

Skidmore College

Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern: The Religion of the Future?

Author(s): CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Salmagundi*, No. 96 (Fall 1992), pp. 27-42

Published by: [Skidmore College](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40548388>

Accessed: 23/03/2012 01:49

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Skidmore College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Salmagundi*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

POLITICS AND CULTURE

BY CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern: The Religion of the Future?

Gnosticism, Christianity's ancient rival and scourge, speaks to us, across the intervening centuries, with a certain urgency. First condemned as a heresy soon after its emergence in the second century, Gnosticism can be characterized as the doctrine that the fall of man took place not when Adam and Eve defied God's will but when God himself—more precisely, a lesser deity in rebellion against the Absolute—created the world. Matter is evil; the disembodied spirit alone is divine; and salvation lies in the long-buried memory of our own origin as sparks from the divine flame. Since this knowledge is difficult to come by, salvation is necessarily restricted to a spiritual elite.

Such a religion—and Gnosticism is best understood as a religion in its own right, not simply as a heretical offshoot of Christianity—could take shape only in a climate of the deepest moral confusion, when old faiths were dying and none of the new ones had clearly established a claim to succession. Under Roman rule, Hellenistic civilization, still dominant throughout the Mediterranean, was showing signs of age. Art, literature, and philosophy consisted largely of commentary on earlier, more original works. Civic life suffered as power passed from localities to a far-flung imperial bureaucracy. Republican simplicity gave way to imperial grandeur. The spread of education created a public avid for new ideas but

impatient with the mental discipline required to master them; learning made people sophisticated without making them wise. The rapid circulation of goods and ideas made for a cosmopolitan outlook, in the light of which the cultural achievements of earlier times, however admirable and impressive, appeared narrow and provincial. At the same time, those achievements were felt to have a vigor and spontaneity that could no longer be recaptured. Mythology, in particular, appealed to the educated classes as a richly inventive, exuberantly imaginative body of untutored insights into the cosmos, to be collected, savored, and reinterpreted by those who could no longer accept them as literal truth. Eclectic in their tastes, the men and women of the second century self-consciously cultivated discarded superstitions; the capacity for appreciation flourished as the capacity for belief declined.

The second century was a time when the accumulation of wealth, comfort, and knowledge outran the ability to put these good things to good use. It was a time of expanding horizons and failing eyesight, of learning without light and great expectations without hope—a time very like our own. Hans Jonas, the preeminent historian of Gnosticism, says that he was “lured” into the “gnostic labyrinth” by the “thrill of this dimly felt affinity.” The Hellenistic world seems more familiar to us than the classical phase of ancient civilization, the fruits of our study of this imperial age more directly applicable—too readily applicable, if anything—to ours. “What I . . . learned out there,” Jonas writes, “made me now better understand the shore from which I had set out.”

Recent commentary on Gnosticism tends to divide into two types: call them scholastic and prophetic. The scholastic enterprise is driven by questions internal to the various disciplines that have converged on Gnosticism, with a concentration of purpose bordering on the rapacious: ancient history, classical languages and literature, the history of religion, paleography, archaeology. Discoveries of new materials—notably the gnostic texts unearthed in Egypt in 1945—have contributed to the growth of gnostic studies. But in all this vast and growing body of scholarship, we find hardly a trace of the excitement, the sense of recognition that attracted someone like Jonas to the study of Gnosticism in the hope of making sense not just of the ancient world but of the modern world as well.

The scholarly community frowns on what it calls presentism—an over-eagerness to read the past in the light of present concerns. Not without reason, scholars insist that the past must first be taken on its own terms. They have little use for analogies or parallels between past and present, let alone for lessons allegedly learned from the past. They look not for “affinities” but for influences, lines of intellectual descent; and academic historians of Gnosticism remain understandably skeptical, in the absence of evidence that would allow us to trace an unbroken tradition of gnostic thought over nearly two millennia, of the claim that gnostic ideas have shaped intellectual and political life in the twentieth century.

It is hard enough to identify intellectual influences in the ancient world. Since the gnostic movements of the second century drew on a great array of religious traditions, scholars have been hard pressed to decide exactly where they originated, how much they owed to Judaism and Christianity, and whether it is possible to speak of Gnosticism at all—a core of doctrine distinct from any other doctrine. Many of them now take the position that the label imposes an artificial uniformity on beliefs that can be found in any number of different combinations. We see here the familiar, unavoidable, disheartening effects of academic scholarship in introducing new qualifications to every generalization, complicating every picture until it becomes unintelligible to anyone but an expert, and finally dissolving the object of study into its components, too fragmentary now to be reassembled into any kind of synthetic view.

With considerable relief, we turn from this imposing but confusing and ultimately unsatisfactory body of scholarship—this admirable collection of fragments, which refuse to come together—to the second type of study, prophetic in the sense that it puts the study of Gnosticism at the service of social criticism. Best exemplified by the work of Jonas—in particular by *The Gnostic Religion*, a book acknowledged as indispensable even by specialists—the second approach is bold, imaginative, and speculative where the first is cautious and circumspect. “Parallels” and “affinities” abound; “influences” are seldom to be seen. Here the study of Gnosticism is shaped not by questions growing out of a tradition of specialized scholarship but by the suspicion that an understanding of the gnostic sensibility will shed light on the spiritual condition of our own times. Historical scholarship becomes a form of philosophical and cultural

criticism. The search for truth, reduced by writers of monographs to endless insignificant revisions of each others' work, emerges once again as a driving passion. Gnosticism commends itself as an object of study, to those with a speculative turn of mind, not because new information has come to light or because gaps in the scholarly record remain to be filled but because it is important for the modern world to understand how it lost its way and might regain it.

Among those who regard Gnosticism as an important current in modern thought, the names of Harold Bloom, Philip Lee, Thomas Molnar, and Eric Voegelin come readily to mind, along with that of Jonas. This abbreviated list is enough to suggest the broad range of contemporary movements with which Gnosticism has been identified. Jonas links it to existentialism, which allegedly grows out of a similar experience of homelessness. Existentialists share with ancient Gnostics, he argues, the crushing discovery that they are alone in a hostile or indifferent universe. The "general style of extremism" in the most advanced twentieth-century thought, existentialist or otherwise, reflects a "split between self and the world, man's alienation from nature, . . . the cosmic solitude of the spirit, and the ensuing nihilism of mundane norms."

Philip Lee and Harold Bloom find gnostic affinities in a quite different quarter—in American Protestantism, with its antinomian emphasis on the individual's direct, unmediated relation to God. Thomas Molnar, on the other hand, locates the modern equivalent of Gnosticism in the "scientific worldview," which reduces man to a machine. If Gnosticism is the "essence of modernity," it is because "both gnostics and adepts of the mechanical model [of human nature] agree on downgrading, denying, eliminating the concept of the *soul*."¹ Molnar sees a connection, in turn, between the mechanistic model of man and utopianism, the attempt to organize humanity into "machine-like collectivities."

Eric Voegelin, like Molnar, condemns utopianism as the driving force of modern politics but traces it to the gnostic dream of a "community of the spiritually perfect who can live together without institutional authority." Drawing heavily on Norman Cohn's investigations of millenarian movements in the Middle Ages, Voegelin interprets the idea of progress, culminating in twentieth-century totalitarianism, as a latter-day revival of the gnostic search for a "terrestrial paradise."² By con-

demning the material world as the creation of an evil demiurge, ancient and medieval Gnostics made it possible for their successors to imagine that its imperfections could be eliminated by a spiritual elite equipped with special insight into the logic of history. The “essence of modernity,” according to Voegelin, is to be found in the “growth of gnosticism,” as a result of which self-appointed elites endow themselves with god-like power to redesign the world.

If we add one more writer to the list, one less familiar than the others but no less fascinated by gnostic parallels, we get still another version of contemporary Gnosticism. For Carl Raschke, a historian of religion teaching at the University of Denver, Gnosticism is above all nostalgia—“a rear-guard action against the ‘progress’ of the modern, industrial world.” In every age, it appeals to downwardly mobile intellectuals and aristocrats—in the modern world, to malcontents like Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Blake, Emerson, Carlyle, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yeats, Hesse, and Jung. “Originally a philosophy of radical world-denial,” Gnosticism in our time takes the shape of a “systematic aversion to the idea of progress.” It reflects a “total loss of social conscience,” the “death of common purpose.”

The prophetic approach to Gnosticism, guided by a search for its contemporary equivalents, seems to lose in historical precision what it makes up in moral passion. What is this Gnosticism that can take such contradictory forms? How can the same term cover both existentialism and fundamentalism, the most profound and the most simplistic varieties of contemporary thought? How can Gnosticism describe, at one and the same time, feelings of existential dread and helplessness and, on the other hand, a boundless confidence in man’s power to remake the world to his liking? How can it embrace an aversion to progress and a belief in progress so extravagant that it justifies every conceivable atrocity in the name of an earthly paradise in the making? In one version, Gnosticism is a religion of hyperactive world-savers; in another, it is pervaded by a mood of passivity and retreat. There is fairly general agreement on the kinship between *gnosis* and Protestantism—but which Protestantism, which *gnosis*? In Bloom’s version of Protestant Gnosticism, the poison consists of aggressive

anti-intellectualism; in Lee's, of a "withdrawal into the self" at the expense of Christian communion; in Voegelin's, of a refusal to "leave the transfiguration of the world to the grace of God beyond history"—an assertion of the self-elected saint's determination to "do the work of God himself, right here and now, in history."

Gnosticism has too many faces, it would seem, to offer insights into the "essence" of modernity or anything else. In each of these interpretations, the case for gnostic parallels and affinities has to rest on a partial and highly selective account of the gnostic outlook. Emphasis on a single feature, to the exclusion of everything else, inevitably has a distorting effect. Thus although gnostic theology, unlike Christianity, does not require a savior, it should not therefore be assimilated to antinomian religions of an "inner light." This phrase refers to an emotion of oneness with the world, poles apart from the gnostic experience of alienation. Insight comes to Gnostics, moreover, in the form of secret knowledge, not as the product of emotional upheaval—which is why it makes no sense to equate Gnosticism with evangelical anti-intellectualism. The knowledge prized by Gnostics is preserved in obscure, difficult texts that have to be decoded before their hidden meaning can be discerned, and it is also misleading, therefore, to read Gnosticism into the type of religion that encourages a direct, unmediated relation between the believer and God. Quite apart from the difficulty that Gnosticism rests on knowledge, not belief (to say nothing of faith), its God is far too impersonal and remote to enjoy a direct relation to human beings. Gnostics would regard the proposition that "you've got a friend in Jesus" as indescribably vulgar. Their God has no personal attributes, nor can He (it) be understood even as Jonathan Edwards's "being in general." Being, for Gnostics, is the very antithesis of God. Being is where the trouble all began. Being means contingency, time, death, and destruction. God, the perfection of non-being, had no need to create. The creator-God—the God of the Old Testament, in some varieties of the gnostic creation-myth—was an imposter, a rebel against the true God, no friend to mankind.

Comparisons between Gnosticism and evangelical Christianity are even more suspect when they stress the messianic as opposed to the antinomian elements in Protestantism. Messianism presupposes order in history, an intelligible beginning and end. For Gnostics, on the other hand,

history has no meaning at all. From the gnostic point of view, the Kingdom of God—the symbol underlying all forms of messianic faith—is an anthropomorphic superstition. The gnostic religion gives little support to the eschatological imagination and still less to organized efforts to build the Kingdom of God on earth. It looks backward to the time before time. As Raschke says, it is profoundly nostalgic; but that hardly means that we can find Gnosticism wherever we find opposition to the idea of progress. Gnosticism originated in an age unacquainted with the idea of progress, a much later invention; and it has remained, through all its subsequent elaboration, largely indifferent to the question of whether history moves in a straight upward line. Criticism of progress implies an interest in history that Gnostics find unaccountable.

* * *

Among those who see a kinship between ancient Gnosticism and various aspects of modern life, Jonas comes closest to the truth when he identifies the heart of the gnostic religion as a nihilistic despair. Yet even this “‘existentialist’ reading of Gnosticism,” inviting as its counterpart a “‘gnostic’ reading of Existentialism,” is not altogether convincing. Gnosticism and existentialism look very much alike if we confine our attention to their common refusal to see God’s hand either in history or in nature. But as Jonas himself admits, the world is actively evil for Gnostics, whereas for existentialists it is merely indifferent. “Merely” hardly catches the difference: a hostile world is preferable, in some ways, to an indifferent one. The former perception implies a vast cosmic drama, elaborated in gnostic mythology as a battle between good and evil, spirit and matter, that ends (at least on the personal level) in a return to the primordial perfection of non-being—to what other religious traditions know as Nirvana. The existentialist perception, more radically despairing, implies a universe utterly devoid of moral significance; the human search for meaning finds no echo or support in the surrounding emptiness.

Both views, it should be added, need to be distinguished from that of Christian existentialists like Kierkegaard and Pascal, whose God is remote but by no means hidden or inaccessible and who see grace and faith—ideas that play no part in gnostic theology—as the bridge between

heaven and earth. Jonas understands Pascal to have been describing the “silence” of the universe when he wrote, “Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened.” But this terror had its antidote in faith, according to Pascal, and it is more than a little misleading to assimilate such statements either to Gnosticism or to the kind of existentialism that takes the death of God as its starting-point.

It is doubly misleading to confuse the death of God with the disenchantment of nature, the “loss of the idea of a kindred *cosmos*.” As Eric Voegelin points out, it was Christianity, not Gnosticism, that brought about the disenchantment of nature. The old cosmologies provided a reassuring view of the world in which the gods made their presence known in every phase of everyday existence. Endowed with human attributes, the gods were experienced as a palpable, material, and immediate force in human life, mating with human beings, alternately thwarting and abetting their designs. Christianity replaced the mythical cosmos with a universe bereft of gods, in which the presence of a spiritual principle had to be taken on faith. Existential anxiety, which Jonas associates exclusively with Gnosticism, was by no means unknown to Christians. “Uncertainty,” as Voegelin writes, “is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of security in a ‘world full of gods’ is lost with the gods themselves.” Its “uncompromising, radical, de-divinization of the world” was precisely “what made Christianity so dangerous”—so destructive, that is, to the peace of mind of those who lived in the comforting shadow of Mount Olympus.

The death of the gods, not only in Greece but in the other ethnic cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, marked the shift from a mythical to a religious understanding of existence. New symbols of the unseen replaced the old ones, new ways of representing the experience of transcendence. Voegelin finds the emergence of a new kind of consciousness not only in Christianity but in classical philosophy, in developments in Judaism more or less contemporaneous with classical philosophy, and in various other “spiritual outbursts” in the ancient world.³ These movements shared the common discovery that spirit revealed itself in human life as a force mysteriously attracting human beings to the pursuit of truth. Not the

gods' control of natural and human events but the human search for the Absolute, which at the same time showed up the contingency of human life by contrast, announced the presence of the spirit. Whatever it was that pulled men and women upward, from darkness into light, was experienced as divine; left to their own devices, men and women would have continued to mistake appearance for reality. The limits of their earlier understanding stood out by contrast with this new experience of a transcendent power opening their eyes to a higher order of truth. Yet insight into this higher truth was elusive and intermittent, dependent on moments of intense illumination impossible to sustain over a lifetime; and its effect was therefore humbling as much as it was exhilarating. Insight came only when people opened themselves to God instead of counting on their own wits. It came as a revelation, not as the accomplishment of human will or ingenuity.

The unsettling effects of these discoveries were magnified, in the Hellenistic phase of ancient civilization, by the collapse of ethnic and tribal cultures under the impact of the imperial organization imposed first by Alexander and later by the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean. The old gods had a decidedly national character; they were too closely tied to particular regions and cultures to retain much credibility, at least among the educated classes, in the cosmopolitan world of late antiquity. The claim that any nation enjoyed special favors from heaven appeared increasingly unconvincing in the Hellenistic melting-pot. Even Jehovah, notwithstanding his prophets' condemnation of tribal deities, now looked to his critics like a tribal deity in his own right. Clever people could see that his "chosen people" had no privileged place in the cosmic scheme of things. As for the Greeks, their claim to superiority, if it had any validity at all, now had to rest on their highly developed art and learning, not on special favors conferred by the Olympians.

In this atmosphere, many people lost confidence in religion altogether or embraced a dignified, cultivated stoicism that had little room for the supernatural. Others gravitated to a variety of inward-turning religions, ranging from esoteric mystery cults to Gnosticism and Christianity, all of which (whatever their differences) drew a sharp distinction between civic life and the life of the spirit. The imperial perspective

reduced the city-state, once the center of the world and the object of intense loyalty, to another provincial town. Except in Rome itself, still a provincial town at the heart of a vast empire, the sense of citizenship survived only in Demosthenes' widely admired, oxymoronic announcement that he regarded himself as a "citizen of the world." Among the religious, civic or national identification seemed wholly incidental to religious identification. Their self-assigned status in the body politic was that of aliens and exiles, conforming to the civil code but reserving their deepest loyalty for God alone. It was said of Christians that "they live in their own countries, but as aliens; they share all duties like citizens and suffer all disabilities like foreigners; every foreign land is their country, and every country is foreign to them."

The same thing could have been said, with much greater justice, of the Gnostics. Christians, after all, did not deny the claims of the state, even if their fulfillment of civic obligations was perfunctory. Gnostics, on the other hand, refused to admit that states exercised any legitimate authority whatsoever. They often made a point of flouting the law, on the grounds that laws were made for lesser mortals and not for them, the children of light. When they chose to observe the prevailing laws and customs, it was in a spirit of pure opportunism, conformity carrying fewer risks than outright defiance. Gnostics had no equivalent of St. Paul's advice to give Caesar his due. In their case, disillusionment with secular authority had reached the extreme of total disbelief.

The City of God could never have been written by a Gnostic. St. Augustine's imagery, from a Gnostic point of view, compromised the spiritual integrity of the Absolute by associating it with categories derived from human politics. Augustine's treatise emphasized the tension between time and eternity, whereas Gnosticism—the Manichean form of which was one of Augustine's principal targets—dissolved this tension by condemning time and contingency as the realm presided over by the Prince of Darkness. For Gnostics, the separation of religion and politics was absolute and unconditional. Politics meant the role of the strongest under the sign of Satan. In a world governed by emperors whose lust for power seemed to have no limit, in which the republican origins of Roman power survived only as a distant memory, the gnostic devaluation of politics made a certain undeniable sense. Gnostic dualism offered the most radical,

in some ways the most intelligible and compelling perspective on the Roman empire and its culture of cynicism, resignation, and disbelief.

Such a perspective gave little support to a politics designed to recreate heaven on earth; nor does it do so today. According to Voegelin and others, the gnostic impulse underwent a process of secularization, in modern times, as a result of which the search for perfection took on a political character. A profound dissatisfaction with reality, always the hallmark of Gnosticism, gave rise to ambitious schemes to redesign reality through political revolutions carried out by elites in possession of a higher truth. Hegel, Marx, and their disciples envisioned a new order that would resolve all contradictions and put an end to the history of human suffering.

But the utopian vision, religious or secular, bears little resemblance to anything that can plausibly be described as gnostic. It derives from the Christian apocalypse, more generally from Christianity's refusal to write off history and politics as irredeemably corrupt. Even in the first two centuries after Christ, when Christians were a persecuted minority and thus had every reason to see politics as the work of the devil, the church refrained from a total condemnation of the civic order. Unlike their Jewish predecessors, Christians no longer saw themselves as a nation bound to God by a special covenant, a chosen people in the Judaic sense; but neither did they deny the necessity or legitimacy of the state.

Nor did they take the position that a Christian life required a complete renunciation of worldly concerns. The church itself—the metaphorical body of Christ (a conception far removed from Gnosticism)—ministered to corporeal men and women, not just souls or spirits. It concerned itself with their immediate welfare as well as their ultimate destiny on the Day of Judgment. When Christianity became the state religion of Rome, the interpenetration of politics and religion was quite explicit. Not that this ever abolished the tension between religion and politics. The Constantinian settlement made secular authorities servants of God, not gods in their own right. It held them accountable to a supernaturally derived standard of political conduct, enforced—however erratically and ineffectively—by a church that saw itself as in the world but not of it.⁴

Throughout the subsequent history of western Christianity, sacred and secular continued to intermingle uneasily. The Reformation

simultaneously reinforced the distinction between religious and secular authority (by deemphasizing good works, including the conscientious performance of civic duties) and blurred the distinction (by replacing the Church of Rome with various national churches), but in spite of these changes, the tension remained: the Protestant churches neither seceded from the world nor allowed themselves to be absorbed into it. They continued to insist that ultimate ends can never be achieved in politics but that politics are not therefore exempt from ethical judgment. Western Christianity, Protestant or Catholic, refused either to authorize a double standard, one for religion and one for politics, or to treat religion and politics as identical.

The tension that orthodox Christianity seeks to maintain can be broken in either of two ways. The first, the spiritualization of politics, can legitimately be understood as one of the antecedents of modern secular utopianism, as long as it is also understood that this way owes more to Christianity itself than to Gnosticism. Once you take the position that history has a spiritual direction and purpose and will culminate, moreover, in the Second Coming, it becomes difficult to discourage enthusiasts from claiming ultimate sanction for contingent, highly particular ends. Partial truths become absolute truths; national or ethnic conflicts become crusades; the Almighty is invoked on behalf of the most outrageous cruelties, the most grotesque perversions of justice. This familiar misuse of religion has been repeatedly condemned in the name of religion, especially by those who speak from the prophetic tradition common to both Judaism and Christianity. Still, the messianic tradition has an undeniable authenticity of its own, which can be traced back to some of the very same prophetic writings as well as to the Christian Book of Revelation—the most fertile source of apocalyptic fantasies and of the apocalyptic style of thought that underlies so many secular utopias. Christian prophecy furnishes a powerful corrective to the inclination to invest political action with ultimate religious significance, but it also provides plenty of encouragement to those who look to politics for salvation.

The rediscovery of Gnosticism, in our time, coincided with the rise of totalitarianism, and it was all too easy to see the former in the latter. The totalitarian phenomenon had about it an unmistakable air of the

archaic and atavistic, a return of the repressed. The grandiose visions of Hitler and Stalin, the religious fervor that seemed to inspire their followers, their fanatical conviction that a higher destiny excused every atrocity—these seemed to well up out of some long-buried past, some underworld of the religious imagination. Gnosticism, the archaizing religion par excellence, was the obvious choice for commentators who wished to trace totalitarianism to religious antecedents. Neo-orthodox movements in Christianity, meanwhile—themselves the product of the same world crisis that produced totalitarianisms—appealed to some of these commentators as the best line of defense, especially against “godless Communism.” Those who understood the utopian politics of absolute ends as above all a kind of heresy, a betrayal of traditions central to western civilization, naturally searched for its origins in Gnosticism, for Christians the heresy of heresies.⁵

But Gnostics, whatever their other faults, have seldom been tempted to play God by realizing His purposes in history. Utopianism seduces those who believe that history has a spiritual purpose in the first place. Gnosticism, which uncompromisingly rejects any Providential view of history, escapes this particular temptation.

It pays a heavy price for its escape, however. If the Christian view of history invites the danger that politics will be confused with religion, the gnostic view relaxes the tension between politics and religion in the other direction. It removes the political realm from ethical criticism altogether. Gnostics have little use for any kind of ethics, least of all for an ethics that might govern civic life. From their point of view, the political realm is beyond redemption. At best, politics offer a means of keeping the rabble at bay. In the ancient world, Gnostics supported the state when it suited their purpose, but they asked nothing of the state (except that it protect their lives and property) and gave nothing in return. They recognized no authority over themselves—neither secular nor sacred, for that matter. Religion presented itself to them not as a body of sacred commandments but as a source of spiritual enlightenment. Christians and Jews turned to religion for ethical guidance, seeking a definition of the good life. Gnostics, on the other hand, wanted to know “who we were, what we have become; where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth and what rebirth.” Such was the

knowledge, according to the Gnostic sage Valentinus, that “makes us free.”

If the gnostic impulse finds expression in our time—in the scientific dream of solving the mysteries of the universe, in New Age spirituality, more generally in a mood of extremity and existential nostalgia—it is because we too, like so many who lived in the fading glow of the Hellenistic civilization, have lost confidence in the world around us. It is hard to find people who feel at home in this world, and those who do invite the suspicion of deadened sensibilities. Our civic culture is dying, our national loyalties now look parochial from a world perspective, and the global circulation of information seems to condemn all forms of ethnic and religious particularism to eventual oblivion. In the global melting pot, particularism can survive, we are told, only if people accept a rigorous separation between politics and culture, politics and religion in particular: witness the horrified reaction to Islamic fundamentalism. The global market has no place for peoples who assert their own traditions in public or claim superiority for those traditions. Ethnic and religious diversity is tolerated, even celebrated, but only as a kind of tourist attraction. Civic life is swallowed up by the market; buying and selling become the only activities we have in common.

As the common world, sustained by traditions now under attack as hopelessly parochial, recedes from view, our grip on the world around us weakens—our sense of it not just as “the environment” but as our human home. An ancient dualism reasserts itself as a plausible description of existence: the world as we know it is a wilderness, a madhouse, a living hell, escape from which (whether in space ships or suicide, in daydreams, in carefully engineered revivals of old superstitions, or simply in a kind of cultivated inattention) holds out the only hope of freedom. Gnosticism, the faith of the faithless, suits the twentieth century as well as it suited the second, and it may turn out to suit the next century better still. Its greatest opportunity, perhaps, still lies ahead. We can expect many people, still only dimly aware of its undeniable attractions, to fall on it as a religion seemingly made to order for the hard times ahead.

Notes

¹Gnostics divided humanity into three categories: *hylics*, creatures of bodily appetite; *psychics*, whose mind or soul was still earth-bound; and *pneumatics*, the spiritual elite who alone had access to the privileged knowledge of their divine origin. Thus it can be said that they valued the spirit more highly than the soul, strictly speaking. Molnar's point seems more than a little strained. Glorification of the spirit does not exactly suggest a mechanical model of human nature.

²Voegelin, who sees so much, does not see that the idea of progress, in its most compelling form, is quite distinct from the expectation of Utopia. It rests on the expectation that the widening of men's horizons, the constant expansion of the desire for a more abundant existence, will generate an indefinite expansion of the productive forces necessary to satisfy this desire. The idea of progress owes nothing to the millenarian imagination, nor does it provide any more than incidental support for totalitarianism. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was often entangled with utopianism, to be sure; but its persistence, long after the ideological collapse of utopianism in the 1940s, indicates that it does not depend on the vision of future perfection. On the contrary, the idea of progress is appealing precisely because it envisions continuing development, along current lines, without any foreseeable ending at all.

³In *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953), Karl Jaspers refers to the period between 800 and 200 B.C. as the Axial Age, in which "man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations." All the "fundamental categories within which we still think today" date from this period, according to Jaspers. Although Voegelin quibbles with the concept of an Axial Age, his interpretation of ancient history owes a great deal to Jaspers's account of a spiritual explosion that gave rise both to philosophy and to the great world religions.

⁴The doctrine of papal supremacy, fully elaborated in the fifth century by Leo I, served as the basis on which later popes defended the superiority of spiritual over temporal authority. In the eastern empire, on the other hand, this doctrine was never accepted. Justinian and his successors, claiming to be Christ's representatives on earth, asserted control over spiritual as well as temporal affairs. The absence of an independent spiritual authority in eastern Christendom may help to account for the long history of despotism in Russia, which inherited the idea that rulers presided over the church as well as over the state. If we wish to uncover religious antecedents of Soviet totalitarianism, we would do better to study the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church than to blame everything on the Gnostics.

⁵This obsession with heresy can be found even in those unconcerned with the utopian "heresy." For Philip Lee, who approaches Gnosticism from the point of view of a practicing clergyman, the gnostic impulse is dangerous because it leads Protestants to ignore the corporate life of the church. Orthodox Christianity, as Lee understands it, teaches that

collective ritual and witness are an essential part of religion. The gnostic elements in American Protestantism, on the other hand, encourage the "personal, private vision and commitment of the individual believer."

At a time when the Protestant churches no longer ask communicants to believe in much of anything, Lee's attempt to rehabilitate the concept of heresy ought to command a certain respect. "Within the church," he notes, heresy has become itself a "heretical word"; and it is hard not to join him in viewing this as a loss. It is not clear, however, that a return to an earlier orthodoxy represents the best answer to the spiritual confusion of our time. The experience of transcendence cannot be reduced to a set of dogmas. By turning religion into orthodox theology, as Eric Voegelin observes in *Anamnesis*, the Christian churches helped to provoke the Enlightenment's assault on religion. In our day, those who now reject the Enlightenment itself "first encounter these older dogmatisms" when they "turn around"; but although those dogmas are "closer to reality" than the enlightened revolt against dogma, "they, too, suffer from a kind of loss of reality which has provoked the ideological rebellion since the eighteenth century." Criticism of the secular ideologies ascendant during the last two centuries cannot stop with "traditions" and "conservatism"—with what Voegelin calls "secondary ideologies" or counter-ideologies. As Voegelin says, it needs to push even farther back, "beyond the traditions, to the predogmatic reality of knowledge."