

The New Gender Gnostics

Craig A. Carter

June 10, 2020

On December 19, 2019 the British writer J. K. Rowling tweeted out the following message:

DRESS HOWEVER YOU PLEASE.
CALL YOURSELF WHATEVER YOU LIKE.
SLEEP WITH ANY CONSENTING ADULT WHO'LL HAVE YOU.
LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE IN PEACE AND SECURITY.
BUT FORCE WOMEN OUT OF THEIR JOBS FOR STATING THAT SEX IS REAL? [#ISTANDWITHMAYA](#)
[#THISISNOTADRILL](#)
— J.K. ROWLING (@JK_ROWLING) [DECEMBER 19, 2019](#)

She was referring to Maya Forstater, a tax expert, who had just lost a legal case against her employer, a British think tank, which did not renew her contract because she tweeted that transgender women cannot actually change their sex. In the opinion, the judge found her beliefs “not worthy of respect in democratic society” and “absolutist.”^[1] But she found a defender in the famous author, J. K. Rowling. Rowling’s tweet, however, was greeted by howls of outrage from the perpetually outraged transgender activists who are used to taking down anyone who dares to challenge them by weaponizing social media. Princeton Professor Robert P. George tweeted his support for Forstater and Rowling on December 19 and then wondered if Rowling would follow what has now become a disturbing pattern of caving to the outrage mob. He put up a poll and found that 61.9% of his readers predicted she would indeed cave. But two days later on December 21 he tweeted this surprising update:

THE GENDER GNOSTICS INVITE JK ROWLING TO RE-EDUCATION CAMP AND SHE SAYS NO. THEY REALIZE THAT THERE'S NOW A LOT AT STAKE AND THEY MUST BEND HER TO THEIR WILL. IF SHE REFUSES TO CAVE & SURVIVES CANCELLATION SHE LICENSES WHOLESAL

DISSENT FROM WOKE ORTHODOXY. THIS IS NOW A BIG DEAL [HTTPS://T.CO/CJF8RG4LR4](https://t.co/CJF8RG4LR4)
— ROBERT P. GEORGE (@MCCORMICKPROF) [DECEMBER 21, 2019](#)

At this point, I retweeted Robert George's defence of J. K. Rowling for stating a scientific fact that the mob denies. I was happy to lend my support, for whatever it is worth, to George, Rowling, and Forstater for standing up for common sense and truth in this case. But, as a theologian, I was also interested in the unusual phrase he used: "gender Gnostics."

I wrote a few brief comments on Twitter in which I suggested that his use of this term is not a gratuitous insult, or a throw-away line utilized as a rhetorical flourish, but is actually a sophisticated philosophical term, which accurately describes the people about whom he is speaking. In this article I want to expand a bit on what I said there because I think it is important to understand the nature of the ideas that are fueling the passions of the woke mob. The basic problem with the transgender activists is that they have bad theology, and Christians who are being tempted to abandon science and biblical teaching on human nature in order to avoid feeling their wrath need to be aware of how bad it is and what is wrong with it.

My concern with this issue is primarily theological and metaphysical, and only secondarily political. But it should be noted that good metaphysics leads to the kind of politics in which all human beings can truly flourish, and that good theology helps us see human beings as God sees them, which makes the world a better place. And, without doubt, good theology and good metaphysics also foster better content on social media!

What Is a Gnostic?

The term "Gnostic" refers to an adherent of certain ideas that were common in both the ancient Jewish and Hellenistic worlds of late antiquity, that is, the age of Second Temple Judaism and the late Roman Empire in which the New Testament was written. This set of ideas has its roots in the ancient Persian dualism that forms the metaphysical framework for Zoroastrianism. But in the religious melting pot of late antiquity, these ideas merged with many others and were incorporated into many different kinds of

new religions and what might be called today “spiritualities.” This era was in some ways similar to the late modern West in its fascination with both eastern and primitive religious ideas, as seen in what is often referred to as the New Age Movement.

It is interesting to note that Manichaeism, the Gnostic religion that Augustine of Hippo followed for nine years during his twenties, is an eclectic mix of religious ideas rooted in this sort of metaphysical dualism. Augustine, of course, would go on to provide a major critique of such a metaphysics and develop his Christian Platonism as an alternative to it, thus laying the foundation for a millennium of orthodox theology that would last until the rise of modern philosophy and the cultural movement known as the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth century.

In the Gnostic system of metaphysics, the cosmos is divided into two realms: the realm of spirit (which is good) and the realm of matter (which is evil). Since the human body is material, it is evil. Since Gnosticism views matter as evil, when it infiltrated early Christianity it redefined salvation as the soul’s permanent escape from the body, rather than as the resurrection of the body in the New Heavens and New Earth. Gnostic teachers like Marcion, for example, rejected the Old Testament and much of the New Testament in an attempt to shift Christianity away from its biblical metaphysics and toward an ontological dualism of good spirit and evil matter.

But Marcion was rejected by the mainstream of the Christian Church, which accepted the Old Testament as God’s Word and saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. The New Testament bears witness to the full deity of Jesus Christ, including his preexistence, virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, and future second coming. The New Testament also sees Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key to interpreting the Old Testament. Jesus Christ was proclaimed by the Apostles to be the Messiah and Son of David prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. The eschatological goal of God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ was seen as the New Heavens and New Earth, in which the saints in their resurrected, glorified bodies would dwell forever in the presence of God. None of this was compatible with Gnostic dualism and its denigration of the material creation as evil and as something the soul needs to escape.

Different groups of Gnostics held one of two different views of the body, which appeared superficially to be almost opposite, but which actually share

a crucial underlying assumption. On the one hand, some Gnostics advocated extreme asceticism to keep the influence of the body on the soul to an absolute minimum. Others, on the other hand, were libertines because they thought that the body is so utterly unimportant that what you do with it is unimportant. This led them to be indifferent toward those who followed their base instincts in whatever way they wished. These two approaches, extreme asceticism and extreme libertinism, may seem very different, but they actually share one basic conviction in common, namely, that there is no long-term future for the body. The body is part of the material world, which is inferior at best and downright evil at worst and, therefore, destined to be left behind, while the destiny of the soul is to enter a purely spiritual realm and live forever.

One of the presuppositions of the Gnostic view of the human person is a body-soul dualism in which the two are separable in principle. One of the implications of this view of the human person is that the soul is more important and valuable than the body. From there it is a very short step to understanding the soul as the “real you” and the body as basically something owned and used by the soul. The key idea here is the radical separation of the real “you” from your body. You are a disembodied *ego* floating above your body, and the body is just raw material on which to impose your will.

The Church Rejects Gnosticism

Although early Christian thinkers like Augustine may seem to be saying something similar, in fact they believe that the human being is really a body-soul composite and that to be complete a person must have both a body and a soul. Even if the soul can, by a special act of God, survive in the intermediate state in heaven, it does so in anticipation of being reunited with its resurrected, glorified body at the end of the age. The idea that the human being consists of a body-soul unity was never lost, on account of the central importance in early Christian theology of the idea of the resurrection of the body, as we can see from its inclusion in the Apostles’ Creed. Thomas Aquinas would later solidify this anthropology by utilizing Aristotelian concepts in service of strengthening the concept of the body-soul unity of the human person. A theological anthropology in which the body is (1) created good, (2) an integral part of the human person, and (3) destined to be

resurrected to eternal life in the New Heavens and New Earth became standard Christian orthodoxy throughout the pre-modern period and is reflected in the Reformation confessions and in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It has persisted in modernity under the influence of confessional orthodoxy despite heavy attacks from modern philosophy, as we shall see.

I have no interest in trying to make a historical argument connecting ancient Gnosticism with the beginnings of modern philosophy in thinkers such as René Descartes. But I do wish to point out a rather significant and obvious similarity between Cartesian dualism and ancient Gnostic dualism when it comes to philosophical anthropology. For Descartes, the “thinking thing” is the part of him that he views as the real person. He sees the self as consciousness or the mind. Having begun in “Meditation I” with his method of radical doubt, in “Meditation II” Descartes proves to himself the existence of himself as “a thing which thinks” before he goes on to prove the existence of God in Meditation III.^[2] In doing so, he invents what comes to be known as the mind-body problem, which has become a staple of philosophical discussion and a topic in most first-year philosophy courses. At first, the influence of the Christian doctrine of the human person as a body-soul unity and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body mitigated the tendency of modern philosophical anthropology to split the person into a real self plus a body. But as secularization gained traction in the Enlightenment period, the relationship between the body and the soul became increasingly tenuous. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modernity became increasingly “Gnostic-like.”

Two of the key developments were the rise of skepticism after Hume and epistemological constructivism after Kant. As metaphysical realism was increasingly rejected in favor of nominalism, the very idea of human nature became a problem rather than a presupposition, as it had been in classical philosophy. Even as Enlightenment rationalism gave way to Romanticism in the nineteenth century, philosophical naturalism began to be taken for granted by many Western intellectuals as the starting point for science. The evolutionary metaphysics of Hegel dominated the nineteenth century mind and became the framework in which the data of natural science was organized and understood. The idea of evolution became a starting point in various sciences beginning with biology and geology and developing from there. By the time the new academic discipline of psychology began to

emerge in the early twentieth century, a hard-edged materialism was the context for understanding the human mind. The concept of the emotions, understood as agitations of brain activity, displaced the older concept of the affections, which had historically been understood as the activity of the soul. The very idea of a human soul was reduced in many cases to the mind, which was reduced to the brain, which was reduced to chemistry. Soon there was no felt need to speak of the soul at all.

The Return of Gnosticism

In such an intellectual context, philosophical anthropology slipped its moorings and drifted off further and further from its Christian roots. By the 1960s the thought of certain French post-structuralists advocating deconstruction began to gain traction in the United States; their work was appropriated by the critical theorists, whose goal was the criticism and eventual dissolution of the family on the basis of Marxist theories of the pernicious influence of the family. As Stephen E. Bonner puts it: “Critical theory was intended as a general theory of society fueled by the desire for liberation.”^[3] The 1970s and 1980s saw the development of something called “gender theory,” in which the concept of “gender” was detached from its biological basis in sex in the name of liberation. The very idea of the sexual binary was challenged, and the concept of gender fluidity came to the fore. The whole idea of the LGBT alphabet soup approach to attacking the sexual binary was to force acceptance of the idea of gender fluidity and undermine the concept of “maleness” and “femaleness” as universals. By the 1970s metaphysical realism was so far in the rear-view mirror as far as many *avant garde* Western intellectuals were concerned that they were convinced that universals were an unnecessary restriction on the autonomy of the modern self.

The highest value in modernity is the same one that motivated first Eve and then Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden: the autonomy of the self. The modern sexual revolution is a revolt against the Christian God. It is a revolt motivated by the self-righteous conviction that the highest good for the human being is freedom defined as freedom from constraint. That prophet of modern decadence, Woody Allen, summed it up perfectly when he said: “The heart wants what the heart wants.” There is no

appealing the decrees of this tribunal, for there is no higher court. The individual human being — defined as mind or consciousness or will — is supreme, and no church, government, or philosopher is permitted to tell it what to do. A particular action can be good, bad, or indifferent in itself or for other people, but when it is chosen by the sovereign self it magically becomes the good for that person. The self has become a god, just as the Serpent said, and this god determines good and evil for itself.

The gender Gnostics put this abstract theory into practice in a radical way. Leaving your spouse to find your soulmate is small potatoes. Women in traditionally male occupations is just a step in the process. When the modern autonomous self begins to think bigger, it contemplates transcending the whole idea of gender itself on the way to transcending the body itself. And so transgenderism, gender fluidity, and gender identity become new terms in the lexicon of modern life — in the name of freedom. The idea of sex is embodied gender and it must give way to the will of the self, which is defined in a non-bodily way. For somewhere along the way it has become an article of faith that the true self is not the limited, smelly, loathsome body. Like the old concept of “God,” the true self is pure spirit; embodiment presents unacceptable limitations to the pretensions of the divine self which, because it is free, must have no limitations of any kind.

The bitter fruit of late modernity, plucked from the tree of metaphysical realism and thus detached in a nominalist way, is gender theory. The essence of modern gender theory is the teaching that sex is merely incidental to identity, which must be true from the modern perspective because sex is merely bodily reality, which is to say, not real at all. In this way we see the return of ancient Gnosticism. The question of historical genealogy is not important for our purposes. All I am arguing for is that the new Gnosticism has the same attitude toward the body as the old Gnosticism did. And so, it is just as much the enemy of the Christian church as the old Gnosticism was. Will the church today expel the new gender Gnostics as the second-century church at Rome did when it told Marcion to take his money and get out?

Gnosticism has the distinction of being one of the few heresies of the patristic age to be denounced explicitly in the pages of the New Testament.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that

confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard was coming and now is in the world already ([1 John 4:1–3](#)).

The early Gnostics often taught the heresy of Docetism, which is a word that comes from the Greek verb *dokeo* meaning “to seem or to appear.” They taught that Jesus only seemed or appeared to be a man, but actually was a divine being disguised as a mere man. Some taught that the divine spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism and left before his crucifixion. All Gnostics denied the full humanity of Jesus Christ and therefore they denied that upon which the gospel depends, namely the atoning death of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. John appears to have had the Gnostic heresy in mind from the beginning of his letter. In the prologue he writes:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was manifest, and we have seen it and testify to it ([1 John 1:1–2](#)).

The New Testament Christ is an embodied man who lives a righteous life, dies our death, and saves us by his blood shed in our place and on our behalf. To the startled disciples to whom he appeared after his resurrection he says: “Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” ([Luke 24:39](#)). The New Testament promises that the destiny of believers is not a disembodied existence in a purely non-physical realm, but rather that we shall be raised from the dead: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall be made alive” ([1 Cor. 15:22](#)). If Gnosticism is true, then Christianity is false; but if Christianity is true, then Gnosticism is false.

These two views of the human body cannot coexist, and the sworn enemies of the Christian church understand this better than many Christians do. The end game is not sexual diversity and tolerance. All the libertarian rhetoric of letting people choose their own way of life is just a way of carving out space and gaining time for the sexual revolution to gain strength. The end game is the complete destruction of the sexual binary, which would mean the end of natural marriage and the end of the organization of society around the family. These are people who think that Huxley’s *Brave New World* is a manual for the ideal society rather than a dystopian novel. So, if you intend to

defend the continued existence of the sexual binary and the natural family in any form, you might as well fight now as later. All those who think science is important, all those who think the rights and dignity of women are important, and all Christians should be on the same side in this battle. The new gender Gnostics are determined to impose their value of autonomy on everyone else, because in the end it always comes down to me imposing my will on the world. And if you are in my way, then too bad. The goal of the new gender Gnostics is to crush all opposition to their body-hating and family-destroying agenda.

The Christian idea of the Good is the ability and inclination to choose the Good by affirming the universal human nature built into creation, which we all instantiate in either a male or a female manner. The Christian view of ethics sees the will as subservient to the Good, which is understood to be a universal — an idea in the mind of God that we cannot change or define out of existence. As Christians, we should receive our sexuality as a gift from our creator with gratitude and not presume to abuse our bodies as if they were not part of our very being as men and women in the image of God. For Christians, realism is a necessary metaphysical corollary of the doctrine of creation. The human will is good when it is directed toward the divine intent for human life and in submission to the universal of human nature. But the human will is evil when it is mis-directed away from the divine intent and when it breaks free of the universal of human nature implanted in creation by God. But, even worse, it becomes the expression of the antichrist when it begins to worship itself as the only good, which is what it does in the thought of the new gender Gnostics.

*Craig A. Carter is Professor of Theology at Tyndale University in Toronto, Ontario and Theologian in Residence at Westney Heights Baptist Church. He is the author of four books, including *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Baker Academic, 2018). His next book will be *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Baker Academic, 2021).*

[1] As Quoted in *The Guardian*, Dec. 18, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/dec/18/judge-rules-against-charity-worker-who-lost-job-over-transgender-tweets>

[2] Rene Descartes, “Meditations” in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*,

Vol. I, edited by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 153. Although this bears a superficial resemblance to Augustine's exploration of the image of the Trinity in the human mind, it is more like the mirror opposite of Augustine's procedure. Augustine begins from faith in God and understands the nature of the human mind from that beginning point; Descartes begins from belief in himself as a thinking thing and explores the possible existence of God from that beginning point. Here we see the essential difference between classical and modern philosophy in a nutshell. See Augustine, *The Trinity, De Trinitate*, Introduction, Translation and Notes by Edmund Hill. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century, Part I, Vol. 5*, ed. John R. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991).

[3] Stephen Eric Bonner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2107), 21.

Downloaded from: <https://cbmw.org/2020/06/10/the-new-gender-gnostics/>