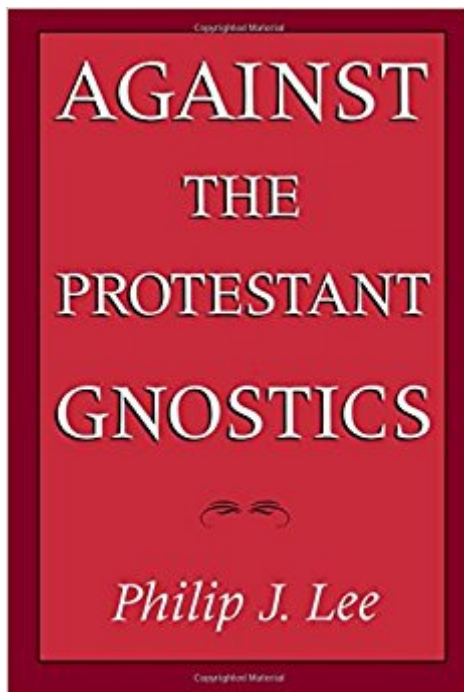


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Against The Protestant Gnostics



Synopsis

In this penetrating and provocative assessment of the current state of religion and its effects on society at large, Philip J. Lee criticizes conservatives and liberals alike as he traces gnostic motifs to the very roots of American Protestantism. With references to an extraordinary spectrum of writings from sources as diverse as John Calvin, Martin Buber, Tom Wolfe, Margaret Atwood, and Emily Dickinson, he probes the effects of gnostic thinking on a wide range of issues. Calling for the restoration of a dialectical faith and practice, the book points to positive ways of restoring health to endangered Protestant churches.

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Customer Reviews

Canadian Presbyterian pastor Phillip. J. Lee uses the ancient heresy of Gnosticism as an archetype by which to gage contemporary strands of Protestantism in North America. Contrasts are drawn between "Gnostic" and "Orthodox" trends in contemporary Christianity with the Orthodox end of the spectrum made to look considerably more true and desirable than the Gnostic. Gnosticism relies on salvation through the attainment of secret "knowledge" that can only be accomplished by a spiritually developed elite. The primary problematic characteristics of Gnosticism, according to Lee, are that it is elitist and that it is dualistic; in other words, it views the created world as inherently evil and the gifts of creation as objects to be avoided. Earthly life, then, is not to be lived, but to be escaped. This results in spiritual-elitism, separation of the holy from the "impure" and an obsessive focus on individual salvation among Conservative-evangelical groups. On the left, Gnostic

tendencies lead to individualistic religion, personalized and subjective "spirituality" and the happiness of the individual as life's ultimate goal. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, is more concerned with the salvation of the Church as an organic body, rather than with particular individuals, and preaches a Christ who cannot be known through private spirituality, but only by participation in the life of the Church. Orthodoxy teaches readily accessible revealed truth, rather than mysterious and esoteric "knowledge". Who are the contemporary Gnostics? Any group that does not fit into the author's understanding of orthodoxy. It is a strategy that is highly effective, even though disingenuous. Lee is extremely though provoking and he is equally critical of both liberal and conservative trends in American Protestantism.

Probing the past for perspectives on the present, a Presbyterian pastor in Saint John, New Brunswick, Philip J. Lee, brings to trial North American Evangelicals in *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987). As one might guess from the title, Lee takes for his mentor St. Irenaeus of Lyons, whose second century treatise, *Against Heresies*, sought to defend the orthodox faith from various gnostic perversions. "For the gnostic Christian, ancient or modern," Lee says, "simple faith (pistis) is not sufficient. Instead, there must be knowledge (gnosis)" (p.3). Almost always, Gnostics have these characteristics: 1) a deep sense of metaphysical alienation; 2) a proposed scheme of knowledge to overcome alienation; 3) a world-denying, escapist stance which often disdains material things; 4) an exclusivist, aristocratic elitism, promising real salvation to the enlightened few; 5) a syncretistic compulsion to compound diverse strands of theories and perspectives. Given these identifying marks, much of what follows entails Lee's analysis of how Gnostic notions have flourished, been condemned, or slipped silently into the darker niches of Christendom. As Lee shows, the main tenets of Gnosticism have almost routinely, across the centuries, been condemned by the Church, though nothing seems to prevent its weed-like re-surfacings. Rooted in the biblical teaching that creation is good, Christians have never rightly tolerated those who would disparage it. Given the inevitable Docetism of most Gnostics, Christians have insisted on the down-to-earth materiality of the Incarnate Christ. Salvation is revealed to Christians primarily through God's historic dealings with His people and thus to the highly visible (if not always highly edifying) believing community.

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