

# Evangelical Countercult Apologists versus Astrology: An Unresolved Conundrum

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*Astrology is a religious, divinatory tool with an ancient pedigree found across many cultures. In the current era astrology is widely used in do-it-yourself (DIY) approaches to spirituality. Since the Reformation, there have been three primary Evangelical Protestant responses to astrology: “critical rejection”, “qualified embrace”, and “apologetic engagement”. Contemporary polemics resemble a form of reality maintenance bounded by “fear” of the alien other, with the objective being the nihilation of astrology as a spiritual competitor. Evangelical Protestants face increased challenges from DIY spiritualities concerning divination and guidance. This paper inquires into the Evangelical responses, noting how each one reflects sympathies or antipathies toward the concept of natural theology or general revelation in the history of Christian thought. The discussion explores these issues, as well as considering what theological questions arise vis-à-vis astrology.*

Astrology is a commonplace spiritual tool with an ancient pedigree from Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, Vedic and Chinese cultures (Neugebauer, 1969; Barton, 1994). Yet astrology has never been a static tool in either its theoretical constructs or practical use. The diversity of activities that have been subsumed under astrology includes: the seasonal observation of planetary, lunar and solar bodies in the sky, correlating planetary positions with meteorological forecasts and medical diagnoses, feng shui designs for buildings, casting horoscopes for nations, kings and individuals, and predictive prophecies based on planetary conjunctions.

In the contemporary setting of postmodernity, astrology has once again surged to the foreground via New Age, Neo-Pagan and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) forms of spirituality (Kemp, 2004; Melton, 1985). Seekers in these pathways believe astrology assists in understanding one’s relationship to God and the cosmos, and in the pursuit of answers to questions of guidance for daily living. In many respects astrology has been transformed into a Jungian-styled tool for counselling (Mansall, 1991). Whilst there are significant variations in use and attitude as to astrology’s effectual worth, nonetheless interest in it continues unabated (Feher, 1992; Lewis, 2004).

Antoine Faivre (1994:95) observes, “astrology still responds to a more or less conscious need to find once more in our uncentered and fragmented world the *Unus mundus*, the unity of mankind and the universe, through an integral language based on the principle of similitude.” What Faivre calls “the principle of

similitude” is also known as the hermetic concept of correspondences. In this concept the entire cosmos, or macrocosm, is encoded symbolically with the mind or nature of the divine. While human beings are in miniature form – the microcosm – a reflection of that macrocosm. It is summed up in the Swedenborgian expression, “As above, so below”. Contemporary astrologers believe they can decode the correspondences between the symbols of the cosmos and the inner spiritual life of the person, in order to facilitate meaning, growth and guidance.

The esoteric approach of astrologers to the practical problem of life has both its staunch supporters (West, 1991), and sceptical modernist (Jerome, 1975; Adorno, 2002) detractors. The dominant religious voice expressing opposition to astrology in the contemporary western world comes from Christian apologists. Apologetics is a theological discipline concerned with commending and defending the Christian faith. Apologists commend the ways of God to intellectual doubters, correct misperceptions about doctrine, and critically challenge ideas deemed to be unhelpful. The discipline of apologetics has often been pursued with tremendous intellectual rigour (Boa and Bowman, 2001; Dulles, 1999).

However, in modern times apologetics has bifurcated into academic and populist styles. One popular sub-category, known as countercult apologetics, has gradually emerged since the nineteenth century as a response to the religious plurality developing within the western world (Melton, 1992). Countercult apologetics has been centred in the Evangelical Protestant traditions, especially in North America where Melton (1992:335) indicates that Evangelicals comprise “the mainstream of religion in America” and command “the largest segment of the religious public.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes both the vocabulary and argumentative stances of countercult apologetics bears the hallmarks of fear of the “alien other” in new religious movements and alternate spiritualities (Cowan, 2003; Johnson, 2000; Morehead, 2004; Saliba, 1999).

## **Astrology Rejected**

Have Christian leaders been uniformly antipathetic toward astrology? Indubitably, there have been those who have rejected astrology as being incompatible with Christian doctrine, and many Evangelical apologists have taken that position. However, a careful examination of both Biblical and Church history yields many surprises, particularly for countercult apologists who have been habituated to only think of astrology as unscientific superstition or as occultic. The “received wisdom” of popular countercult literature appears somewhat shallow when viewed from the standpoint of astrology’s complex place through church history.

A survey of Christian apologetic responses to astrology from Biblical times to the present day may be sorted into three distinct categories: “outright rejection”, “qualified acceptance” and “apologetic engagement”.<sup>2</sup> While the following survey

is necessarily compressed, and Catholic, Orthodox and Protestants are mentioned, the primary emphasis is on identifying Evangelical Protestant attitudes.

The first category is identified in the writings of Church Fathers, such as Hippolytus and Augustine, and also in modern countercult texts. In the Biblical sources one can discern a polemic against planetolatry (worship of planets as gods) within the Genesis creation narratives (Hamilton, 1990; Hasel, 1974), and the prophets' disdain for those within Israel who sought spiritual guidance from any source other than Yahweh (Isa. 47:12-15). In the case of the Church Fathers who rejected astrology, the grounds of their arguments rest primarily on identifying within astrology the twin problems of planetolatry and cosmic determinism as being incompatible with Biblical faith (Barton, 1994; Ferrari, 1973).

It is undeniable that in ancient Near Eastern cultures astrology was often associated with planetolatry and fatalist philosophies like Stoicism (Barton, 1994). In the imperial Roman cultus, pagan religions and gnostic groups also used astrology. In this light it is understandable why the Christian Church opposed astrology. Jesus Christ, by the example of his incarnation, life and death meant freedom from fatalism and remote uncaring gods. The absolute monotheism of Christianity naturally opposed any perceived syncretism with paganism. Christianity as a corporate faith was undermined by astrology's individualistic ethos. Astrology was condemned at the Council of Laodicea (365 AD), the Council of Toledo (400 AD) and the Council of Braga (560-565 AD).

By the fifth century when the empire was declared "Christian", former pagans swelled the Church's membership, but there were also pagan polemics against Christianity over the sack of Rome. Augustine felt compelled to make strong statements against both paganism and astrology. Ferrari (1973) points out that passages in Augustine's *Confessions* disclose an enthusiastic pre-Christian proclivity for astrology. The distance Augustine placed between Christian belief and astrology was probably shaped in part by his former commitment to Manichean religion.

It is important to note that the Patristic rejection of astrology reflects the cultural and ideological concerns of their day. Remarkably, there is a near total absence of Biblical interaction when they justify their positions. The basis for such condemnation was largely expressed philosophically. So the Patristic rejection of astrology is best comprehended against this philosophical, cultural and religious backdrop (Barton, 1994).

The majority of Evangelical countercult responses to astrology (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1989; Birkett, 1997; Bjornstad and Johnson, 1971; Davies, 1961; Larson, 1989; Martin [audio-lecture, n.d.]; Morey, 1981; Petersen, 1982; Strohmer, 1988, 1992; Winterburn, 1992) comprise a negative apologetic style that is designated "heresy-rationalist" (Johnson, 2000; Morehead, 2004). The argumentative style used to oppose astrology is characterised by a three-fold emphasis:

- (1). Demarcating astrology as heretical on the basis of exegeting a select cluster of Biblical prohibitions about divinatory and occult practices; and today's astrologers are tainted by their commitments to unbiblical beliefs such as reincarnation and spiritualism. Therefore anyone who professes faith in Christ should eschew astrology.
- (2). The Church Fathers and Reformers have invariably rejected astrology on the grounds that it is idolatrous and in conflict with the sovereignty of God.
- (3). Asserting that belief in astrology is "irrational" on the basis of contemporary astronomical cosmology. Embedded within this is a rationalist grammatology that is expressed using disparaging or scathing terms such as "superstition" (with the implicit concomitant that a "rational" person will believe in Christ). For example, Davies (1961: 156) states, "astrology is contrary to common sense" and dismisses it "as quackery and superstitious humbug."

The theological and missiological imperatives of Evangelical apologists ought to be appreciated on interpathic and emic grounds. Within the context of Evangelicalism the apologist functions as a gatekeeper and exhorter who challenges non-Christian ideas and practices, and urges practitioners of astrology to have faith in Christ. Apologists assess non-Christian beliefs by comparing them with the teachings of the Bible and to a lesser extent Church traditions. The comparison centres on Christology and soteriology. The Christ-event is of paramount importance because it entails the redemption of humanity from sin. It is at the heart of the Christian kerygma. The necessity to proclaim the kerygma is grounded in the missional imperatives of the Christ's teachings (Terry, Smith and Anderson, 1998). The legitimacy for challenging other beliefs is therefore grounded in the uniqueness and particularity of Christ and in Scriptural mandates to discern truth from error and giving reasons for one's faith (Deut. 13:1-5; Deut. 18:9-22; Matt. 7:15-23; Acts 20:28-32; 1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3). So the rejection of astrology as a perceived soteriological rival is understandable when set alongside these theological imperatives.

A preliminary observation is that given the apologists' soteriological emphasis on the Christ-event as recorded in Scripture, there is a corresponding de-emphasis – or in some cases complete silence – on the role of natural theology or general revelation in their assessments of astrology. This is a point to which we shall return later in the discussion. One other point is that while countercult apologists (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1989; Morey, 1981) briefly discuss the attitudes of some Christian leaders throughout church history, their surveys tend to be superficial and overlook examples of leaders who had a qualified acceptance of astrology.

These apologetic discourses can also be examined from etic and eidetic standpoints. Douglas Cowan (2003) proposes that Christian countercult polemics may be construed as an exercise in reality construction and maintenance, with the

objective of the nihilation of rivals. Cowan builds on the theoretical schemas of Karl Mannheim, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann concerning the social construction of reality, and combines them with insights drawn from Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison on “cognitive praxis and movement intellectuals” (2003: 10). Cowan argues that apologists view the world *as it ought to be* through the prism of Scripture and theology and therefore contest the validity of non-Christian views as aberrations. Cowan observes that the vocabulary employed by apologists is value-laden with metaphors of infiltration, threat and disease, with the antidote being the “therapeutic nihilation of the worldview in question” (2003: 54). In debunking a questioned worldview, apologists seek to protect the faithful from spiritual contamination and to facilitate the migration of non-Christians into the Evangelical community.

When applying Cowan’s model to the specific countercult texts on astrology, reality maintenance can certainly be discerned. The apologist interprets astrological practices for the Evangelical community. These cognitive acts of interpretation identify the apologist as a trusted authority figure. As the apologist has researched the subject of astrology, the wider Evangelical community has no cognitive grounds to mistrust what is reported. Armed with the apologists’ Scriptural, logical and rhetorical arguments, the Christian reader is enabled to comprehend the “alien other” as represented in astrology. Astrology is construed as an opponent of Christianity, endangering one’s redemption in the Christ. It is rejected as an unworthy and deceptive spiritual competitor, and this dismissal of astrology leaves the Christian reader with no further need to consider it, or even engage with practitioners or consumers of the craft. Instead, the apologists’ countercult ministry can be entrusted with the task of conversing with practitioners.

The vocabulary employed to negate astrology as spiritually suspect include remarks like, “its fundamental hostility to biblical truth” (Ankerberg & Weldon, 1989:163); “deceptive spirits are using the ambiguities of astrology’s abstract language to draw people further into the craft” (Strohmer, 1988: 63); and, “astrology is a tool the Devil uses to entice men” (Larson, 1989: 144). As astrology is an “alien other” that impinges on the boundaries of Evangelical faith, the critical response entails in part a theological monologue about the dangers astrology poses to the faithful. The apologists have ostensibly met the challenge of astrology and so the Evangelical community need only insulate itself from its contaminating influences.

### *Liberal Protestant “Agnosticism”*

Liberal Protestantism is theologically different from the Evangelical traditions. Evangelicals have expressed disquiet over Liberal Protestant standpoints on Scripture, Christology and Soteriology (Edwards and Stott, 1988; Marsden, 1980; 1987). Their vexation with Liberal Protestants might be paralleled to the boundary maintenance gambits of countercult apologists in resisting

astrology. Liberal Protestant interpretations of alternate spiritualities tend to be irenic and less polemical than Evangelical texts (Shupe, 1981; Trompf, 1987). Due to space limitations, a thorough survey of Liberal Protestant attitudes toward astrology cannot be undertaken.

However, a few brief observations are warranted. Unlike the Evangelicals (Van Baalen, 1938), early Liberal Protestant discourses about new religious movements (Bach, 1946; Braden, 1949) ignored modern day astrology. Liberal scholars have certainly written about astrology in church history, but have been slow to respond to contemporary astrological interests. Saliba (1999) has described recent Liberal Protestant attitudes toward New Age generally, but the topic of astrology does not loom large in his survey.

Some Liberal clergy seem to share the Evangelicals' antipathy toward astrology. In the context of pastoral counselling, Carrigan (1970) highlighted the need for empathic identification with parishioners interested in astrology. However Carrigan avers his astrological agnosticism and rejects astrology as incompatible with Christianity. Palmer (1993) and Peters (1991) in their respective treatments of New Age spiritualities have expressed their disbelief in astrology on doctrinal, scientific and rationalist grounds.

Another trajectory concerns Jung, for as Lewis (2003: 369) notes, "Jung utilized astrology in his counseling work, and it was his work with myths and symbols that most influenced modern astrology." As mainline Protestants, such as Morton Kelsey and John Sanford, have made positive use of Jungian analytic theory, future research could explore Jung's astrological views vis-à-vis Liberal Protestantism.

Lastly, Kemp has studied three English church experiments involving responses to New Age spirituality. Kemp hypothesized that any synthesis between Christian and New Age might constitute what he designates "the Christaquarians" (Kemp, 2001). It is not feasible to revisit his research here, but the Christaquarians could be examined for attitudes toward astrology.

## **Qualified Acceptance**

The Evangelical negation of astrology, however, represents just one of three critical Christian responses. We shall now examine the second position, namely "qualified acceptance". This position entails an acknowledgement of astral signs in the creation that are then incorporated into natural theology or a specific apologetic for the revelation of God in the cosmos. These trajectories of thought can be traced throughout church history in Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Protestant traditions. An exhaustive survey is beyond the scope of this paper, but brief illustrations are explored here from the Biblical, Patristic, Medieval, Renaissance and Reformation eras.

*Astrology, Divination and Scripture*

Within the Old and New Testaments there are a significant amount of direct and indirect references to astral images, astrology and other forms of divination.<sup>3</sup> Some Evangelical apologists do not address all these passages. From the opening chapter of Genesis, God is presented as the creator of the stars with their function to serve as “signs and for seasons” (Gen. 1:14-18). Most Christians would maintain that the Old Testament prohibits any interest in astrology because of apparent blanket and absolute statements of condemnation of planetolatry (Deut. 4:19). However this blanket condemnation is not as “clear cut” as many would assume. Whilst idolatry is eschewed, the Zodiac (“Mazzaroth”) is directly mentioned in Job 38:33 (Pope, 1973). There is also the enigmatic Jacob’s Star in the oracles of Balaam (Num. 24:17), which has been interpreted as a messianic prophecy with possible links to the Nativity of Christ (Ashley, 1993: 500-503; Burrows, 1938).

Again while there are pointed commands against certain divinatory practices (Deut. 18:10-14), other forms of divination, like hydromancy (fleece reading) were actively used (Judges 6:37-40). Some notable characters of the Old Testament were skilled in different divinatory techniques. For example, Joseph had a cup used for divination (Gen. 44:2-5) and interpreted dreams; likewise Daniel interpreted dreams and he was made chief of the Babylonian astrologers (Dan. 2:48) (Gnuse, 1990). The high priests of Israel employed what is understood to be a form of stone or stick throwing divination using the Urim and Thummim (Deut. 33:8) (Guillaume, 1938). In the non-canonical Pseudepigrapha, 1 Enoch 72-82 warns against “Chaldean astrology” because it originates from fallen angels, but also details a Jewish understanding of zodiacal signs that are subsumed in a theology about Yahweh, angels and apocalyptic (Charlesworth, 1977; Ness, 1999; Von Stuckrad, 2000).

In the New Testament, Judas is replaced by Matthias through the casting of lots<sup>4</sup> (Acts 1:26). The Magi, who came to the infant Jesus, were probably Persian astrologers and Zoroastrian priests (Yamauchi, 1989; 1990). Indeed, they intuited the significance of the Christ-child as shown by their generous and prophetic gifts (Matt. 2:11) (France, 1981). Moving beyond explicit cases of divination, the Apostle Paul understood and expressed the power and work of Christ in many ways including his cosmic relationship to the stars and their power (Col. 1:20, 1 Cor. 15:40). Other parts of the New Testament echo that Pauline thought (eg: Heb. 4:14, Jude 13, 2 Pet. 1:19).

Recent commentators on the book of Revelation employing social-scientific perspectives (Malina, 1995; Malina & Pilch, 2000; Chevalier, 1997) have drawn attention to references or allusions to the stars, zodiacal figures and houses in the apocalypse. Malina and Pilch (2000) find that the Roman astrological worldview illuminates the contents of Revelation, and they discern within it a type of astro-prophecy. However Chevalier disagrees with Malina’s stance, and regards astrology and apocalyptic as two utterly different ways of looking at life. In

Chevalier's estimation these twin opposing views have had a seminal influence on the history of ideas. The approaches of Malina and Pilch, and that of Chevalier, are the product of recent scholarly investigations into the cultural background, context and genre of Revelation. Their respective views have yet to fully impact on apocalyptic studies. Yet, they have at the very least opened up some tantalising suggestions concerning the cultural and literary matrix in which Revelation was composed.

### "Forgotten" Church Fathers

In the preceding discussion reference was made to the Magi of the Nativity. The Magi episode was interpreted in various ways during the Patristic era (Yamauchi, 1989). In his apologetic reply to Celsus, Origen referred to the Magi as learned Zoroastrians who were led by the prophecy of Balaam and Nativity Star to find Christ. He clearly states that after they had found the Christ, they lost their previous magical powers. He referred to the Creation account, that stars are not agents, but signs. However his connective insight was lost when he was declared a heretic in the Christendom order. Part of the reason for this arose from Origen's creative interaction with a common Hellenistic belief that the stars were souls (Scott, 1991).

The possibility that God had used astrology to guide practising astrologers to the Christ-child was a conundrum for other church fathers. Clement of Alexandria traced the Magi's origins to Persia, as did John Chrysostom, but both were opposed to determinist astrology. Gregory of Nazianzus composed poems rejecting astrological fatalism and "relates how even the Magi were converted, abandoned their craft, and adored Christ" (Laistner, 1941: 258). Both Ignatius of Antioch (*Letter to the Ephesians*) and Tertullian (*On Idolatry*) argued that astrologers *did* have futuristic knowledge, but this ceased with the birth of Christ. Tertullian saw the Magi as kings rather than astrologers. Ignatius' "starhymn" in his *Letter to the Ephesians* has an embryonic positive apologetic for the advent of Christ (Stander, 1989; Walaskay, 1979). Ambrosiaster, Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome all linked the Magi's visit to Balaam's oracle. In the post-Apostolic literature known as the apocryphal gospels, the Magi's visit to Jerusalem is due to a prophecy of Zoroaster (*The Arabic Infancy Gospel*), while the much later *Armenian Infancy Gospel* supplies the traditional names of the three Wise Men. Yamauchi (1989:16-17) notes that early Christian art depicted the Magi in Persian costumes. After the Council of Laodicea and the polemic of Augustine the western Roman church leaders recast the Magi as noble kings. However in the liturgy of Eastern Orthodox churches the Magi are still remembered as astrologers.<sup>5</sup>

During the fourth century, Firmicus Maternus, who wrote the most authoritative Roman guide to astrology, later became a Christian. He rebuked his former art's judicial or determinative nature, but did not repudiate a general influence of the stars, and actually used the sun and moon as illustrations of God and His Church (Maternus, 1970; 2003). Sidonius Apollinaris, the fifth century

Bishop of Lyons condemned astrology, yet retained some respect for the topic and was able to name numerous Christian friends who practised the art (Barton, 1994: 71).

Perhaps the most creative interaction with astrology in this era is found in the fourth century Bishop Zeno of Verona who Christianised the zodiac for his “baptismal sermon”. His theme was that those born again in Christ have a new zodiac sign that destines them for heaven. His sermon then interacted with the twelve signs of the zodiac to explain key Christian motifs (Jeanes, 1995). Barton (1994: 71) indicates that Zeno’s sermon was still known in Gaul in the sixth century.

In the Oriental Orthodox traditions the Syrian Bardesanes was a convert from astrology who reputedly aligned the times for the birth, execution and resurrection of Jesus with planetary conjunctions (Trompf, 1979: 206).

### *Medieval & Renaissance*

Negative attitudes carried over from Patristic times into the late classical and early medieval eras. Due to Augustine’s polemic, astrology largely fell into disrepute in the Christian West. This was reinforced in the fifth century by Pope Leo I’s condemnation of the Priscillianists who affirmed belief in astral influences. In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great repudiated astrology in his Homily for Epiphany. He cited the divergent lives of the biblical twins Esau and Jacob as proof against astral-natal influences. Isidore of Seville disapproved of astrology, yet was not averse to linking “bodily changes with the qualities of the stars” (Laistner, 1941: 267-268). Isidore also classified seven kinds of philosophy, of which astrology was listed alongside of medicine and mechanics. Although astrology was officially condemned, Laistner observes (1941: 275) “there is no adequate ground for asserting that it disappeared in the West because it was suppressed by authority.”

In the twelfth century astrology formally re-entered European discourse as Arabic manuscripts of Classical and Islamic cultures were translated into Latin. It must be recalled that in Medieval and Renaissance thought a clear-cut demarcation between astrology and astronomy did not exist. The newly translated works of Aristotle, and the Greco-Roman and Arabic astrologers, provided theologians with a template upon which to construct interpretations of the natural world. Astrological determinism was rejected because it conflicted with God’s sovereignty. However the observations of celestial or astrological phenomena was grist for the mill of medieval science. Lindberg (1992: 279) refers to these developments in cosmology as “the Aristotelianizing of astrology.” The emphasis in twelfth century astrology was not on the supernatural but rather “entailed the exploration of the natural forces that link heaven and earth” (Lindberg, 1992: 202).

As God was the creator of the natural forces in the cosmos, the thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas could simultaneously reject astrological determinism, accounting for prognostications as demonic, and accept the notion of

divine celestial influences. Ramon Lull (1232-1316) the Catalan missionary to Islam likewise accepted the concept of astral correspondences and astral medicine, while simultaneously rejecting horoscopic determinism (Yates, 1979). Lindberg (1992: 211) notes that astrology was included in the curriculum of medieval universities, particularly in medical studies. Grant (1986: 69) sums up:

Medieval theologians were able to interrelate science and theology with relative ease and confidence, whether this involved the application of science to scriptural exegesis, the application of God's absolute power to alternative possibilities in the natural world, or even the frequent invocation of scriptural texts in scientific treatises in support of scientific theories and ideas.

Pierre D'Ailly (1350-1420) was a French Cardinal who rose to prominence during the Great Papal Schism of 1378-1414. D'Ailly wrote extensively on astrology in the context of it as a Medieval science, as a means to interpret history and prophecy, and as one component in developing a natural theology. His interest in apocalyptic prophecy, that was borne out of the Papal schism, led D'Ailly to conjectures about the imminent emergence of the Antichrist and the likely date for the end of world history. D'Ailly's work stimulated the imagination of Christopher Columbus in his concerns for world evangelisation (Smoller, 1994).

The work on St. Peter's Basilica was undertaken according to astrological data (Quinlan-McGrath, 2001). Similarly, zodiacal data was regularly printed in English Church prayer books until the 1540s (Siegenthaler, 1975) and also appeared in the original edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

During the Italian Renaissance vigorous discourses concerning astrology abound on the conflict between stellar influences and human free will. Animadversions about astrological determinism were expressed by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) in his *Adversus astrologus*. While Pico marshalled some theological arguments against astrology, much of his antagonism stemmed from his defence of the freedom of the human will.

Pico's older contemporary Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) was a Florentine priest and Neoplatonist philosopher, who in 1489 composed *Libri de Vita* (Book of Life). Ficino's work was concerned with medicine, in which he accepted the influence between stellar objects and the human body. Ficino believed that God was the apex of reality containing all the archetypes, and all other beings emanated from the divine. Throughout his treatise Ficino expounded a natural magic that allowed room for the use of talismans and astral influences (Allen, 1966; Yates, 1964). Space precludes further discussion, but a parallel psychologised version of Ficino's position is evident in Thomas Moore's (1982) recent study, *The Planets Within*.

### *Lutheran Reformation*

During the Protestant Reformation several prominent Lutherans, such as Melancthon, Rhaeticus, Chemnitz, Brahe and Kepler, were practitioners or students of astrology (Kusukawa, 1994; Methuen, 1996; Montgomery, 1973a). In

Melanchthon's circle of friends and pupils astronomical and astrological work were entwined. On emic grounds the attitude of these Lutherans toward astrology is best appreciated from their Christocentric theology and their corresponding interests in natural philosophy and creation theology (Elert, 1962; Preus, 1972). Melanchthon read horoscopes, encouraged the integration of astrological diagnosis into medicine, but rejected fatalist precepts (Kusukawa, 1993). He articulated a natural philosophy where astrology played a prominent role, and the theological construct for this was interrelated with Luther's "Book of Nature". Caroti (1986: 109) remarks, "Melanchthon combined absolute belief in an immanent divine providence with a symbolic and ... Neoplatonic interpretation of natural and historical phenomena". Montgomery (1973a: 10) argues that Melanchthon's astrological interests are best understood through his belief that "God providentially guides the world through 'secondary causes'" and this thought is "one with Luther's conviction that the risen Christ is dynamically present in even the apparently trivial natural occurrences of the world."

The astrologer-astronomers Brahe and Kepler developed their cosmological theories, with Brahe rejecting the Copernican theory, while Kepler's work supported Copernicus' model. Montgomery (1973a: 9) provides an intriguing illustration of Brahe's horoscopic work:

The intimate connection between astronomy and astrology in Brahe's work is well illustrated by the fact that his study of the great comet of 1577 led him to predict that in the north, in Finland, a prince would be born who should lay waste Germany and vanish in 1632; Gustavus Adolphus was born in Finland, ravaged Germany during the Thirty Years' War, and was killed at Lützen in 1632!

Kepler served as a mathematician-astrologer in Graz and then subsequently for the Emperor Rudolph in Prague (Ferguson, 2002). Kepler became disenchanted with astrological prognostications while serving the Emperor, and sought to reform astrology from folk religiosity by grounding it both theologically and scientifically (Field, 1984; Simon, 1975). Kepler sought to harmonise astronomical discoveries and astrological observations with the Bible in a complex theory of Pythagorean harmony with planetary spheres, geometrical archetypes and musical consonances (Stephenson, 1994).

Another Lutheran figure of interest is Valentin Weigel (1533-1588). Weigel was a mystically inclined pastor who subscribed to the Lutheran Formula of Concord but also developed a standpoint on pneumatology that paralleled ideas held by Jacob Böhme (Versluis, 1999: 5). He composed *Astrology Theologized* (1886) in which he stressed "the providential action of God throughout His created universe – both in the stellar realm and in man himself" (Montgomery, 1973a: 12). Weigel used the Paracelsian construct of the macrocosm and microcosm and argued his case from creation and Scripture. While some of Weigel's fellow Lutherans accused him of heterodoxy, his confessional commitment to the Formula of Concord must be kept in perspective (Weeks, 2000).

In ensuing decades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries various Lutheran pastors also invoked planetary conjunctions and comets as omens of God's impending judgement (Dixon, 1999). However, not all Lutherans were enthusiastic about astrology as is evidenced in the work of the seventeenth century theologian Johann Gerhard (Preus, 1972). Similarly, Luther did not share Melanchthon's enthusiasm for astrology, for he regarded astrological prognostications as doubtful. Elert (1962:417) remarks:

Luther was a sworn enemy of astrology, and at times he even characterised it as idolatry. For this reason he often made fun of Melanchthon and even reproved him. In general, however, he let him have his way, since the Gospel remained untouched by astrology.

### *Calvinist & Puritan Reformation*

While John Calvin is generally remembered as being hostile toward predictive astrology, it is also the case that Calvin was content to accept "natural astrology", as in the role of planetary influences on the human body for medical diagnosis (Calvin, 1983; Probes, 1974). Meanwhile, in the wake of the English Reformation, astrological practices were often entwined in politics and church life in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially for the period of the Puritan Commonwealth and the Royalist Restoration (Allen, 1966; Curry, 1989). There is evidence of keen Puritan use of prophetic astrology during the Commonwealth (Nelson, 1976; Rusche, 1969; Walsham, 1998).

The use of prophetic astrology is a curious but inadequately acknowledged feature in Christian history. The popular propensity for an eschatological fatalism parallels astrological determinism, or, as was the case in seventeenth century England eschatological prophecies were based on astrological conjunctions (Dyrness, 1976; cf. Curry, 1989). American Christian fundamentalists are presently preoccupied with eschatological speculations about current events in the Middle East (Hunt, 2001). A major indicator of this is in the recent series of end-times novels known as *Left Behind* by the Dispensational-fundamentalist authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Their novels have now outsold John Grisham's legal thrillers. While these fundamentalists repudiate astrology, their prophetic scenarios of the imminent Battle of Armageddon convey fatalistic attitudes toward current events.

### *Protestant Theosophists*

There are other figures from the Post-Reformation era that accepted astrology but who developed an esoteric interpretation of Christianity. These characters, who Versluis (1999) refers to as "Protestant Theosophists", were regarded as heterodox in the eyes of their mainline counterparts. One figure of this astrological Protestant ilk is Johannes Kelpius (Butler, 1979; Versluis, 1999). Another is Emanuel Swedenborg. These figures provide a fascinating window on astrological and theosophical impulses in the history of ideas that eventually coalesces in the activities of Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater. It is beyond the scope of this paper

to pursue these lines of inquiry. Suffice to say that today's countercult apologists, as well as some in other Christian traditions, would indubitably echo the cry of heterodoxy concerning esoteric interpretations of Christianity (Tillett, 1995).

### *Summary*

This brief but by no means exhaustive survey indicates that in past epochs Christians have been prominently associated with, and had qualified acceptance of, different aspects of astrology. The qualified acceptance of astrology has largely centred in natural theology, but at times has also played a role in prophetic conjectures. This evidence from Church history contradicts the superficial portrait conveyed in countercult apologetic literature that Christians have almost always condemned astrology. Contemporary Evangelical apologists have overlooked the possibility of developing positive apologetics stimulated by their Lutheran and Puritan "heroes of the faith". This superficial portrait also has feet of clay in the eyes of modern professional astrologers who are well aware of the role played in the history of astrology by figures like D'Ailly, Melancthon, and Kepler.

### **Apologetic Engagement**

The third response to astrology is what we designate as "apologetic engagement." By apologetic engagement we refer to a distinct school of thought that repudiates horoscopic astrology but reconfigures zodiacal symbolism in a creative apologia for the revelation of God in nature pointing to the gospel. This particular approach, known as the "Gospel in the Stars" (GIS), developed among Evangelicals interested in Dispensationalist interpretations of prophecy during the late nineteenth century. Early Dispensationalist views became the cradle for fundamentalism (Marsden, 1980).

The architects of GIS (Rolleston, 2001[1865]; Bullinger, 1967 [1893]; Seiss, 1972 [1882]) were entirely opposed to predictive, determinist astrology. The gist of their argument may be summarised as follows:

- God created the stars, sun and moon for signs (Gen. 1:14).
- The purpose of these signs in the sky was to prophetically foreshadow the coming of Messiah to redeem sinners; hence natural revelation bears direct witness to special or Scriptural revelation.
- The specific signs that disclose the Gospel message comprise the 12 constellations of the zodiac; and the word for zodiac, "Mazzaroth", is used in Job 38:32.
- God named the stars and by inference must have shown to Adam what the stars' names mean. So the promise of a redeeming Messiah is attested in the stars and then in written Scripture.
- The proper understanding of the zodiac was corrupted into idolatrous astrology at the Tower of Babel. However there is cross-cultural evidence to show from diverse cultures (like China) that there were

prophetic expectations of a child to be born to a virgin. The episode of the Magi shows that the stars can lead people to discover Christ.

There is some renewed interest in the GIS theory among Evangelicals and esotericists as these nineteenth century books are back in print.<sup>6</sup> R. A. Gilbert (2001) points out how leaders in the Order of the Golden Dawn, such as William Westcott and F. L. Gardner, knew Rolleston's book. Gilbert even proposes that the tabular structure of Rolleston's text may have influenced the format of Samuel Mathers' book 777.

The GIS has had its critics. In 1899 Richard Allen (1963) cast doubt on the linguistic evidence Rolleston assembled concerning two particular stars. Recent Evangelical defenders of the GIS like Kennedy have found themselves enmeshed in acrimonious debates with fellow countercult apologists (Hanegraaff, 2001; Rogeberg, 2001). However more strident criticisms have emerged from countercult apologists like Strohmer (2000) who argues:

- The GIS theory is not explicitly stated in Scripture, but is inferred or "read into" certain Biblical passages.
- The purpose of natural or general revelation has been classically understood to mean that the creation's existence and discernible order attests to the existence of God. Natural revelation has never been understood in Church history to be bound up with the stars as signs of the content of the Gospel.
- Rolleston's argument rests, in part, on the assumption that Hebrew was the original language spoken by Adam and from which all other languages derive; but linguistic evidence shows that Hebrew is by no means the oldest language. Moreover we simply do not know what the first spoken language comprised.

The critical standpoint espoused by Strohmer has been questioned (Clifford and Johnson, 2001), but no substantial rehabilitation of the GIS theory has been attempted. There have been some tentative suggestions about developing a theological construct concerning the unity of the cosmos and its fragmentation (Montgomery, 1973b) but Evangelical apologists appear to have ignored them.

## **Critical Crosscurrents**

Contemporary interest in astrology poses several critical challenges for Protestants generally, but especially for Evangelicals. In past epochs where Christianity was dominant, it was possible for Christians to dismiss alternate practices like astrology as fringe or irrational concerns. However, the recent demographic data in England (Brown, 2000; Davie, 1994) and Australia (Hughes, 1997) disclose aged congregations and shrinking attendance rates. Meanwhile younger age groups participate in de-institutional spiritual practices, like New Age, or are committed to non-Christian spiritual groups be they Buddhist, Neo-Pagan and so on. Astrology now appeals to a broad constituency. A critical issue

for reflection concerns the churches' capacity to adjust to these sociological realities. Moberg (1984: 546) posited the conundrum this way:

Few churches are able to retain successfully an unmodified program of activities over long periods of time. Social change cuts across every aspect of the work of the church ... the church must understand much better than ever before its continually changing social environment and the impact of that environment upon the lives of people if it is to cope successfully with the tremendous challenges it faces. If the church is merely another social institution, not significantly different in its objectives and activities from others in society, its services are not particularly needed to meet the challenges of the present age.

The contemplation of changed social circumstances should bring with it the realisation that the Church must dialogue with non-Christian faiths and alternate spiritual practices *inside* the western world (Drane, 1999; Hexham, Rost and Morehead, 2004). Dialogue with practitioners of alternate spiritualities and astrology, should then prompt critical theological reflection on a range of topics like ecclesiology, creation theology, pneumatology, general revelation, guidance, apologetic gambits, and methods in missiology. While the present discussion is not framed as a theological discourse, some brief observations are in order.

#### *Astrology as "Protest"*

Evangelical apologists invariably classify astrology under the rubric of occultism, and the negative criticisms they present usually terminate with warnings about spiritual deception. Apologists who take this route rarely pose any deep reflective questions as to whether the popularity of astrology mirrors deficiencies in the Church's structures and praxis. In his examination of the role of folklore in popular occult practices, Bill Ellis (2004: 12-13) observes:

It is clear that much occult literature is best seen as an expression of protest against religious norms ... [it is] a protest against the way orthodox Christianity limited the common person's ability to contact and participate in divine forces.

In the present setting, electronic technology has "democratised" access to religious information, coinciding with what Possamai (2003) refers to as a consumer culture of religion. The impulse to mix-and-match to create personal "redemption kits" (Ellwood, 1993: 245) represents a challenge for churches accustomed to traditionally mediating unquestioned orthodox beliefs. A de-institutional approach to spirituality may also reflect disenchantment with the Church. Its ecclesial structures exalt the authority of the clergy and theologian, while simultaneously disempowering the laity in a limited role of participation. The appropriation of astrology among parishioners, church exiles and the wider community may represent a protest at being excluded or constrained. If congregations do not approximate a gathering where people can learn and grow and contribute to the growth of others, then Evangelicals ought not to be appalled that people look elsewhere to find spiritual nourishment. Perhaps the popularity of

astrology prompts the question, whatever happened to the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers?

### *Transcendence, Immanence, Natural Revelation*

Allied to this challenge is the lack of reflection on whether there has been an over-emphasis on the transcendence of God and a corresponding lack of explication on God's immanence in the creation. If, as Faivre puts it, astrology is an attempt to locate the *Unus Mundus*, and if much of alternate spiritualities concentrate on locating the divine within the creation, then perhaps this reflects a deficiency in Evangelical discourse about God's immanence (and with it a need to balance transcendence and immanence). To address that issue would necessarily require Evangelicals to also re-examine both their pneumatology and creation theology (Hildebrandt, 1995; Yong, 2003).

During the twentieth century Protestant neo-orthodox theologians jostled over the validity of the knowledge of God in general or natural revelation (Brunner and Barth, 1946). In theologically conservative Calvinist circles similar debates have ensued (Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, 1984; Van Til, 1980). One outcome is that many Protestants, including some Evangelicals, are reluctant to acknowledge divine revelation beyond the deontological (what is in the Bible). The alternate spiritualities emerging in the post-modern era, and the praxis of astrology, demands direct correspondence with the creator. Whether Protestant Christianity will be able to revisit the debate of natural versus exclusively deontological revelation affects much of its ability to confidently address the challenges of postmodernity and alternate spiritualities. Perhaps this is where a rehabilitation of the GIS could emerge as part of that discourse.

### *Theology of Guidance*

In their reflections on the challenges that New Age spiritualities pose for Christian praxis, Clifford and Johnson (2003: 282) indicate that "there is a real need for a practical theology of guidance." What Clifford and Johnson allude to arise from observing the diverse tools for guidance and divination employed in astrology and DIY approaches to spirituality. While these processes are susceptible to the consumer demand for "instant solutions", the gravitation toward intuitive and divinatory methods suggests that Christians need to readdress the issue of guidance. Protestant Christianity has tended toward either a pietistic approach, where decisions are based on reflection, meditation and prayer - or a Logos-centred approach, where decision making comprises a cerebral, rational process of sorting out options by deriving principles directly from Scripture. It is a hallmark of Christianity that spiritual growth may be facilitated by prolonged struggle, and that doubt, paradox and unanswered questions are part of the maturing of a faith journey. The "no easy answers" of the Christian tradition is something of a counter-response that some seekers in DIY spirituality may balk at, but nonetheless need to hear. Yet the heartthrob for a practically oriented theology of guidance remains to be visited.

*Reflecting on Apologetic Gambits*

In surveying the countercult apologists' answers to astrology, at least eight critical weaknesses can be itemised:

- Astrology is treated as a static phenomenon, with insufficient critical reflection on the historical contexts in which it has been found.
- Planetolatry has not been a constant feature of astrological practices (Barton, 1994) and is irrelevant in today's context.
- It does not encourage a mutual discussion between Christians and non-Christians who might practice astrology.
- A very superficial and lop-sided view of Christian attitudes toward astrology is presented (namely it has always or almost always been condemned in church history), while the evidence that many prominent Christians have had "qualified acceptance" of aspects of it is ignored.
- Biblical passages on divination are superficially treated without any critical reflection on Israel's use of casting lots, Urim & Thummim, dream interpretation etc.
- Guilt-by-association arguments are used – such as: some astrologers believe in reincarnation, therefore astrology is completely false; some astrologers also practice channelling spirits, therefore astrology is Satanic.
- The application of sceptical debunking models to astrology that can equally be applied to debunk Biblical miracles.
- No careful effort is made to appreciate astrology's appeal to seekers.

These critical deficiencies must be addressed if apologists wish to have their case heard among those who find astrology meaningful in their journey. In tackling these drawbacks apologists could also benefit by taking to heart Saliba's (1999: 78) sagely remarks about the negative apologetic toward astrology and alternate spiritualities:

[It] fails to give real witness to the Christian message of the Good News because its methods and message are more attuned to elicit fear and anxiety and to dwell on foreboding and pessimistic outlooks for the future. Moreover, it unintentionally confirms negative impressions of, and elicits antagonistic feelings towards, Christianity, and hence encourages uncooperative reactions from those who have abandoned their traditional faith.

In reappraising their apologetic gambits, apologists would do well to make every effort in their writings to avoid the oft-made charge that by misconstruing what non-Christians believe that they tacitly approve of bearing false witness against their neighbours. To this one could add that apologists could enhance their efforts by moving from the role of arm-chair critics, and undertake phenomenological field studies of those they wish to create dialogue with. This is a point that Trompf (1987) has made concerning Christian missiology, and it has

been recently echoed inside Evangelicalism (Muck, 1993; 2004). In taking up a phenomenological method in research, this does not equate to a suppression of religious dissent based on one's confessional commitments. As Sharpe and Trompf (1981) remind us:

The orthodox Christian churches ... should listen and understand rather than condemn, but never relinquish the right to challenge teachings they believe to be unhelpful or false.

## Conclusion

The threshold that waits to be crossed is whether Christian apologists will now begin to creatively respond to the metaphysical concepts and praxis of astrology. As phenomenologists and sociologists of religion look on, the yet-to-be-answered questions remain: Will Evangelical Protestants be forced to accept that some of their previous paradigms used to understand astrology have been simplistic, and highly selective; and will they positively interact with both the art of astrology, and also the underlying longings that practitioners of astrology yearn for?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. Technically Protestant Evangelicals should be differentiated from Protestant Fundamentalists on sociological, historical and theological grounds; see Marsden (1980; 1987; 1991).

<sup>2</sup>. This discussion is specifically focussed on formal apologetic-theological responses to astrology. This paper does not inquire into the question of consistency in belief and praxis of those professing Christians who consult astrologers or practise the craft themselves as trained astrologers.

<sup>3</sup>. This survey of Biblical texts is by no means exhaustive.

<sup>4</sup>. A form of stick or stone divination.

<sup>5</sup>. For example, "Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath revealed to the world the Light of wisdom: for in it those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore thee, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know thee, the Dayspring from on high. Glory be to thee. O Lord" (Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, 1945: 32).

<sup>6</sup>. While much interest is occurring within Evangelical communities, it is worth noting that Weiser the US Theosophical publisher has reprinted Rolleston's book.

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