

Gnostic Wolfe vs CE Wolfe

The Urth list — 13 messages, 5 voices, 25 Oct 2002

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James Wynn — 25 Oct 2002, 19:47

Tom said:

Gnostics (as far as we know) weren't all that pessimistic, really. Compared to doctrines like Sheol and predestination, Gnostics were positively euphoric.

It's best to read this entire entry [on Gnosticism from the CE) as an outdated (almost 100 year old) polemic by an ancient enemy of the Gnostics, rather than a serious analysis.

Crush responds:

My interest in the CE is primarily in its influence on Wolfe's views and images. Wolfe's a bit of an antiquarian. He consistently incorporates statement's works by writers such as Graves and Sharpe uncritically - without worrying about whether they conform to the latest data (or in Graves case, whether they are textually supportable). That said, I don't see how one can say the article is not a "serious analysis". I'd be curious to know how 20th century discoveries of Gnostic documents would alter (rather than augment) what's covered in this article.

This article seems to clearly delineate Gnostic pessimism as relating to Creation and it's Creator. Even Calvinist Protestantism doesn't claim that Creation was wrong from its inception by an evil god; only that it is "fallen"--totally so. They claim it was made perfect by a perfect and doting Creator. There are better authorities on Gnosticism on this list than me, but it seems to me even *that* somewhat pessimistic religious view is incompatible with Gnostic doctrine as I understand it.

I guess I have to agree with you that Wolfe seems to have created a world that can only conform the Gnostic model. His purpose in doing so? I don't know. He could be doing it to argue against it, or he may be conceding *some* of Gnosticism's points-of-view and redirecting them based on his worldview.

--- Crush

tom — 28 Oct 2002, 16:17 · follows James Wynn

James Wynn writes:

Tom said:

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Crush responds:

[...] That said, I don't see how

one can say the article is not a "serious analysis".

The article does a decent job of noting sources and summarizing the positions of various scholars. It fails, however, to provide an objective view of Gnostic doctrine. This is due, at least in part, by a lack of primary sources. Arendzen compounds this by his repeated choice of pejorative phrases to describe Gnosticism: "mad hope", "pseudo-intellectual", "pretended to be", "spread as a fungus", "stupefying roar of bombast", and so on. It also leaves out the interesting topic of how Gnosticism influenced (and was influenced by) early Catholicism.

I'd be curious to know

how 20th century discoveries of Gnostic documents would alter (rather than augment) what's covered in this article.

The findings at Nag Hammadi and (to some extent) the Dead Sea Scrolls could lessen the author's use of secondary, antagonistic sources. The author had at hand a mere fraction of the material now available. A newer version would involve a major overhaul of his textual evidence.

Given the article's (necessary) paucity of details concerning the various Gnostic doctrines, Wolfe certainly had other sources.

I might suggest Elaine Pagels' The Gnostic Gospels for those looking to read up on the Gnostics, or the Amazon.com Listmania entries:

Gnostic Starter Library and Coptic Gnostic Library at Chenoboskion. For a more modern, popular take, read Philip K. Dick's final three novels (Valis, The Divine Invasion, The Transmigration of Timothy Archer). The Whorl looks a lot like The Black Iron Prison and Fats's laser beam is the same deus ex machina as the portals (although Silk is nothing like Horselover Fats). On the web (although biased): <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhlintro.html>

This article seems to clearly delineate Gnostic pessimism as relating to Creation and it's Creator. Even Calvinist Protestantism doesn't claim that Creation was wrong from its inception by an evil god; only that it is "fallen"--totally so. They claim it was made perfect by a perfect and doting Creator. There are better authorities on Gnosticism on this list than me, but it seems to me even *that* somewhat pessimistic religious view is incompatible with Gnostic doctrine as I understand it.

Gnostics had a variety of beliefs about the material world, ranging from it being evil to simply irrelevant. A common thread is the idea that the material world is not as important as the spiritual one, an idea they shared with Christianity.

Maybe I'm missing the meaning of pessimism, but salvation through gnosis seems a lot less pessimistic than predestination.

--- Crush

James Wynn — 28 Oct 2002, 16:59 · follows tom

First of all, thanks for the recommended readings on Gnosticism.

Tom said:

Given the article's (necessary) paucity of details concerning the various Gnostic doctrines, Wolfe certainly had other sources.

Crush responds:

Perhaps he did. But the CE strikes me as a touchstone of his. He has other sources for Greek mythology as well, but he returns to Graves' works again and again for how to view them.

Tom said:

Gnostics had a variety of beliefs about the material world, ranging from it being evil to simply irrelevant. A common thread is the idea that the material world is not as important as the spiritual one, an idea they shared with Christianity.

Crush responds:

I'm certain you're more qualified on this issue than I am. I presume you are correct about the variety of view points in Gnosticism regarding the created world. Still, J.P. ARENDZEN's view of Gnosticism does not strike me as at odds with view of it by the Gospel of John, with Revelation, with Jude, or the letters of Paul. I realize, of course, these are the *non-gnostic* Christian texts, yet I presume they are Wolfe's as well.

Tom said:

Maybe I'm missing the meaning of pessimism, but salvation through gnosis seems a lot less pessimistic than predestination.

Crush responds:

Hmmm. It seems to me you are confusing "predestination" with "fatalism." An easy mistake, but they're not the same thing.

Josh Geller — 28 Oct 2002, 17:01 · follows James Wynn

On Mon, 28 Oct 2002, tom wrote:

James Wynn writes:

Gnostics (as far as we know) weren't all that pessimistic, really.

Modern ones generally aren't.

Compared to doctrines like Sheol and predestination, Gnostics were positively euphoric.

It's best to read this entire entry [on Gnosticism from the CE) as an outdated (almost 100 year old) polemic by an ancient enemy of the Gnostics, rather than a serious analysis.

You should see their article on Bruno.

I might suggest Elaine Pagels' [_The Gnostic Gospels_](#) for those looking to read up on the Gnostics,

Why? The Nag Hammadi library is readily available.

J.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 28 Oct 2002, 17:09 · follows Josh Geller

I might suggest Elaine Pagels' [_The Gnostic Gospels_](#) for those looking to read up on the Gnostics, or the Amazon.com Listmania entries: [_Gnostic Starter Library_](#) and [_Coptic Gnostic Library at Chenoboskion_](#). For a more modern, popular take, read Philip K. Dick's final three novels ([_Valis_](#), [_The Divine Invasion_](#), [_The Transmigration of Timothy Archer_](#)).

Even better, I think, would be the various collection of his late letters and notebooks which have been published. Probably the most relevant among the rather overwhelming Dickiana which have been printed would be IN PURSUIT OF VALIS: SELECTIONS FROM THE EXEGESIS (which is rather jaggedly edited but contains much good stuff); THE SHIFTING REALITIES OF PHILIP K.

DICK: SELECTED LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS (which I haven't read but looks quite interesting; and WHAT IF OUR WORLD IS THEIR HEAVEN? THE FINAL CONVERSATIONS OF PHILIP K. DICK (which I enjoyed immensely).

The Whorl looks a lot like The Black Iron Prison and Fats's laser beam is the same deus ex machina as the portals

Actually I would compare Dick's/Fat's "pink laser beam" to the opening scene of NIGHTSIDE -- that is, Silk's enlightenment. Dick describes the laser beam in terms strikingly similar to what happens to Silk -- it supposedly filled his head with information, some of it stuff he had no way of knowing but was able to confirm (such as his infant son's undiagnosed hernia), and took a very long time subjectively compared to a very short objective time.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 28 Oct 2002, 17:19 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

A few fussy points for philosophical clarity.

Gnostics (as far as we know) weren't all that pessimistic, really.

Modern ones generally aren't.

Compared to doctrines like Sheol and predestination, Gnostics were positively euphoric.

Actually, one common meaning, and _the_ basic philosophical meaning, of "pessimism" is very much in line with Gnostic doctrine; see definition 2a. below (from www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary):

Main Entry: pes*si*mism

Pronunciation: 'pe-s&- "mi-z&m also 'pe-z&-

Function: noun

Etymology: French pessimisme, from Latin pessimus
worst -- more at PEJORATIVE

Date: 1815

1 : an inclination to emphasize adverse aspects,
conditions, and possibilities or to expect the
worst possible outcome

2 a : the doctrine that reality is essentially evil

b : the doctrine that evil overbalances happiness
in life

To call someone a "pessimist" in common speech is to say he's a glass-half-empty-ist. But to call someone a "pessimist" in philosophical dialogue is to say that they believe that "this world sucks."

(Which, I might add, is _not_ a basic Christian doctrine; Christianity teaches that the world was made by a good God -- this is the opposite of Gnosticism! -- and that, though fallen, it is in its basic nature good -- "Good looked at" [everything he made] "and saw that it was good.")

Josh Geller — 28 Oct 2002, 17:25 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 28 Oct 2002, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Modern ones generally aren't.

Compared to doctrines like Sheol and predestination, Gnostics were positively euphoric.

Actually, one common meaning, and _the_ basic philosophical meaning, of "pessimism" is very much in line with Gnostic doctrine; see definition 2a. below (from www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary):

You're talking about Gnosticism as if all Gnostics think and believe alike.

This is not the case.

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 28 Oct 2002, 17:47 · follows Josh Geller

Josh Geller writes:

You're talking about Gnosticism as if all Gnostics think and believe alike.

This is not the case.

My apologies; since so many people (including some on this list) speak of Christianity as if all Christians thought and believed alike, I should know better. Is there, then, a form of Gnosticism that does _not_ teach that the world of matter is the false and illusory creation of a false and illusory god, and a barrier to knowledge of the true God and the true reality?

Josh Geller — 28 Oct 2002, 17:55 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 28 Oct 2002, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Josh Geller writes:

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This is not the case.

My apologies; since so many people (including some on this list) speak of Christianity as if all Christians thought and believed alike, I should know better. Is there, then, a form of Gnosticism that does _not_ teach that the world of matter is the false and illusory creation of a false and illusory god, and a barrier to knowledge of the true God and the true reality?

Right.

.

tom — 28 Oct 2002, 21:06 · follows Josh Geller

James Wynn writes:

First of all, thanks for the recommended readings on Gnosticism.

My pleasure. I've certainly got a lot more out of this list than I've contributed.

Tom said:

Maybe I'm missing the meaning of pessimism, but salvation through gnosis

seems a lot less pessimistic than predestination.

Crush responds:

Hmmm. It seems to me you are confusing "predestination" with "fatalism." An easy mistake, but they're not the same thing.

I think I've got it right. By predestination I mean the family that includes what the CE describes as: "It was Calvin who elaborated the repulsive doctrine that an absolute Divine decree from all eternity positively predestined part of mankind to hell and, in order to obtain this end effectually, also to sin.", and its Catholic cousin.

Basically, that God knows whether you're going to hell or not before you're born. Now that's pessimism.

In any case, Wolfe doesn't seem to hold that view. I'm unaware of any character of his espousing it, in any case.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 28 Oct 2002, 21:33 · follows tom

If this is getting too far off topic, someone please yell at me. I think it retains relevance as a discussion of what, as a Catholic, Wolfe's views of certain issues might be.

Tom writes:

I think I've got it right. By predestination I mean the family that includes what the CE describes as: "It was Calvin who elaborated the repulsive doctrine that an absolute Divine decree from all eternity positively predestined part of mankind to hell and, in order to obtain this end effectually, also to sin.", and its Catholic cousin.

Not sure what you mean by "its Catholic cousin." Catholics are neither fatalists nor predestinationists ... the Catholic view involves what I call a "binocular view."

With one eye, you look from within Time. Each of us, within Time, is free in the existential sense that, though one is not free to choose the facticity of one's life, one is absolutely free to choose (what the pessimistic/atheistic existentialists call being "condemned" to choose) how one will respond to that facticity: noting, however, that the facticity of one's life presents inherent limits to one's freedom. For example, one is not free to flap one's arms and fly to Mars. More subtly, if one chooses to go to Rome, one is not free to be in Carpathia at the same time. Further, if one has certain neurological conditions, one is not free to behave in certain ways which might otherwise be physically possible, or to not do some things.

With the other eye, you strain to look from the point of view of Eternity. To God, outside Time, all moments are eternally present from the very act of Creation; and as such, all the free choices of all freely-willed creatures are always-already known to God. As a simple example, though I freely choose, at this moment, to write this response, God always-already knows, from the moment of Creation, that I choose/will choose/have chosen to write this response. Thus, from the moment of Creation, God always-already knows which creatures will choose (by the totality of their life's free choices) to be damned, and which will choose to be saved.

The Church also teaches that God intervenes in many, if not all, lives, to influence (but never force) creatures to choose salvation. This influence is usually subtle and is referred to as grace. When it is blatant, it is called a miracle.

Basically, that God knows whether you're going to hell or not before you're born. Now that's pessimism.

Not really, because the word "before" is irrelevant; it makes the assumption that God decides for you to be damned. Further, it is equally true to say that God knows "before" whether you're going to Heaven or not; if the one is pessimism, why would the other not be optimism?

In any case, Wolfe doesn't seem to hold that view. I'm unaware of any character of his espousing it, in any case.

Silk sums a lot of this stuff up rather neatly in one of the LS books by suggesting that "freedom" is the ability to say, "Not as I will, but as You will." I'm misquoting badly, but I think I have the gist.

tom — 29 Oct 2002, 15:58 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes writes:

If this is getting too far off topic, someone please yell at me. I think it retains relevance as a discussion of what, as a Catholic, Wolfe's views of certain issues might be.

It is straying a bit. On the other hand, this brings up the question: given multiple Severians, what happened to the "failed" ones after they died?

Tom writes:

I think I've got it right. By predestination I mean the family that includes what the CE describes as: "It was Calvin who elaborated the repulsive doctrine that an absolute Divine decree from all eternity positively predestined part of mankind to hell and, in order to obtain this end effectually, also to sin.", and its Catholic cousin.

Not sure what you mean by "its Catholic cousin." Catholics are neither fatalists nor predestinationists ...

The CE describes Catholics as predestinationists in the entry for predestination, subtitle II. The Catholic Dogma_.

the Catholic view involves what I call a "binocular view."

(good summary of complex stuff deleted for space)

According to the CE, there are at least two different theories about how that works. Wolfe seems to favor the Thomist theory:

"God, by an absolute decree and without regard to any future supernatural merits, predestined from all eternity certain men to the glory of heaven, and then, in consequence of this decree, decided to give them all the graces necessary for its accomplishment."

This is certainly the case for Silk - he's got all the good stuff. He's gifted, extremely well-suited for the mission before him. All without effort on his part.

Now, for a minimum of theological nitpicking.

Basically, that God knows whether you're going to hell or not before you're born. Now that's pessimism.

Not really, because the word "before" is irrelevant;

The word "before" is the point. Assume God set up a box with a big red button. The button was labelled "Your Afterlife", and by pushing it you'd find out where you were going after you died.

You push the button and get the answer. Kinda makes the rest of your life pointless, doesn't it? You know where you're gonna go, and there's no changing it. Now that's pessimism.

It's interesting to look at leaving the Whorl as a sort of death-experience, along with payoff. The inhabitants either get a lander going to heaven (Blue) or hell (Green). Where they go is predestined (the landers are set ahead of time by somebody else), but the people inside don't know. The difference between Pas and God is that for Pas it's random, for God it's based on merit.

it makes the assumption that God decides for you to be damned.

The whole subject is terribly complicated, but I think this view can be supported.

--Blattid

Jerry Friedman — 01 Nov 2002, 23:45 · follows tom

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:

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those looking to read up on the Gnostics, or the Amazon.com

Listmania entries: Gnostic Starter Library and Coptic

Gnostic Library at Chenoboskion_. For a more modern, popular

take, read Philip K. Dick's final three novels (Valis, The

Divine Invasion, The Transmigration of Timothy Archer).

(Piggybacking after an ill-advised deletion)

Some might also enjoy The Wrestler's Cruel Study, by Stephen Dobyns. Not very Wolfean, but fun. ...

Jerry Friedman