

adulterated . . . and mixed up with imagery derived from science fiction—flying saucers, extraterrestrial intervention in human history, escape from the earth to a new home in space.”

The New Age movement is to gnosticism, Lasch says, what fundamentalism is to Christianity. “Both rest on a therapeutic view of religion, a belief in its immediate power to produce health and peace of

mind The question is not whether New Age therapies really work but whether religion ought to be reduced to therapy. If it offers nothing more than a spiritual high, religion becomes another drug in a drug-ridden society.” Yet a “more rigorous” version of gnosticism is not the solution. “[The] only corrective to the ersatz religions of the New Age,” he concludes, “is to turn to the real thing.”

Divorce from the West

“The Islamic World and the Latin West, 1350–1500” by Archibald R. Lewis, in *Speculum* (Oct. 1990), Medieval Acad. of America, 1430 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

When did today’s split between the Islamic world and the West occur? During the 14th and 15th centuries, said the late University of Massachusetts historian Lewis. The attitudes “that these two great world civilizations formed” then toward each other “still govern much of how they interact today.” By the mid-14th century, while Western Europe was falling on hard times (with the Black Death, economic depression, the Hundred Years War, and pervasive loss of confidence in the papacy), the Muslim world was starting to emerge from a difficult era of its own. In the decades that followed, Islamic strength and confidence returned, and there was an extremely important religious revival.

The Muslim world had been all but torn apart in the 13th century by the expansion of a crusading Latin Europe and the attacks of Mongol armies. But the clouds gradually lifted after the mid-14th century. Slave armies the Muslims created proved able to defeat the Mongols in battle. And Ottoman sultans from Asia Minor crossed into Europe and within decades controlled most of the Balkans. A major European crusade in 1396 to check this menace was repelled. Constantinople, the thousand-year-old Christian capital, fell to the Ottomans in 1453. The Muslim world stretched from North Africa to Southeast Asia.

But even more important than the Muslims’ new military strength, Lewis said, was a religious revival. Muslim religious law (*Shari’a*), “interpreted by legal scholars known as *ulema* in courts throughout

the entire Islamic world, came to govern every aspect of [Muslims’] lives.” The growth of Sufi mysticism, which “dealt with the hearts,” also strengthened Islam. And schisms ceased to divide Muslims after 1350, as orthodox Sunni Islam largely prevailed. But the new religious ardor, Lewis noted, was “hostile to [the] philosophical and speculative thought that had been the glory of . . . medieval Islam.”

Meanwhile, in the West, despite many conflicts and difficulties, “much that was hopeful also was at work.” A new capitalism was stirring, the nation-state appeared, and vital institutions such as the medieval town came into existence. The number of universities increased fivefold between 1300 and 1500. And scientific progress continued, “laying the basis for the [modern] secular intellectual world.”

As Latin Europe thus prepared itself “for its world role in a way that was to be more effective than that of its Islamic neighbors,” a divorce between the two great cultures took place. Much of the blame, in Lewis’s view, “rests on the Islamic side where, after 1350, all Western European influences, except military technologies, were rejected.” But much blame, he said, also rests with Western Europe, which “closed itself off from the same Islamic culture it had earlier found so stimulating Western Europeans were to advance into the wider world, separated from and hostile to the culture of the great Islamic civilization nearby. And this was to remain so for centuries to come.”