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The Danger of Gnosticism — And Its Attraction

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Just count this as unlikely agreement week. Earlier, I found reason to agree with a statement by heretical retired Bishop John Shelby Spong [[see here](#)]. Now, I find basic agreement with and appreciation for an editorial published in *The Christian Century*. Somebody better check the water.

In the [editorial](#), published in the May 16, 2006 edition of the magazine, the editors get to the heart of the Gnostic quest and its attraction. They suggest that *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown and the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins — different as they are — suggest a common appeal to a hidden secret to be revealed in the respective books. They further suggest that *The Da Vinci Code*, with its themes that Mary Magdalene had married Jesus and that the church has conspired to hide the “divine feminine” is “the sort of thing that presumably appeals to far-out liberals” while the *Left Behind* series “appeals to far-right biblical fundamentalists who scour the news for signs that the rapture is coming.”

As the editors argue:

Yet these two publishing phenomena share more than success in the marketplace. [B]oth trade on a fundamentally gnostic premise: that most of the church has been duped and that the real Christian belief is a secret that will now be divulged to the privileged reader.

And:

Even though Dan Brown's novel has sold some 40 million copies and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's series some 60 million, their respective “secrets” still have the sexy smell of novelty and of being a threat to established ecclesial and political views. Both also update the dusty old gospel of the churches with action-packed stories that move so fast that readers tend not to notice the problems in the stories or the mediocrity of the prose. All the authors insist on the absolute plausibility if not veracity of the events they narrate. All they have done is lay a fictional story over the truth, they claim . . .

Finally:

The early church rejected gnosticism and its purveyors (as in the case of the recently rereleased Gospel of Judas) because the gnostics were telling a fundamentally different story from that narrated by the texts that became the New Testament. The gnostics denigrated such fleshy things as the goodness of creation, the election of Israel, the humanity of Jesus and the resurrection of the body. (That is why Judas was a hero to the gnostics: he helped liberate Jesus from his body.) The church developed the rule of faith—the creeds, the canon, and the role of bishops in apostolic succession—to keep Christian individuals and groups from spinning off whatever religious fantasy they liked, writing it up and claiming it was the “real” thing. Unlike the gnostics, the church told its story openly and engaged in public debate about its veracity. To hide its story would have betrayed the church's evangelical purpose of being a light to the world. Our age has some of the same unease that the gnostics had with the goodness of creation, the particularity of Israel's election, and the flesh of Jesus. It is also uneasy about the body (a discomfort that lurks behind The Da Vinci Code's ostensible effort to affirm the body). When the junk food of the gnostic stories fails to satisfy, churches should be there with the soul food of the gospel.

Ditto on that last sentence.

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