

New Gnosticism

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (March 2023)



The Meal of Lord Candlestick, Leonora Carrington, 1938

Once we reject God, the rejection of objective truth follows soon behind. Rejection of objective truth means, among other things, an inability to properly bring into focus what and who we really are. People come to think their mission in life is to define themselves based on the urges of the inner id or something. But then it turns out that this self-definition derives from social values. In these strange times, bohemian countercultural cool means rigid conformity to social metanarrative.

Rejection of God doesn't mean we really get rid of hierarchy in values and objectivity. We just substitute another objective hierarchy. That's social consensus, but "consensus" as defined in the upside-down world of postmodern word-play. It means the consensus of people who think the same way. Those who don't are just ignored; they're irrational because they have their own point of view, and irrational people don't count. The bogus consensus that drives social metanarrative takes the place of universal values, those we could formerly agree on even as we disagreed about so much. Universals like honesty, tolerance, forbearance, respect, love. The words are still in play, mind. But now they just mean whatever the postmod speaker intends them to mean. Even dishonesty, intolerance, impulsivity, contempt, hate.

The newly substituted values hierarchy is not attributable to the universality of transcendentally derived objective values applicable to all. Instead it's a product of the roil of social negotiation; immanently but immanence divorced from transcendence, like the horizontal beam of the Christian cross suspended in air without the support of the vertical. The personal is political. There is no understanding of self and the world except socially. Values are understood as horizontally derived through immanent process philosophy.

There is no God in this worldview, and yet there is a vaguely religious quality to it. Cultish, it must be said. It becomes really important to people to be plugged into the zeitgeist, understanding the social expectations on them and desperately trying to fulfill them. The cultish quality of the postmodern worldview echoes the esoteric metaphysics of Gnosticism.

As Christianity began to spread, two millennia ago, theologians undertook to understand the dualistic reality of nature and spirit systematically, so that all the mind-stretching parts of it would fit together. Some were of a Gnostic inclination. Gnostics, including some who considered themselves Christian (but deeply heretical), came to adopt a

monist view that the spiritual is the only worthwhile constituent of reality, with material, like the body, being insignificant or even illusory. For this reason, what they did with the corrupted body didn't matter. They tended to extremes of ascetism or hedonism.

Gnostics sought esoteric knowledge; that is, they looked for dispensation of special knowledge from the unseen spirit world, to be manifested in their own intuition. There are parallels to what we're seeing now. People who adopt the postmodern worldview likewise seek esoteric knowledge, but the source of that knowledge is not the spirit world, but rather discernment among social movements. The new Gnostics still look to the unseen, but the unseen consists in structures and systems of social oppression behind the mundane world of people minding their own business. The unseen they imagine they see is the photographic negative of Elisha's servant's vision, when his eyes were opened to the heavenly host arrayed against the enemy.

History itself lives, as Hegel taught. For postmodern Druids, things aren't true and good because of universal value. They're true and good because the zeitgeist tells them so. Social movements generate the gnosis for those with the discerning tool of neo-Marxist Critique. The process of discernment includes a psychological disposition toward negation and critique so as to see past "false consciousness" and expose patriarchy, heteronormative hegemony, xenophobia, and systemic racism. These count as evil structures to be deconstructed, and deconstruction in this general sense means eradicating barriers wherever they are found, including but not limited to categorical male/female difference.

The disposition to negation and critique seems to recur in prominence from time to time. It didn't originate with Karl Marx. The disposition to intuit power-seeking social systems stems from a felt sense of alienation, the same ineradicable human condition for which Christianity provided hope. In the

post-Christian world of process-generated truth, the sense of alienation is instead addressed in competing totalizing this-world systems like Marxism and its postmodern variants, all operating on a paradigm of power rather than love.

The metanarrative of socialist progressivism is the source of gnosis. Upon receiving this esoteric awareness, one is awakened to the presence of unseen systems in the world protecting power interests. This awakening makes one "woke." The gnosis includes awareness of these hidden social structures but also an awareness of self-distinct from oppressive categories—so that we imagine we create ourselves, and that self we create is our "true" self. The true self is not discerned from the spirit world, as with the Gnosticism of the ancients, but rather in existential self-creation.

Viewed from the non-woke outside, however, that self-creation is limited, because the self being created is social, and essentially so. Rather than existentially generating the self entirely from within, the self is formed in reference to social metanarrative. The social metanarrative supports gnostic self-expression but only insofar as it conforms to the metanarrative as it develops. The self authors its own expression, but the self is subsumed into the hive so the range of that expression is limited to inconsequential matters of fleeting fashion and inch-deep self-awareness. This is the way of totalitarianism, on the original definition of "fascism."

On this way of thinking, one's true essence is not confined by objective categories or bourgeois social conventions. In this way a female may consider her true self to be male, contrary to the indications of her body, and because the body is insignificant alongside this true essence, it may as well be modified to match. As with the Gnostics of yore, the givenness of the physical body can be cast aside.

There are real and devastating consequences when eternal,

immutable, and transcendent truth is dissolved in temporal, mutable, process.

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Albert Norton, Jr is a writer and attorney working in the American South. His most recent book is [Dangerous God: A Defense of Transcendent Truth](#) (2021) concerning formation of truth and values in a postmodern age; and *Intuition of Significance*, a 2020 work weighing the merits of theism against materialism. He is also the author of several award-winning short stories, and two novels: *Another Like Me* (2015) and *Rough Water Baptism* (2017), on themes of navigating reality in a post-Christian world.

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