

The New Gnosticism

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (February 2024)



The Agony in the Garden, Raphael, 1504

Most thinkers trying to make sense of the world without religion begin with the felt sense of alienation. The *self* is alienated, but from what? Religion explains this alienation as the sense of longing for reconnection to God, necessitated by our separation from Him. If religion is rejected, that doesn't make the feeling of alienation go away. It has to be explained some other way. A person whose identity is formed through

interaction with the objective world, imagined to be Godless, will experience a sense of unease or anxiety from the supposition that this identity is temporary, changeable, and formed merely from accidents of life, so there is no ultimate meaning to his existence.

This state is untenable for human beings. We intuit on a deep level that there is [more to us](#). If that specialness is not explained by our God-breathed status, then it must be explained some other way. And that other way may be a conviction that there is some “real” me that is deeper than the sum of temporal influences. A real me that is internal, rather than a product of the meaningless external. That is [the discovered self](#), one’s true identity.

That requires faith. And that faith is religious in nature, though God is explicitly rejected, because it taps into the same longing for the ineffable that drives others to embrace monotheism. This curious form of faith in a discoverable true self is not unprecedented, in the history of the world. It is resurgent Gnosticism.

Gnosticism has emerged from time to time as an attempt to explain the coexistence of both good and evil in the world. The basic idea is that only the spiritual world has significance, and material things (including the human body) are of no consequence or are even illusory. Gnostics often lived at extremes of asceticism or hedonism, for this reason. The “real” reality is behind this flawed immediate presence.

Because there is so much evil in the world, Gnostics conclude there is something wrong with the world itself, rather than with mankind. An evil Demiurge, rather than the all-good God, created the world, and so all within the natural world is evil. And yet there is a spark of divinity within mankind, and we can find it and identify it, by looking within. Special knowledge—gnosis—reveals it. It is a form of esoteric knowledge manifesting in the inner conscious self.

According to the monotheisms, the sequence was this: (1) creation of the world; (2) differentiation of men and women upon their creation in the existing world; and (3) their fall from grace. The Gnostic view was that these 3 events coincided. Men and women were undifferentiated in the mind of God, and then became differentiated along with the unhappy event of the Fall. For this reason some Gnostic writing pays special attention to the fact of male/female differentiation, presenting androgyny as an ideal.

Many radical gender activists today desire a norm of non-binary identity in place of self-identification by sex. This may seem like a peculiar extreme of gender ideology that just happens to coincide with ancient Gnostic belief. But actually it recurs in history because it is the fullest expression available of the remissive/release impulse, and the most complete repudiation of the interdictory and renunciatory religious construct.

The goal is a kind of ultimate expansive freedom; dissolution of the primal interdict which effects dissolution of all others. "Ye shall be as gods," said the serpent, omitting the cost. The point is to dissolve all fixed categories extant in the world which might constrain emergence of the tender shoot of true identity. This would constitute the ultimate victory of philosophical *becoming* over *being*; an overthrow of the givenness of categories in the world. God is replaced by the dynamism of history, so purpose is now thought of as self-generated in the flow of time.

We can think of it as the instinct to return to chaos and disorder; to unwind the architecture of ontological dualities on which the world is constructed. In the opening words of Genesis, the spirit of God hovers over the "waters" formless and void. He brings order and structure to the matterless form and formless matter. The attack on fundamental dualities, even the ontological duality of male and female, is an attempt at unwinding that order and structure. This is the object of the

release impulse, at the heart of ancient Gnosticism and of postmodern gender ideology.

In ancient Gnosticism the true inner self is a remnant divine spark emerging from the detritus of evil material. Psychological man repudiates God, but not the religious character of gnosis. Esoteric knowledge is generated in social processes, but is perceived as emerging from the inner being. It starts with the God-substitute, Hegelian historicism. The dialectic is the ultimate process philosophy. Simply living in the gradient of time provides the spark to establish the inner self as against the evil of the material.

Likewise (and not unrelatedly) social Narrative in the postmodern era takes on a distinct reality that we imagine to be akin to divinity. It supports metanarrative manifesting in the inner self. This isn't understood as mental processing of social facts. Instead it is thought to be divined from the ether. Its acceptance as such is modeled on the former thinking that God informed the conscience. The social metanarrative emerges from Baumann's Liquid Modernity, or Baudrillard's hyperreality, or Durkheim's social facts, or Rorty's pragmatism, all as discussed in my book [The Mountain and the River](#) (2023). It is the false consensus of modern democracy, exploited through desire for ecstatic feelings of community, to an ultimate collectivism of oceanic feeling. This is the esoteric source of [the discovered self](#).

The perception of inner-formed identity is really just garbled digestion of social messaging. We learn that we are to regard ourselves each as the center of the universe, now that God is deposed, and in that position we are the measure of all things. Psychological man is a practicing narcissist. Even the sense of self is entirely self-formed. And yet that inner being is unwittingly dictated to us, the combination of socially-approved norms which include the norm that we decide our essence.

No one ever decides their inner essence is an ascetic Stylite. It is only ever a comfortable but vulnerable victim or victim-adjacent unactualized being, unbounded by sexual norms of the past or fixed categories of things and ideas. Psychological man is oblivious to the social influence on formation of the inner being. It is regarded as having welled up *ex nihilo* from the depths of the psyche. We make ourselves gods, and like the real God of Genesis hover over the face of the waters to draw up identity from formless void.

Identity is not truly self-formed, however. Its provenance is mysterious only to psychological man, the postmodernist so given over to the therapeutic worldview that he lives in the delusion that ontological physical boundaries can be transcended. There are to be no interdicts, no boundaries, no form, and so no renunciation. Ultimate freedom. All release into the void. All remission of restraint.

The [antisemitism](#) against those God-inventing Jews becomes generalized to hostility to religion in general, and so also to the social structures that presume to limit the self into prescribed categories. It is all a vague fantasy not even real enough to describe; an absence rather than a presence; a pure feeling, one of animosity toward the fact of structure in the universe. And all a repudiation of reality in all its glorious architectures of hierarchy built on fixed categories of things, and meaning, starting with that first separation of heaven and earth, in the beginning. God is hated by embittered new Gnostics for His creation and all His other dear crimes. But only God can reverse His creation. A person can no more "identify" as the other sex than identify as another species.

The therapeutic worldview has such close parallels to resurgent Gnosticism that we can reasonably treat them as superficially distinct manifestations of the same human impulse. The therapeutic culture elevates self-obsession to a pseudo-religion, making it a version of the centuries-old Gnostic belief that the authentic, divine self needs to be

freed from the corruption and limitations of the world.

Psychological man believes freedom follows, even as he winds the chains around himself.

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