christian faith: God becoming flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. It rejects this doctrine because it rejects what flesh means for our understanding of the world.

Flesh allows for the possibility of different *beings*. Flesh makes *individuality* possible. Judeo-Christian creation theology begins with God's Spirit bringing order to the "formlessness and void"⁴ by separating it into the various individual beings "each according to its kind."⁵ He divided light from darkness, land from water, and living beings from the earth. Each created being possesses its individual existence *in matter*. After the creation God gave his imprimatur on the whole project: *It is very good*. That sets up the ethical relation between God's creation and the cosmic structures he established. Nature and nature's laws are related to ethics.

Gnostics invert this entire premise. For them, the separation of being is evil, the act of an alien god imposing multiple forms on preexistent formlessness.⁶ It's the source of death.⁷ The primitive formlessness – this unnameable, divine blob – reflected a superior state when everything was One. Flesh gives form to separate beings – *here is a cat and here is a dog*, etc. – and imposes walls amidst the primeval Oneness that should have remained one and indivisible were it not for the intrusion of this alien god. For the Gnostic, this alien god is what the Western tradition has called *God* since the advent of Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. It's the God of the Scriptures who imposed separateness onto the primeval Oneness. His work of dividing and separating formlessness into the various forms is the true fall, bringing forth a world full of all the various divisions.

To the Gnostic the Judeo-Christian God is not unlike the "God" of science, reason, and philosophy, disciplines seeking insight into the nature of things through contemplation of the physical universe and its divvied up properties. Their cogitations result in multiplying categories and complex definitions that help us understand nature's many properties. *Not so*, says the Gnostic. Such thinkers, usually *Western* thinkers, only build thought structures by which they impose *their* meaning on our world, tyrannically ruling us with their loftily-conceived "natural laws." Their brand of "materialistic reductionism" and "categorical thinking" – the Newtonian/Cartesian paradigm – is precisely the sort of cancer inflicting the West, a paradigm that must be replaced.

What does all this mean for me personally, from a Gnostic perspective? After all, I'm born into the individualizing materiality of flesh, imprisoned in its confines. Is there hope for me?

My birth into human flesh is my personal fall. It's the fall of a *spark* of divinity into my particular flesh. At first I deceptively believe this

is *me*. This is because at my birth, the pre-existent divine spark becomes overwhelmed by flesh and falls asleep under a flesh-induced stupor. I forget I am part of the primeval Oneness. Salvation happens when I awaken to the truth: *I am not my flesh; the Oneness is my true identity, my true Self*. My true home is outside of this created order, in another world beyond the grasp of any human faculty, beyond what science, reason, or traditional religion can know, delineate, or define.

One can discern echoes of the New Age with all its *finding-God-within* hopes, and the parallels are there. New Ager Marilyn Ferguson heralded the coming new “emergent spiritual tradition”⁸ in America, describing the paradigm shift in spirituality thus: “Adherents prefer direct experience – [the] ‘excursion’ to an inner world whose vision then infuses all of life – to any form of organized religion.”⁹

She later quotes Roman Catholic theologian Anthony Padovano, who describes the current spiritual climate: “The great turmoil in the religions is caused by the spirit demanding interiority. Faith is not dying in the West. It is merely moving inside.”¹⁰

The theme is identical in both quotes. Society is moving towards a supposed New Age of internalized spirituality. It’s rejecting the forms of organized religion. The message for the rest of us? *Evolve or die*.

The implications for Christianity, or for that matter any religion, are clear. If I find God within, I don’t need external mediation points, such things like texts, ministers, priests, rituals, sacraments, or any institutional form. Ultimately I don’t even need a Jesus Christ, the ultimate claim to mediacy. All forms that would box God into a located presence are false and delusive, nothing more than man’s attempt to manage God. Jesus Christ at best is an internal Spirit Guide, a Cosmic Guru, an archetype, a representative from the primeval Unity who helps me awaken to my inner spark and then guides me home.¹¹ The Gnostic tract, *The Apocryphon of James*, sets out the true role of Christ as a copilot to the Self’s personal journey, recording Jesus’ real message, “I tell you this, [so] that you may know yourselves.”¹²

His role is not unlike that given to him by New Ager David Spangler, who describes his Christ as that “aspect of this Godhead that reaches deep into the incarnation patterns of creation and links the immanent with the transcendent, the particular with the universal . . . I think of it generically as the avatar function . . . When I first encountered it, it simply said, ‘I am that which you have named the Christ.’”¹³

Self-proclaimed Gnostic Harold Bloom recognizes this Christ – a

Christ abstracted from his humanity – in America’s most native version of Christianity (Evangelicalism): “The American finds God in herself or himself, but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude. . . . In perfect solitude, the American spirit learns again its absolute isolation as a spark of God floating in a sea of space. Salvation, for the American, cannot come through the community or the congregation, but is a one-on-one act of confrontation.”¹⁴

American spirituality eschews any idea that God can be boxed in, encountered through physical, external means, or located at specific times and places. The American God is a non-physical, abstracted Lord encountered intuitively on highly personalized terms. Jesus becomes the invisible Guide walking and talking with me on the sandy beach of life’s journey, leading me onward until I’m released from this vessel of flesh. Meanwhile the flesh is something distinct from who I really am. It’s a vessel, something useless at my death, fit only for the fire, which partly explains the increasing demand for cremation.

Traditional Christian doctrine centers on Christ’s mysterious presence through the Church. Gnosticism, because it requires no ecclesiastical intermediary, has always strained against the Church. This is what’s going on behind such phrases as, “I’m spiritual but not religious” or “I believe in Christ, but not the Church”¹⁵ or “I believe in Christianity not Churchianity.” Diana Butler Bass works with this premise in her *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (2013). Meanwhile church marketing experts, recognizing where American spirituality is at, tap into it and adapt their programs to that vibe.

This anti-institutional trend in American spirituality has a heritage, and that heritage is Gnosticism. Gnosticism was the “spiritual but not religious” creed of the ancient world, a creed aptly described by Robert C. Fuller as the conviction that “the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance, and that . . . union or harmonious relation with this ‘spiritual more’ is our true end.”¹⁶

To this end, Fuller continues, people dissatisfied with “institutional religion” seek “personal religious experience” and “associate faith with the ‘private’ realm of personal experience rather than the ‘public’ realm of institutions, creeds, and rituals.”¹⁷

Gnosticism attracts the seeker of unbounded, unhoused, *God-outside-the-box*¹⁸ spirituality. Gnosticism erodes the borders between different beings. It tears down the walls within which a specific *being* is

defined (*form*). It blurs lines. It is *non-denominational*, appealing to a oneness said to transcend whatever is denominated, whether those be the teachings of a church body or the so-called “gender constructs.” All these must be transcended.

Syncretistic

Ancient Gnosticism was syncretistic, adopting from a variety of religions, philosophies, and systems. Gnostic scholar Kurt Rudolf calls it “parasitic.”¹⁹

In the early days of the Christian Church, syncretism attracted a pluralistic Greco-Roman culture. Syncretism is cultivated in pluralistic societies where diverse cultures live side by side. Like today the ancients saw religious diversity, and the provincialism of their own particular beliefs gave them anxiety: *Is it true that my little provincial belief is true for all people of all times?* So they sought transcendent universals to which, they claimed, not only their own particular beliefs pointed, but also those of all other particular beliefs.

Third century Roman emperor Severus Alexander (222-235) kept statues of the Lares (Roman household gods), Apollonius of Tyana (a Neopythagorean miracle worker and teacher), Christ, Abraham, Orpheus, and others.²⁰ Severus’ tossed salad is not so different from the “spiritual but not religious” woman of today who “has a home altar that symbolizes her personal spiritual beliefs [on which] are eighteen candles, an amulet attached to a photo of her grandmother, amethyst crystals used in healing meditations, oriental incense, a Tibetan prayer bell, a representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and some other traditional Catholic items.”²¹

Taking syncretism one step further, Emergent Church spokesman Brian McClaren recognizes the paradoxes of diverse teachings, but embraces them. He claims to be a “Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN.”²² McClaren thrives on these contradictions, believing that somewhere in the conversation between those holding opposing opinions a story emerges in which we take part.²³

Syncretism formats our minds against recognizing truth in specific things bounded by time/place contours, or in things articulated through propositional language. It allows us to identify meaning above and beyond

the formal or physical contours of any given thing. While our mind is busy naming and identifying what we perceive are truths – everything from “there is a cat sitting there” to “this is My Body” or “this is what marriage is” – Gnosticism lifts us beyond such “imposing” of form upon our world, a world which, we remember, is the creation of a usurper deity anyways.

The Gnostic text *Thunder: Perfect Mind* is described as “an excellent example of a religious polemical stance against the power of names, labels, designations.”²⁴ It’s an entire tome whose basic gist is *I am X. I am non-X*.²⁵ It pushes meaning beyond the abilities of language, rendering it useless. But in exchange the Gnostic gains new, universalistic meaning transcending the limiting and miserly constraints of language.

The Gnostics mastered the syncretistic spirit, picking and choosing from the various philosophies, religions, and cults of the Roman Empire and concocting a potion saluting anything and everything it came across. There were not Gnostic schools in the sense that Plato or Aristotle had schools named after them. The different Gnostic sects didn’t debate among themselves. They were tolerant of the sacred texts of other religions. They promoted a free-for-all program for self-salvation.²⁶

Gnosticism holds a unique place among traditional Western categories, which forever have philosophy and religion vying against each other. Throughout the history of the West this Gnostic third force has always lurked in the shadows.²⁷ Gnosticism fits neither the category of religion nor philosophy. It would claim it moves beyond categories because it transcends both. It offers something superior to both, which explains its popularity in a postmodern society cynical toward both. Gnosticism offers a different path: an adventure, a journey, a way of approaching things, a way of life transcending the “old paradigms”²⁸ of faith and reason.

Gnosis: Inner Knowledge and the Gnostic Creation Myth

Inner Knowledge

The basic Gnostic framework is, as the rock group Police put it, “we are spirits in a material world.”²⁹ We are spirits, or sparks of divinity, trapped in the prison cell of this material world. Our true home is outside of this world, outside all time and place designations. In modern terms we spawn from a completely different dimension. This realm the Gnostics called the *pleroma*, Greek for “fullness.” The *pleroma* is the fullness of

Monad and the *aeons*. Monad, Greek for “one,” is what we would call *God* but in reality is beyond all naming. It’s the central, animating principle of the *pleroma*. From it came the *aeons*, Greek for “ages,” which emanate out from Monad and fill out the *pleroma*. This is our true home. While on one hand we have an alien fleshly existence due to a grand cosmic error, some of us have a spark of Monad residing in our flesh, something we can potentially wake up to.

The Gnostics were anti-cosmic, an important point needing explanation. In Greek thought, *cosmos* meant the known universe, or, anything that can be known by the mind.³⁰ The word means “order” or “arrangement.” It included all material things but also abstractions like *justice* or *piety*, anything the mind can formulate ideas on. The *cosmos* is the realm of *nouns*: persons, places, things, and ideas – whatever our mind puts definition to. *Noun* comes from the Latin *nomen*, meaning “name,” the idea being that the diverse properties of the *cosmos* can be identified and named just as Adam did and the Lord himself did after separating light from darkness, sky from earth, and land from water. The *cosmos* (from which we get “cosmetic”) is good, beautiful, able to be grasped by the mind, and able to be discussed with human language. Its elements are rationally arranged by a rational Mind, and rationally engaging in it involves something inherently good. Meditation on the *cosmos* rallies the mind to a good cause, because the objects of its thoughts reflect the intelligent, good, and beautiful Mind generating those objects. To “muse on the work of Your hands” as the Psalmist does (Psalm 143: 5) is to engage in something intrinsically good, whether that meditation results in science, poetry, philosophy, or theology.

Gnosticism was anti-cosmic, meaning they rejected as deceptive, false, and evil *all that could be known or named³¹ by the human mind*. Gnostic scholar Hans Jonas writes, “the divinity of cosmic order is turned into the opposite of divine . . . devoid of meaning and goodness, alien to the purposes of man and to his inner essence, no object for his communication and affirmation.”³²

The human mind, the Gnostic says, is the fleshly instrument by which we impose meaning on a physical world that was a mistake in the first place. Human language is also intrinsically corrupt. Far better is an intuitive knowledge, a knowledge by ecstatic insight, a glimpse into the beyond, a knowledge of the heart rather than the mind. The word Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” This *gnosis* – knowledge transcending all that can be known

by the mind – is the focal point of the Gnostic quest.

The Gnostic Creation Myth

The Gnostic creation myth is really a psychological tale, feeding off the ancient view that the journey of the soul was tied to the story of the gods. Because in the ancient mind the macrocosm reflected the microcosm and vice versa, creation myths set up certain psychic archetypes which made sense of the soul's journey.

The Gnostic myth in particular begins with Monad, their "God," but not God as traditionally understood in the West, one defined by certain attributes (as in philosophy) or believed to have a name and to have done certain historical things (as in Judaism and Christianity). Again, the Gnostic would complain that such activities box God into our delineations, or box him into an insular history. Rather, the Monad is beyond all categories, beyond all names and naming, and beyond all involvement in our history. He transcends words, doctrines, names, and thought itself. Even negative theology – the sort that believes God can only be described by what he is *not* – doesn't do Monad justice.³³

From the Monad came emanations of male and female parities, like ripples out from a stone dropped in water. The first male/female emanation proceeded to produce another male/female emanation, and so on and so forth. These parities were called "syzygies," and each new emanation was an aeon. So long as male and female were harmonized in each emanation, everything balanced out. The totality of aeons, along with the Monad, was the pleroma.³⁴

Trouble began in paradise when Sophia, the female element in the last aeon, decided to create something on her own without consulting her male partner. She generated a ghastly monster known as Yaltabaoth. Ashamed of her deed, she extracted the half snake, half lion beast from her womb and hid him in a cloud. Some Gnostics called it an abortion.³⁵ Hidden in his cloud from the pleroma, Yaltabaoth believed he alone existed and decided to create something of his own. He created what we know as the universe. He also created our physical bodies.³⁶

Yaltabaoth created 365 *archons* (powers or governors) to help him rule the cosmos. These rulers helped him set up the laws (Greek: *nomos*) governing the various orders in nature, politics, culture, and ethics. He himself pridefully declared, "I, I am a [jealous] god, and apart from me nothing has [come into being]."³⁷ And, "It is I who am God, and there is no other one that exists apart from me."³⁸

These latter words may sound familiar to the Jew or Christian, because in the Old Testament the Lord repeats them seven times. This is why Gnostics reject Old Testament theology and its God. The Old Testament, they said, picks up the story too late, beginning only at the point of Yaltabaoth's creative activity. The Hebrews falsely believed Yaltabaoth, whom they called Yahweh, was the one true God. They misunderstood his creating as the beginning point of all things.

Throughout history Gnosticism has proposed two gods, one based in the Old Testament – a fierce, wrathful, named, provincial Deity, a bit over-involved in history, who demands blood sacrifices, rites, and rituals – and a universal New Testament God of enlightenment and love who offers freedom and spontaneity.³⁹ Against this classic Gnostic position the ancient Church established two of its traditions surviving to this day: the canonization of Scripture (to include the Old Testament in the biblical canon) and certain language inserted into its creeds: “according to the Scriptures” and “spake by the prophets.”

In any event, Sophia pitied Yaltabaoth's human creations and cast a *spark*⁴⁰ (Greek: *spynthēr*) of the Monad in some of them, creating a duality in the human person of body and spirit, each with a source contested against the other. Eden's snake, traditionally seen as the devil, was a messenger of truth sent to alert Eve. By getting her to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge (*gnosis*) of Good and Evil, the snake hoped to provide the true *gnosis* of what is Good (the Monad) and what is Evil (the false god who made them).⁴¹

But alas, Yahweh cut things off at the pass, stymying the devil, and Adam and Eve's descendants fell asleep to their inner sparks under the cumbersome materiality of their physical flesh. Yet hope for salvation remained; the Monad sent Christ to give people knowledge (*gnosis*) of their true home, to awaken them to the truth of the cosmos⁴² – a moment of ecstatic enlightenment and awakening⁴³ known as *palingenesis*,⁴⁴ or “born again experience” – and to lead them on a journey back home to the pleroma, their state of primal harmony.

Of course we misapply the myth when we take it literally. Gnostics are anything but literal. Poetry, allegory, double meanings, and surreal mindscapes are their bread and butter. Thus this myth is a psychological tale populated by archetypal aspects of our psyches. Monad is the center of our being, the depths of our true Self. The fall of Yaltabaoth is the fallen psyche, what some call the ego and its prideful ruts. The archons represent whatever it is in my personal psychological

tale keeping my true Self from emerging, the bonds of the “powers that be” in my world: parents and their pathologies, Church and her doctrines, state and its arbitrary laws, global capitalism, fate, my personality, whatever. Sophia introduces the liberating role of *eros*, love erotically understood. Jesus is related to her, the otherworldly Guide who leads me home.

In this psychological tale are all sorts of characters who pepper our lives, characters abstracted from the figments of real flesh and blood personages, characters who loom larger than life as they assume the numinous mantles of these Gnostic archetypes. The Gnostic myth gives life to these archetypes but more intriguingly places them in a greater psychological narrative of self-salvation.

The archon archetype is the glowering looks of “establishment” people in society forcing me to conform to their standards. It’s the uniformed police, “the man,” or stone-faced traditionalists. It’s the pudgy, fiftyish white man who surely runs every boardroom. It’s the magical vibe conveyed by certain words or phrases – the *banks*, *Wall Street*, the *Jews*, the *system*. It’s the “big X” formula used in phrases like “big business,” “big oil,” or “big pharmaceutical.” It’s Heidegger’s “they.” Who exactly is “the they”? The Gnostics have an answer; “they” are your masters.

Meanwhile, the Sophia archetype stands by ready to offer salvation. She peers at me through a stranger’s flirtatious glance, which crafts the quickly-scribed romance fantasy, so invigorating and liberating. She sings to me through music simulating that same feeling. She embraces me with her mother’s love, somatically-induced through any number of intoxicants, from the pharmaceutical to the psychological, emotional, or spiritual. Whatever she is, she defies the tyranny of logic.

Then there’s the Jesus archetype, my personal Savior, the Spirit Guide who takes my hand and leads me home, who in the end is nothing more than my transcendent, ideal *me*, the unity of Monad and my redeemed Self.

Rudolf ventures straight into this psychic terrain when he comments on the difficulty in translating the Greek word for “divine spark from the Monad,” *spinhēr*: “In order to make use of a uniform expression scholars have become accustomed to speak of the ‘self’ or ‘I’, . . . The ‘incomparable self’ in man.”⁴⁵

For the Gnostic, the *Self* is a spark of the Monad; the *Self* is God. The journey to find God is the journey to find our Selves. When we

awaken to our inner Selves away from what we think we are (the ego), we find we are all part of God, or perhaps better put, a collective divine unity, the pleroma. The Self is central in Gnostic religion, even as it is central to modern American spirituality. Again Harold Bloom: “The God of the American Religion is an experiential God, so radically within our own being as to become a virtual identity with what is most authentic (oldest and best) in the self.”⁴⁶ The identification of God with the *authentic Self* is a classic Gnostic construct.

Gnostic Practice

Fourth century bishop of Salamis, Epiphanius, testified of the Gnostics, “They condemn baptism even though some of them were previously baptized. They reject participation in the (church) sacraments (mysteries) and deny their value, as extraneous and introduced in the name of [the demiurge, Yaltabaoth].”⁴⁷

This rejection of the sacraments follows Gnosticism throughout its history. True, they had some cultic activities with vague parallels to the sacraments of the Church, but no more than symbolic value, usually having something to do with the initiate’s union with the pleroma or his “angel image” in the pleroma.⁴⁸ Their litanies speak the language of symbolism, uncertainties, and vagueness, as in this baptismal formula: “In the name of the unknown Father of all things, into Truth, the mother of all, into him who descended on Jesus (i.e. Christ), into union, into redemption, into the communion of the powers.”⁴⁹ Or in this communion prayer: “He (Jesus) said on that day in the eucharist: ‘(You) who have joined the perfect, the light, with the Holy Spirit, join the angels with us also, the images.’”⁵⁰ The cryptic language is purposeful, meant to be hidden from all but the elite few, the enlightened, or the awakened.

Obviously they denied the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament just as they denied the incarnation of Jesus himself in flesh and blood (the particular doctrine that St. John described in I John 4: 3). They said Jesus only *seemed* to be human, leading to one of the names given the early Gnostics, the Docetists (from the Greek, *doceo*, “to seem”).⁵¹ Against docetic teaching already embryonic in apostolic days, both St. Luke and St. John emphasized the physicality of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances: “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” (Luke 24: 39; see also John 20: 27.)

Irenaeus of Lyons (*d.* 202), the ancient champion of orthodoxy

against Gnosticism, saw the danger in Gnostic anti-materialism for the Church's sacrament, writing, "But if [the flesh] indeed does not obtain salvation, then neither did the Lord redeem us with His blood, nor is the cup of the Eucharist the communion of His blood." He asks the question, "[When] the mingled cup and the baked bread receive the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and the body of Christ is made . . . how can they [the Gnostics] maintain that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God?"⁵²

Gnostic premises, in other words, unraveled the Church's traditional means of contact and communion with her Lord. Herein is its revolutionary character as far as the Church was concerned: *to remove the necessity of a mediating structure negates the entire purpose of the Church*. But the damage done to the Church portends similar damage done to all earthly institutions, ultimately making sacred any act of iconoclasm both inside and outside the Church.

Certain branches of Gnosticism had a bizarre ritual known as the Bridal Chamber. If the original breach in the cosmos resulted from Sophia's break from her male counterpart, healing this cosmic breach depended on her reunion with him. Her restoration served as a model for all who would be restored to the pleroma.⁵³ In the Gnostic Gospels, Mary Magdalene represents Sophia, and Jesus represents her male counterpart. They were lovers – their union repairing the cosmic breach – and their kisses, as one author puts it, "produces spiritual children,"⁵⁴ the Gnostic. In the Bridal Chamber ceremony, an initiate would reenact his own reunion with the pleroma by means of a Sophia stand-in. The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* justified the symbolism of the rite – "Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images" – and called the Bridal Chamber a symbol of "the restoration (of the pleroma, apokatastasis)."⁵⁵

The ceremony ritualized the restoration of the union between the Father with the "virgin who descends," that being Sophia, God the Mother, the Holy Spirit. Scholars offer wide opinion on the nature of this ritual, ranging from a simple kiss of peace to a literal bridal chamber equipt with mirrors on all the walls. Here too might be placed the scandalous words of the *Gospel of Philip*, that Jesus often kissed Mary Magdalene, his lover. The sexual symbolism is meant as a metaphor, a "discovery of the spiritual self and the reunion with it."⁵⁶

Gnostic doctrine and practice reveals several layers of syncretism at work. Many of the terms and stories come from the Hebrew and

Christian scriptures. The idea that the material world is lacking or deceptive comes from Plato. The stark division of the cosmos into Good and Evil comes from Zoroastrianism. The Bridal Chamber ritual finds parallels in the ancient mystery cults (fertility cults that ritualized the union of father sky and mother earth). Important among the influential mystery cults is Orphism, which laid the foundation for the association of love, music, and Gnosticism. Also important in this context is Hermeticism, an ancient variant of Gnosticism which derived more this-worldly implications of Gnostic teachings.

Behind these imported concepts is the core Gnostic impulse: we are strangers in a physical world governed by oppressive forces and laws. Our bodies are bound by laws that have nothing to do with true human striving. Salvation occurs when I awaken to my true origins and begin the journey up and out of this cosmic oppression tyrannized by Yaltabaoth and his archons. Sophia and Jesus help me attain this goal. Meanwhile, completely rejected is the notion that this physical world – its laws, institutions, structures, language, or thought systems – can have any claim on my Self's journey.

✧ Chapter 2 ✧

Gnostic Traits

Naming the Demon

Gnosticism is an adventure, a journey, or a way of approaching things. It begins with a premise of namelessness, a nameless God. Its God is like the God addressed in the Orphic hymn to “Thundering Dionysus”: “Universal God of many names . . . Dionysus, God among us, we honor you. Inspire us.”

Of course, as we see in this hymn, the nameless God does have a name, Dionysus, and the pretense to namelessness is just that, pretense. So also with the Gnostic nameless God. At first nailing down specific Gnostic teachings seems a bit like wrestling a greased pig. Just trying to figure out how scholars define the term *Gnostic* is a game of terminological Twister.¹

But then when we observe the common traits surfacing over and over again in Gnostic movements throughout history, we notice it most certainly does have form. It has quite nameable traits. This chapter we survey these traits, committing the sacrilege of naming, identifying, and analyzing them. Understanding these traits will help us recognize its trail through history.

These traits are: (1) God’s Namelessness as a Fundamental Premise; (2) Pleromic Universalism; (3) Separateness as *the* Cosmic Evil; (4) Anti-authority; (5) Transcending Gender; (6) The Rejection of Logos; (7) The Archetypical Role of Sophia; (8) Mysticism, Ecstasy, and Palingenesia: Waking Up to the God Within; (9) Gnostic Elitism; (10) The Journey of

the Self against Archontic Powers; Antinomianism; (11) Love (Eros) as Cosmic Bungee Cord; (12) The Gnostic/Magic connection; and (13) The New Age, or Emerging Paradigms.

God's Namelessness as a Fundamental Premise

We've all seen the bumper sticker spelling "COEXIST" with the symbols of different world religions. The sentiment presents the Gnostic position succinctly: *God transcends all names.*

God's name has moored Judeo-Christian theology ever since God revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush. Yahweh forbade the vain use of his name in the Ten Commandments. Sixty-six times the Old Testament uses the expression "[so and so] shall know that I am Yahweh." Hebraic theology anathematized the worship of a generic God through generic worship forms or through some wispy notion of spirituality. Likewise the New Testament Church maintained the name theology through its baptismal formula: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." *Invocation* grounds Christian faith and worship and by explicit definition requires a name.

By contrast the Gnostics postulate a nameless, generic God, an abstracted, unknowable, and ineffable God. The Gnostic Silvanus wrote, "[I]t is not difficult to know the Creator of all creatures [Yaltabaoth, i.e. Yahweh], but it is impossible to comprehend the likeness of this One [Monad]."² The Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* lifts God's name beyond the capacity of human language.³ Church father Hippolytus of Rome (170 - 235) attests to the Gnostic worship of a "non-existent god," following the Gnostic Valentinus (100 - 160) who calls his god the "inconceivable."⁴

Gnostics set themselves apart from the named deities of the historic religions: Yahweh, Zeus, Jesus, Allah, and so on. These elemental, regional gods arise from time and place circumstances: ancient Sinai, ancient Greece, first century Judea, seventh century Arabia, etc. The true God, says the Gnostic, can't be limited by time or place, much less a name. As stated above, names delineate, *define*, and therefore *confine*, placing limits on what should have no limits. They *pigeon-hole*, a cardinal sin among Gnostics because it distinguishes one thing from Other. Partisan spirit enters as those who follow one name set themselves against those who follow another. The naming of God leads to conflict and war.

Best-selling author and "spiritual teacher," Eckhart Tolle, a frequent guest of Oprah, gives a good example of the sentiment: "Man made 'God' in his own image. The eternal, the infinite, and unnameable

was reduced to a mental idol that you had to believe in and worship as ‘my god’ or ‘our god.’”⁵

And yet, he contemplates, Gnostic movements in each of the world religions have always recognized the universalistic kernel of its original teaching. He gives as examples Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, Advaita Vedanta in Hinduism, Zen in Buddhism, and Gnosticism and mysticism in Christianity.

Emergent Christian Samir Selmanovic shares Tolle’s viewpoint, honing in on traditional Christianity’s supposed idolatry of itself as a religion, commenting, “We do believe that God is best defined by the historical revelation in Jesus Christ, but to believe that God is limited to it would be an attempt to manage God. If one holds that Christ is confined to Christianity, one has chosen a god that is not sovereign.” He naturally concludes the presence of Christ is “in substance rather than in name.”⁶

Gnosticism’s nameless God transcends all earthly delineations. The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* reveals, “The names which are given to worldly (things) are the occasion of a great error . . . He who hears ‘God’ does not perceive what is firmly established, but he has perceived what is not firmly established.”⁷ So also with words like *Father, Son, Holy Spirit, life, light, resurrection, and church*. These words were introduced by Yaltabaoth’s archons in order to deceive men.

A truer spirituality, says the modern Gnostic, means rejecting all pigeon-holing, especially the audacity of naming God himself. In October of 1975, a group of spiritual leaders read the following statement to the United Nations: “The crises of our time are challenging the world religions to release a new spiritual force transcending religious, cultural, and national boundaries into a new consciousness of the Oneness of the human community. . . . We affirm a new spirituality divested of insularity and directed toward planetary consciousness.”⁸

A universalistic “spirituality divested of insularity” is precisely the sort of spirituality seen throughout the history of Gnosticism. Such is the Gnostic God, a generic God, a God without a name, a God abstracted from bits and pieces of the various religions. Embracing such a notion of God, says the Gnostic, is the only true remedy for the conflicts of our world, the only way we can truly “coexist.”

Pleromic Universalism

The Gnostic pleroma is the totality of aeons emanating from the

Monad. It is the realm of spiritual beings, where separation has no place, where all is one. Yaltabaoth and his archons were a pale, fallen mockery of the original pleromic Oneness. Their gross materiality introduced the separation of beings, names, divisions, and all the things of the fallen material world unsettling the Gnostics. The fall of any man occurs as a spark from pleromic harmony falls into materiality. Ultimate salvation happens through gnosis, which, *The Gospel of Truth* tells us, “dissolve[s] the division, and [brings] the warm pleroma of love in order that . . . there should be the unity of perfect thought.”⁹

In the end of time a final *apokatastasis* (restoration) will bring final mending to the pleroma and destroy the material world forever. All will return to Oneness as it began.

What attracts some to Gnosticism is the immediacy of this return. They don’t have to wait until death for ascent into pleromic Oneness. One Gnostic calls it a spiritual resurrection possible in the present time: “Come away from the divisions (in this world) and the fetters and already you have resurrection.”¹⁰ He continues, “Nothing (earthly) redeems us from this place (the world,) but (only) the All which we are (ourselves) – we are already saved, we have received complete salvation.”¹¹ Immediate ascent out of the divisions and fetters into the pleromic All is the Gnostic salvation program.

This program gives rise to two implications and along with these implications, a conundrum. First, if Gnosticism offers salvation free of any intervening institutions, it should be strictly personal. Second, once awakened the true Gnostic should be completely freed from *all* terrestrial concerns. The Gnostic is a stranger in a strange land and knows this world is a farce. He should embrace a radical other-worldliness of the likes of the book, *A Course in Miracles* (1976). In it Helen Schucman (1909-1981), inspired by a “Voice” she believes is Jesus, portrays the world as an illusion full of pain, violence, darkness, and sorrow. Only when everyone awakens to his origins in God and loses himself in these origins will the world cease to be.¹²

The last thing a true Gnostic should be concerned about is this deceptive world. If asked, “What does pleromic universalism imply for this world?” he should answer, “Absolutely nothing.”

Still, as philosopher A. O. Lovejoy (1873-1962) observed, the human soul cannot tolerate radical otherworldliness. “The great metaphysicians might seek to demonstrate its truth [of otherworldly reality], the saints might in some measure fashion their lives in accordance

with it, the mystics might return from their ecstasies and stammeringly report a direct experience of that contact with the absolute reality and the sole satisfying good which it proclaimed; but Nature in the main has been too potent for it . . . [and man] continued to find something very solid and engrossing in the world.”¹³

That’s the conundrum. Something always seems to call the Gnostic back into the material world. But how does this square with the quest for radical otherworldliness? On one hand, the Gnostic knows this world is an illusion and has tapped into pleromic Oneness. On the other hand, per Lovejoy’s analysis, the Gnostic somehow divines implications for the created order based on his gnosis.

For instance some Gnostics ritualized the pleromic reunion through the Bridal Chamber ceremony. Some practiced property and wife-sharing communalism based on the premise that pleromic Oneness negates the categories of *mine* and *thine*: “Love [never calls something its own, . . . It never [says ‘This is yours’] or ‘this is mine,’ . . .”¹⁴ Their practices tended toward the polar extremes of either asceticism or libertinism.

But doesn’t the tendency toward any of these things suggest a contradiction, a subjection to some mundane principle gnosis frees them from? If they’re truly free from the body, why deny it or indulge it? Why not just let it be while they go on living a life as the Cleavers, or the Osbournes, or whomever? Why make a value judgment regarding whatever earthly mask one is wearing at all? The same could be said for every part of their program of salvation. If it’s just the Gnostic and the pleromic Oneness, nothing else should be needed. *Nothing*.

Father of depth psychology Carl Jung confronted the concept of pleroma, he claims, in a vision given by ancient Gnostic Basilides. He contrasts pleroma with *creatura*. *Creatura* are the beings resulting from the disintegration of pleromic Oneness, the various distinct creations. Pleroma is “nothingness or fullness,”¹⁵ a good mind-bending Gnostic construction. It is where distinctions cease and individuality is no more. From the pleroma Jung got his idea of the Collective Unconscious, which he says is “common to all,” not unlike the ancient idea of the “sympathy of all things”¹⁶ which was the basis of magic.

Jung himself tapped into this pleroma and found it connected him psychically with his patients. In other words, for him, pleromic universalism invaded his world and inspired ideas on how mundane existence should be understood and organized. He developed an entire

practical psychology on it, meant to help patients. This should be an inconsistency for Gnosticism.

But not for Hermeticism, a more practical and relevant variant of ancient Gnosticism, especially popular in the Renaissance and resurrected by Jung in the modern era. By discovering positive implications for the pleroma *in this world*, Jung betrays his Hermeticism.

For the Hermeticists, knowledge of otherworldly divine things can help humanity's lot in this world. Grounded on the theory of the cosmic interrelatedness of all being, or *sympatheia*, the Hermeticist uncovered the secret knowledge of this *sympatheia* and by its secrets could wisely manipulate events. He ascends the cosmic spheres, even above its Creator (Yaltabaoth, but in this instance called the demiurge) and learns the machinations of his creative activity, all so that he can ape it and help the world along to his divinely-intuited ends. He becomes a "co-creator with God."¹⁷

We will return to this Hermetical idea of co-creating with God when we discuss progressivism (as well as Neo-evangelicalism¹⁸), only to point out here another solution to the conundrum of pleromic universalism. That is, the pleroma inspires political action, particularly of the collectivist kind. The Gnostic returns from his ascent into Oneness and is kind enough to apply his discovery to earthly politics, showing us that we are all truly one.

It's of a piece with the New Age veneration of "holism," understood either as a universalism governed by a centrifugal source (the Gnostic and Hermetic Monad) or as a universalism arising from the interrelated network of various "systems."¹⁹ The latter view generally takes into consideration modern science and technology, fertilizing the cultural soil for mystical views of the Internet.

However it is understood, universalism is in vogue, and it strikes at the heart of, among other things, the materialistic reductionism of science, the Judeo-Christian distinction between Creator and creature, the elements of grammar, and the fragmentation of the world into self-governing nations. These are all vestiges of old paradigms and must give way to universalism. A Gnostic culture entering a new age longs for something in their world reflecting the pleromic universalism its prophets have divined.

Separateness as *the* Cosmic Evil

The Gnostic Fall began when Sophia decided to do something on

her own. Yaltabaoth resulted, and through him came the material world and all its divisions. His act of creation impacted everything. It defined the fall. The creation of any individual became his own fall, when he became a being separate from other life forms.

Accordingly, flesh and matter are regarded as evil not for *moral* reasons but for *essential* reasons: they are the stuff of individuation, particularity, and separate-ness. Our vision of reality is likewise crippled, formatted in a Me/Other duality. There is *me* and there is *everything else* (Other), the various things my mind delineates through language and organized thought structures. This entire perception, says the Gnostic, is false, deluded, forever marked by “the law of individuation . . . rather than . . . a consciousness of the whole.”²⁰

In the above United Nations quote, the spiritual leaders spoke of “a new spirituality divested of insularity.” Insularity is what happens when people and things have physical properties, when they fall into their fleshly delineations – one thing becomes an island separated from other things, thus *insular* – and for this original cosmic evil we can thank that monstrous cosmic mistake, Yaltabaoth, or more relevant to the point, the whole Judeo-Christian cosmological framework.

But the evil of separate-ness goes far beyond physical insularity. It pervades our emotional and spiritual thinking as well. Gnostic Psychologist Murray Stein describes how:

“Yaltabaoth . . . stands in contradiction to the unity and wholeness of the Self. Yaldabaoth is the principle of individuation (the ego), as opposed to the principle of comprehensive unity (the Self), and as such it is the force also behind such social imperatives as territoriality, blind nationalism, and ‘ethnic cleansing.’ . . . Yaldabaoth is the rigorous perfectionist in us that wishes to eliminate anything foreign, alien, or even just different. . . . The Gnostics who fixed their attention on the biblical tradition identified Yaldabaothian attributes in Yahweh, who would have ‘no other gods’ before him and who was a ‘jealous God’ who promised his chosen people specialness in exchange for ethnic purity and obedience to tribal laws. This is an attitude that we can see in every kind of provincialism, in every instance of nationalism, and in all forms of sexism.

“Yaldabaoth is certainly not . . . to be identified with the God of love of the Christian faith. And yet within even these familiar traditions Yaldabaoth shows his face: in the splintering of the biblical tradition into groups and factions – Jews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, orthodox and reformed and fundamentalists of every stripe and doctrinal

nuance, each insisting with absolute conviction on its own views and ideas and condemning all others to eternal damnation. From the pleromatic point of view, all of these certainties are tragic illusions, and all they amount to is people without gnosis banding together and reinforcing one another in common delusional systems. The Yaldabaothian splitting attitude in these groups teaches that where there are differences, there must be enemies, opposites who must battle for dominance and the right to claim all truth for themselves. There can be only one god, and he is ours, he is us. Here Yaltabaoth is ruler.”²¹

That we are victims of alienation and disintegration due to malevolent cosmic forces is not foreign to modern thought. Marx placed our supposed alienation at the feet of the capitalistic system, which he said separates the laborer from the product of his labor. For Jung, the fall of Sophia and emergence of Yaltabaoth parallel the soul’s lapse into “emergent psychic structures,”²² the personal myth of my distinctness from Other. Here Yaltabaoth represents an “egoistic and anti-relational attitude,”²³ in which the soul loses connection to the Collective Unconscious from which it came.

This strain – that Western Civilization itself is a sort of mass neurosis due to our psychological disintegration, our alienation from primordial collectiveness – surfaces time and time again. Stein summarizes: “Yaldabaoth represents the ground plan of the individualistic, controlling, narcissistic ego so familiar in Western culture. What the Gnostics identified and named in Yaldabaoth is still with us, perhaps even more so.”²⁴

On these terms the modern Gnostic lexicon distinguishes between the terms *Self* and *ego*. The *Self* is the spark of divinity connecting us to the One. The *ego* is our *false Self* – the one formed by time and place circumstances, say, our family name, religion, or nation – which we falsely think we are. As put by Sufi scholar Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, “The Self, not the ego, is the prime agent of transformation. The ego takes us towards separation while the Self pulls us towards wholeness.”²⁵

The very things defining my separateness – my body, my family, my church, and my nation – are the stuff of the Gnostic Fall. They must be overcome if I am to come to true knowledge.

Anti-Authority

In the ancient world, Gnostic communities eschewed authority structures like those of their Christian counterparts. The order St. Paul

required of his congregations through the clergy and canonical traditions was not valued by the Gnostic. If the Gnostic has direct access to God, obviously he didn't need structures claiming meditation between the soul and God. Certain *leaders* (Gr. *prostatēs*), could gain authority by their charisma from time to time. Communities might gather around such teachers, but no formalized custom continued the community's structural integrity after their departure or death.²⁶

"They wish the abandonment of discipline (*disciplina*) to be taken for simplicity," said Church Father Tertullian (160-225). He added, "Nowhere is there easier advancement than in the camp of the rebels, where even to be there is a merit. In this way one man is bishop today, another tomorrow, today one is deacon, who tomorrow will be reader, today a priest (presbyter), who tomorrow will be a layman. For even to laymen they commit priestly duties."²⁷

Yet, setting off a paradox we see time and time again in the history of Gnostic movements, traditional authority structures yield to a new authority, one established by the personal charisma of one called *leader*. The *leader* marks Gnostic movements throughout history, from initial Gnostic *prostatēs* through the *dux e Babylon* of the later millenarians to the *Führer* himself. Contemporary Church obsession with "leadership training" feeds off the same impulse: the spiritual community cannot survive without the centripetal force of a spirit-endowed, charismatic individual.

One Gnostic, Proteus, is a good example. According to Church Father Lucian (120-180) Proteus gathered about himself a cult-like following: "[His followers] took him for a divine being (literally: god), made him their law-giver and declared him their leader (*prostatēs*)."²⁸ Another such cult-like leader was Marcus, "community leader, prophet and magician or priest all in one person."²⁹ Irenaeus, commenting on Marcus, writes in his *Against All Heresy*, "[Their leaders] claim that they have more knowledge than all others, and that they alone have attained the greatness of the knowledge of the ineffable power."³⁰

Gnosticism holds to that paradox we see over and over again in modern life, where anarchy against traditional authorities – Church, state, family – gives rise to a groveling submission to another leader. Donna Minkowitz gives an honest behind-the-scenes look at this tendency, writing about her leadership role at a gay rights rally: "This is a movement that celebrates anarchy, but I am one of its leaders. That's just one of the paradoxes that make the gay movement the sweet impossibility it is . . .

I am the ‘bus captain,’ and the title makes me feel like a gentle but masterly authority figure.”³¹

While at the same time eschewing establishment authorities, the Gnostic accepts the new leader’s claim to transcendency. In a Gnostic climate, personality cults are not only possible, *they define social or political arrangement.*

Transcending Gender

If separate-ness characterizes the primordial cosmic evil, Eve’s cleaving from Adam, the separation of genders, is one of the fundamental evils of our world. It is, as the Gnostic Bogomil sect put it, “alien to identity, imposed by the devil.”³²

Gnostic Elaine Pagels writes how the story of the separation of Adam from Eve “describes how we, as human beings, became separated – alienated from our spiritual selves, how we become literally ‘dis-integrated.’ Thus the myth shows how we have lost consciousness of our spiritual potential and consequently of our innate need for spiritual growth.”³³ The male/female division provokes all divisiveness and disconnectedness, divisions among races and nations, divisions of all sorts.

Of course, the fleshly sexual organs making men men and women woman are just more things to be transcended for those reconnecting with Monad, himself called the “androgynous Father”³⁴ by the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. Rudolf summarizes, “for the Gnostics bisexuality is an expression of perfection; it is only the earthly creation which leads to a separation of the original divine unity.”³⁵ Gnostic communities stressed gender equality and affirmed the role of women as priests, prophetesses, and ministers. This was the true source of St. Paul’s polemic against female ministers in his letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy. Throughout the history of Gnosticism, this transcending of gender figures prominently.

The tendency is accelerating.

In 2009 Swedish parents made news when they let their two-year-old child “Pop” determine his/her own sexuality. They kept Pop’s gender a secret to all but the few who changed his/her diapers, believing it “cruel to bring a child into the world with a blue or pink stamp on their forehead.” Mimicking feminist *gender-as-social-construct* dogma, they added, “We want Pop to grow up more freely and avoid being forced into a specific gender mould from the outset.”³⁶

The idea is being pushed in international Law. The Yogyakarta Principles, presented to the UN in 2007 as a charter for gay and gender

identity rights, declares in its preamble that “gender identity” refers “to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body.”³⁷ It later declares in its Principle 3: “Each person’s self-defined sexual orientation and gender identity is integral to their personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom.”³⁸ Sixteen states and Washington D. C. reflect The Yogyakarta Principles.³⁹

One wonders what the practical effects of such laws would be. Could a peeping Tom enter a women’s locker room claiming his “self-defined gender identity” was a woman? That was Robert Domansky’s defense when in 2004 the 48-year-old cross-dresser entered a girls’ locker room in a Pennsylvania high school dressed as a cheerleader. Or when the city of Portland’s gender identity law permitted a cross-dressing sex offender to enter a female locker room while little girls were present.⁴⁰

Gnostic spirituality sets a person’s physicality against his inner spark, his true Self. As the genderqueer in our introduction said, “People like me don’t feel comfortable in the bodies in which we were born.” The physical body is nothing more than a vessel, a shell, an illusion bestowed upon us by Yaltabaoth deceiving us to think we are something we aren’t.

This discussion reveals confusion about authentic feminism. Is feminism a *celebration* or a *transcending* of unique female attributes? On one hand, as in the above incidents, those things defining female sexuality are to be transcended and ignored. On the other hand, embracing the feminine in our spirituality is one of the trademarks of modern Gnosticism. By this they mean we should quit being so logical and linear in our thinking and more intuitive and feeling-oriented. Or is it sexist to say women are illogical, capricious, and do everything based on feeling? Therein is the paradox.

Ultimately the Gnostic believes female illogicality (or intuition, pending on one’s perspective) and capriciousness (evidently a woman’s prerogative) constitute a superior way of knowing, bestowed upon us by Sophia. These ways of knowing can belong to a person not by virtue of his sex organs, but by virtue of his self-determination, provided he is willing to wake up from his patriarchally imposed patterns of thinking. When elementary school teachers discourage boyish competition and force boys to participate in traditionally female activities, the purpose is to introduce the boys to their true Self, their superior inner Sophia.⁴¹

The Rejection of Logos

The Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* describes the “knowledge of the living book” whose letters “are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of something foolish, but they are letters of the truth.” The things of truth, it continues, “surpass every form (and) every sound.”⁴² Rather, it proposes, not the ears but the nose picks up the fragrance of the Father’s gifts, the nose being a metaphor for the intuition of the heart.

The idea that truth transcends the written word permeates Gnostic texts. The Gnostic *Exegesis of the Soul* lays down a teaching which sounds a lot like the trend in contemporary Christianity against catechism-learning in favor of nurturing “hearts that pump for Jesus” or some such: “[I]t is by being born again that the soul will be saved. And this is due not to rote phrases or to professional skills or to book learning.”⁴³

It’s not anti-intellectualism, the Gnostic would say. It’s trans-intellectualism. Like the elements of creation, the elements of language are things the Gnostic transcends. Truth is “inaccessible to the human mind” and incommunicable through mundane means.⁴⁴ Rational discourse cannot relay knowledge. The truth takes us beyond the edge of the word, into the mysterious, silent wilderness beyond its borders. Here mythology, symbolism, allegory, paradox, and sometimes undecipherable babble rule. Gnostic writings are cryptic, poetic, and mysterious. Hence the opaque nonsense we regularly come upon in Gnostic writing. The Sufis in particular cloaked their thoughts in non-discursive, non-rational writing forms – the romantic love tale for instance – and even dance, believing direct knowledge of God rendered futile all “book-learning and theological subtleties.”⁴⁵ The Sufi asks questions like, “Why is the sound of an onion?”⁴⁶

The Gnostic *Gospel of the Egyptians* reveals this nugget: “And the throne of his glory was established in it, this one on which his unrevealable name is inscribed, on the tablet . . . one is the word, the Father of the light of everything, he who came forth from the silence, while he rests in the silence, he whose name is in an invisible symbol. Hidden, invisible mystery came forth iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii eeeeeeeeeee oooooooooooooooooo uuuuuuuuuuu eeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa oooooooooooooooooo oooooooooooooooooo.”⁴⁷

We’ve run across this insightful line before in our introduction, with our peek into the climax of the mega-church service. The Gnostic climax cannot come under the management of human language.

This view of language follows their view of physical nature. What is language, after all, but words describing actions and properties possible only in a physical universe set up in time/place contours? Because *word* denotes *being*, the multiplicity of *beings* begets the multiplicity of *words*. *Word A = Thing A* and not *Thing B*. But if multiplicity and division of being are seen as perverse, a truer religion whose quest is the nameless God needs no names or words. In the words of Schuyler Brown, "There can be no one-to-one correspondence between language and external reality."⁴⁸ Thus thought the ancient Gnostic, as well as his modern counterpart, as aptly put by Marilyn Ferguson: "Words and sentences have given us a false sense of understanding, blinding us to the complexity and dynamics of nature. Life is not constructed like a sentence, subject acting on object." She concludes, "Language frames our thought, thus setting up barriers."⁴⁹

Or as Paul Davies puts it, "We can say that just as creation is the 'dualitude' of an original unity, so language is the refraction into parts of what is in principle a whole."⁵⁰

Adam's first assignment from God – naming the animals – marked the consummate evil. But then how typically male – patriarchally logical, phallically linear. With such patriarchal strictures, we close ourselves off from the fullness of what may be relayed to us; our "canonicity entails a closed system, to which only texts passing scrutinizing, standardized tests gain access." Such is the conclusion of one author, who rather celebrated the "mixtures [involving] paradox, puns, and other features of lived experience."⁵¹

This explains the current antipathy against grammar. Peter Elbow's influential grammar textbook suggests grammar "makes it almost impossible to achieve that undistracted attention to your thoughts and experiences as you write that is so crucial for strong writing (and sanity). For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar."⁵²

English Professor David Mulroy, fighting a losing cause on behalf of grammar, describes the "righteous struggle" of modern grammarians whose arguments are "couched in rhetoric reminiscent of political campaigns for civil rights or against censorship." He recognizes the revolutionary, cosmically sweeping posture of his opponents.

The results are an abysmal comprehension of language. Administering an in-class study, Mulroy asked his students to paraphrase the prologue to the Declaration of Independence. He elicited a variety of responses, only a few of which captured even the gist of Thomas

Jefferson's prose. Most were radically off, for example, "People must have true facts to back up their thoughts on a god if they are different from the thoughts of the majority."⁵³

Many of the responses veered into Gnostic sentimentality, unbeknownst to the students of course, who simply fell back to their default spiritual cocktail of warmed-over Nietzschean thought, New Agerism, and existentialism.

Some examples: "Mankind is in a state of separation. There will come a time when all will be forgotten, and man will be one with mother earth." Or "Cut your earthly bonds and wear the mantle of Nature and God. Wield the power and declare justly your ascension from man's law. Then all shall bow before your might." Or again, "I think it means that people should look at their own morals. They should follow the laws of Nature and Nature's God, but also in their own way follow their own morals."⁵⁴

At a minimum the paraphrases reveal a student body preoccupied with the Self, as if the objective writings of another are mere window dressing for their own personal musings. Of course this is deliberate. It goes hand in hand with the Gnostic preoccupation with the Self as the true locus of meaning. The meaning of another (like Thomas Jefferson) and the student's sort of blur together in an impressionistic haze of random stream-of-consciousness thoughts.

Here should be placed the discussion on gay marriage, which is not about the gay lifestyle but about violence done both to language and to an institution, particularly the meaning of the word *marriage* and what it means for society. A society rooted in a respect for nature acknowledges the role flesh plays in defining sexual identity and compatibility. It rests on the biological reality that egg and sperm create baby. Last we checked, the determining factor in one's gender was whether he produced an egg or a sperm.

But through the ministrations of Gnostic iconoclasm, fleshly distinctions are illusory, the product of Yaltabaath's mistake. And any linguistic forms institutionalizing this fleshly compatibility are illusive as well. The term *marriage* and all it means for society are there by human convention alone, *corrupt* human convention.

As Gnosticism takes over society, marriage goes from being about the fleshly compatibility of male and female to being about the union of two abstracted Selves transcending gender. Gender itself is no longer a biological reality but a construct of personal "Self-identification." Of

course, the only way to arrive at this understanding is to deny the actual physical form of the male and female bodies. To deny what is obvious – what biology tells us about male and female compatibility – doesn't lend itself to, we might say, a naturally-flowing development of language.

Instinctually we recoil at such denials of nature: a spade is a spade. Such is the basis of tradition and traditional views of marriage. Tradition is the “distillation of centuries of human experience,”⁵⁵ which is without a doubt the basis for a traditional view of marriage. Gnostics rejoice with an *a priori* rejection of tradition, human experience, and instinct. These things only institutionalize natural arrangements, which are at root inherently corrupt, the creation of our usurper deity. Whatever violence, then, is done to tradition is redemptive in and of itself. There has always been a strain in Gnosticism that sacralizes iconoclastic violence, its founding violence being Sophia's redemptive abortion of Yaltabaoth.

Donna Minkowitz gives us a peek into this inherent violence and iconoclasm with an insider's perspective on homosexual love. Her words look obnoxious at first, until we understand them according to the above Gnostic reading of her position. (By the way, she's writing these words in the context of positively comparing her sexual experiences with the charismatic experiences of Christian believers, mainly women, at an event in Toronto, for whom “it's impossible for the Torontans to go into spasm without knowing it's a sign that God loves *them*.”)

She writes, “I take sex as a sign of radical disobedience. Though I believe I'm obeying the Sublime One when I have sex, I also feel intensely that I'm fighting back, that each caress is a blow of sorts. But who is it a blow against? It's a whack at all the forces that want to deprive me, want me to be untouched, unpetted, caged in. I understand these forces in political terms, as the social interests that don't want women, or lesbians, or people in general to feel sexual ecstasy. There certainly are social forces that ache to lace us up, but it's odd that I should identify with the forces in my own head that want to shield me, hold me back. . . .

“I love disobedience as much as I love sex itself, the rebel-god who topples earthly rules. Sexual chaos fights the ‘principalities and powers’ St. Paul warned about, ‘the rulers of the darkness of this age, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.’ Religious-right people love this verse and quote it all the time because at bottom their religion is, like mine, a Manichaeon [i.e. Gnostic] one.”⁵⁶

Those that do not face up to this sentiment do not understand the visceral hatred and potential for justified violence aimed at tradition and

its representatives. It is justified because it's the acting out of a grand cosmic battle. The Gnostic feels caged in, and autoeroticism, with the pretext of an "Other" stand-in (*any* other), is his key out of that cage.

Again, "iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii eeeeeeeeeee ooooooooooooooooooooo
 uuuuuuuuuuuu eeeee eeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
 oooooooooooooo ooooooooooooooooooooo."

Language is violently overthrown. It cannot be about *reflecting* the natural order, but about *manipulating* our perception of the natural order according to the Gnostic myth. Thus the politicizing of language, the violence done to language by Political Correctness. Minkowitz' sadism, or the violence of sodomy, or the injustice done to children in broken families, or the violence of abortion, must be accepted as unfortunate collateral damage in the greater cosmic battle. And so, by fiat marriage shall be redefined as "Two adult Selves who love each other."

Of course, the alert will note that with this new sentence, a whole new regime of boundaries, delineations, and constrictions enter, all deserving violent overthrow just as much as the previous ones. Why only "two" and not "three"? Why not everyone in one big pleromic orgy, like Woodstock, or like the tangled lines of illegitimacy and step-parentage making up the modern family? Or why "adult" and not "any age" as NAMBLA is pushing for?⁵⁷ Why must love be a component, as the "asexuals" are now asserting?⁵⁸ We end up on a slippery slope. When the boundaries of words are transgressed, the effects on our society parallel the cacophony of vowels we saw above, or the cacophony of interpretations of the Declaration, the complete breakdown of order, a return to chaos and formlessness. But again, this is the Gnostic quest, to return to that time before Yaltabaath imposed his institutes on the original Oneness.

The word for *word* in Greek is *logos*. *Logos* denotes more than what *word* means to us. In the Greek mind it denoted rationality itself, *reason*, *argument*, or *discourse*. It comes from the Greek verb *legein*, meaning "to arrange in order." From *logos* we get logic, and we get other derivatives like all the studies ending in -ology, meaning "study of." *Logos* fuels what we normally consider knowledge to be. We go to school and take classes ending with -ology, and at these classes we learn a body of knowledge governing its particular branch.

Gnosticism undoes traditional ways of viewing knowledge. Traditional knowledge comes to us objectively from the outside and needs a medium like a teacher or a book, or some experience with the natural world, some observance coinciding with the actual, physical world.

Traditional knowledge comes to us *extra nos*, from the outside. Gnostic knowledge [*gnosis*] cannot be something coming to us from the outside because the external world is essentially evil and deceptive.

Again from the *Gospel of the Egyptians*: “Really, truly, iEa aiO, in the heart, who exists, u aei eis aei, ei o ei, ei os ei (or: (Son) forever, You are what you are, You are who you are)! This great name of yours is upon me, O self-begotten Perfect one, who is not outside me.”⁵⁹

Our Tourette’s-inflicted Gnostic friend hasn’t the discipline to organize much in this mess, but the one thing he’s got down is, *whatever it is, it’s not outside of me*. It’s from the inside, from the heart. It’s intuited, felt, or experienced on a level rendering the humble word wholly unsatisfactory. Wayne Dyer’s Self-help book *Real Magic* gives seven tips for finding that magic within. His seventh tip? “You can go beyond logic.”⁶⁰

With the breakdown of Logos and language comes the breakdown of rational discourse. In the past a rational argument had potency insofar as it was logical, concise, and true to basic rules of propositional thinking. Now rational argument is *ipso facto* corrupt.

Those who take their Gnosticism through feminism will speak of the patriarchalism of the whole rational enterprise: to speak rationally is to think like phallo-centric males or write literature that is “boring in its pointedness and singularity.”⁶¹ (A=B, B=C, C=D, therefore A=D. How linear! How phallic! It’s a linguistic rape! Etc.) This is the position of the *Écriture Feminine* strain of literary theory.

The one who takes his Gnosticism through the New Age speaks of rationality as the mode of thinking in the Age of Pisces. The above-mentioned Ferguson lauds the Hopi and Chinese for their “nonlinear” language.⁶²

In any event, using words with meaning and arguments with logic are things to move beyond in our current postmodern world. On these terms the tongues-speaking charismatics were ahead of their time. Through a Gnostic reading of current culture, we live in an entire society of tongues-speaking charismatics.

The deconstructionist movement suits this understanding of language, accelerating its decline. Deconstructionism claims all language is a mask hiding the power politics of the person saying it. One’s words only reflect what he is as a flesh-bound, particular individual confined by gender, race, and other physical delineations. They are a “logocentric prison” we must get out of and discover life beyond the edges of language,

as in Michel Foucault's *silence*, or in "the fiction of the invisible space" between words. Words and their accompanying thoughts are borders beyond which we "fumble, fall, bruise ourselves [and] enter the labyrinth and become entangled in paradox, parody, and negation."⁶³

Schuyler Brown is describing Gnosticism but gives an excellent primer on deconstructionism when he writes, "Language does not mirror the outer world but interprets it, and no interpretation is uninfluenced by the interpreter. 'Objective' reality finds expression in language as a creation of human consciousness."⁶⁴

In short, Gnosticism does not outline its program with arguments or systematic teaching. It traffics in non-rational, supra-rational, trans-rational, and even irrational speech. Human language is not something to be used respectfully as a way to construct civilized life. It's something to be toyed with during the passing interlude of this world's existence, something to be *de-construct*-ed.

The Archetypal Role of Sophia

The above-quoted Brown sees contrasting paradigms of knowledge set up between Christ the masculine Logos and Sophia the feminine personification of Wisdom: "Gnostics and orthodox seem to be guided by two different root metaphors. . . . The masculine Logos replaces the feminine figure of Sophia." Alluding to a theme we'll cover in a bit, he continues, "In the Gnostic reading of Scripture, sexuality, not speech, is the root metaphor. The beginning of the cosmic process is not the divine word but an act of autoeroticism."⁶⁵ This autoeroticism refers to Sophia's breach of the male/female pairing in the pleroma: she conceives without her consort's approval.

In any event, she represents a "critique of religious rationalism."⁶⁶ She's the archetypal challenge to the logocentric orientation supposedly established with Christianity's patriarchal beginnings. What marks this orientation? Dogma, rituals, a focus on externals, the establishment of clergy to enforce discipline, the idea of canonicity, all rooted in us/them, true/false, orthodoxy/heresy distinctions. Sophia represents not just a new god, but new paradigms of thinking.

Specifically her critique has three components:

First, by being Yaltabaoth's mother, she stands above the one most people consider God. She's a higher God. The God of this world is merely the product of her bad choice, after all. Irenaeus recounts how Gnostics invoke certain spells as they ascend back into the pleroma

through the various archontic spheres, needing to bind the archons guarding the gates at each sphere. When at last they meet Yaltabaoth himself, the final gate, they say, “I am a vessel more precious than the female who formed you. If your mother is ignorant of her own descent, I know myself, and I am aware from where I am. And I call upon the incorruptible Sophia, who is in the Father, and is the Mother of your mother.”⁶⁷

Modern Gnostics interpret this archetypically. If Yaltabaoth is the foundation of both rationalism and religious dogmatism – cancers on the Western heart – Sophia is the beginning of a restored view of God. Understanding this point clarifies the *God-is-dead* sentiment of the nineteenth century. It’s not that *God* doesn’t exist, but *God as we have historically understood him in the West* has been replaced by a superior understanding. Put another way, *Yaltabaoth is dead*, and the religion replacing him yields to a truer spirituality so *other* and *beyond* traditional religious categories it requires a reoriented lexicon and new paradigms.

God-is-dead proponents like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the existentialists divined transcendent meaning, else they wouldn’t have philosophized in the first place. In the words of Heidegger, *God-is-dead* “is no atheistic proposition, but the formula for the basic experience of an event in western history.”⁶⁸ That event is the changing orientation away from religious dogmatism and rationalism.

Most supposed secular humanists, both of the past and present, don’t deny God; they deny *God as traditionally understood*. Their atheism or agnosticism is actually a very earnest faith in Sophia, not so named of course – we’re beyond names – but a metaphorical Sophia, the fount of a reoriented cosmic perspective.

Second, Sophia’s desire to fix what she damaged serves as a model for us all. Unlike her deformed son, she recognized the need to change course. She shows how we can be restored through Christ, her counterpart with whom she became reunited. The ancient Gnostic demonstrated this reunion through the Bridal Chamber ceremony. Obviously this ceremony no longer exists, but it does at a metaphorical level. It’s the *love-will-save-us* theme permeating modern thinking, love understood as the breakdown of divisions but really nothing more than “the reintegration of the masculine with the feminine . . . symbolized by the sexual act.”⁶⁹ Sex as a non-procreative symbol of restoration is Sophia’s heritage to our culture.

Finally, Sophia serves as a principle of *The Feminine*. In 1993

members of several mainline Protestant Churches attended a “Re-Imagining Christianity” conference in Minneapolis which included a “Milk and Honey” ritual dedicated to Sophia, seeking to tap into their inner female. Pursuit of the Divine Feminine has long marked the New Age. Its roots stretch back to Gnosticism.⁷⁰ The Gnostic will claim traditional Christianity deprecated The Feminine through its negative views on Eve and on the fallen soul (which is seen as feminine), whereas Gnostics present a more positive view of The Feminine principle in our soul.⁷¹

This feminist element pervades modern spiritualism. In the popular book, *The Shack* (2007), God the Father appears as a black woman. Could he have appeared any other way, given where we are at spiritually and culturally? Only two things have a numinous enough quality to house the Father’s appearance in a human character: woman-ness and blackness. The black element is the culmination of several decades of American literary and cinematic myth-making, the *Magical-Negro* archetype referenced above. The woman element comes straight from Gnosticism.

Richard Smoley explains in *Forbidden Faith* (2006), “much of the present enthusiasm for Gnosticism comes from those who perceive the God of the Bible (both Jewish and Christian) as unsalvageably patriarchal and who feel much kinship with his demotion in the Gnostic myths to the status of [the self-serving Yaltabaoth]. For women (and men) who still identify with Christian values but reject the institutional establishment, the welcoming of Sophia back into Christian theology represents a way to transform Christianity from within.”⁷²

Mysticism, Ecstasy, and Palingenesia: Waking Up to the God Within

Among the influences on Gnosticism were antiquity’s version of secret societies, the mystery religions. These influences included initiation rites, secret handshakes, graduated levels of involvement, and finally an elitist division between the “initiated” and “uninitiated.”⁷³

Mystery cults centered around local deities like Cybele, Atargatis, Astarte, Demeter, Isis, or Dionysus, inspired by the fertility myths associated with these characters. Initiates ritualized the annual death/renewal cycle of the seasons, believing participation in these rituals procured immediate resurrection, an event experienced ecstatically or mystically. Rituals included blood baths, sacrifices, castrations, orgies, the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*), or ecstatic vision of the *secret thing* (the

mystery), something engineered through various techniques. Prevalent was the use of musical instruments – tambourines or the flute-like *aulos* – to whip initiates into a frenzy. Second century satirist Lucian mentions the use of dance.⁷⁴ Even alcohol and drugs were used to achieve the ecstatic state.

The Dionysian mysteries (related to the Orphic mysteries) staged orgies. The orgy ritualized love binding multiple souls together as one. The cult of Astarte practiced ritual prostitution, a rite rooted in the sacred marriage. The Syrian cult, devoted to the goddess Atargatis, involved a bizarre rite demanded of the initiate. After a period of penitential self-flagellation and self-castration, the candidate ran through the streets, threw his severed penis into a randomly-selected house, and took as his permanent dress the clothes of the house's female occupant.⁷⁵ The cult of the Great Mother also included emasculation rites in which the priest assumed female dress and grew his hair long. Bisexuality, transgenderism, the Divine Feminine, extreme attitudes on sexuality, the mystical program, all these traits reverberate in Gnosticism.

The role of mystical vision, gnosis, ecstasy, rebirth, or illumination in religion is a fascinating topic. Christianity has always wrestled with movements claiming the ability to ascend into divine mysteries through mystical technique. These programs passed on from the mystery cults some version of the sacred marriage, elitism, and the moment of ecstatic, beatific, or mystical insight. When these movements occupied the fringes of Catholic Christianity, some (like the Spiritual Franciscans or other mystics) dabbled dangerously close to heresy, others (the Cathars or the Free Spirit movement) embraced full-throated Gnosticism.

What is the fine line between so-called orthodox mysticism and heretical gnosis? It depends on one's perspective.

Medieval Christianity, following the Neoplatonic mysticism of Origen, Evagrius, and Pseudo-Dionysius, staked claim on a safe, modified form of mysticism by anchoring it on the Church's earthly symbols. Meditation on the sacrament, for example, could lead to mystical vision.⁷⁶ Medieval scholar David Knowles highlights the "doctrine of mediated illumination and spiritual knowledge conferred by the sacraments and by angelic ministrations" passed on from Neoplatonism to medieval Christianity.⁷⁷ We think of Thomas Aquinas' famous mystical vision of Christ during mass.

But then we also think of not-so-famous Theosophist Charles

Leadbeater (1847-1934), who described his vision at the moment of consecration: “At the moment of consecration the Host glowed with the most dazzling brightness; it became in fact a veritable sun to the eye of the clairvoyant, and as the Priest lifted it above the heads of the people I noticed that two distinct varieties of spiritual force poured forth from it.” So powerful was the force that neighboring society itself was affected by it.⁷⁸

Leadbeater invokes Lord Buddha in the same treatise, showing his hand. But this only amplifies the fuzzy line between orthodox and heretical mysticism. What exactly is the difference between Leadbeater’s experience and that of Aquinas, both of which centered on the sacrament?

Some emphasize doctrinal distinctions. Historian of love Denis de Rougemont classifies two types of mysticism: *unitive* and *epithalamian*. Unitive mysticism – shared by Gnostics and Neoplatonists – holds possible the fusion of the soul to the Monad: the two become one. Epithalamian mysticism prefers the language of marriage between the soul and God, maintaining the “essential distinction between creature and Creator.”⁷⁹

Or is this a distinction without a difference? Rougemont notes how difficult it is to isolate the two traditions historically. He untied the Gordian knot by focusing on the role of *agape* versus *eros* in mysticism, the former orthodox and the latter Gnostic (a distinction we will pursue further in a bit). But then he mentions how the mystic Meister Eckhart, seemingly orthodox in his emphasis on *agape*, was condemned by a papal bull for the “unitive mystical” belief that “We become completely changed into God and are converted into Him.”⁸⁰

This ambiguity leads other Christian theologians to reject mysticism altogether. Mysticism, they argue, begins with the mistaken premise that “sin is creatureliness.”⁸¹ In other words, for the mystic, man’s limited, finite perspective prevents ascent into infinitude. The beginning of the mystical ascent calls the seeker to look beyond, even to deny, his limited creatureliness. Christ’s call for one to deny himself is not because he is sinful, but *because he exists*. Only when he annihilates his creatureliness through the ascetic disciplines can he ascend into infinitude. Late medieval mystic Johann Tauler spoke in these terms, delighting in the moment when “the created nothing submerges in the uncreated nothing.”⁸²

Rather, these anti-mysticism theologians argue, sin is an *ethical* breach between Creator and creature. Salvation seeks not the dissolution of the creature into the Creator. It centers on the gracious work of

Creator upon creature. The creature ends up not dissolved, but restored. Yes, there will exist a “fellowship of I and Thou,”⁸³ but this can only happen so long as Creator and creature remain distinct. Communion, not union, is the goal.

That all being said, this whole discussion is pedantic, because by the standards of current American spirituality, no one cares. Half of Americans are claiming mystical experiences to varying degrees. We’re beyond doctrinal subtleties. The floodgates are opened. However one wants to define it – unitive, marital, psychological, ecstatic, experiential, divine, annihilative, transcendent – whatever it is, it’s claimed by one out of two people. To decide that Bob’s “oceanic feeling” at church supercedes John’s “dissolving into light” at New Age camp ignores what’s really going on.

And what is going on? Our culture has embraced an understanding of salvation going back to the mystery cults, one centered not on the validity or truthfulness of a teaching, but on the *enthusiastic* experience, an experience ranging anywhere from holy barking to benign sensations of personal wellness, but each an experiential happening nonetheless.

Aristotle used the term *entheos* (Gr. *full of god*) to describe the experience of mystery cultists induced by music, dancing, drugs, or sex. Since then the term *enthusiasm* historically and theologically refers to the experience of God’s presence through internally-induced techniques. This understanding in turn has guided one particular understanding of *palingenesia*, or “rebirth,” an ancient concept embraced by Jesus in the New Testament and understood today by many as some sort of personal frisson induced at church camp, or wherever.

Scripture centers rebirth on the Church’s baptismal and catechetical ministry. St. John’s Gospel emphasizes rebirth “by water and the spirit” (John 3: 5) while St. Peter relates it to the word. (I Peter 1: 23) Palingenesia was externally, not internally, induced.

For the mystery cults and their enthusiastic heirs, palingenesia was wholly an internal affair, something manufactured through various techniques leading to that personal experience. These techniques, observed Aristotle, “induce such a heightening of consciousness in a man that he would be receptive to the god who came to be united with him. Such a person was then an [entheos], an enthusiast.”⁸⁴

Without a doubt this is how Americans increasingly understand salvation, which is why Harold Bloom used the term *Orphic* to describe

American religion. We've adopted the enthusiastic, experiential understanding of palingenesia. Meanwhile the possibility for an ecclesiastical, sacramental understanding really doesn't even compute.

What is the nature of this enthusiastic rebirth? One author describes it as "the 'great rush,' the flash of white light or moment of illumination that takes over the body completely and that can . . . change the course of a person's life."⁸⁵ After describing his own experience of "dissolving into light," the same author musters mystics from across the ages to justify his experience: "The same sort of turnaround occurs with classical 'oceanic' experiences, such as have been reported by Jakob Boehme, William Blake, Teresa of Avila, and many other[s]."⁸⁶ Charles Wesley famously felt his heart strangely warmed during his experience.

Physicist Fritjof Capra details his experience: "I 'saw' cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I 'saw' the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I 'heard' its sound, and at that moment I knew this was the Dance of Shiva."⁸⁷

Charles Lindbergh, eighteen hours into his famous flight, chronicled his own "awareness spreading through space, over the earth and into the heavens, unhampered by time or substance." He reports a feeling of weightlessness, as if separated from his body. Behind him the spirits of family and friends filed through the fuselage giving him "messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life." He added, "Death no longer seems the final end it used to be, but rather the entrance to a new and free existence."⁸⁸

Natural man needs palingenesia of this nature, said the Gnostic, because he is born in a state of drunken sleep, and would die blissfully unaware of his true origins from the Monad were it not for the possibility of being awakened.⁸⁹ Today poets, prophets, mystics, and artists – the crazier the better – are best suited to awaken us, for the likes of these have tapped into the dream life of the pleroma. "Sleep," a hymn of the archetypal poet-musician Orpheus proposes, will "bind us in invisible chains." But dreams are the "Source of oracles."⁹⁰ Seen as melancholic in ages past or even as madmen to some, today the poet-artists are the prophets of our Gnostic religion. They have dared to venture into the dreamland of the reborn imagination and have come back with images, both visual and audible, to show us the way.

Gnostic Elitism

Gnostics were and remain elitists. Palingenesia was not for everyone. Not everyone had the same endowments. Not everyone had received the divine spark. Some received the spark and were keenly aware of it; these were the *pneumatics*, or, *spiritual ones*. Some had received the spark but had to be helped along in discovering it; these were the *psychics*, or *natural ones*. Others had no hope for salvation, the *earthly ones* (*hulikoi*).

The medieval incarnation of Gnosticism, Catharism, likewise had a twofold division among its followers between the *Perfecti* (the *perfect ones*) and the *Credentes* (the *believers*). We see the same elitism in the medieval heresy of the Free Spirit, which distinguished between the *Little Church* of Rome and its own *Great Church* comprised of its own members, those who achieved deification through gnosis.⁹¹

Over and over we see this trait in secret societies, communistic movements, and spiritual programs. Each has its frozen chosen. This is the true source of progressivism's elitism, the likes of which we will see in philosophers Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill.

But what about the previous point on transcending divisions and separateness? Isn't separating humanity into classes one of the great divisions of history? Here we see one of Gnosticism's ugliest tendencies: *they can hold the paradox by denying the essential humanity of fellow human beings*. Humans, understood as individual flesh and blood beings, were created by a monster. Consequently no particular human *as a flesh and blood creature* has inherent value. Rather, true humanity is understood as those who have received the inner spark of the Monad. And these are all one.

So all who have the inner spark are one. And what of those that don't have the spark? Technically they're not the same species. They are dust and destined for dust. They haven't developed to the next great stage of human evolution, from mere matter into emerging light beings. They haven't "achieved a cognitive state that empowers a more coherent understanding."⁹² Like children, they think in linear, causal, black/white terms, not holistically as an adult might.

Understanding Gnostic elitism explains one of the great conundrums of modern philosophy, an inconsistency pursued by political philosopher, Leo Strauss. He rightly pointed out the inconsistency of various modern philosophers – particularly from the social sciences – who proposed sweeping theories said to explain the totality of human behavior,

while somehow exempting their own philosophies from their sweeping generalizations. The paradox goes as follows:

Philosopher proposes Theory X to explain why everybody's minds and brains work the way they do.

But (we would respond) does Theory X explain why your brain thinks the way you do, particularly how it thought up this dumb theory?

Essentially their answer is, No. I am of a unique character and special in the history of the world.⁹³ I have been granted an insight that lifts me above everything, to see what's really going on.⁹⁴

Oh. OK.

Strauss' critique nailed it. It remains the intellectual scandal to modernism. The problem is, no one cares, because philosophy has moved into Gnostic terrain where all thinking is divided into two camps: the enlightened elite who know the big picture, and the regressive masses thrashing around under the paradigm of a previous intellectual tradition, the sort in which the likes of Leo Strauss excelled.

The French Revolution, communism, and Nazism each believed itself the vanguard of a dawning new age. They each claimed a position for their version of the *new man*, gloriously evolved individuals who had glimpsed into the very cosmic truth of where history was marching. For the French Revolutionary, that cosmic truth was *liberty and the brotherhood of man*; for the communist, *the triumph of the proletariat*; for the Nazi, the German *Volk*. Those that shared their enlightenment were one with them. The rest were of a lesser species, non-human, fit only for the guillotine, the showers, and the gulag.

The more benign, but no less pernicious, manifestation of Gnostic elitism in today's world is progressivism. Progressives believe they have unique insight, a secret gnosis, into the cosmic end toward which society must *progress*, and their cosmically-ordained task is to lead their benighted fellow citizens toward this end. Progressive attitudes about the unconvinced may not be as murderous as those of the communist or fascist. Nevertheless they amount to a sort of *evolve-or-die* mentality.

Human evolution obviously plays a role in this thinking. Human evolution proposes we will develop into new beings. If that evolution is slow, no harm no foul. What do I care if some being eight million years from now is a species distinct from me? But if evolution is believed to operate in shoots and fits, as Peter Russell proposes in his *The Awakening Earth: The Global Brain* (2008),⁹⁵ then perhaps we are in the midst of an evolutionary fit right now. This is exactly what Will Smith thought

Obama would be, an “evolutionary flashpoint.” Those shoots, fits, and flashpoints may be part of the natural progression of evolution, or they may be catalyzed by science and technology toying with our genes. Presbyterian ethicist and minister Rev. Mark Douglas, resurrecting the ideas of Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, suggests God is directing humanity to an evolved “transhumanism.”⁹⁶

In best selling author Eckhart Tolle’s, *A New Earth* (2008; featured in Oprah’s Book Club), all the classic tropes of modern Gnosticism come marching out – the rejection of religion in favor of spirituality, the antinomianism and iconoclasm, the awakening to new consciousness, the disavowal of material delineations, etc. The last line of his book ought to terrify us. He writes, “A new species is rising on the earth. It is arising now, and you are it!”⁹⁷

The question each of us should ponder is, “What if I am not *it*?”

The Journey of the Self Against Archontic Powers: Antinomianism

Irenaeus referred to a Gnostic sect, the Carpocratians, who were “so abandoned in their recklessness that they claim to have in their power and to be able to practise anything whatsoever that is ungodly (irreligious) and impious. They say that conduct is good and evil only in the opinion of men.”⁹⁸

Such recklessness proved to the Gnostic how free he was from all the binding laws set up by Yaltabaath and his archons. Echoes of Gnostic freedom reverberate in Nietzsche’s philosophical treatise *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and – his philosophy laying down the foundation for postmodern relativism – introduce a convergence between our times and ancient Gnosticism.

What exactly is antinomianism?

By convention the Gnosticism 101 summary will always include *Gnostic antinomianism*. By this is meant Gnostic rejection of moral codes, especially in regard to sexuality. But the issue is more complex, and we have to investigate ancient psychology to understand what’s at stake.

For the ancients, the soul reflected the cosmos and vice versa. Psychology was the flip side of cosmology. The myth of what happened in the cosmos was directly related to what went on in the soul. In the *Timaeus*, Plato argued the soul resided in the head and concluded the universe is round because the head is round. The only reason the head is attached to the body is so it doesn’t roll around on the ground, a gravitational dilemma evidently avoided by the universe.

This macrocosm/microcosm sympathy is the basis of astrology. The ancients believed the soul entered the body through various cosmic influences, represented by the sun, moon, planets, and stars. On the way down its descent the soul picked up certain character traits – based on the position of the various spheres – and these traits dictated the fate of that individual because, as ancient philosopher Heraclitus said, “Character is fate.”

But there’s more. The elements of the cosmos – the things dividing the cosmos up into time and place, everything from the heavenly bodies down to the rocks and trees, but also days, months, and years – took on spiritual qualities. Animating spirits called *daemons* lurked behind these things of place and time. The sum total of these animating spirits – the hierarchical network of daemons – constituted the cosmos.

These animating spirits populated the ancient imagination in any number of ways: the sprites and nymphs of Greek myth; the personified Ideas of Middle Platonic philosophy (Sophia’s origin); the genii, numina, and manes of Roman piety; the angels and demons of Hebraic religion. They were seen as ethically neutral, capable of either good or evil.

Psychologically, each man’s soul had a place in the cosmos and was placed under the tutelage of certain daemoniac beings based on his situation in time and place. The quest of any ancient philosophy or religion worth its salt was to provide an answer to the question of how the human soul should relate to this daemoniac reality of the cosmos. Generally there were three answers to this question.

Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism argued the soul should adjust itself and relate favorably to the principles of the cosmos by yielding to the hierarchy.⁹⁹ For them the question is, *what is according to nature?*

Christians saw the world as invaded by fallen angels, Satanic powers subjugating the world to their influences. For them the cosmos is not evil, but it’s corrupted by this reign of demons. Christ came to regain the dominion Adam lost – the kingdom of heaven – realized in the “world to come.” The Christian casts a sanctified vision on the fallen creation, hopes in its redemption, and through faith sees its original beauty.

The Gnostics reject the possibility of redemption.¹⁰⁰ Any product of this world order – the creation, our bodies, the societal and political systems – came about by a grand cosmic error. They can disregard such things completely. For them the daemoniac spheres are a large prison house with multiple layers of walls and gates, and each individual spirit is locked away in his bodily cell at the center. Upon awakening to the

knowledge from whence he came, the Gnostic begins his ascent out of his cell. Gates and doors open up for him with each new Gnostic insight, little Gnostic keys attained through enlightenment. Eventually he ascends out of the prison cell of the cosmos altogether and enjoys pleromic bliss. Thus, a major attraction of the Gnostic salvation program was “salvation from astral determinism, because they regarded fate as demonic.”¹⁰¹ And this salvation began with a total rejection of the demonic world order, which went way beyond orthodoxy’s understanding of demonic powers to include the entire created order.

The Gnostic sect, the Cainites, believed they could not “be saved in any other way, except that they pass through all things.”¹⁰² What things? The gates and doors, those things laid down in law by the “angels who created the world.”¹⁰³ These were the same spirits who gave Moses the Law, or who dictated fate through astrology, or who set up the laws of nature. Gnostics predicated redemption on the enlightened discovery of their freedom from all restraint, moral or psychic. These were the keys opening the doors, their liberation from all order, moral and other.

Yaltabaoth’s 365 archons governed these gates and doors.¹⁰⁴ They oversaw all the systems of the world and established the laws and principles governing these systems. For this reason Gnosticism was antinomian,¹⁰⁵ meaning it was anti-*nomos*, *nomos* being the Greek word for *law* or *principle*. Yaltabaoth was the chief Law-giver. *Nomos* includes, but means more than, the Ten Commandments. *Nomos* denotes the governing principles of the world, both in nature and in society.¹⁰⁶ Its Latin counterpart is *institutum*,¹⁰⁷ cluing us to the affinities of modern anti-institutionalism with Gnostic antinomianism. It includes all the written and unwritten rules of *the system*, whatever system that may be, from the solar system to the political system. It includes natural order itself, such arrangements dictating, for example, the unwritten societal rules of what femininity, masculinity, and marriage are.

Each commandment of the Decalogue codifies the principle of individuation and separation, thereby sanctifying whatever entity is set apart from the other. The Lord and his name are separated from all others and only should be served, not taken in vain. His Sabbath day is separate from all others and must be kept holy. My person, wife, properties, and reputation are my own and ought to be protected. To the Gnostic, these laws sanction a system, for example, of private property. Or of parental authority. Or of the sanctity of bodily life. Or of marriage. Or of worship preserved for a named, local deity. These laws offend because of

their fundamental premise: *the only thing bringing about individualized properties like life, wife, and land is Yaltabaoth's flawed creation.*

Abusing St. Paul's grace-centered theology, the Gnostics claimed to be completely free from all *nomos*, and this antinomianism led to the shiftlessness and sexual immorality described by the apostles in their epistles. (II Peter 2; Jude; Revelation 2: 20) It also led to communalism and wife-sharing, for their Gospel brought them to a pre-Law point of existence, back to a primitive age when there was no law, only an Eden where all things were shared. This at least was the position of the Gnostic Carpocratians.¹⁰⁸

Today's Gnostics likewise always butt up against nature and nature's laws like battering rams, insisting nature should not dictate anyone's place in the world, as in the forced argument that femininity, masculinity, and marriage are not natural but social constructs. Their archons take new forms: the Church, culture, the state, or whoever perniciously controls language and cultural institutions, overseeing the cosmic constructs by which they maintain power. The Gnostic must deconstruct this cosmic architecture and all its arbitrary conventions to be liberated. Put another way, he must break open the archontic gates binding him to the dominant paradigms of thought.

In Christian circles the code word for archontic evil is "legalism" or "Pharisaism," which upon inspection is often nothing more than the denigration of standards in morality, doctrine, or worship. Robert E. Webber summarises the attitudes of younger Evangelicals after giving two examples of "legalism" (one of which included a pastor telling a young woman that she would have to stop sleeping with her boyfriend before she could be a Christian), "[There is] one word that I have heard over and over again from the twenty-somethings – *authentic*. They want to be real Christians in a real world – not phony Christians in a world of their own making. To achieve this goal, they know that they must break from the legalistic bondage of a spirituality defined by external rules and embrace the true meaning of freedom in Christ."¹⁰⁹

Breaking free of the legalistic bondage, such is the stuff of the Gnostic antinomian salvation. Of course, the Occupy Wall Street movement took the cake on the antinomianism front. For them, *Walmart* or *Wall Street* or *The 1%* are the archons. The very mention of such phrases conjures up something uncannily evil for those who believe they are imprisoned in a multinational capitalistic system. *Halliburton* has a similar effect on those convinced the world is governed by military-

industrial overseers. The *Koch brothers* of course are the puppetmasters duping Middle America to be conservative against their better interests. The simple word *big* prefixed to any concept *archontifies* it. Gnostics always need these archontic characters, some word or idea looming large, dark, oppressive, and controlling in the collective mind, something to rebel against to give their lives meaning.

Take this random example from a blogger in the *comments* section following a political essay on energy: “Forget gas economy . . . the oilers are gonna be sure to make their profit . . . start knee cappin’/head blastin’ some of these big shots with their fingers in the pie . . . ceo’s, cfo’s x’s and o’s with their theivery hiding behind make believe cost increases, etc, supply and demand, free enterprise, bs democracy, and their control freak so called keep the peace bunches . . . they’re just the same as any thief, dope dealin’ cartel, they lie, they cheat, they steal and they’re protected by a bunch of ***** with black robes, thick ass law books, and of course the almighty fraternal protectorates of the police and the military . . . I wonder how well these big wigs are truly protected . . . not as well as some might believe . . .”

The comment parades forth all the usual archontic suspects: oil companies, CEOs, supply and demand, free enterprise, democracy, judges, the police, and the military. These are the rulers of the system, a system the commentator believes is inherently corrupt. Not only rulers, but ruling principles – like supply and demand, or democracy – are hopelessly corrupt. He suggests the positions of these entities aren’t so secure, hinting at some sort of revolution.

Such is the fantasy-infused perception of the Gnostic, particularly when he applies the dark/light formatting of his mind to politics. His opponents are not flesh and blood people. They’re abstracted archetypes animated by the characters in the Gnostic myth, ready-made evil stock characters sitting on Hollywood’s shelf, or drab-grey oils blended on the palette of our cultural myth-makers for the sole purpose of shading in the contrasting dark haunts on the canvass of our imagination. The idea that any of these characters could actually be human with blends of good and evil cannot be. They are two-dimensional personifications of evil itself, only suitable for “head blastin’.” Moreover, the possibility that the author himself, after toppling this evil system and gaining power, would fall for the same corrupting impulses, is also impossible. He’s on the side of light; the powers are on the side of darkness.

Anyone insisting “it can’t happen here,” to use Sinclair Lewis’

eponymous phrase for his novel exploring how totalitarianism might arise in America, needs to peer into the above quote and wonder what it portends that more and more Americans are engaging our world with thusly-formatted minds.

Love (Eros) as Cosmic Bungee Cord

A certain sort of sexuality, non-procreative in nature, appears throughout the history of Gnosticism. The word *buggery*, a synonym for *sodomy*, derives from a group of medieval Gnostics known as Bogomils, a descendant of the early charismatic sect, the Messalians. The same non-procreative understanding of love fueled Socrates' celebration of pederasty in the *Phaedrus*. Or again, there is the Gnostic practice of *coitus interruptus* which we see in its various permutations, as in tantric sex practices and in the sex practices of the utopian Oneida Community.

For similar reasons the Gnostics condemned marriage. The Apostle Paul had the Gnostics in mind when he warned against those who forbid marriage and command abstinence from foods "which God [i.e. the evil Yaltabaoth, in the mind of the Gnostic] created." (I Timothy 4: 3) Later third century Marcionite groups believed marriage fulfilled the "work of Satan."¹¹⁰ Irenaeus likewise testified to this Gnostic impulse: "Marriage and procreation, they maintain, are of Satan. Many of [their] followers abstain from [meat]."¹¹¹ This rejection of marriage, along with vegetarianism (because vegetables are food not produced by sexual intercourse), follows the Gnostic stream throughout history.

Sexuality per se isn't forbidden. Irenaeus attributes sexual license to Simon Magus, whom ancient Church tradition decreed the first Gnostic. Simon took up with a prostitute named Helen. Irenaeus summarizes: "[Simon believes] they should as free men do what they wish: for through his (Simon's) grace are men saved, and not through righteous works. Nor are works just by nature, but by convention (*accidens*), as the angels who made the world ordained, in order to enslave men by such precepts." Irenaeus goes on to cite Valentinian Gnostic justifications for license as "repaying to the flesh what belongs to the flesh."¹¹²

Erotic overtones mark Gnostic spirituality throughout its history, from the medieval Free Spirit movement to the Children of God cult in the 1960s. Mystic G. I. Gurdjieff (1866-1949) fathered eight illegitimate children and sought liaisons with adepts he knew to be married. One of his students defended him: "All his strange and often repellent behavior was a screen to hide him from people who would otherwise have idolized

his person instead of working for themselves.” Some suggest Gurdjieff may have been a follower of the Sufi “way of blame,” which believed the “most elevated group” of adepts purposely hid their goodness.¹¹³

If salvation rests on liberation from moral order, the Gnostics demonstrated their freedom by their libertine sexual attitudes. Some Gnostic sects were downright X-rated in their rites. The Barbeliote Gnostics believed the spark of a man resided in his sperm or in a woman’s menstrual blood. Their rites included intercourse, but prior to consummation, the discharge was collected in the hands of the man and woman. They ate it saying, “This is the body of Christ, and this is the Passover; hence our bodies are given over to passion and compelled to confess the passion of Christ.” Similarly at a woman’s menstruation period, the substance was taken in the hands of the man and woman, and eating it they said, “This is the blood of Christ.”¹¹⁴ These emissions were not allowed to escape, but were collected in the hand lest they become united and generated more sparks falling into evil material existence. If conception did occur, the fetus was aborted, and according to one early church father, eaten sacramentally.

Gnostic defenders claim these accusations are slanders made by institutional powers maligning Gnosticism in the eyes of the public. But what are they afraid of? The Gnostic is free from this world’s Creator, Yaltabaoth, and all his morality laws. Worse, procreation replicates the primal evil, the creation of evil flesh. As one contemporary Gnostic “reverend” writes, “There is a current that goes against having children in the history of Gnosticism. . . . [I]f humans are imprisoned here then we shouldn’t take part in that imprisonment. ‘I have sown no children to the rulers of the world,’ is in keeping with this view.”¹¹⁵ Indeed it is!

To compound the problem, children stifle one’s journey of Self-discovery. Explaining his inspiration for the movie *Revolutionary Road* (2008) starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, director Sam Mendes said, “[The movie] deals with this idea . . . that you somehow find yourself living a life you hadn’t quite expected and certainly one that you didn’t really want to live.” The movie climaxes with the wife getting an abortion to combat suburban ennui. Thomas Hibbs comments, “Pregnancy is the great evil in the film, the enemy to be defeated.” Why? “[B]ecause the presence of children punctures the world of perpetual adolescent fantasy to which the main characters are devoted.” Hibbs’ analysis recalls Justice Anthony Kennedy’s justification for abortion: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the

universe, and of the mystery of human life.”¹¹⁶

For new Gnostics seeking to escape mundane reality for their self-absorbed worlds of light and authenticity, sex resulting in demanding children must be replaced by new paradigms of sex. It’s rather about the transcendent feeling connecting two Selves on a higher plane.

Marilyn Ferguson lauds the advent of “new-paradigm relationships” that are more about “shared psychic intensity” than sexuality. Some Gnostic-minded Americans, she says, flinch at this new understanding. “For many people, giving up the idea of exclusive relationships is the most difficult paradigm shift in their own transformation.” In a footnote she quotes a sociologist’s study suggesting monogamous marriage is outdated and needs to be expanded to include “relationships with others, possibly including various degrees of sexual intimacy.”¹¹⁷

Where does this emphasis on a non-procreative, anti-marriage love come from?

The English language doesn’t delineate the various nuances of the word *love*. The word is used with everything, from high school infatuations to the spouse of a sixty year marriage, from hot dogs to God. The Greek language allowed for a bit more nuance, especially in its differentiation between *eros* and *agape*. Of these two, orthodoxy coopted the latter and Gnosticism the former.

Agape in Christian terms is defined by God’s sacrificial love for humanity, displayed in the giving of his Son unto death. This sacrificial love works the love a Christian has for his neighbor: *love creates a neighbor where before there was none*. It restores the original order in which the entire flow of life itself is one of self-giving: the Father giving of himself for the Son, the Son giving of himself for man, man giving of himself for woman, and woman giving of herself for her child. This self-giving happens at the bosom point. After the Fall, the same self-giving goes on, but now – as typified by the crucifix – through suffering, hence, *passion*, which comes from the Latin for *suffering*. Love, in Christian terms, involves real *gut-wrenching*¹¹⁸ *agape*: Christ spilling out his guts on the cross; a woman wrenching her insides to give birth; a man working in the coal mines or going off to war to protect and provide for his family.

Gnosticism is the negative image of everything just stated. First, the whole idea of *neighbor* is nullified. The creation of one who could be a neighbor was not only the work of a usurper deity, but a fundamentally corrupt action: *there should be no neighbors because we should all be one as we*

were before Yaltabaoth started dividing everything up! With the annihilation of ego upon which salvation depends also goes the annihilation of Other, or neighbor. Neighbor along with me joins the collective pleroma and thus must be dealt with by a new understanding of love, erotic love.

Likewise is self-sacrifice – fathers sacrificing to provide and protect; mothers giving birth – simply a continuation of Yaltabaoth’s creative activity, a *procreation*. Love resulting in procreation and its demands is an obnoxious notion. It continues Yaltabaoth’s error.

What then is love to the Gnostic? *Eros* more closely approximates what they mean by love. *Eros* is erotic love, or romantic love. This sort of love defines the Romantic period, a longing and yearning for some intangible *out-there* thing transcending anything this earthly existence can offer. The ultimate *out-there* thing is Monad, our Source. It makes its appearance to us as Sophia, setting the table for a whole literary and philosophical history of Divine Female love motifs.

Because nothing in this physical world can satisfy one’s erotic longing for his source, the true Gnostic always suffers. He too has passion, but passion as we understand it today, the passion of love, the suffering of yearning fulfilled in the ecstasy of orgasm. The ecstasy is where it’s at – a spiritual moment really – certainly not the resulting physical occurrence: sperm bursting forth to germinate egg.

The above-quoted Donna Minkowitz aptly describes such love: “Love without inequality. Pleasure without restriction. Vulnerability without exploitation. To me, to most of us, gay love means all these things and more – an ecstatic knowledge, almost a *gnosis*, that sex is possible outside of the horrifying thickets in which the rest of the culture has hedged it. And that we ourselves can get to it! Visions of a totally satisfying oral bliss, what Ginsberg called ‘caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,’ the mind-stealing kisses of ‘human seraphim,’ a physical joy beyond the bounds of anything most people experience, almost beyond the bounds of desire itself, my God! no wonder people fear us! But they should not fear. They should open to the Ultimate, as we have done.”¹¹⁹

Sex resulting in children is obviously what nature has bestowed on us, something biology classifies as the operation of the *reproductive system*. If a “culture” is “hedging” sex with this “horrifying” reality, it’s because culture is formalizing something quite natural, kind of like the way culture hedges drivers to speed limits on mountainous curves because nature has a few horrifying things to say about centripetal force, which among other

horrifying things tethers our planet to the sun. But through the Gnostic myth, nature is the work of Yaltabaoth, something to liberate oneself from.

In any event, this notion of love – mystical ecstasy as sublimated orgasm – runs deep in literary and philosophical history, going back to the Orpheus myth, then through Socrates and Plato, to the Neoplatonists and Gnostics. It's shared by Christian mystics. We see it among the Romantic poets and philosophers. It drives modern pop and rock music.

It's ultimately rooted in what we might call the *cosmic bungee cord* view of love in the ancient world, in which love is the spiritual searcher's magnetic draw to his Source, Monad. It's like a spark descending from the Monad through the pleroma on a bungee cord. His fall is a process of individuation whereby his spark takes on all sorts of fleshly designations, falling through one archontic sphere to another – the stellar and planetary influences – until he reaches the nadir of his existence, a flesh and blood human falsely believing himself to be defined by gender, ethnic, religious, cultural, and personality designations. The walls are up, the very rudiments of hate setting up a world of *We's* and *They's*, *ego* and *Other*.

But for the Gnostic the bungee cord is a two way process; what goes down must go up. The slumbering spark awakens. He learns of his origins in the Monad, and Sophia appears ready to guide him home. Suddenly all the things he thought were real are deceptive frauds. He cares only for the return home. He cares only for Sophia, his new love. This love tugs and draws him upward and outward in an ascent only consummated at death, when at last he will reunite with the pleroma.

The Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus meditates on this sort of love when he asks, "What is this intoxication, this exultation, this longing to break away from the body and live sunken within yourselves? All true lovers experience it. But what awakens so much passion?"

He answers, "[O]nly those reach it who rise to the intelligible realm, face it fully, stripped of the muddy vesture with which they were clothed in their descent . . . and enter in nakedness, having cast off in the ascent all that is alien to the divine. There one, in the solitude of self, beholds simplicity and purity, the existent upon which all depends, towards which all look, by which reality is, life is, thought is."

He continues, "Seeing with what love and desire for union one is seized – what wondering delight! If a person who has never seen this hungers for it as for his all, one that has seen it must love and reverence it as authentic beauty, must be flooded with an awesome happiness, stricken

by a salutary terror. Such a one loves with a true love, with desires that flame. All other loves than this he must despise and all that once seemed fair he must disdain.”¹²⁰

Romantic poets and philosophers continue the theme. First there’s the descent on the bungee cord – the evil of separation, the disintegration of humanity, the alienation of the human spirit. “All relationships,” said Hegel, “are tearing themselves apart.” For Schiller this fragmented humanity was the cause of mental illness. But then things bounce back, as love pulls the soul back to its source. “Love is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything that exists,” said Shelley. Hegel adds, “In love the separate does not remain, but as something united and no longer as something separate.”¹²¹

Christian agape is an other-directed love unrelated to how one feels or what’s going on internally. It’s formalized expression through, say, charity organizations or the institution of marriage can be ploddingly, drudgingly participated in and still be effective. But this harkens back to a time when *duty* was a component of love and seen as good. It lengthened marriages, protected women and children, strengthened communities, and gave some hope for the poor.

Gnostic love is entirely inner-directed and has little to do with the object of that love.

Exhibit A is the adulterous affair, whose whole point is love without sacrifice or commitment for the actual person. Gnostic love scorns a real flesh and blood person: that person is a stand-in for something deeper going on, the subject’s love for love. Hollywood traffics in Gnostic love. They cut off the story right before the real agape-oriented stuff is required, right before the lovers get married and have to deal with actual issues. Sacrifice as a component of love has long left the equation of American love, replaced by utopian ideas of romance and eroticism.

Exhibit B is how love for humankind has replaced love for actual humans. John Lennon left his first wife behind at the train depot on his way to go to India and write songs about love. *All you need is love!* (I’m sure that sentiment was a great relief to his estranged son Julian.) This is the love inspiring the moral preening about an expanding welfare state. It’s not love for actual people who in reality end up soul-sapped and dependent on a cold bureaucracy. It’s rather a love for an abstraction, an idea, that is, the idea of a pleromic collective, that we are not individuals but bound toward one another, including an abstracted “the poor.” One

can be self-satisfied not by the old pagan observation of Christians – “See how they love one another” – but by the newest ascription, “See how I voted!”¹²²

What agape sees as the necessary consequence of true love – the begetting of others, the begetting of neighbors, the begetting of one’s wife, one’s children, the begetting of one who calls upon my self-sacrifice – the Gnostic sees as corrupt.

In any event, to set the table for further discussion, we emphasize three things about Gnosticism and love. First, Gnostic love was a concept pregnant with symbolic meaning as reflected in its spiritual marriage and sex rituals, symbolizing the reunion between “one’s lower aspect with its Lightworld prototype.”¹²³ Second, love or the spiritual marriage had nothing to do with procreation, and in fact procreation was seen as the perpetuation of an evil, something to be aborted. Here, Sophia’s dismissal of Yaltabaoth after his conception serves as the prototypical abortion. Third, central to Gnostic love was passion, understood as the suffering that the lover undergoes as part of his healing process, of leaving this evil material world behind for the journey into cosmic bliss.

The Gnostic/Magic Connection

We saw how ancient cosmology was related to psychology. The ancient cosmos was populated by a hierarchical network of spirit beings called *daemons*, which bore influence on the individual soul. The magician was a practitioner of the art of manipulating the network of demons. By influencing one demon, through the network, he could manipulate other areas, like tugging at one part of a web to effect a reaction at another part. He influenced a point in the demonic network through certain secret words and phrases, or spells. Christianity’s arch-nemesis Simon Magus was a magician. The posture of the magician is ultimately Gnostic: if the world is the product of a usurper, then the world may either be avoided altogether – how the ascetics interpreted it – or tinkered with.

This is how some, like Renaissance scholar Francis Yates, see affinities between modern science and Gnosticism. Yates is particularly interested in the role Hermeticism played in the rise of modern science. It was the Hermetical posture toward nature, she argues, or “magic as an aid to gnosis,”¹²⁴ which laid the revolutionary foundation from which modern science arose.

One of the fathers of the scientific revolution, Francis Bacon, nicely echoes this Hermetical posture: *Nature, to be commanded, must be*

obeyed. It's all about technique. The goal is subjugating nature. *How* do we gain mastery over something? *How* do we manipulate our world? The Hermetical magician manipulates and uses nature to his own advantage, whether good (white magic) or bad (black magic). This posture revolutionized the ancient model, possessed as it was of far more humility before nature and its divine order. The Hermetical posture toward nature by contrast allows for the sort of tinkering modern technology does, because the *divine* in *divine order* is cast as a usurping fraud. He is freed from the laws of nature, freed to master them in turn.¹²⁵

So far so good. While there are some cases, like tinkering with genes or DNA, where the ethics of “playing God” enter, much of modern technology is simply a footnote on the invention of fire, the wheel, or the alphabet, hardly usurpations of the Creator. But then we can't forget: cosmology is related to psychology. The Renaissance magicians were far more interested in the psychological side of this equation, and for this reason, doubled as the world's first psychoanalysts, or, tinkerers of *human* nature. The magician influenced not only cosmic realms through his manipulations, he also manipulated the troubled soul and released it from cosmic influences. Marsilio Ficino's medical treatise, *De vita libri tres* (1489), attempted to do this for those suffering from melancholy and stands as a signpost for the Self-Help times to come.

The Hermeticists also understood the role of music in magic. Given the saturation of music in all areas of modern life, their viewpoint is illuminating. If love is the cosmic bungee cord drawing the soul back to its source, and if the archons are impeding the way, music might unlock these archontic doors. The magician will learn its erotic secrets. Ficino played a lyre emblazoned with an image of Orpheus for good reason. Just as Orpheus pacified the powers of this world order with his song, so can the magician-musician change the constitution of the world – set up as it is by the powers that be – through the wise manipulation of melody and harmony. Likewise can he help the trapped soul during his ascent out of his pathologies.

Obviously music can have positive or negative effects on the human soul, but can music change society? The Camarata – a group of Florentine Neoplatonic humanists – said “yes,” and opera was the result. They paved the way for the likes of Jimi Hendrix, who said, “through music, you can hypnotize people . . . and when you get them at their weakest point, you can preach into the subconscious minds what we want to say.”¹²⁶ His goal was put bluntly in a 1969 interview with *Newsweek*,

“Definitely I’m trying to change the world.”¹²⁷

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the Renaissance philosopher whose work *De vinculis in genere* (1590) laid out the basic connection between magic and love, particularly how the magician can manipulate the masses by understanding the erotic bonds in the human psyche, put it this way: “Magic action occurs through . . . sounds and images which exert power over the sense of sight and hearing. . . . Passing through the opening of the senses, they impress on the imagination certain mental states of attraction or aversion, of joy or revulsion. . . . Sounds and images are not chosen at random; they stem from the occult language of the universal spirit. . . . With regard to sounds, the manipulator should know that tragic harmonies give rise to more passions than comic ones . . . , being able to act on souls in doubt.”¹²⁸

In other words, the collective mind of any society is saturated with images (or *phantasms*) fueled by the passions and loves of its people. These images are situated in a grand network and cross paths with a wide variety of icons. The master magician can tug at one part of the network and effect something at another part. He uses both sound and visual images in the manipulation of masses. A melody here, a harmony there, conjoined with some logo or archetype, all these conjure up images which can be leveraged to specific actions. It’s magic.

Coupled with the modern use of marketing – the manipulation of branding for products, the control of narratives by political campaigns – we truly live in magical times, the blurring of the border between Disney World and reality. Rational discourse is less and less about cogent or logical ideas in the same way that the purchase of a product is less and less premised on useful information. It’s all about manipulating the images, or conveying thoughts through archetypical shorthand, and tinkering with these abstracted ideas in the fantasy life of the individual.

The New Age, or Emerging Paradigms

The term *New Age* is prejudiced by decades of wackiness associated with it. Then again, as a *Christianity Today* article observed, “[T]he New Age label itself [has fallen] away. Like Baptist and other churches disowning their denominational identifiers to present themselves as ‘community churches,’ postmodern New Agers would rather not be encumbered by the pigeonholing of the New Age name.”¹²⁹

No longer, the article continues, is the New Age using traditional verbiage to describe its program – we’re all beyond language and

pigeonholing now – but it’s using phrases like “emerging mainstream.” We would expect modern Gnostics of all stripes to disown words and names: it’s what they do. But what exactly is the New Age? What is the Gnostic view of how history goes forward?

A traditionalist view of history is developmental: things build off of what precedes it; the wisdom of the past is passed on to future generations. But that implies respect for institutions involved in passing on the past such as family, society, culture, traditions in the Church, and state rituals.

In the Gnostic mind, however, these institutions are all creations of Yaltabaath, systems of this false and evil world he must transcend. The Gnostic understanding of history thus moves from *developmental* to *revolutionary*, or using the newest phrase, *emerging*. Developmental *builds* off the past; revolutionary *revolts* against the past; emerging *transcends* the past. *Revolutionary* and *emerging* have similar ends but differ in means, the former willing to force the issue, the latter believing that minds will change first by the gentile tugging of Gnostic avatars, and then by an avalanche of societal change.

This interest in history at all, of course, presumes an involvement eluding more radical, otherworldly Gnostics. But Hermeticism, or “proletarian Gnosticism”¹³⁰ allows for such involvement through mechanisms we’ll explore in our section on politics.

Today’s Gnostics are closer to this proletarian variety, and so believe we are at the threshold of a new age. The code word most suggesting such thinking is *paradigm*.

Thomas Kuhn introduced the word in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Marilyn Ferguson popularized it in her New Age work, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980). Those attracted to *paradigm* talk generally believe there is an imminent revolutionary *shift* in the lodestars guiding how people think, a spiritual reorientation. It’s not just a change of opinion; it’s a change in the psychic architecture by which those opinions are made.

History itself is divided into periods reflecting supposed paradigmatic change. Common to each of these periods is the pretense of a new, world-historical way of thinking, a new age. The very terms of historical nomenclature display over and over again the rotting corpses of periods considered imminently paradigm-shifting at the time. What is remarkable is how this nomenclature smacks of Gnosticism: *Middle Age* (transitional period leading to a revolutionary, third millennial age);

Renaissance (new birth); *Enlightenment* (as opposed to the darkness of the Dark Ages); the age of *Radical Revolution* (uprooting the status quo). These terms don't suggest developmental change or reformation of cherished institutions.

From John Stuart Mill's thinking that "the times [are] pregnant with change" and how a revolution was taking place "in the human mind and in the constitution of human society"¹³¹ to Robert Schuller's *New Reformation* (1982), over and over we see this strange and steadfast insistence on the dawn of great change concurrent with the author's own age.

The most humorous example is from an author contributing an essay on *The Apocalyptic Vision in America* (1982). His tome is a dispassionate review of all the new age thinking occurring in the nineteenth century among the various revivalistic groups. He rightly identified how these revivalistic groups were fueled by their millenarian views of society: *Christ was coming to establish his kingdom on earth!* But then without irony he writes in a final chapter, "I believe with great conviction that our own age is in fact different from previous ages. . . . Such predictions are now based on a scientific observation rather than on religious inspiration."¹³²

What he failed to realize is that he was in perfect consort with the revivals of the past. Precisely where he failed to see the "religious inspiration" of his own thinking, he was perfectly in tune with Gnostic currents today.

Conclusion: Cur Deus Homo?

The incarnation of God in human flesh is the most powerful affirmation of physical creation ever given. That doctrine governs all of Christian theology: Jesus Christ is the bridge, or Mediator, between God and man. The Church is the post-ascension extension of this truth.

Because Gnosticism locates the process of salvation internally, it is the mother of those heresies claiming the Church is ultimately unnecessary. Throughout history, there have been movements outside the Church claiming not to need the Church. They claim salvation comes through intuition, through inner feeling, or through a personal experience of the Holy Spirit. These movements are all part of the Gnostic family tree.

Writers sympathetic to Gnosticism say the Church tyrannizes or monopolizes an experience open to all (or at least the elite) without any

mediation. The Church puts forth, says one author, a “transitional object”¹³³ through which contact with God must be found, just as the medieval Church said “outside of the Church is no salvation.” The transitional object includes such things as dogma, rituals, or sacraments. By inserting the transitional object, the Church gains political power: it controls access to God.

Such authors may take heart, for by droves people are casting off the transitional object and all institutional churches. Already in the 1990s, a study revealed a third of Americans hold to the statement “people have God within them, so churches aren’t really necessary.”¹³⁴ More recent studies suggest this figure has expanded, as younger people tend more toward this “spiritual, but not religious” creed.

Marilyn Ferguson predicted it: “[T]he heretics are gaining ground, doctrine is losing its authority, and knowing is superseding belief.”¹³⁵