



**CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS**

**THE PAGAN  
HEART**  
OF TODAY'S CULTURE

**PETER JONES**



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Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

# THE PAGAN HEART OF TODAY'S CULTURE

PETER JONES



PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



P U B L I S H I N G

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THIS BOOKLET EXAMINES the spiritual heart of our culture through a prism of *isms*. Though *ism* words can be daunting, they also can be helpful because they are precise. This booklet argues that three seemingly unrelated *isms* (or worldviews)—postmodernism, Gnosticism, and polytheism—form a constructive lens through which we can understand what is sometimes called the New Spirituality. Readers may well ask what meaningful connection could exist between the worldwide ancient religion of polytheism, the first-through-fourth-century Christian heresy of Gnosticism, and the contemporary philosophy of postmodernism. To find out, read on! These three ways of thinking have become strangely connected. Together they help explain the nature of today’s pagan worldview and its opposition to the truth of the gospel. To understand the interconnectedness of the three *isms*, we first must look at each one separately.

#### BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + As you begin this booklet, what do you already know about polytheism, Gnosticism, and postmodernism? Are you aware of any ways in which these ideologies influence you or people with whom you have contact?
- + What will the author be arguing about these three *isms*? Why is his argument important to Christians?

### **POSTMODERNISM**

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Being a postmodern has very little to do with sporting tattoos, wearing grungy clothes, or adopting an easygoing nature. Literally, the postmodern is someone who has dispensed with the modern. In philosophical terms, *modern*

describes a two-hundred-year period of intellectual history, called the Enlightenment, in which human reason was held to be the only arbiter of truth. That period was bookended by two symbolic “falls,” one in 1789 and the other in 1989.

On July 14, 1789, the Bastille Prison in Paris fell, representing the demise of the combined despotic authority of the Crown and the church. Though this dreaded place of confinement actually contained only seven prisoners, its fall was mere symbolic “political theater,” since the incident served to launch the French Revolution. Talk about “political theater”! On November 10, 1793, revolutionaries placed a bust of the goddess Reason on the high altar in the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris. Rationalism had triumphed over religious superstition. This rationalist movement was the first great apostasy from Christianity in the modern era. One of the fathers of the French Revolution, Voltaire, gave to the Revolution the famous phrase *Écrasez l'infâme*: “Crush the horrid thing.” The “horrid thing” was the superstition of Christianity. From then on, skepticism of all things spiritual was considered a sign of true intelligence, reason the sole measure of reality and the basis for human progress. Modernism even entered the church, denying the supernatural, the miracles, and the divinity of Christ. The success of modernism led many Western thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to expect that the twenty-first century would see the full flowering of secularism and the disappearance of irrational religion. They were wrong. Believe it or not, scholars now speak of the *postsecular age*.<sup>1</sup> Postsecularism “does not accept that reason must rule out religion.”<sup>2</sup>

The “fall” that brought a close to the modern period was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, symbolizing the collapse of materialism and of atheistic, secular Marxism. What brought down the great edifice of rational Enlightenment and modernist culture? It was postmodernism, which, though it rejects the

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truth claims of Christianity, also undermines “[all] absolutist explanations of reality, [including atheistic] Marxism.”<sup>3</sup> The post-modern laser gun was aimed not only at Christianity but also at the *ideology* of secularism, in “a rage against humanism and the Enlightenment legacy.”<sup>4</sup>

### BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + What beliefs characterize modernism? How can these beliefs be seen in the unfolding of the French Revolution, starting with the fall of the Bastille?
- + How did modernism affect the church? Why is this abandonment of Christian orthodoxy a natural consequence of embracing modernism?
- + What beliefs characterize postmodernism? What ideologies does it oppose?
- + How was the fall of the Berlin Wall a symbolic deathblow to modernism?

“Postmodern deconstruction” deconstructs *any* confidence in absolute truth.<sup>5</sup> “There is no empirical ‘fact’ that is not already theory-laden, and there is no logical argument or formal principle that is *a priori* certain.”<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the Christian apologist Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary also said that facts were never neutral. If postmoderns and Reformed apologists say the same thing, it is doubtless true!<sup>7</sup> Unlike the modern mind, which merely assumed that reality is objectively ordered via human reason, and the Christian mind, which assumed it to be regulated by God’s will, the postmodern mind rejects all objective truths and true personhood. All that it can propose are blurred and amorphous partial truths—except in one instance. The postmodern critique of human rationalism is reasonable only if it presupposes the rationality of postmodern reasoning.

## GNOSTICISM

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Gnosticism proposes a search for the self, not in scriptural revelation or in reason, but within one's own self via mystical trance. *Gnosis* in Greek means "knowledge," but not just any kind of knowledge. It is knowledge in the sense of direct "experience," that is, experience of the self as "divine." Gnosticism thus has deep connections with various aspects of mystical Judaism, Persian (Iranian) and Zoroastrian traditions, Greek Hellenistic traditions, and the imperial mystery religions.

A perfect example comes from one of the forty-seven recently discovered (in 1945) ancient Gnostic texts in Egypt, namely, the Gospel of Thomas. Though some liberal scholars try to claim that Thomas is the first expression of the faith of Jesus and belongs in the Christian canon, as we will see below, it becomes manifestly clear that Thomas is in direct opposition to the books of the New Testament canon. I have pointed this out in a book-length study.<sup>23</sup>

In the Gospels of the New Testament, which were written by the earliest followers of Jesus in the middle or toward the later part of the first century A.D., Jesus asks his disciples to tell him what people say about him. The popular answers miss the mark, but the correct answer is given by Peter through divine revelation from the Father: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, probably put together toward the end of the second century A.D. as a "pious Gnostic fiction,"<sup>24</sup> the very opposite is said.<sup>25</sup> In a polemic against the early church, Peter is incorrectly made to say that Jesus is merely "a righteous angel." Only Thomas understands who Jesus truly is, but in a strange and unexpected way. The Thomas of history says to Jesus in John's Gospel, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). This false Gnostic Thomas says:

“Master, I am incapable of saying what you are like.” The Jesus of John’s Gospel promises blessing to all who believe what Thomas has just confessed (John 20:29). The reply of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is quite different. Jesus says: “I am not your master.” We are clearly dealing here with two quite contradictory descriptions of Jesus.

Then the Gnostic Jesus takes Thomas to one side and tells him three secrets. When Thomas returns, the other disciples ask him what Jesus said. Thomas refuses to tell them because he knows that “they will stone him.” This is a clear reference to the Jewish penalty for blasphemy, for making oneself God. What does this mean? Jesus will not allow Thomas to call him “master” because Thomas has “drunk from the bubbling stream.” Jesus further declares, “He who drinks from my mouth will become like me. I will become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed.”<sup>26</sup> Thomas, called Didymus, which means “twin,” is the true Gnostic who, as the twin of Jesus, knows himself to be divine, like Jesus. Here the Creator-creature distinction of biblical revelation is utterly destroyed.

As an “objective historian,” Elaine Pagels, who blends Buddhism with her version of Christianity,<sup>27</sup> attempted to rehabilitate the Gnostic “Christians” by portraying them as forgotten heroes of an old class war between the politically motivated orthodox patriarchal bishops and their hapless spiritual victims. She presents Gnosticism as “a wider valid expression of Christianity,”<sup>28</sup> and Gnostic gospels as complementary to the canonical ones. Thomas seemed to fit that agenda to a T. But Jesus of Thomas, in addition to teaching the Gnostic Thomas that he is divine, makes a clearly pantheistic or polytheistic statement:<sup>29</sup> “It is I who am the All. From me did the All come forth . . . . Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up a stone and you will find me

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there.”<sup>30</sup> Such a view of God is clearly pantheistic and Oneist (that is, paganly monist) and is typical of the entire Gnostic system of belief. The most-respected experts on ancient Gnosticism are two German scholars—Hans Jonas<sup>31</sup> and Kurt Rudolph.<sup>32</sup> Neither sees Gnosticism as Christian. For Jonas, Gnosticism is an ancient form of modern existentialism. For Rudolph, Gnosticism is an independent world religion, not a narrowly limited Christian heresy. He argues that Gnosticism was “a parasite prosper[ing] on the soil of a host religion.”<sup>33</sup>

### BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What quest lies at the heart of Gnosticism? How does this make Gnosticism similar to postmodernism?
- ✦ How is Thomas in the Gospel of Thomas a Gnostic figure? What does he “know” about Jesus? What does he know about himself?
- ✦ What examples does the author give of differences between the Gospel of Thomas and the four historical Gospels? Why do Christians reject the Gospel of Thomas?
- ✦ Why do two experts on ancient Gnosticism also reject Gnosticism as an expression of Christianity? What other philosophies does Gnosticism resemble?

Though Gnostic thought is radically dualistic in affirming opposition between spirit and matter, regarding the entire material universe as both an illusion and the work of an evil and inferior divine being, yet the individual Gnostic sees no opposition between himself and God, no ontological Creator-creature distinction. The Gnostic is made of the same spiritual stuff as the great “Father of the Totalities” or “the All.” This is clearly seen by Rudolph, who describes Gnosticism as “dualism on a monistic background.”<sup>34</sup>

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A contemporary Wiccan priestess of Isis, Caitlín Matthews, agrees: “Gnosticism serves most admirably as a bridge for paganism to infiltrate Christianity [in our time].”<sup>58</sup> She announces “the Second Coming of the Goddess,” that is, the “Sophianic Millennium,” the era of goddess-blessing and worship when all peoples and faiths will be united. For this to happen, the monotheistic Jahweh must be silenced as an era of polytheism approaches.

### BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What factors coincided with the discovery of the Gnostic texts known as the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Coptic texts? What are the philosophical connections between these cultural developments? How did Gnosticism serve as a bridge for paganism into Christianity?

## POLYTHEISM

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As we pass from Gnosticism to polytheism, it is worthy of note that a modern authority on polytheism, Jordan Paper, observes: “The first Christian heresies, labeled Gnosticism, tended toward polytheism.”<sup>59</sup> Effectively, we are dealing with variants of the same theme.

Polytheism is as old as the hills and “covers all the cultures of the world.”<sup>60</sup> It includes all the nonbiblical religions as far apart as Buddhism, Native American shamanism, and Chinese, Manchurian, Hawaiian, and ancient Greek and Roman religions, because, says Paper, polytheism “fits the human mind and experience so comfortably.”<sup>61</sup> It is “the human cultural norm . . . reflecting human nature,” whereas, says Paper, monotheism is “contrary” to human nature.<sup>62</sup> This is certainly true. The polytheist goes within to meet the gods. The theist goes outside the self to meet the God of utter transcendence.

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So this ancient system is the direct opposite of biblical faith, as Paper recognizes: “Monotheism and polytheism are ideologically in opposition.”<sup>63</sup> Obviously, the idea of one God versus many gods represents two clearly contradictory confessions, but the difference has to do not only with number, but with kind. The God of monotheism is the transcendent Other, the Creator beyond the creation; the gods of polytheism are immanent within creation, and “creation” and human beings share their divine nature.<sup>64</sup> According to Paper, for the polytheist, the multiplicity of gods is an advantage—“the more the better . . . [for] one has nothing to lose by making offerings to every available deity.”<sup>65</sup> This is especially true because the deities are not assumed to be omnipotent, nor are they always successful with regard to human requests. Some indeed may lose their power altogether.<sup>66</sup> This is doubtless why polytheism contains both unitary and multiple understandings of the divine. In Hinduism, which has 250 million gods, Shiva is often understood as the supreme god. Moreover, in spite of this multitude of deities present in the various Hindu traditions, they all share an essential commonality of the Great Spirit. Thus, many gods and one Great Spirit can be found side by side.<sup>67</sup> And while this Great Spirit can sometimes be called “the Creator,” polytheistic traditions “tend not to have creation myths”<sup>68</sup> because polytheism is not interested in the creation event.

### BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ Polytheism is a major feature of religions found all over the world. Why does Jordan Paper argue that this is the case? In what way does the author agree with him?
- ✦ What does Paper see as an advantage to polytheism? Pragmatically speaking, what are some disadvantages for the polytheist?

Although postmodernism, polytheism, and the ancient heresy of Gnosticism seem unrelated, Peter Jones shows that they are part of an ancient religious worldview that seeks to impose significant elements of a pagan civilization on our once “Christian” Western culture. Jones helps us to understand this opposing spiritual system so that we can counter it with the biblical gospel.

*“The Pagan Heart of Today’s Culture merits the attention of every minister, teacher, parent, and student.”*

—**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas

*“Bit by bit, the details come into focus, and the reader perceives the true threat of these movements and the urgency of faith in the true gospel of Jesus Christ.”*

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Written to equip and strengthen laypeople in their defense of the faith, *Christian Answers to Hard Questions* challenges contemporary opposition to Christianity with concise, practical answers.

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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