

WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST: CONFRONTING OUR GNOSTIC EMPIRE OF DESIRE (PART 1)

Americans today are at heart revolutionaries for revolution's sake alone, rebelling now not against oppressive monarchies for the sake of ordered liberty but rebelling for disorder against the very truths of Nature and Nature's God.

September 28, 2019 Dr. Leroy Huizenga



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Conservative critics of contemporary culture often remark that our contemporary age is marked by Gnosticism. And it's not just conservative Christians or Catholics who make the observation. The late Yale literary critic, Harold Bloom, who was raised an Orthodox Jew but as an aged adult once described himself as a "Jewish Gnostic," wrote in his seminal 1992 work *The American Religion* that "the American religion, for its two centuries of existence, seems to me irretrievably Gnostic"; we are "an obsessed society wholly in the grip of a dominant Gnosticism"; "Gnosticism is now, and always has been, the hidden religion of the United States, the American religion proper". At more length:

The oddity of our American Gnosis is that it is a mass phenomenon. There are tens of millions of Americans whose obsessive idea of spiritual freedom violates the normative basis of historical Christianity, though they are incapable of realizing how little they share of what once was considered Christian doctrine.

Given the claims made about our society, it behooves us to understand what it is and how we might combat it. For Gnosticism is perennial challenge to the Church, whether a heretical temptation to Christians within or an operative philosophy of the dominant culture without. As perennial, it remains a challenge today, and I would suggest we live now in the West under a Gnostic empire of desire.

But what is Gnosticism? At its point of historical origin, it is fundamentally a radical reading of Plato as regards matter and the body. In Plato's dialogues, arguments are presented claiming the senses deceive, for and the visible realm of sense perception is illusory and a realm of constant flux, while it is the invisible, intelligible realm that is stable, unchanging, and ultimately Real. We may attain knowledge of it through the spiritual soul's contemplation of it. And so in Plato's dialogues, the body is a problem. Indeed, it's described even as a "tomb" or a "prison," neither of which are nice places:

There was a time when with the rest of the happy band they saw beauty shining in brightness—we philosophers following in the train of Zeus, others in company with other gods; and then we beheld the beatific vision and were initiated into a mystery which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence, before we had any experience of evils to come, when we were admitted to the sight of apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy, which we beheld shining impure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell. (Plato, *Phaedrus* 250c)

I think this admits of many explanations, if a little, even very little, change is made; for some say it [the body] is the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul, their notion being that the soul is buried in the present

life; and again, because by its means the soul gives any signs which it gives, it is for this reason also properly called “sign” (*sēma*). But I think it most likely that the Orphic poets gave this name, with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure to keep it safe, like a prison, and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe (*sōma*) for the soul, until the penalty is paid, and not even a letter needs to be changed. (Plato, *Cratylus* 400b-c)

Gnosticism, then, as radical Platonism, is a worldview which sees matter, and thus bodies, not just as a problem but as fundamentally evil, something which imprisons and entombs spirits. Plato’s demiurge (the fashioner of the cosmos lower than the One, the true and highest divinity) becomes a wicked, evil agent fashioning the evil visible world, and imprisoning souls in bodies. And so Gnosticism sees the true essence of a person as the spiritual soul, and since the body is a prison or tomb, Gnosticism sees salvation as striving for the liberation of the soul from the body and its constraints.

Gnosticism was the greatest heretical challenge to the early Church. Christian Gnostics basically interpreted Christian beliefs through the lens of their radical Platonism, while Gnostics outside the Church (like the Manichaeans with whom St. Augustine was affiliated for a decade) competed for converts. And so Gnostics necessarily believed in at least two gods, with the creator god of the material, visible world as presented in the Old

Testament as an evil deity responsible for imprisoning spirits in bodies, while the kind, loving father-god of Jesus as presented in the New Testament worked to liberate spirits from bodies. Indeed, the historic creeds of the early Church were anti-Gnostic by effect and by design: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

So much for Gnostics on the question of God and gods. With regard to humanity, Gnosticism was, and is, also elitist, holding that there is a hierarchy within humanity. The highest rank comprises the pneumatics, the “spirituals” (as *pneuma* in Greek means “spirit”). These people have spirits that can be liberated from their bodies. The next rank comprises the psychics, “soulish” people (*psychē* meaning “soul”) who may not be able to be saved as they lack spirits but who, having some sort of souls, can achieve some degree of illumination. And the final rank comprises the vast mass of humanity, the *hylics* (*hulē* meaning “matter”), who are only bodies, lacking spirits and souls. They’re cattle, and cannot be illuminated or saved.

Salvation for Gnosticism is a matter of knowledge. Indeed, that’s where “Gnostic” comes from, as the Greek word for knowledge is *gnōsis*, as in the English words *prognosis* (knowledge of how a disease will progress), *diagnosis* (knowledge of a disease through its symptoms), and *agnostic* (someone who doesn’t know if there’s a god). One must know reality is really how Gnostics understand it, know that one is one of the elite who can be saved, and know the secret code that will liberate spirit from body.

Secrecy: Gnosticism trades in it, and the elites were the ones who possessed the secret knowledge about the cosmos and the secret codes for escaping it. The elites simply know the very structure of the universe and simply know the secret code of salvation. Christian Gnostics also claimed to know secret sayings of Jesus. Gnostic Gospels composed long after Jesus lived concoct secret sayings of Jesus and conversations with him in which he happens to support their ideology. For instance, the Gospel of Thomas (dated to about A.D. 150) begins, "These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded." The Gospel of Judas similarly begins, "The secret discourse of the pronouncement in which Jesus spoke with Judas Iscariot for eight days, three days before he celebrated Passover." And so secrecy empowers elites: they just know how things are, and are thus intellectually superior to lower humans, especially hylics, who are not to question their judgment.

The Gnostic ideology meant, and means, three major things in the realm of faith and morals, all flowing from the idea that matter, and thus bodies, are intrinsically evil. In terms of the Christian faith, it first means sacraments were senseless. Sacraments are essentially God working through matter, but Gnostics regard matter as intrinsically evil, so no god and certainly not the highest god would work through it.

In terms of morality, it means second that babies were bad; what else is a newborn but seven pounds of inherently evil matter? And so Gnostics advocated and practiced contraception, abortion, and infanticide, all of

which were common in the ancient world. They also had a disdain for the female form since females bore babies, and saw the human person not as dimorphic (male and female) in principle but as androgynous. For instance, the last saying (#114) in the *Gospel of Thomas* is an exchange between a fictional Jesus and fictional Peter: “Simon Peter said, ‘Mary [Magdalene] should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ And Jesus said, “Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she becomes a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male shall enter the kingdom of heaven.”

And then again as regards morals, in the third place Gnostics were often antinomian, meaning that they rejected any rules or laws disciplining the body, and so felt free to engage in licentious behavior; if the body does not matter, if we are not ultimately our bodies, why not use them as we please? But the logic could cut the other way, too, leading some Gnostics to extreme asceticism; if the body is evil, best not to feed its passions for food, drink, or sex in any way.

At every point, then, heretical Christian Gnosticism understood the Christian story in a way diametrically opposed to the Church’s understanding of her own story. Catholics like St. Irenaeus fought Gnosticism by emphasizing the ancient rule of faith (*regula fidei*) going back to Jesus. The rule of faith as found in the Church Fathers looks much like what we know today as the Apostles Creed. It is monotheist, affirming there is one God, the Creator, who made everything, including matter and bodies: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator

of heaven and earth.” It’s Trinitarian: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord”—and so the creator God is the Father of Jesus, not a different God. And of course the third person of the Trinity is affirmed, and that Holy Spirit guides and empowers the visible Church: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church.” Church follows Spirit in the rule of faith and our Apostles Creed for these reasons.

With regard to supposedly secret traditions known to the elite leaders of the Gnostic antichurch, St. Irenaeus affirmed apostolic succession (he himself traces his lineage back to Jesus through his mentor Polycarp and Polycarp’s mentor, St. John the Apostle) in the visible Church established by Jesus and declared that anyone can walk into any Church and find true Christian teaching proclaimed publicly there. And not only teaching, but sacraments were there as well. The creator God, Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, made matter and works through matter, giving his people sacramental nourishment for body and soul. And on that point, the Catholic Church was for everyone, for there is no fundamental division of humanity. Every single person has a spiritual soul, not just a body, from the Emperor and the sage to the lowest slave girl. And as regards morality, the early Church rejected contraception and abortion outright.

Gnosticism and American Culture

Gnosticism is not merely ancient. A perennial ideology, it’s proven itself a powerful cultural current

through the ages. In the middle ages it resurfaced in the heresy of Albigensianism (or Catharism), which denied the importance of the Church and its sacraments, claiming people could be “good Christians” on their own, believing in Jesus personally. Certain anti-sacramental strains of the Reformation skewed Gnostic. And many in our own day have found America to be fundamentally Gnostic, such as the aforementioned Harold Bloom of Yale, finding it to be our fundamental American religion. Americans flee the constraints of the visible world, and particularly the constraints of the body. White Americans fled Europe, a product of history with all the constraints historical legacy imposes, and founded a republic based on an idea. While the Founders attempted to establish a republic founded on what the Declaration of Independence termed the “Laws of Nature, and Nature’s God,” Americans today are at heart revolutionaries for revolution’s sake alone, rebelling now not against oppressive monarchies for the sake of ordered liberty but rebelling for disorder against the very truths of Nature and Nature’s God.

Americans today are like Gnostics, then, in rejecting any and all constraints. For us, freedom is antinomian license. During his visit to the United States in 1998 in a homily at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Pope St. John Paul II **reminded Americans of the true nature of freedom:**

Surely it is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation. Every

generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.

With these words, John Paul was attempting to correct our warped understanding of freedom. For Americans today see freedom as freedom *from* any and all constraints, any and all rules, any and all laws, while true freedom is having freedom *for* virtue, to live virtuous lives ordered to the Good.

With the throwing off of constraints comes the rejection of the body as a gift given by God. In recent years extreme body piercing and tattooing have become common, while disorders like anorexia and bulimia are on the rise, all of which at the least reflect confusion regarding the goodness of the body as given, and even its rejection. So too with the more obvious examples of elective cosmetic surgery, body modification, and sex change operations (or “gender reassignment surgery,” as it’s now often called). Some people have even used surgery to make themselves resemble zombies, or **dragons**.

Gnosticism is also seen in America’s ready acceptance of contraception, which progressives now see as an absolute right that must be provided by private employers and government entities, and even religious organizations, and also in our abortion regime, under which well over fifty million have died before seeing the light of day. And of course as we operate with a conception of freedom from constraints, America is marked by the same licentiousness early Christians criticized ancient Gnostics for. As St.

Irenaeus wrote, “the ‘most perfect’ among them do unafraid all the forbidden things of which the Scripture tells us that ‘they who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.’”

Gnosticism and the Law

It’s observed that Gnosticism, particularly in the form of the licentiousness of the sexual revolution, has come to infect American jurisprudence as well. The legal regime legitimizing contraception and abortion and indeed the broader sexual revolution is not found in the text of the Constitution, but rather in its shadows, the “penumbras” and “emanations.” In his opinion in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* (1965), which struck down state laws banning contraception, Justice William O. Douglas wrote, “The foregoing cases suggest that specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras, formed by emanations from those guarantees that help give them life and substance. Various guarantees create zones of privacy.” Ancient Gnostics used the same terms—“penumbras” and “emanations”—and their elites simply knew what was found in those shadowy domains by virtue of being the elite, much like our justices simply know that a right to privacy undergirding the ideology of the sexual revolution is somehow there not in the words but in the shadows of the Constitution.

Jurisprudential Gnosticism is found in Justice Anthony Kennedy’s decision in *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* (1992), which upheld and strengthened the abortion

regime of *Roe vs. Wade* (1973). Writing for the majority, Kennedy asserted,

These matters, involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime, choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. 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. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.

If Gnosticism is radical Platonism, this is radical Gnosticism. Kennedy does not argue for his claim that liberty has at its heart “the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life,” he just asserts it. He simply *knows* it, as the most elite of an elite, the functional swing vote of the Supreme Court of the United States. He has secret knowledge, somehow.

Our Gnosticism is more relativistic than ancient Gnosticism, however. The ancient Gnostics, at least, believed that the invisible was an objective, stable realm, ultimate Reality, the same for everyone, even if the visible realm was inconstant illusory flux. For Americans today, however, invisible, ultimate Reality is also up for grabs, defined as whatever any individual wants it to be. Gnostics had the principle of universal doctrine, true for everybody.

Kennedy's quote encapsulates the total relativism of our age: we now believe Reality is whatever someone wishes it to be. Robert George, a Catholic who serves as the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, **writes:**

The moral implications [of contemporary Gnosticism] are clear. It is personal life that we have reason to hold inviolate and protect against harm; by contrast, we can legitimately use other creatures for our purposes. So someone who buys into a Gnostic anthropology that separates person and body in the way I have described will find it easier to speak of those with undeveloped, defective, or diminished mental capacities as non-persons. They will find it easier to justify abortion; infanticide; euthanasia for the cognitively impaired; and the production, use, and destruction of human embryos for biomedical research.

By the same token, such an anthropology underwrites social liberalism's rejection of traditional marital and sexual ethics and its vision of marriage as a male-female union. That vision makes no sense if the body is a mere instrument of the person, to be used to satisfy subjective goals or produce desirable feelings in the person-as-conscious-subject. If we are not our bodies, marriage cannot essentially involve the one-flesh union of man and woman, as Jewish, Christian, and classical ethics hold. For if the

body is not part of the personal reality of the human being, there can be nothing morally or humanly important about “merely biological” union, apart from its contingent psychological effects.

This is why we can speak of a Gnostic empire of desire. The Gnostic empire involves the imperious tendency to promote the sexual revolution by force of the majesty of the law, and now in service of individual conceptions of the self, which usually have desire at the center. And so today’s Gnostic relativism isn’t so relative after all, and once again relativism is shown to be impossible on its own terms, something used as a political and rhetorical wedge to dislodge one worldview and erect another. **Beware those claiming everything is gray, for once in power they will paint the world black and white according to their preferred pattern.**

Now classical Judaeo-Christian anthropology drew on Genesis 1-2 and the best of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, and so saw man as a body-soul composite, with the soul as the seat of the intellect and will who had as a chief task the ruling of the passions. In the Enlightenment’s “Age of Reason,” man was seen chiefly as a mind, and reason was regarded as universal and supreme. But the postmodern age, inaugurated in philosophy and culture by Friedrich Nietzsche, saw desire as primary. Nietzsche counterposed Dionysian passion against Apollonian reason, predicting the essence of our

postmodern age. **The desires of the self now define individuals.**

And so identity is now bound up with desire, and our Gnostic jurisprudence sees its task as defending and promoting the expression of the self's desires against any and all would-be legal and cultural constraints. In explaining the "New Gnosticism" undergirding the Supreme Court's finding of a right to gay marriage in *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, Sherif Girgis **writes,**

The Court did not simply allow new relationships; it required their recognition as marriages, as similar to opposite-sex bonds in every important way. In other words, it didn't simply free people to live by the New Gnosticism. It required us, "the People," to endorse this dogma, by forbidding us to enact distinctions that cut against it. It held that your dignity demands more than the freedom to lead your life as a purely spiritual subject. It requires us all to treat you as a purely spiritual subject. Anything else is demeaning; it implies that you are essentially bound by a body.

It's not that the New Gnostics are an especially vindictive bunch. It's that a **certain kind of coercion is built into their view from the start. If your most valuable, defining core just is the self that you choose to express, there can be no real difference between you as a person, and your acts of self-expression; I can't affirm you and oppose those**

acts. Not to embrace *self-expressive* acts is to despise the self those acts express. I don't simply err by gainsaying your sense of self. I deny *your* existence, and do *you* an injustice. For the New Gnostic, then, a just society cannot live and let live, when it comes to sex. Sooner or later, the common good—respect for people as self-defining subjects—will require *social approval* of their self-definition and -expression.

In short, people are what they feel they desire to be, in spite of their bodies, and denying that is a fundamental injustice, which the Law cannot tolerate.

Indeed, as Rod Dreher observed, in overturning the West's conception of the human person, the sexual revolution involves **the institution of a new, dominant, Gnostic cosmology:**

Gay marriage signifies the final triumph of the Sexual Revolution and the dethroning of Christianity because it denies the core concept of Christian anthropology. In classical Christian teaching, the divinely sanctioned union of male and female is an icon of the relationship of Christ to His church and ultimately of God to His creation. This is why gay marriage negates Christian cosmology, from which we derive our modern concept of human rights and other fundamental goods of modernity. Whether we can keep them in the post-Christian epoch remains to be seen.

Editor's note: *This essay is adapted from Behold the Messiah: Proclaiming the Gospel of Matthew (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road, 2019 [forthcoming])*

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What we're up against: Confronting our Gnostic empire of desire (part 2)

The Gnostics tell a captivating counterstory to the Christian story of salvation history, and Gnosticism allows one to reject traditional Christianity while still claiming the name.

October 3, 2019 Dr. Leroy Huizenga

Print

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Gnosticism and Religion

Contemporary Gnosticism, then, is a totalizing ideology that brooks no opposition and tolerates no dissent. Now ideologies pretend to be philosophies, but

they're not. A philosophy, in principle, is flexible; it reacts to Truth. It can adjust itself as its adherents use their reason to wrestle with the ultimate Reality it attempts to approach. A philosophy is not doctrinaire. An ideology, by contrast, is inflexible, believing it has the ultimate Truth of Reality. Its adherents do not engage in deep, rational reflection, for their ideology is a projection of their deepest desires. They simply think they *know* with absolute certainty that they're right because their feelings about their identity and their picture of the universe is so strong. Philosophies involve convictions, but one of those convictions is the freedom to explore Reality and adjust one's philosophy as needed. Ideology, by contrast, believes the answers are already known, that there's nothing left to explore, and so it coerces belief in others.

Contemporary Gnosticism therefore employs all sorts of techniques in service of coercion, from mass media to law. It wants to separate humans from all tradition and social locations (family, community, and so on) which serve as natural points of opposition. Separated from tradition, family, culture, and nature, the individual becomes a subject of the State facing the stick of coercion. But there's also a carrot. Like all ideologies, contemporary Gnosticism entices postmodern men and women with promises of a perfect utopia, a heaven on earth in the here and now, if only we trust elites to run with their plans for us. Gnostic ideologues promise to rip heaven down to earth, to force the eschaton now, but quite apart from Jesus. As such, ideology is idolatry: the State replaces Jesus, forcing a false heaven for the true one, the kingdom

of heaven his Second Coming will bring. In short, elite sophisticates replace God.

Gnostic ideologies therefore deceive. The result is that the individual is set against nature. The order of the cosmos philosophy seeks and finds is replaced by the false order asserted by the ideologue. Disorientation results; on a practical level, subjects of totalitarian societies, such as ours is becoming, are pulled between what they perceive to be the truths of nature and what the State asserts must be the truth. In totalitarian societies, such as communist eastern Europe in recent memory, people either become true believers in the ideological system, or they come to realize that they are living under an enforced lie. Those who take the red pill either suffer under the lie, or join the resistance.

That's the totalizing way of the sexual revolution: most people believe in men and women, but that's fast becoming a belief that will get one written out of polite society and penalized by the law. Those of us who recognize the lie either keep our heads down (which for some may be a justified, advisable, prudential path), or engage in acts of subtle or overt resistance.

Finally, like ancient Gnosticism, our contemporary spirit of the age seeks to reimagine Jesus as a mascot for its ideology. Modernist Christianity, rooted in the Enlightenment, sought to adapt its understanding of Christian faith to the latest knowledge in secular domains—the sciences hard and soft, as well as philosophy and ethics. It therefore was, and is, embarrassed by the miraculous and the sacrificial, both of which belonged to

an unscientific premodern age. And so modernist Christians sought to save the faith for modernity by purifying it of all that modernity rejects. What is left over is ethics; Jesus is preserved as a great moral teacher of enduring relevance through demythologization, that is, stripping away the miraculous and sacrificial myths that grew up around his legend and going behind the Gospels to find a historical Jesus congenial to the spirit of the age. Even here, however, with regard to ethics, Jesus was understood to teach what the Enlightenment believed anyway, and so Jesus was remade in the image of (say) the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant.

So too now in our postmodern age. We make a malleable Messiah in our image, a tolerant, inclusive Jesus, a breaker of all boundaries who does so purely for the sake of transgression, and all those who would insist on maintaining religion's traditional rules and rituals are written off as rigid, pilloried as Pharisees. Far from seeing him as our Master, the postmodern age makes Jesus our mascot, the one who affirms our favored causes and affirms us in our deepest selves, where we find ourselves defined by our severest desires.

But that means we're trapped; in our desire to escape from all constraints, we're constrained by desire. We're trapped by our very selves, slaves to our passions, even making them the determiners of our very identity. Trying to find an escape from our bodies, we find ourselves trapped even deeper, by the passions that define our very selves. And as St. Augustine famously said, "What am I to myself but a guide to my own self-destruction?"

St. Augustine's solution to self-entrapment in one's own passions is the gospel: **God, both the Creator outside of us creatures and yet also inside us, closer to us than we are to ourselves, comes to us in Jesus Christ to reorder or disordered passions and restore us to our true selves found truly in Christ.**

This, I think, is the way of St. Matthew, who in his Gospel tells how the God of Israel came to us in Jesus to be Emmanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23), to give us back our truest selves, to rightly order our passions, to form us body and soul to be like Christ himself through Christ's own power. He gives us the gifts of his new messianic Law and indeed himself in the sacraments, in and through the Church he founded. Following the broad way that leads to destruction, we can remain slaves to the self, or following the narrow way that leads to life, we can become servants of Christ.

The Appeal of Gnosticism

If Gnosticism is so bad, why have so many people through the ages found it so appealing? **The Gnostics tell a captivating counterstory to the Christian story of salvation history, and Gnosticism allows one to reject traditional Christianity while still claiming the name.** In the time of the early Church, as we have seen, the Gnostics proclaimed that a wicked creator god trapped divine spirits in the evil of material bodies, and so for them salvation consists of the escape from the body and indeed all of material creation, an

opportunity provided by the higher kind and loving god, the father of Jesus Christ. That god sends the divine Son to appear like a man to teach the spiritual elite, the pneumatics, the secret to spiritual liberation.

The Gnostic story is compelling then and now because it squares with historic human experience. For most people, life is hard, and often miserable. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher of the 1600s, described the fundamental essence of human existence as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” For most of human history, this has been the case. Ancient skeletal remains reveal over ninety percent of humans suffered from malnutrition. Famine and plague were regular threats. Many children, perhaps more than half, died in infancy, and many women died in childbirth. And this is not merely the situation in the ancient or medieval world. In Florence at the height of the Renaissance, sixty-one percent of children died before their first birthday. And we need say little about twentieth-century disasters, as they are well known. The year 1918 saw over one hundred million people die of influenza; five hundred million people were infected out of a world population of 1.8 billion. The two World Wars saw about seventy million dead, and Communism is blamed for another seventy million deaths. Stable food supplies and radically decreased mortality and morbidity resulted only recently in the postwar boom in the United States and Western Europe.

And so Gnosticism is appealing to the degree that one finds the world horrible, for it explains extreme pain and suffering in a coherent but

extreme way, and promises a way out. Suffering is not our fault, but rather the Creator's, and salvation is not found through suffering but is defined as escape from suffering and all that causes suffering.

The desire to explain and escape suffering is why various flavors of Gnosticism are so appealing today. **Think of modern people, often affluent and pampered members of the upper classes, uttering statements like, "I wouldn't want to bring a child into this horrible world." That's Gnosticism speaking,** and that Gnostic attitude undergirds our contraception and abortion regime. Or think of popular televangelists who present a heretical Christianity promising freedom from suffering, health, and wealth in the here and now. That too is fundamentally Gnostic.

Confronting the Gnostic Empire of Desire

How, then, do we confront the Gnostic Empire of Desire? The Church has confronted Gnosticism before, especially in the time of the Fathers and in the middle ages during the Albigensian crisis. First and foremost, to use a healing metaphor, we need have an accurate diagnosis, knowledge of what the malady is, so that we might provide the remedy. Hopefully the foregoing has provided that diagnosis.

We then need, like the early Church, to proclaim our message without fear. But what might that message be? The more I teach, and the more I reflect on the situation of the Church and

the world today, the more I think (for what it's worth) that in some ways we need to talk about God the Creator as much as we talk about Jesus.

The Father in the Trinity is in a sense prior to the Son, as he begets the Son, but the Creator is certainly prior to Jesus Christ. Further, talking of Jesus alone runs the risk of leaving people today with their inherited assumption that Jesus was a prophet and good teacher. Even when we do proclaim that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, people today do not have a sense of what and who God is. All Christian theology, I think, is really aspects of the doctrine of creation (which suffers the Fall, which is redeemed, and which is transformed at the eschaton), and the living God of the Bible is best contrasted with the divinities of the ancient world by understanding him as sovereign Creator. The Christian message is more than forgiveness of sins; that's an instrumental good ordered to the intrinsic good of sharing in the divine Trinitarian life forever.

This will help with the next important thing: we have to make sense of pain and suffering and perceived evil. There is here both a conceptual, theological dimension and an existential dimension. (As the late Rich Mullins once sang, "And I know that it would not hurt any less/Even if it could be explained.") For Gnosticism is appealing because it offers a radical solution to the perceived badness of the world. We need to move people from thinking of God as a "supreme being" who then is really perceived too much like us, just a greater version of us, himself operating from within space and time, to a vision of God as Creator outside of space and time, indeed the Creator not just of

things visible and invisible but space and time itself. Understanding St. Augustine's *Confessions* is indispensable here; we may not need to have everyone we address read it, but it is incumbent upon the apologist to know his or her classical theism, for understanding God rightly solves all conceptual problems. (Frank Sheed's works, of course, offer accessible, if dry, introductions to the classical Catholic conception of God.) Put differently, we need to help our audiences move from a brute anthropomorphism to an allegorical understanding of Scripture that allows and nurtures a proper conceptual understanding of God.

The Gnostics are accidentally correct in one assumption: this world is not our ultimate home (as Plato and Jesus both taught). Pain and suffering affects people deeply because they believe that this world is more certain than the next world, and so they better find their happiness here. And of course that's not possible: even the wealthy hurt in this realm, and no one can find true happiness apart from God. As C. S. Lewis observed:

If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad.

Imagine a set of people all living in the same building. Half of them think it is a hotel, the other half think it is a prison. Those who think it a hotel might regard it as quite intolerable and those who thought it was a prison might decide

that it was really surprisingly comfortable. So that what seems the ugly doctrine is one that comforts and strengthens you in the end. The people who try to hold an optimistic view of this world would become pessimists: the people who hold a pretty stern view of it become optimistic. (*God in the Dock*, “Answers to Questions on Christianity” [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014], 41)

Good theology helps here: **this world is not our home, and the deeper one accepts that, the more sense this world makes. It’s a fallen realm of sin, sickness, and death, and it’s meant to be an opportunity for us to begin our return to God.**

Finally, there is the way of martyrdom. Given the way culture, politics, and business is going, it will be ever harder for faithful Christians to avoid the LGBT+ juggernaut, Gnostic at its core, and it will mean white martyrdom for many of us. For many corporations are beginning to evaluate employees in part on the basis of their commitment to diversity, and mainstream opinion will soon come to regard those not fully on board with the juggernaut as the same as racists and segregationists since the LGBT+ movement has claimed the mantel of civil rights. Martyrdom is often the way of the faithful in this world, which is not our home, but it has also been the way of winning others to Faith in the Creator, the Triune God.

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