

Things above (Colossians 3:1-11)

Have you ever heard of an egregore?

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Have you ever heard of an egregore?

It's admittedly an obscure term—one that, until recently, I'd only ever seen in occult texts, where it refers to a phantom intelligence conjured into being by humans, intentionally or not. These "phantoms" grow in power and control, nourished by human attention.

Yeah. It's weird. Do a search for "egregore" online and you will turn up spooky podcasts that use theramins in their intro music, Dungeons and Dragons-themed Twitter accounts, some New Age gurus, and tech nerds.

But I've also noticed the word popping up in online discourse among Christian friends as a fancy way of talking about the dangers of group-think.

So much of this discourse is cloaked in irony that it's hard to tell when people are speaking in earnest. Still, the use of the term "egregore" in relation to someone's perceived conformity to "wokeness," for example, or to expressions of support for gender-affirming health care, disturbed me.

On the one hand it reads like a dismissal of facile assent to the causes du jour of the secular hive mind—an elevated way of calling people sheep. Then again, it could also be read as a diagnosis of such support as demonically motivated.

Spiritualizing what we deem to be group-think—to the point of describing it as a kind of controlling demon—is a dangerous path to justifying violence against groups of people who don't think like us. The use of “egregore” in these contexts—by Christians, not occultists—rang an internal alarm for me.

But I thought of egregores again when I read in Colossians 3, “Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.” In hermetic Christianity, egregores, though powerful, are not eternal but earthly—they do not come from above and are entirely dependent upon humans for their existence. They are created when we focus on the things of the earth: the anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language Paul tells us to get rid of, for example. Sounds suspiciously like Twitter to me. *Well, there's your egregore*, I thought.

It might be a stretch to use Colossians 3 as a case for practicing social media hygiene, but I'm about to, and as someone who just spent more hours than I care to admit researching egregores, I'm going to take my own advice.

I am as susceptible as anyone to the seductions of online discourse, which research has confirmed depends on our anger, wrath, and malice for its existence. However disembodied these interactions may be, they tend to feed on our earthly concerns. We are more likely to share what makes us angry or afraid and more likely to comment on posts that make our blood pressure spike or hijack our amygdalas. I understand the temptation to view the power social media wields on our behavior as supernatural when I notice the peace that returns to my spirit after I've fasted from it, even briefly, and set my mind on things above.

It can be helpful to take several steps away from the screen and consider what we're growing, what we're feeding, every time we log on. It doesn't have to be a demon to be dangerous.