

The Necessity of Iconography and the Idolatry of Modern Gnostic Religion

*How Dogmatic Iconography defends the doctrine of the Incarnation
against the ancient and pernicious heresy of Gnosticism.*



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In the name of the +Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Esteemed fathers and brothers, visitors, guests, and fellow Christians,

Harold Bloom, in his 1992 book, *The American Religion*, rightly comes to the startling conclusion that America is a nation of Gnostics, and that modern American 'religion' was in fact a modern version of this ancient heresy.

When first published, many saw Bloom's conclusion as eccentric at best, or a crackpot at worst, as he contended that most Americans' beliefs "masks itself as Christianity yet has ceased to be Christian," veering strongly into Gnosticism. This is no longer considered as crazy as it was at that time.

What is Gnosticism?

To begin, we should sketch what the Gnostics of ancient times actually believed. Gnostic comes from the word *Gnosis*, which is the Greek word for "knowledge." The typical form of the faith was radically dualistic, presenting an obscure or unknown deity.

The central belief portrayed a radically dualistic understanding of the universe. The 'spirit' world was good, holy, and virtuous, but the material world as a realm of sin and error was bad, and that be ignored or even better - escaped.

Salvation, for the Gnostic, was freedom from matter, especially the body – the very opposite of Christianity!

Now, ask any Protestant today if there are physical bodies in heaven or if physical bodies can possess grace after death, and you will certainly receive the answer 'no', but the flesh of Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father at this moment, an essential fact of Christian faith.

We do not believe that heaven is only for spiritual things, and that Jesus' body

dropped off like a second-stage booster rocket while he was ascending and now he is Ascended to heaven, but can't get back down!

Gnostics considered themselves 'children of the spirit' so in order to prove it they were to indulge the fleshly vices (gluttony, fornication, etc) to prove their freedom from the power of the flesh/matter - unlike Orthodox Christians who were considered 'children of the flesh', and therefore must AVOID indulgence of the flesh in order to have any chance at salvation.

Clever system, isn't it? We Gnostics CAN to fornicate, but you Orthodox Christians MUST NEVER.

Devotees cited what were supposed to be hidden sayings from Jesus that had been preserved by spiritual elitists (remember the "Gospel of Thomas" - which wasn't even a Gospel at all!). Additionally, an amalgamation of many different psychic beliefs made their way into Gnosticism at various stages.

NOW, those who read Bloom's book were flabbergasted that such beliefs could be considered by any rational American Christian.

Yet after the initial hostility, later analysts figured Bloom was onto something. *First Things* magazine complained that much of what passes for U.S.

Christianity is indeed a "sub-Christian Gnosticism" **that cannot sustain moral tradition.** Other protestant theologians agreed that much "neo-pagan religion" was quickly gaining ground among U.S. Protestants.

Christians not immune to Gnosticism

According to a Pew Study newly published just this month, most American adults self-identify as Christians. But many of them also hold what are characterized as "New Age" beliefs – including belief in reincarnation, astrology, psychics and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects like mountains, trees, crystals, etc.. Many Americans who are religiously unaffiliated

also have these beliefs.

Overall, roughly six-in-ten – **60%** - of American adults accept at least one of these New Age beliefs.

Specifically, 40% believe in **psychics** and that '**spiritual energy**' can be found in physical objects, while somewhat smaller shares express belief in

- **reincarnation (33%) and**
- **astrology (29%).**

There also are gender, age and other demographic differences associated with New Age beliefs. For instance, just as women are more likely than men to identify with a religion and to engage in a number of religious practices, women also are more likely to hold New Age beliefs.

Across all four measures – belief in psychics, reincarnation, astrology and that spiritual energy can be found in objects – larger shares of women than men subscribe to these beliefs. And overall, 70% women hold at least one New Age belief, compared to 55% of men.

The Pew Study also states that adults under age 65, those who have not graduated from college, and Democrats (and those who lean toward the Democratic Party) are more likely than others to hold to at least one New Age belief. (hey, don't shoot the messenger)

New Age, Old Gnostic Heresy

Despite the secularism of our age — or maybe, because of it — many people are rediscovering an interest in 'spirituality.' One can go to almost any commercial bookstore and discover whole sections devoted to 'spirituality.'

Sadly, most of what sells as “spiritual reading,” usually classified under the heading of “New Age,” does not demand any more faith or belief than going to

the grocery store.

That ole' Enneagram

A good example is the Enneagram, which in recent years has enjoyed growing popularity among Christian groups and has even been largely promoted by many protestant and Catholic religious communities.

The Enneagram is a pseudo-psychological exercise supposedly based on Eastern mysticism, which introduces deliberate ambiguity into the doctrine and life of the Christian experience of faith and therefore cannot be safely used to promote growth in any authentic Christian spirituality. It is about as helpful or useful as a Facebook quiz that reveals "What kind of Disney Princess are you?"

What about Cultural Gnosticism

The American propensity to be religious iconoclasts on the one hand, and cultural idolators on the other is a stark and broken contrast with Incarnational Christianity, precisely because one cannot remake God, spirituality, or religion in one's own image if God really became a man in space and time.

Despite protestations to the contrary, it is not the icon which is so offensive to Gnostics and iconoclasts, it is the message which the icon represents which cannot be tolerated.

Secular Iconography & Political Iconography

Sports teams all have logos, pictures and posters of famous players, their own sayings, uniforms, and their own traditions. A high degree of religiosity plays an important part in sports propaganda worldwide.

Politics have always used religiosity and iconography, even those who were religious iconoclasts.

In communist countries in the last century, giant 'parades' (religious

processions) with posters (icons) of the glorious leader, the little red books containing the 'catechism' of the political movement, and the religious fervor of classic Gnostics (agree, obey or suffer) all were part and parcel of secularist societies.

But these were simply replacements for Christian icons, Christian festal processions, Bibles and prayerbooks. The icons, in this case, were not just destroyed, but deliberately replaced with 'atheist' iconography.

Because it was based on a falsehood – that the state is supreme – it could not last. Indeed, we see much of the same kind of tactic going on today in America.

It is doomed to the same historical failure.

About Christian Dogmatic Iconography

Before the Incarnation, it was idolatrous to make an image of God. Now that the Incarnation has taken place, it would be idolatrous not to make images of Him.

For example, Muslims reject the Incarnation – the doctrine that God Himself took a human body, mind, soul, spirit – God became a man. Therefore, mosques have bare walls and no images of God. In this, they resemble heterodox places of worship!

Under their influence, and the resurgence of Gnosticism, many civil authorities in the past engaged in religious iconoclasm.

This state-sponsored iconoclasm (literally "image smashing") was countered by

- St. John of Damascus (d. 749),
- Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople (d. 732), and
- St. Theodore the Studite (d. 826),

who marshaled Scripture and theological thinking in favor of the use of icons in

Christian worship. John of Damascus argued that God was the first and original image-maker of the universe and that the son of God was the living image of God in his very nature. Since Paul in the Epistle to the Colossians had written,

“He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15),

the worship of the icon of the Father - Jesus Christ Himself - was not idolatrous, because, in the oft-quoted formula of Saint Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) in *De Spiritu Sancto* (On the Holy Spirit),

“The honor paid to the image [the Son] passes over to the prototype [the Father].”

When a religion rejects images of God, it confirms the message that God **is only** a spirit, and that He has no physical form.

So far, so good. Before the Incarnation, that was true. After the Incarnation, it is FALSE, and is therefore, as false worship, a form of idolatry.

In ancient Israel, when people worshiped Baal, Ashtoreth, and Moloch, they committed the **first form of idolatry**. These are all false gods, and it is idolatry to worship them in any way whatsoever, either with or without images.

When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf, they committed the **second form of idolatry**. They correctly noted the identity of the true God, but they grossly misrepresented Him. Instead of recognizing God as an invisible Spirit, the Israelites made a golden calf, they praised it for delivering them from Egypt, and even called the calf “Yahweh”.(Exodus 32:4-5)

“He [Aaron] took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "This your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to Yahweh."

Idol Worship by Any Other Name

When the Israelites sinned with the golden calf, they were still correct that God's name is "Yahweh". They were correct that Yahweh had delivered them from Egypt. And they were correct to praise Yahweh. But their worship was turned into idolatry, because they **misrepresented** Him and eventually abandoned Him altogether, which is the eventual and consistent result - **it always happens.**

(2 Kings 17)

"They... followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them...They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, "Do not do as they do." They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sought omens and sold themselves to do evil..."

God is not a cow, nor does He look like one. Similarly, when heterodox Christians worship with bare walls and an absence of icons, they are correct that God's name is "Jesus". They are correct that Jesus came to deliver them from sin. And they are correct to praise Jesus. But their worship quickly turns into idolatry, often in this case bibliolatry, because they misrepresent something crucial about Him. God is no longer merely a faceless spirit.

Misrepresenting God is a Grievous Sin

In ancient Israel, God did not want His people bowing down before images of Himself, because any image of Him they made would be misrepresenting Him. But He knew that people needed to bow down before something, so He provided the Temple in Jerusalem for this purpose.

The temple did not represent the image of God, but it did represent His presence. So God had His people bow down toward the temple:

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house.
I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. (Psalm 5:7)

Anticipating the day when He would become incarnate, when His people would be able to have images of Himself, God taught His people to include many images in the context of worship.

The Jerusalem temple included icons of angels, and early synagogues were covered with icons of many Old Testament saints. The Word had not yet become flesh, so God's people venerated the Word of God contained in Scripture. Even to this day, Jews bow toward the Torah scrolls when entering/exiting the synagogue, and also during special Torah services. Jews also kiss the Torah to venerate it.

Before the Incarnation, it was impossible to make an image of the invisible God, a heavenly reality, without misrepresenting Him. Once, however, God became flesh in the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, the invisible God became visible, the immaterial God was suddenly material. As is sung in the Nativity hymns of the Orthodox Church during Christmas,

The uncontainable God is contained in a cave and lies in a manger,
The unapproachable God summons the Magi to approach Him,
The untouchable God nurses at His mother's breast,
The invisible God is seen by shepherds, etc.

It is the reality of the Incarnation which iconography, as sure as the written Scriptures and the liturgical hymns of the Church throughout the ages, protect, defend and guarantee that Christ is understood in one way and one way only – as God the Word come in the flesh in time.

After Christ came, He referred to His own body as the true Temple.

Therefore, instead of continuing to bow down toward a temple building, we now bow down toward images of Jesus. This is not worship of the icon any more than bowing towards the Temple was worship OF the Temple – perish the thought! No Orthodox Christian thinks a piece of wood with paint created heaven and earth.

We also bow to one another, because Scripture says that every Orthodox Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit and made in the image of Christ. When Orthodox Christians bow to an icon of Christ, they are reminded that God is now forever united to a human body – the physical flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is fully God, and fully human, and He is physically seated in Heaven today. **Orthodox worship represents God correctly.**

We should say what the Icon Isn't and What it Is

The Icon is not a 'holy picture' designed to increase piety.

Neither is an icon something spiritual in itself, as it does not depict "God" in general. The icon is a dogmatic expression of a theological truth. It is, therefore, not variable as artists would claim by 'artistic license' – a term I, as an artist, have always found to be a reprehensible cop out for lack of talent or lack of vision.

One cannot translate the Bible any old way one wishes to and still remain true to the text – my students know this as a practice specifically called 'haplography', and it is all over heterodox Bibles. Neither can one paint an icon any old way one wishes to and still remain true to the prototype.

There are no dogmatic icons of Jesus as Chinese or Jamaican, or with blonde hair and blue eyes.

In fact, one of the great aberrations iconographically in western Christianity is

the Nordic 'Christ' in the apse at the Roman Catholic National Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC. If you have not seen it, allow me to describe it.

- Heavily muscled,
- flowing blonde hair,
- piercing blue eyes,
- a stubble beard (*ala* Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*)
- wearing a bright red toga-style robe with nothing under it,
- with flames literally shooting out of his halo, and
- hands raised not in the prayerful 'orans' position, but hanging in the air before bringing down judgment.

This misrepresents Christ.

I've always felt it resembles the anti-Christ more than the historic Christ.

By the same token, the icon is far more than just an attempt to capture a historical person or event. The icon shows the spiritual truth or heavenly reality – not just the image or 'snapshot' of history.

Therefore, we never see icons of saints who wore glasses in which they are still wearing their glasses. Why not? Because, no one wears glasses in heaven, where all may gaze and contemplate upon the glories of heaven.

In the most convincing words of John of Damascus:

“We have passed the stage of infancy, and reached the perfection of manhood. We receive our habit of mind from God, and know what may be imaged and what may not....The Scripture says, “You have not seen the likeness of Him.” (Ex. 33.20) What wisdom in the law-giver. How depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How give expression to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give a form to immensity?

How paint immortality? How localize mystery?

When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh (as in the Incarnation of God in the flesh – John 1:14), you may then draw a likeness of His form. When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it...”

Indeed, we see that as American Gnosticism strains to invent a distant, amorphous and ahistorical “concept of God,” Who can never be seen or heard **or heard from**, it is precisely the dogmatic icon which is so offensive to Gnostic leaning religious sensibilities, as the dogmatic icon depicts Christ as He appeared in time, in history, on the earth and among men, which guarantees the Truth of the historical Incarnation that God became flesh and dwelt among us.

The reality is that American Gnosticism clearly denies the objective presence of Christ in the World through Church, Sacrament, and Creed – all vehicles for remaining ‘on the mark’ so to speak. In short, it attempts to make the Incarnation irrelevant.

This matters!

All Opinions and Beliefs about God are not benign or ancillary.

If you believe that God is an incestuous fornicator (Elohim the Father according to Mormon teaching), then you can imagine what kind of behavior is acceptable and even laudable to believers. Joseph Smith, after all, stole many men's wives for himself, including underage girls. What could possibly go wrong?

If you believe God is merciful but not a loving Father, and your prophet is a thieving, murdering pedophile (admitted of Mohammed by all Muslims), is it any surprise that larceny, fornication, and even inbreeding make up so much of

Muslim societies?

If you believe that God tortures people for their own good, as in the Roman doctrine of purgatory, then physical abuse, priests abusing children, and nuns beating them 'for their own good' isn't a stretch, is it?

In fact, it is ENTIRELY PREDICTABLE.

But if you believe not in a 'Cosmic Christ' but in Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jew who was crucified, died, risen from the dead and now seated at the right hand of the Power of God, all other 'versions' or contrary opinions about Him must fade into obscurity, so far from the reality they are that they do not resemble the Bridegroom of the Church.

It is the dogmatic icon which destroys the idolatrous fantasy of Gnostic relativism, and which is, therefore, intolerable to any person or religious system with Gnostic leanings.

Because different groups continue interpret the Scriptures according to their own whim, true dogmatic iconography is the only guarantor of the theological truth about the historical Jesus Christ.

When the Word became flesh, iconoclasm became idolatry.

The Incarnation changes everything.