

BOOK REVIEW

***Ars Vitae: The Fate of Inwardness
and the Return of the Ancient Arts of Living***

by Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn

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As a retired teacher, I fondly recall how I was often bemused by the things I overheard my students say. America's youth tend to be exposed to, and often express, the most current cultural trends, primarily due to their exposure to the internet and social media. One morning I witnessed something particularly perplexing. As they passed each other in the hallway, several boys greeted each other by slamming their fists into their chests while proudly proclaiming, "Strength and Honor!" Over the passing weeks, more boys greeted their classmates similarly.

Of course, the line was immediately recognizable from Russell Crowe's character Maximus Decimus Meridius in *The Gladiator*. The phenomenon prompted a discussion in the classroom about the film and its meaning. Several students remarked how much they admired Maximus for his ability to face life's adversities with inner courage. Interest in Stoicism was increasingly evident as a few students began their search for the origins of the philosophy and discovered the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Where some studied, others took action that was less than desirable on a middle school campus. Parents and teachers became concerned; the chest-pounding quickly became a display of testosterone-driven adolescent bravado that demanded disciplinary action by school officials. Philosophy can have that effect if not approached correctly. To be sure, there is fear regarding the ancient philosophies, due mainly to lack of understanding regarding the subject. Philosophy is no longer considered a core subject in American schools. When one is finally exposed to it, the study is a requirement in a university. Even in the ideological centers and information houses that pass as higher education, the topic is often either lifeless and dry, or overburdened with *du jour* serving of politics and social reform. Perhaps Americans have become complacent regarding philosophy, in that they have become akin to the proverbial frog in the pot of water that gradually increased in temperature, which ultimately kills the frog before the poor creature realizes it has been boiled.

In current postmodern/metamodern America, individuals are increasingly feeling lost, alienated, and disillusioned, searching for a meaningful existence that is too often not found. The evidence is all around us in the form of increased addictions, looting, rioting, and a general sense of loss. The increasing focus on self and narcissism Christopher Lasch (1979) vigorously decried has continued to the point of a virtual cultural meltdown. Nevertheless, that is not to

say there are no modern-day sophists willing to offer advice for a price. The self-help industry makes a fortune by showing people what is wrong with them, then providing quick, and often unfruitful, answers. In her profoundly insightful and thought-provoking work, Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, Professor of History at Syracuse University and daughter of the renowned, late Christopher Lasch, noted, “the problems with contemporary culture stem in part from its inability, even in the event that basic needs are met, to provide adequate resources for the living of everyday life” (9). Lasch-Quinn’s analysis of the American cultural emphasis on the self, emotion, and questions about how to live are put into perspective with the classical philosophies and schools of thought in ancient Greco-Rome.

Relying heavily on observations of Voegelin (1968) and others, Lasch-Quinn posits that what we experience in contemporary American culture is a result of the resurgence of Gnosticism. More than an early Christian heresy, Gnosticism existed before the birth of Christ and has continued throughout modern history. Gnosticism's earmarks are unmistakable and evident in much of our media, institutions, and cultural movements, and Lasch-Quinn provides enough examples to make one wonder how influential Gnosticism truly is. *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and *The Matrix* (1999) are provided as examples of its influence in popular media, demonstrating the Woke culture and suspicion that we might have been deceived about history and reality. It leaves little wonder why conspiracy theories flourish. However, one could continue the search and discover strong Gnostic influence in *Fringe* (Fox 2018-2013), *Grimm* (NBC 2011-2017), and *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon 2015-2019), all popular television programs. Even seemingly innocuous programs such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* were not immune.

Lasch-Quinn’s work not only informs but urges the reader to seek a deeper understanding of the current problems we face. Gnosticism has been informing American culture; however, the media has not been the only vehicle used. Gnosticism has become the mindset for many Americans, with strains in virtually all cultural institutions. Citing Voegelin’s identification of the six major characteristics of Gnosticism, Lasch-Quinn unveils how Gnosticism has permeated modern life, leaving any remnants of a supreme referent discarded, and resulting in a relativistic morality where emotivism dominates and manipulates the cultural discourse. A cynical “dissatisfaction with the present situation . . . the need to change the ‘order of being’ in real historical time; man’s ability to make these changes; and a special knowledge or gnosis, a ‘formula for self and world salvation’” has taken hold of American culture (60).

Lasch-Quinn directs the reader to the earlier communitarianism of previous generations, where duty and obligation were the standards, and how that concept was shifted toward the Gnostic therapeutic and the emphasis on self. The elevation of the human self has replaced earlier notions of the self in society, and the Gnostic-grounded search for utopia resulted in modern social engineering. Science was not spared, having become a cult of knowledge that no longer searches for truth, but creates an unscientific orthodoxy of its own. The American

religious experience was also tainted with Gnostic beliefs, with some maintaining that humans are part divine, “the ultimate self-esteem builder” (67). The New Age spirituality is only one symptom, but Lasch-Quinn wrote of much deeper indications of Gnosticism. Even architecture, as exemplified in the openly Gnostic-inspired Samitaur building in Los Angeles, was examined. Gnosticism is a part of the American culture, and it is firmly planted. However, there has been a recent swing away from therapeutic, Gnostic, psychological humanity toward a practical philosophical approach.

Interestingly, the practical philosophies experiencing a resurgence, Lasch-Quinn claims, are in the forms of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism. Again, Lasch-Quinn is quick to offer numerous examples that are well supported by prior research and commentaries. While embraced by some as a heroic mien in the face of life’s adversities, the rise of Stoicism is problematic and, as Lasch-Quinn reminds us, “human social life is not so simple, and human nature resists such gross categorization. The knee-jerk resort to hypermasculinity as a solution simplifies problems and current conditions needing addressing. It lends itself to political reaction and social exclusion, hierarchy, and domination” (140). Nevertheless, Lasch-Quinn reminds the reader that not all of Stoicism should be set aside. Some elements can be useful in life.

Similarly, Lasch-Quinn addresses the Epicurean movement in American culture, noting that “Current-day Epicureanism turns to experience as the goal of life, giving rise to a sort of ‘bucket list’ culture” (148). Americans have an insatiable appetite for novel experience from travel to dining, and have become a nation of experience consumers. One need not look further than the television and film industry to witness the phenomenon. Yet, “as classical Epicureanism taught, anyone wishing to live a life filled with enjoyment must know when to refrain from as well as when to surrender to the call of pleasure, a point some modern versions miss” (149). Lasch-Quinn’s approach to Cynicism defines much of the postmodernist trend in America. Again, Lasch-Quinn is careful to demonstrate Cynicism’s examples in the media, and traces the movement with balance and insight, while acknowledging that Cynicism was not a school of philosophy. Instead, it is an “approach” and “a kind of tradition, but paradoxically one of opposition or antifoundational thought” (205). Ultimately, “cynicism is about truth-telling, that much is true, but it has little to go on when it comes to truth” (262).

Lasch-Quinn suggests that Neoplatonism offered an alternative or, at the very least, an equal balance to the prior notions. The chapter on Neoplatonism provides a brilliant argument in response to the Gnosticism encountered in the first chapter, thereby balancing her work. Alienation resulting from Gnosticism’s dualism, for example, is resolved through the Neoplatonic approach of Plotinus. The inherent failings of Stoicism and Epicureanism are also addressed with precision, and demonstrate the authority of Platonism overall. Lasch-Quinn’s discussion of St. Augustine is *apropos* historically and theologically, her critique providing greater insight, continuity, and connection to one of Christendom’s greatest minds.

Lasch-Quinn traces the origins of each philosophical tradition with brevity and clarity so that the reader is informed before analyzing the influence each has on contemporary American culture. For those unfamiliar with the philosophies, it is sure to be appreciated. Her evaluation of the Greco-Roman traditions and their influence offers a significant contribution to understanding the current cultural dilemma facing America today, and is both timely and thought-provoking as the nation seeks to understand itself and the future.

For those interested in the sociology of religion, particularly American Christianity, Lasch-Quinn's work serves as an indictment. That Gnosticism permeates much of American Christianity, regardless of denomination, is blatantly evident. The increased emphasis on experience over doctrine, the God-and-me culture, and Christian self-help programs are salient examples. Perusal of the shelves of any Christian bookstore will confirm any suspicions. Unless Christianity takes notice and acts, the Christian faith will become little more than an ancient philosophy, a quaint relic, one that future generations will merely consider among the excellent life choices. People are searching for meaning in life, and if Lasch-Quinn is correct and Christianity does not respond to the call, Gnostic-imbued culture will provide it. The problem is, are Americans open to listening, or are they too content to remain in the cave Plato described?

References

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- Voegelin, Eric. 2004. *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Wilmington, DE: ISE Books.

Ken Schmidt
Brandman University