

The Non-Christian Anti-cosmic Roots of Amillennialism

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As the church expanded and moved into the Greek and Roman world, Christianity was, over time, quite literally transformed into a non-Jewish and somewhat anti-cosmic religion. While some modern religious scholars seem to be confused on this point, the Bible actually takes a very positive view of the physical world, at least in regard to both its origin and its ultimate future. At creation God declared His creation to be “good” (Gen. 1:31) The Old Testament view of the good life is clearly “pro” cosmic (*i.e.*, the physical world was created for, and is adequate and suitable as an environment in which the promises and purposes of God for man can be fulfilled). The New Testament does not differ from this position, though it does see the need for a restoration, or re-creation, in order to completely ameliorate the effects of man’s sin and the curse brought upon the earth because of that sin. Both the gospels and the book of Revelation picture Christ as returning to the earth to establish His kingdom; and Revelation describes the heavenly city as descending to rest upon the restored earth. Unfortunately, some students of the Bible mistake the physical world for the world powers of this present age (*i.e.*, the world system), which are under the influence of the powers of darkness. According to the New Testament, the world is presently under the curse of man’s sin, and until that curse is lifted, the world is under the strong influence (and to some degree, the control) of the powers of darkness (Rom. 8:18-23). Hence, the ways of the world are evil, but the physical world itself is not evil, it is only suffering the effects of the curse brought upon it by man’s rebellion against God (an extrinsic condition). There is then a distinction to be made between “the world-physical,” and “the world-moral.” Confusion on this point can lead, and has led, to an anti-cosmic worldview, by seeing what is physical as intrinsically inadequate to the purpose of God for man.

Owing to the influence of Platonism and Gnosticism in the early centuries of the church, both of which are highly anti-cosmic, the gospel was reshaped according to the prevailing view that the physical world is inferior and unredeemable. This shift in worldview profoundly impacted every area of theology, especially the doctrines concerning the nature of God, Christ, original sin and salvation, and eschatology; and directly or indirectly gave rise to virtually all of the great theological disputes of the first four centuries of the church. While the early church eventually worked out most of the difficulties with respect to the nature of God (the Trinity), and original sin and salvation, eschatology fell victim to Greek philosophic and Gnostic influence. This happened because of the prevailing influence of Gnosticism in the early centuries of the church, and because the non-literal, and heavily Platonic system of interpretation developed by the Jewish interpreter Philo (of Alexandria) was picked up by Clement (of Alexandria), and passed to his student Origen (of Alexandria), and through the influence of Origen this type of interpretation eventually influenced Augustine (who for the last thirty-

four years of his life was the bishop of Hippo (present day Annaba, in northeastern Tunisia, on the north African coast). Augustine, the last in this chain, owing to his great stature in church history, is responsible for codifying, in the western church, the non-literal interpretation of eschatological prophecy, which serves as the basis of amillennialism. There can be no doubt that the dual influence of Platonism and Gnosticism in the early church was clearly the major factor in the rejection of premillennialism.

The background of “Christian” anti-cosmic worldviews in the early church

Christian Gnosticism permeated the Greek and Roman world, taking root first in North Africa, then in Syria/Palestine, then in East Asia, and finally in West Asia and Europe. Since this parallels the advance of non-premillennial eschatology, one is bound to ask whether there might have been a connection between Gnosticism and the growing rejection of premillennialism in the early Church in the first few centuries.

Just as Platonism is an anti-cosmic philosophy, Gnosticism is an anti-cosmic theology, meaning that it views the physical world as inferior (at best), or perhaps evil (at worst) in some intrinsic way. While the Bible views the world as being under the temporary influence of evil, owing to the fall of man, the critical difference between the biblical worldview and the anti-cosmic worldviews is that, according to the Bible, the world was created “good;” it only came under a curse when man fell, and in man’s redemption, the earth itself will experience it’s own redemption and restoration (Rom. 8:18-23). Platonism and Gnosticism on the other hand, view the physical realm as intrinsically inferior to the heavenly, or “ideal” world, of which it is but a mere reflection. Since they view the physical world as intrinsically inferior, the idea of redemption for creation, or the possibility of an earthly eternal kingdom of God located on earth is excluded. According to these views, the world, at its best, would still be intrinsically inferior and unsuitable as an eternal abode for God and man. In practical terms, no anti-cosmic worldview can be compatible with biblical premillennialism—the doctrine of an eternal kingdom on earth with Christ personally and eternally present to rule—and this is why Gnosticism, in bloc, denied the earlier premillennial teachings of the Bible (understood according to the normal use of language). While premillennialism can be found in some of the church fathers, the defection away from biblical premillennialism was early, and the development of amillennialism followed soon thereafter. If the reformation teaches any lesson (from a Protestant viewpoint), it is that the Bible—not church history—is the authoritative determiner of truth.

The features of Gnosticism

While an anti-cosmic attitude is at the metaphysical root of Gnosticism, its determinative feature is the belief that the “God” of the Old Testament is a creature (actually an angel, or “archon,” referred to generically as the “Demiurge,” or personally by the name, “Ialtabaoth”). The Gnostics reasoned that since the world is deeply flawed, it must have been created by an inferior, though very powerful being. They believed that the true, eternal God—the Original Creator—is higher and unknown to the “God” of the Old Testament—the Demiurge, or “Artisan,” whom they viewed as not only inferior and self-absorbed, but also somewhat malevolent (according to some Gnostics). It appears that the Gnostics arrived at this worldview through their rejection of original sin. That is, in failing to understand (or accept) the biblical view of the fall of man and its effects upon the world, they thus attributed the failure in creation to the Creator himself; but wishing to preserve the notion of a holy God, they hence removed the true God further from creation into a higher (and separate) realm, and attributed creation to a lesser being (the Demiurge). Of course Platonism was the template for this worldview, and it is generally acknowledged that the Gnostic ideas regarding creation were drawn largely from Plato’s mythical account in *Timaeus*. The Gnostics developed an elaborate mythology and body of literature to elucidate and support their views. They were forced to do this because their doctrines clearly could not be established through any normal understanding of the Bible. [For those who may be less familiar with Gnosticism, documents like *The Gospel of Thomas* that are currently being popularized in modern religious fiction such as Dan Brown’s, *The Da Vinci Code*, are for the most part, Gnostic writings that were rejected by the early church because their theological content is incompatible with the Bible. In every case, these writings are pseudepigraphal; that is, they were not written by the people whose names they bear, or at the time claimed. They were simply forgeries designed to elucidate and support a Gnostic worldview.]

A feature that while not unique, is nonetheless fundamental to Gnosticism, is “dualism.” Dualism proceeds naturally from an anti-cosmic worldview. If the physical realm is inferior, or evil, it is clear that the true God could have nothing to do with it directly. He could be neither its creator, nor its redeemer. Thus, Gnostics not only denied that the true God made the world; they also denied the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ. There were many flavors of Gnosticism. Some Gnostics held that Christ wasn’t a man at all, but that he only appeared to be human; some held that he wasn’t God at all, that he was only a man. Still others held that Jesus was a man and that the “Christ Spirit” rested upon him only temporarily, but was not joined to him (hypostatically constituting a singular person). In all cases, however, the Gnostics denied that Christ (as God in the flesh) died on the cross. Since the Gnostics believed that sin is an illusion, they saw no need for atonement; to them, the Son was a messenger

from the realm beyond that of the Demiurge. He was a messenger sent by the True God to reveal the knowledge of the truth (the *gnosis*) to those capable of receiving it, that men have a spark of divinity within them that, with the proper keys of knowledge (the *gnosis*), can return to God from whence it ultimately originated. Those who do not, or cannot, receive this knowledge are doomed to remain trapped in this physical existence through perpetual reincarnations. (Gnostic mythology, which denies that Christ died on the cross, often describes him as living out his life elsewhere, even marrying and having children; but this mythology was developed only to support Gnostic dualism, which could not accept the incarnation, and thus could not accept divine atonement upon the cross. Some Gnostics taught that Jesus mysteriously switched bodies with Simon the Cyrenian who carried the cross, and that it was actually Simon who died, not Christ.)

The mythology that was developed by the Gnostics was rich and varied. For instance, some Gnostics taught that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, raped Eve and fathered Cain and Abel. They taught that only Seth was the son of Adam, and viewed only the descendants of Seth as being capable of receiving the *gnosis* (the true knowledge that provides the key to escaping the physical realm)—of course, they viewed themselves as being “Sethites.” They held that the tree of life was a trap placed in the Garden by Yahweh/Jehovah (the Demiurge) to keep men trapped in this physical existence, and that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a way of escaping this trap. Consequently, the serpent was actually an agent of good in tempting Eve (according to *The Secret Book of John*, which presents the typical Gnostic view of creation). One might ask the question why the Gnostics appealed to the Old Testament at all, since their views obviously don’t square with the biblical record. The answer would seem to be that while they viewed the Old Testament as having been written from the perspective of the Demiurge (and therefore seriously flawed), they still needed it as the foundation of Christianity of which they viewed themselves as being a part. In other words, they were “stuck” with the Old Testament. Without the Old Testament, Christianity had no validity, and without Christianity there would be no Gnosticism. So rather than deny the Old Testament, they simply chose to reinterpret it according to their own mythology. [Amillennialists follow the same pattern. Their doctrine is incompatible with what the Bible actually states; nevertheless they are stuck with prophetic material like the book of Revelation, and so they simply deny its literal meaning and reinterpret it according to their own preconceived theology, even though that theology blatantly contradicts the plain statements of Scripture.]

Since the Gnostics viewed the God of the Old Testament as malevolent, they viewed the Jewish people as being in league with a malevolent power, hence Gnosticism developed a characteristically anti-Jewish flavor. The futuristic eschatology of the Old Testament, which was characterized as both physical and

Jewish-centered, was discarded in favor of a realized personal eschatology which the individual enters into both when they come into possession of the *gnosis*, and at death—when they can then use the keys of *gnosis* to escape the physical realm and return to the true God. [The amillennial parallel to this is the belief that the first resurrection is to be understood as rising from the water of baptism; again, just as in Gnosticism, future eschatology is replaced by realized personal eschatology. Also amillennialism’s concept of “replacement theology,” in which the church replaces Israel in the kingdom program, has been the source of much anti-Jewish sentiment within the church and within church dominated culture. Paul warned the church concerning this tendency in Romans 11:1-36.]

No biblical scholar can seriously believe that the kingdom idea taught in the Old Testament is of a kingdom that is primarily spiritual (as opposed to physical) in nature. Such an idea must be injected backwards from a particularly narrow understanding of the New Testament gospels. [See the author’s essays, *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, and *How the Amillennial Conception of the Kingdom is Developed* (www.biblicalreader.com).] In fact it seems to have been a particularly Gnostic trait to think of the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament as analogous to that of the spiritual realm to the physical realm. In other words, to the Gnostic, the Old Testament represented the theology of the physical realm (an inferior theology), whereas the New Testament represented the theology of the spirit realm (a superior revelation). This is, of course, a low view of inspiration, and calls into question the inspiration and veracity of the Old Testament revelation—just as amillennialism’s “reinterpretation” of the Old Testament in light of the New calls into question the veracity of the OT, and the inspiration of the NT (since its inspiration claim is based on its connection to and consistency with the prior revelation). Amillennialism also parallels Gnosticism both in its view that the Old Testament bears a dependant (rather than determinative) relationship to the New Testament and in its view of realized personal eschatology—believing that the first resurrection is to be understood spiritually as rising from the water of baptism (or at the time of conversion), rather than a future event, as a normal understanding of biblical statements would indicate.

There can be no doubt that the development of amillennial thought, particularly in Augustine, was influenced by Gnostic dualism and by neo-Platonism. [Simone Pétremont, who has written extensively on early Gnosticism, states that both Origen and Augustine were, “profoundly influenced by Gnosticism and to a large extent incorporated it into their doctrines” (*A Separate God: the Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, p. 24).] The denial of the doctrine of a literal millennium with Christ ruling upon the earth as is plainly taught in both the Old and New Testaments is not the result of the discovery of a superior revelation of truth in the New Testament, leading to the true “spiritual” meaning (and reinterpretation) of the kingdom theology of the Old Testament; it is, in large

measure, the result of a pagan anti-cosmic, and anti-Jewish worldview that crept into the church in the early centuries of its theological development, and has now been codified in Catholic and Reformed theology. This was largely due to its adoption by Augustine—who seems to have adopted many of the core interpretations and key hermeneutical principles from Tichonius (who was the first person known to have presented an entirely “spiritual” interpretation of the book of Revelation).

[Of course in referring to Augustine we must also consider the fact that Rome had developed a patron relationship with the church. Augustine’s City of God was written as a defense of Christianity after the sacking of Rome in A.D. 410. Had Augustine then taken a premillennial approach to biblical prophecy, he would have thrown gasoline on the fire of Roman criticism of Christianity by taking the position that Christ would ultimately overthrow Rome in the establishing of his own earthly kingdom. Such an idea would hardly have accomplished what Augustine desired in his attempt to conciliate skeptical Romans to a more favorable view of Christianity. The sad truth is that the church of Augustine’s day had gone to bed with “the Devil,” and now that they were chained to him, they dare not make him mad. While Platonism and Gnosticism provided the theological “soup” in which amillennialism could develop, it was likely a combination of several factors that lead to the codification of amillennialism in the early church: the desire to make the Scriptures palatable to skeptical and philosophically “sophisticated” Greeks, the influence of anti-cosmic dualism within the church, and sensitivity to the negative criticism of some influential Roman citizens that likely would have been exacerbated by a premillennial stance. (Many of the Roman elite displaced by the Visigoth invasion had sought refuge in North Africa, and some undoubtedly grumbled over the fact that within such a few short years of adopting Christianity, Rome had suffered such a humiliating defeat.)]

It is important to recognize that amillennialism does not represent the biblical view of the kingdom. (It certainly was not the view of any biblical writer.) The biblical view can only be characterized as “premillennial”—with Christ establishing his kingdom on earth at his return. Amillennialism is the result of taking an originally and fundamentally Jewish kingdom theology, melting it down (by denying its literal meaning) and recasting it in a Greek mold, in which the centrality of the Jewish people, and nation, in the kingdom is denied (through allegorical, or what is termed, “spiritualized” interpretation). The difficulty is that since amillennialism has been codified in the church, both Catholic and Protestant, for over fifteen hundred years, most theologians believe that in defending amillennialism they are defending the truth. Indeed they are defending the orthodox position, in so far as “orthodoxy” means, the “accepted” view. But the question isn’t: “Is it orthodox?” The question is: “Is it biblical?” And that question can be answered by asking another question: “Can it be shown that any

biblical author, according to his own authorial intent, taught that the kingdom is entirely spiritual?” The answer to that question is, “No”—that’s why amillennialists are forced to allegorize future prophecy. The fact that Jesus spoke of an immanent kingdom (spiritually present) does not deny the physical aspect of the kingdom so well established from the Old Testament, and reaffirmed in the book of Revelation (in spite of recapitulation theory, which represents incredibly inept exegesis). Anyone who thinks about the kingdom promises must realize that any physical kingdom would have to be preceded by spiritual renewal (a spiritual aspect of the kingdom), else who would populate such a kingdom? Perhaps the problem is that for too long the church has thought antithetically (*i.e.*, if the kingdom is spiritual, it cannot be physical), rather than synthetically (*i.e.*, the kingdom obviously has spiritual and physical dimensions, and one does not deny the other). Of course another piece of the puzzle is anti-Semitism. Until the church is willing, if it should be determined to be God’s will, to see the Jewish nation as preeminent in the kingdom, it can never acknowledge premillennialism as the teaching of the Bible—and I suspect this is more of a factor in the ongoing insistence on amillennialism (and postmillennialism) than anyone cares to admit.

[For additional information on the biblical basis of premillennialism see: *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, by the author. For information on how amillennialists rationalize amillennialism see, *How the Amillennial Conception of the Kingdom is Developed*, by the author. For information on covenant theology see, *The Problem With Covenant Theology*, also by the author. These and other resources are available free at *The Biblical Reader* at www.biblicalreader.com.]

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